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Benchmark Cultural Immersion Project: Research and Events Paper Assignment

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is the group and culture of gay men. This paper is split into two major sections. The first section is the research portion. Here, four key elements of this specific population are identified through academic research. Both historical and current oppression of the gay male population is also reviewed. The second section goes over the events portion of the assignment, in which the author was required to attend two events that provided an experience of cultural immersion. The events portion includes an overview of each event, the emotional impact, key takeaways outside of the research, as well as relevant and effective counseling theories for the gay male population.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ community, gay male population, cultural events, immersion

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Introduction

In today's world, most people are free to choose how they identify themselves and who they want to be. Even though the world is becoming more progressive, certain populations still struggle. The LGBTQ+ community, more specifically the gay male community, is often scrutinized and overlooked. The gay male population has a culture unique to themselves within the greater LGBTQ+ population. Researching the population of gay men yields various results, as there are often discrepancies in data and reporting. With passing time, the LGBTQ+ community has been growing in terms of number and in the degree of which they are accepted. In the US, two percent of males ages eighteen to forty-four identified as gay and an additional two percent identified as bisexual (Hays & Erford, 2022). According to The Williams Institute under UCLA's School of Law (2019), forty-eight percent of the LGBTQ+ population identify as male. By researching and immersing oneself into this culture, a greater understanding and appreciation for this community can be built.

Research Portion

Key Elements

Element One

Throughout the scholarly research process, four key elements were identified about the LGBTQ+ population, but more specifically gay men. The first key element is group characters. Even when narrowing down the population to just include gay men, the group characteristics still vary greatly. The inter-group characteristics, meaning this population is compared to other groups, presents obvious differences- with the largest being sexual identity and sexual orientation. In a blanket statement, this would be looking at the differences between those who identify as heterosexual and those who identify as homosexual. Compared to other groups of men, the gay

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population faces issues such as stigma, discrimination, and hate crimes. Consequences of this include depletion of mental health, physical health, and self-esteem and an increase in suicidal ideation, risk of sexually transmitted infections, and stress (Hays & Erford, 2022). Though heterosexism is still a present issue, a relationship that is nonsexual in nature between gay men and other groups may exist. For example, close friendships may develop between men who identify as gay and others who identify as heterosexual, which can contribute to ally relationships between different groups of people (Knepp, 2022).

The intra-group characteristics, or differences within the population of gay men, still presents a large scale of variety. Under the umbrella term of “gay men” is a largely diverse group. The population of gay men encompasses percentages from almost, if not all, races, cultures, socio-economic classes, etc. Identifying as a part of the gay male population does not take away other identities in someone. The most pressing idea related to this idea is the intersectionality of different issues related to these other cultural, racial, and social identities. Establishing healthy racial and sexual identities is a major issue within this community, as it can be extremely complex to disentangle various forms of oppression (Hays & Erford, 2022).

Element Two

The second key element is common attitudes, beliefs, and values relative to the gay male population and culture. The LGBTQ+ population is a culture based largely on survival, acceptance, and inclusion (Parmenter et al., 2020). Solely based on statistics, the LGBTQ+ community, including the population who identifies as gay men, is considered a minority. Because of this, this population has had to fight for equal rights, acceptance of others, and equitable treatment. Throughout the years, gay men and the rest of the LGBTQ+ community have had to sacrifice numerous rights and opportunities in order to be their true selves- which

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gives the survival concept a premise. Although gay men come from all different walks of life, there is an unwavering sense of pride in who every individual chooses to be. There are no parameters that need to be met in order to feel included. Members of this community report a sense of pride in who they are and how they identify, as it was advantageous to their identity development (Parmenter et al., 2020).

