

Metronormativity: A Philosophical Understanding of the Masking of Rural LGBTQ+ Agriculture Teachers' Lived Experiences

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Introduction

As Murray et al. (2020) stated in the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, “For more than 30 years, the field of agricultural education has been grappling with complex questions of how to recruit, support, retain, and teach diverse youth” (p. 296). A key part of this is understanding how the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) community is often portrayed as an exclusively urban experience leaving out those living in rural areas. Called metronormativity, this theoretical framework allowed the researchers to assess the current literature on rural LGBTQ+ individuals. Importantly, this work extends the work of Murray et al. (2020) by not only focusing on LGBTQ+ students but including LGBTQ+ agriculture teachers and their lived experiences.

Conceptual Framework

In analyzing the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in rural communities, the researchers found a common theme within the literature regarding the invalidation of rural LGBTQ+ life. The conceptual framework that allowed the researchers to conduct a review of the literature surrounding rural LGBTQ+ experiences is metronormativity. Metronormativity is a societal bias that universalizes LGBTQ+ urban identities and within which rural LGBTQ+ experiences are excluded (Podmore & Bain, 2020). A common belief central to the metronormative narrative is that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to experience violence in rural rather than urban places (Abelson, 2016).

Methodology

For this project, the researchers conducted a conceptual review of metronormativity. Coombs and Le Roi (1991) describe a conceptual analysis as a philosophical inquiry into topics that need further investigation. In conducting a conceptual review of metronormativity, the researchers reviewed literature that examined the concept of metronormativity and assessed its implications for rural LGBTQ+ agriculture teachers. The researchers analyzed literature in agricultural education, rural sociology, Queer theory, education, and LGBTQ+ studies. The review included journals, books, and edited anthologies.

The researchers utilized a social constructivist philosophical worldview. Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which one lives and works (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Social constructivists base their decisions on social interactions, rather than a biology of cognitive structures.

Results

To understand the importance of metronormativity, one example lies with the murder of Matthew Shepard. Shepard, a rural gay man, was brutally killed by two men in Wyoming on October 6th, 1998 (Ott & Aoki, 2002). Through this antigay hate crime, Shepard’s death sparked conversations surrounding LGBTQ+ life in rural communities (Noelle, 2002). However, the narrative that emerged around Shepard’s death instead supported the metronormative mindset that LGBTQ+ people are not safe in rural areas and must move to urban areas (Sikk & Meyer, 2019).

Since then, research has shown LGBTQ+ narratives depicted in the media primarily represent life for urban LGBTQ+ individuals (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Through these depictions, the urban experience is the norm making the universal LGBTQ+ experience seem to only occur in urban areas (Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). Metronormative narratives make rural LGBTQ+ lives invisible and for teachers, makes supporting them all the more important.

The researchers discovered that metronormativity has an impact on LGBTQ+ youth as well. Recognizing and supporting LGBTQ+ youth students in rural areas is essential (Sorgen & Rogers, 2020). As Stone (2018) states, “The city is imagined as a place of community and freedom from surveillance” (p. 1). As a result, rural LGBTQ+ youth feel they must flee rural areas to escape the surveillance of their heteronormative communities (Gray, 2009).

Today, the LGBTQ+ literature is moving away from metronormativity towards conceptualizing anti-urbanism (Herring, 2007). To combat metronormativity, anti-urbanism argues that the lived experiences of rural LGBTQ+ individuals reveal many positives of living in rural areas (Kazyak, 2012). In addition, rural LGBTQ+ teachers may also influence LGBTQ+ youth to stay in a rural area (Kosciw, 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The researchers conclude that additional research needs to be conducted to understand the impact of metronormativity for both agricultural science teachers and students. Agricultural science educators that identify within the LGBTQ+ community need to feel empowered to teach in rural communities, and the profession needs to include practices that encourage LGBTQ+ individuals to seek a career in agricultural science education and other facets of the agricultural industry. Moreover, the researchers recommend that teacher educators teach their preservice teachers on supporting LGBTQ+ youth in their classrooms.

The researchers further indicate that other terms, like metronormativity, need attention, such as heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and rural masculinity. Additionally, within the LGBTQ+ literature, while gay men are one of the most populous demographics (Herring, 2007), research must also include other members of the LGBTQ+ community to ensure those individuals feel supported as well.

In contrast to metronormativity, anti-urbanism is the opposite which means that rural LGBTQ+ people can thrive. Additional support is needed in rural areas for LGBTQ+ agriculture teachers, youth, and allies. Research shows that diverse representation in the classroom matters, including the presence of LGBTQ+ teachers in rural communities (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013).

LGBTQ+ people choose to live in rural areas for many of the same reasons straight people do because it is where they are from, where their families live, or where they feel at home (Gray et al., 2016). Therefore, rural LGBTQ+ agriculture teachers need the support of school districts and community members to serve their schools to their fullest extent.

Rural LGBTQ+ persons fare no worse than their urban counterparts regarding their sense of wellbeing (Wienke & Hill, 2013). When researching the LGBTQ+ narratives, the researchers ask that additional research to highlight the LGBTQ+ teachers’ lived experiences instead of relying on metronormative assumptions about being LGBTQ+ in rural communities.

To conclude, understanding LGBTQIA+ topics may empower agricultural educators that identify as queer (Murray et al., 2020). Having these conversations has the potential to encourage LGBTQIA+ individuals to seek agriculture education careers.

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