Element Three

The third prominent element of the gay male population is their prominent customs, practices, and behaviors. Because this population varies so greatly, some customs, values, and related behaviors often vary. However, when approaching the subject with a more general overview, some customs and practices stand out. Behaviors can be broken down into multiple categories based on the function they serve. One example of this is custom behavior and practices that promote physical health within the gay male population. There is a higher engagement of health-related behaviors- such as a balanced diet, preventative self-care, proper use of healthcare, avoidance of anger and stress, and avoidance of substance use- within this population when they are presented as normative to gay men rather than presented as normative to heterosexual men (Jadaszewski & Levant, 2021). Within this population the normative ideology of masculinity is altered and sometimes completely ignored. In social settings for this population, customs such as drag queens and performing are normative. Other customs involve a higher interest in fashion, dancing, makeup and beauty, and other activities viewed as rather “feminine” in society. While everyone takes on these behaviors and practices to varying degrees, they are unique to this population.

Element Four

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The fourth key element is about historical events and figures impacting the cultural and societal perceptions of the gay male population. Like many other minority populations in the US, there has been progressive change as time passes, but equality has yet been achieved for the gay male and the rest of the LGBTQ+ population. Key historical events identified by members of the LGBTQ+ include categories such as policy and legislation, adversity and oppression, protest and activism, community and celebration, public figures, and media and culture (Weststrate & McLean, 2022). Relevant policy and legislation include the Obergefell v. Hodges case, which gave the LGBTQ+ community marriage equality, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, and the overall decriminalization of homosexuality (Weststrate & McLean, 2022). The media and public figures have also played a large part in activism for this community. These include Billy Porter, Harvey Milk, Mayor Pete Buttigieg, the television show RuPaul's Drag Race, and Queer Eye on Netflix (Weststrate & McLean, 2022).

Oppression

Historically, the LGTBQ+ community and the gay male population have endured great oppression. This population has had to fight for social rights, employment rights, healthcare rights, and marriage rights. To start broadly, homosexuality was listed as a disorder within the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM) until the year 1974. While this was a large step in reframing how Americans viewed those who identified as homosexual, up until the release of the DSM-5 in 2013, disorders with regard to distress of sexual orientation were still listed under various names. While the US is becoming more accepting in coming years, the fight for equal rights has not been easy for this population.

In terms of healthcare, the oppression is both historical and current. In the 1970s and 1980s, gay men were faced with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and were greatly shamed because of it.

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A cure emerged decades later, meaning HIV/AIDS took the lives of many individuals, including those of status such as Freddy Mercury. Even today, there are still many cases where clinicians refused care to individuals based solely on the premise of the patient's sexual orientation, gender identity, or both (Abram & Campo-Engelstein, 2021).

This community also has experienced and will continue to experience oppression in the preprofessional workplace setting as well. Factors and situations such as denial of a position, termination of a position, promotion, pay and benefits, participation in the company, equal pay, employment opportunities, and the safety of a work environment can all be impacted by sexual orientation (Mara et al., 2021).

Events Portion

Events Summary

To immerse myself in this community and culture, I participated in two separate events. While each event celebrated the LGBTQ+ community, each highlighted the gay community in different ways. The first event I took part in was an outing at Southern Nights in Tampa, Florida. Southern Nights is a gay night club, and they offered a fully immersive experience. On top of the classic night club essentials, like a DJ and signature cocktails, Southern Nights offered a festive experience. LGBTQ+ culture was celebrated and highlighted with drag queens and go-go dancers. The experience was undoubtedly one of a kind. I was able to experience individuals in a space that was completely accepting and fast pace. More than that, they accepted me as well. I clearly did not fit in, but because I approached them warmly, the same energy was reciprocated.

The second event I attended was the Tampa Pride Parade, which was an experience unlike anything else I have ever been to. Above all, this was a festival of love and acceptance. While Southern Nights was majority men, the pride parade consisted of everyone- regardless of race,

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gender, sexual identity, and so on. The parade was colorful, loud, and essentially radiated positivity. There was drag queens, poetry, dancers, music, beads, and crazy outfits. Here, I was able to see the pride of belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Everyone's truth was heard and celebrated. On top of the celebration, the parade also drew attention to the unfair treatment, discrimination, and bullying that this community faces.

Emotional Impact

It is difficult to capture the depth of the effect these events had on me emotionally. Through observing, listening, participating, and asking questions, I was able to become more emotionally aware and culturally sensitive. My response to these events is two-fold. On one hand, I had a really great time at both events. I loved the dancing, the music, the shows, the glitz, and the colors. Everything about these experiences stimulated my senses. Aside from the physical environments, I was surrounded by a group of people whose aim was to love and celebrate. Everyone was there because they chose to be there. It was evident they wanted to be there. It filled my heart with joy to see so many people loved, supported, and happy. The majority of my memories from these culturally immersive experiences are people smiling, hugging, and letting their guard down. In response to this perception, I found myself doing the same.

On the flip side, there was also sadness amongst all the love. For me, these feelings really came after I had time to reflect on these experiences. What saddened me the most is the fact that this community cannot be who truly they are at all times. During these events, they were allowed to let go of cultural facades, be themselves, and feel free. I feel this level of freedom all the time, and it was difficult for me to think about having to hide who I am. The reality that people have to put limits on their personality or pretend to be someone they're not is something that deeply shook me. Fish et al. (2020) describes the LGBTQ+ experience as both multifaceted and multi-

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contextual, meaning this community adapts their personality and visible persona depending on how accepting a specific context is. I can only imagine the additional daily frustration, exhaustion, and anxiety this would add to someone's daily life.

Neither of my responses came as a shock to me. I find that I tend to be very in-tune with my emotions, and I allow myself to really explore the depth behind them. I think my admiration for this population really formulated both of my responses to these experiences. I always hope for the best for all people, regardless of what they believe or what they look like. I believe that my internal belief and hope in humanity was what caused me to respond in such ways.

Key Takeaways

Through experiencing these events for myself, I can identify three key take aways I learned about the gay male culture. The first is that each person takes on their identity as a gay male in a different way. Some men choose to express themselves in more feminine clothing and mannerisms. Other choose to embrace some form of masculinity and have a balance between their sexual identity and their gender identity. It should be noted that neither way is right or wrong, and that it is the beauty of this population. For this population, everyone is allowed to come as they are and not have to change anything to be accepted.

The second key element I learned about is how drag queens and the drag community function as sub-group of the gay male population. In my research, drag came up periodically, but it was never deeply discussed. After experiencing a drag show and seeing all that goes into it, I have a new newfound level of respect for the art that it is. Drag queens spend large amounts of money on costumes, makeup, and props to create an ambiance unlike any other. I was able to quickly understand why this is so important to the gay male population. Drag shows are an activity

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that is specific and unique to them. It allows the community to come together and lift each another up.

The last key takeaway I learned through my experiences is homophobia is still very real and present in our society today. While I previously knew what homophobia means and what it may look like, I was able to see and experience some microaggression from people on the outside. Even in just watching some gay men leave the nightclub, they were met with hurtful comments about how they looked. Watching things like this occur made me realize just how much of a part I have to play in ending oppression and discrimination for this population, and the significance of this speaks for itself. I truly was able to see the resilience and discipline of this culture on display.

Relevant and Effective Counseling Theories

Among the major counseling theories, two theories that have been empirically validated as effective with the gay male population are cognitive-behavioral therapy and affirmative therapy. Cognitive-behavioral therapy within this population is successful because of its ability to be adapted to specific groups needs. Because cognitive-behavioral therapy focuses on thoughts, feels, and behavior, some specific curriculum for this population includes encountering and addressing anti-oppression, the coming out process, and experiences of homophobia (Tan & Kelly, 2020). By catering to the specific needs of this group, this theory creates and facilitates an open and applicable therapeutic environment. Affirmative therapy with this population is vital, as the goal of affirmative therapy is to create an atmosphere where the client feels accepted and welcome. Many issues are explored in affirmative therapy in the context of the gay male population and the LGBTQ+ population, including discrimination in various areas of life, relationship dynamics, the effects of HIV/AIDS, and identity development impairments (Hays & Erford, 2022). Guidelines

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stemming from affirmative counseling practices are important in this context because it can be foundational when integrating spirituality, especially with this population (Tan & Kelly, 2020).

Conclusion

Overall, the gay male population presents many unique cultural beliefs and practices that differ from the norm of society. Key elements of this community include inter- and intra-group characteristics, common attitudes and beliefs, common beliefs and practices, and historical events and figures. Historical and current oppression of this group shape the societal perception of this group and will continue to be a gripping issue. Through experiences of cultural immersion, I was able to see beneath the worldly perceptions about the gay male population and was impacted greatly by the realizations and knowledge acquired. It is my belief that if others were open to having similar experiences, our understandings of one another would grow in a positive way.

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Benchmark Cultural Immersion Project: Interview Paper Assignment

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Abstract

Similar to the first major assignment of the cultural immersion project, the focus of this paper is the gay male population. This paper is split into two major sections- the interview portion and the summary portion. The interview portion is split into the organizational interview and the individual interview. Here, the stories and beliefs of the interviewees are gone over in depth. An author reflection and gracist view are also included in this section. The second section is the summary portion of the assignment. In this section the interviews are compared and contrasted, author reactions and impacts are detailed, and general insights are explained.

Keywords: interviews, gay men, social justice, gracism

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Introduction

There are various ways to gain insight and information about a topic of interest. In the previous portion of the cultural immersion project, I was tasked with researching and attending two cultural events relevant to a specific chosen population- the gay male community. In this subsequent portion of the cultural immersion project, I was tasked with completing two interviews. The first is with a social justice organization, GLAAD, that supports the gay male community, or in this case the LGBTQ+ community as a whole. The second interview is with an individual, Jeremiah Taylor, who identifies as a gay male and is an active participant within my selected population. The interviews detail what these people and organizations stand for, why they believe in their community, their hardships, and stories of overcoming adversity.

Interviews

Organization Interview

The Mission

The first interview I facilitated was with a representative from GLAAD, formerly known as Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation. As one can assume based off the company's name, they are focused on the LGBTQ+ community and their rights. Many social justice organizations exist, and I wanted to know what set GLAAD apart from the others. GLAAD's representative answered this question in two parts. First, I was pointed towards the GLAAD mission statement. The mission statement reads "GLAAD works through entertainment, news, and digital media to share stories from the LGBTQ community that accelerate acceptance" (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023). The second part of this answer was when the representative explained that while a lot of companies have learned the importance and versatility of the media and having an online presence, it was always something that GLAAD was

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focused on from the beginning. GLAAD aimed to rewrite the LGBTQ+ narrative in the media, giving this population the awareness they deserve (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023).

Services

I also inquired about the services provided to this community. Overall, this organization aims to make sure the coverage in all facets of the media- television, newspapers, radio, magazines, movies, and things alike - are fair and accurate about this population and the issues they face. GLAAD works to find the unbiased facts and coverage, ensuring that this population has a voice. GLAAD offers various forms of services, such as surveys, interviews, research, news coverage, and youth engagement programs. Because of the multifaceted nature of the services provided to the LGBTQ+ community, there are multiple ways the served population is made aware of all that is available. GLAAD holds their own annual award gala, there are online resources on their website, the GLAAD blog, as well as GLAAD YouTube videos. GLAAD uses all media platforms to reach various individuals, both within and outside of the LGBTQ+ community (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023). It was explained that social media and platforms alike are so ingrained and prevalent in our society, it is the easiest way to spread awareness about GLAAD and what it has to offer supporters.

Current Needs

While GLAAD has been one of the most successful social justice organizations for the LGBTQ+ community, including gay men, there are also still needs that need to be met. The areas of greatest need, not only for the organization, but also within the LGBTQ+ population are recognition and validation. The GLAAD representative explained that the LGBTQ+ community has been historically mistreated and underserved. It was stated that, "Being recognized and

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respected as an organization and as a community goes hand in hand. You cannot have one without the other. We are trying to create a true image of this community, fight for equality, bring awareness to social issues, and things alike- but all of this has to source from somewhere. Donations from our supporters are extremely helpful and can actually help make a difference” (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023). The issues of finances are also addressed within the statement, saying that none of the goals can be attained without funding from somewhere. Even outside of GLAAD and the LGBTQ+ community, finances play a large role in the level of exposure and support an organization can acquire.

Challenges

When asked about challenges GLAAD faces serving the LGBTQ+, including the gay male population, a few details were noted during the interview. First, the topic of conversation was opponents of the goal of GLAAD. Heterosexism, homophobia, and pure hatred are something that the company faces every day. While all of GLAAD’s employees believe in the cause and mission of the organization, it does not come without its challenges. The representative explained how “There are always going to be people who believe the opposite of what you do. It is imperative to stand up for what you believe in... because if you don’t, who will?” (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023). Opponents of LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy are rooted in all different walks of life- ranging from protesters on the street to those protected by the secret service. Another prominent issue for the LGBTQ+ population that was discussed was misinformation. It was explained that there are a number of rumors spread about this population. The GLAAD representative continued by saying that debunking rumors is like trying to put out a forest fire with a bucket of water. An example of this that was provided during the interview was how the drag community, which is gay males specifically, is causing the school shootings in

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America. To address these challenges, GLAAD intends to keep shining light on the truth. For both of these concerns, giving people the resources to access the truth is a key component in helping others understand and learn to advocate for this misunderstood population. It was stated, “Like many within the LGBTQ+ population would agree... the truth sets people free” (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023).

Importance of Social Justice

Relating to the previous notion that the LGBTQ+ community is misunderstood and misconstrued in the media, the importance of social justice is highlighted. The GLAAD representative explained that because the LGBTQ+ community has been publicly humiliated, and essentially crucified by the hands of the media and society, the need for organizations such as GLAAD and others alike is ever-present. Social justice organizations were described as “essential” to the LGBTQ+ population (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023). Without engaging in social justice, there would be no one to fight for the rights of this community. For those who work at GLAAD, this serves as an opportunity to help make the world a better place. The representative explained, “This organization serves as more than an employment or internship opportunity. It is making a true, real-life difference” (GLAAD representative, personal communication, May 1, 2023).

Individual Interview

Background

Moving onto a smaller scale interview, I spoke with twenty-three-year-old Jeremiah Taylor. Taylor confirmed he identifies with the gale male population. Taylor shared that he moved around a lot in his early childhood, and he often felt that he did not have one place to truly belong. Eventually he found stability in Bartow, FL living with his father. Taylor shared that in high

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school, he found a passion for cheerleading. Even though Taylor was not publicly open about his sexuality in his early high school years, he shared that cheer gave him a place to feel accepted and a community to cheer him on- quite literally. Through the formation of meaningful friendships with teammates and coaches, he began to feel more comfortable about who he truly was.

At the age of seventeen, Taylor publicly came out as gay to his family. He shared that life has gotten easier from that point as, as he felt he could finally live as himself. He stated, “The mask from my emotions, my aura, and my sexuality had been removed” (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2023). He opened up further about his coming out experience, describing that it was not easy. In fact, at the time, it was one of the most difficult things he had to do. “I did not want to let my family down... but I also did not want to let myself down,” he stated. He continued by saying, “I had deep-rooted fears that my family wouldn’t accept me. I knew that my family would never ostracize me, but I had heard other stories of children being practically disowned because of their mannerisms and sexual orientation. It was a very scary reality to face a young kid” (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Since coming out to his family and friends, Taylor has excelled in various areas of life. He is currently newly engaged and is pursuing continuing education in dental hygiene.

Key Cultural Events

According to Taylor, there are a few of key cultural events that shaped his life in both positive and negative ways. Starting with the positive, Taylor shares that at the age of twenty, he began to explore his feminine side and love for makeup, hair, and fashion by becoming a drag queen. According to Taylor, “Drag had brought me so many different opportunities that are nothing short of amazing. I have been able to travel to different parts of the world, headline important shows within the LGBTQ+ community-such as pride parades, and even perform for children with

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similar interests as me. It has truly been one of the most rewarding things I have ever done” (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Taylor expressed his appreciation for the LGBTQ+ and drag community, saying they offer him a safe haven and an opportunity for genuine representation.

While there are many positives, Taylor also shared that he believes it is important to acknowledge and understand the negative sides of his situation as well. Taylor began to explain this by stating, “Growing up as a gay male was a bit difficult for me, but I realize that it has been much easier than earlier times in America. I understand things that what I have endured as a part of the LGBTQ+ community has been much easier than my elder community members” (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Here, he touches on the fact that there is both current and historical oppression of his chosen communities as a whole. Though times are changing, we still have not reached equality. Interactions with the majority culture include experiences of discrimination. Even when it comes to drag, Taylor faces challenges. He describes that, “Being an entertainer is troubling at times. The backlash from everyone intensified, including some of those within my community. It made me second guess this part of my identity that was forming” (J. Taylor, personal communication, April 30, 2023). Taylor felt as though he can continue to work and perform through the backlash, as it is important to stand up for yourself and speak on what’s right.

Reflection

As Jeremiah shared his story, I was really taken aback by the level of perseverance he has demonstrated through his life. Personally, I was really inspired by his choices to choose freedom and continue to push for what is right. Even when it was difficult for him, he chose the path that was rewarding rather than easy. Especially when speaking about his response to difficult cultural

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events, he could have let the negativity weigh him down. It is easy to internalize heterosexism and homophobia. Not surprisingly, individuals within the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to suffer from depression, suicide, anxiety, and substance abuse and related disorders (Hays & Erford, 2022). I was, to be completely truthful, surprised he had not struggled more with mental health given these stats. I think I responded in such a way due to my experiences with this cultural group thus far. By interviewing an individual and immersing myself in the culture, all of the statistics were no longer just numbers. In my eyes, they are people- all of whom have a story.

Based solely on the interview experience, I gained further knowledge about the gay male population. While I learned lots about statistics on mental health, LGBTQ+ prevalence, and cultural customs, I was only able to acquire what was presented in scholarly research and open experiences. Interviewing gave me an opportunity to go below the surface with people who wanted their story told. I learned so much about the impact immediate surroundings have on LGBTQ+ individuals. When talking with the interviewees, I was able to see just how much of an impact social support has on someone's daily life and overall life satisfaction. It was clear that when the external environment gave cues that it was an accepting place, people let their guards down. I also learned that there are various ways to approach hard subjects, and the way things are worded has a significant impact, especially with this community in particular.

Gracism

Throughout the course, I have been tasked with reading Anderson's (2023) book *Gracism: The Art of Inclusion*. Within the book, there are seven main sayings discussed and detailed. While all of them can be applied in some capacity, there are some that apply to the gay male population specifically. Of those seven sayings, "I will stand with you" and "I will celebrate with you" are best applied. Anderson explains the saying "I will stand with you" by explaining how unity aligns

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us with God. When a community is working towards accepting and loving one another, they are following the order of the Lord to love your neighbor. However, if people cling to division, it aligns them with the kingdom of darkness- in which its sole purpose is to separate (Anderson, 2023). The second saying, “I will celebrate with you”, means uplifting others and commemorating their wins in life (Anderson, 2023). It is easy to celebrate the wins in our own lives, but actively searching for the accomplishments and good deeds in the lives of others around us takes intention.

Based on my experiences from this immersion experience, specific ways that I can engage as a gracist with the gay male population are extending a helping hand when needed, celebrating victories in their lives, and acknowledging how the world impacts them. To go about doing these things, I think it is important realize that my purpose here on Earth is to love, not to judge. God is the ultimate judge of our lives and our decisions, so it is important to remember I am not here to fulfill that role. One last way I could apply gracism principles is by helping clientele who identify as LGBTQ+ identify their “red dot”, or more commonly recognized as their insecurities, and help them work through those in appropriate ways (Anderson, 2023).

Summary

Similarities and Differences

After completing both the first portion of the cultural immersion project- research and events- and the second portion- the interviews- I noticed distinct similarities and differences between the information learned within each phase. The most apparent similarity is that both portions of this project allowed me to gain deeper insight into the gay male population through various types of exposure. Through the completion of both portions, I was able to attain information on what it means to be an individual within the LGBTQ+ community, the stigma related to identifying as gay, the pressing social issues that are still prevalent in society, cultural

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customs, as well as baseline statistics and relevant percentages on populations and mental health. Recognizably, though, this information was obtained through different means. The research portion gave me peer-reviewed completely truthful information through an electronic screen. The events portion allowed me to get a deep-dive experience into the culture of the gay male community. The interviews allowed me to really reach a more intimate level of stories and information. There was a greater emotional impact when I heard the story come from an actual individual rather than words in an article. The interview portion of this project really allowed me to become familiar with real community members and learn their unique stories. I was able to create a very individualized experience rather than applying the blanket statements to the entire population.

Personal Reaction

From the interview experience specifically, I learned that you cannot have any sort of expectation when it comes to the answers you think you will receive. The two things that were the most surprising about the information gathered through interviewing both an individual and a social justice organization are the level of openness that was immediately fostered, and the level of appreciation shown to me for inquiring about this community. From the very beginning of the interviews, both parties were extremely open to sharing their stories and facing their emotions. In my own experience, it was often taught that we need to learn to control our emotions and appear strong in front of others. The interviewees' reaction was the opposite of the general cultural norm in my world. After looking into this further, I learned that members of the LGBTQ+ community seek out professional help more than their heterosexual counterparts due to the greater level of discrimination and unjust perceptions (Hays & Erford, 2022). And for my second point, I was surprised at their positive reactions to my questions because, often times, people are reluctant to

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share their most pressing issues. I think because this community has been repressed various times throughout history, they are proud to speak on the challenges they face.

Personal Impact

By immersing myself in a culture different from my own, I feel the weight of its impact. I have changed in numerous ways- I feel as though I have grown in my ability to exude cultural humility, be an ally, and recognize heterosexism. According to Lekas et al. (2020) cultural humility includes being open to sharing the power with clients, being open to learning from clients, and appreciating their untrained expertise in their culture. For me, I feel as though I can now successfully do these things. I realize that while I have done the research, they are ultimately living in the culture, and I am not. By growing in these areas, I have also grown in my ability to be an ally. Being an effective ally involves taking all LGBTQ+ ages seriously, understanding this population is multidimensional, learning from multiple sources, a willingness to be uncomfortable, and prioritizing safety (Uttamchandani et al., 2019). Through my experiences of interviewing and meeting people at events, I realize how large of an impact an effective ally can have. This is especially important when I recognize heterosexism, both intentional and unintentional. I feel as though I am more aware of discriminatory behavior, oppression, and prejudice towards this community. Therefore, I am able to identify it in various types of situations.

General Insights

Throughout the cultivation of this experience of cultural immersion, I have learned so much about interacting with different populations, but more specifically the gay male population. In general, I have taken three general insights from this project. The first is that action that is rooted in fear or hate will never be successful. The second, which is mainly pulled from the interviews and other in person interactions, is that you cannot have hatred towards yourself but still live a life

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that you love. The third general insight is that, while it may seem obvious, there are always going to be people that dislike you or the mainstream culture you belong to. It is not your job to live your life according to the persona that someone has expected you to be. My perspective of working with culturally different individuals changed through this project by highlighting how much power words can hold. One person does have the ability to make a difference in some way. To apply these insights and new knowledge in my future work with culturally different clients, I plan to never take vulnerability for granted. Some individuals have been on a quest to find just one person who will intently listen. For me, that is the goal. I want to become an unbiased professional who views everyone as equals yet is not colorblind to cultural differences and distinctive experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interview process of the cultural immersion project was incredibly insightful. I was able to gain a deeper understanding about the daily lives of those who live absorbed in the gay male population. Through the interview interactions, a collaborative communication style was built, and I was able to discuss difficult topics such as social justice, coming out, and acceptance. Through this experience, I was able to learn more about the interactions I have with others, both in and out of the gay male community. Overall, the biggest lesson I took away from this experience are the importance of motivations, positive self-talk, perseverance, and being an ally to those who need you. We all can make an impact, even if it just reaches one person's life- it is worth it.

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