Clearly Queer: Pride and Visibility at Gay Pride Celebrations
Charlie Curtis, Class of 2014

Gay Pride celebrations are an annual feature of many cities and towns throughout the United States. These are highly visible events — attendance frequently numbers in the tens or hundreds of thousands, and even into the millions for the largest events such as those in New York City and San Francisco. They are meant to draw attention to the queer (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, asexual, and otherwise non-heterosexual) community and to provide a place for the expression and celebration of queer identities. I was intrigued by the frequent connection of pride with visibility (and shame with invisibility) at Pride events and in queer culture more broadly. This linkage presents a particular idea of what it means to be queer: that we must be out and visible in order to experience authentic happiness and a truly complete life.

I spent the month of June conducting ethnographic fieldwork at Gay Pride celebrations in Boston, Portland, ME, and New York City. While there, I interviewed sixteen participants in the events, whose different involvements included event organizers, marchers in the parades, volunteers, and audience members. I also attended parades, street festivals, and rallies and observed the different messages about, and ways that people acted out, pride and visibility. By participating in Pride, particularly as a queer person, I was better able to understand some of the experiences that my interview subjects talked about, but which were difficult to describe. I spent the remainder of my fellowship period on campus transcribing interviews, investigating the media coverage surrounding Pride events, reading about queer history, queer ethics, and queer theory, and meeting with my faculty advisor to discuss my ideas and research.

My interviews with Pride participants indicate that many of my initial perceptions about how the queer community views pride and visibility were correct. Most people believed that seeing other out queer people helps those who are still closeted or ashamed to feel proud of themselves, and that Pride events do this on a mass scale. Furthermore, people tended to define their own sense of pride in terms of being out or “not hiding” their queer identity. This led many of the people I interviewed to argue that in almost all cases queer people should come out in order to help others in the community and to show straight people that queer people are not stereotypes. However, I also found that many people were ambivalent about some of the particular visual aspects of Pride, and with certain aspects of visibility more generally. A frequent comment was that, while people are not ashamed of their queer identity and do not seek to hide it, they also do not “flaunt” it. Similarly, a common concern about Pride events was that if there was nudity or behavior that too blatantly referenced sex and sexuality, all of the attention would be directed at those individuals. This was concerning for people both because they feared that other groups and individuals would not receive the visibility they deserved and because they did not want “the rest” of society to believe that Pride and the queer community are solely focused on sex.

My work this summer has prompted me to think about a number of questions. What do we mean when we talk about pride (or shame)? What makes someone visible (or invisible)? Who watches Pride? How does the audience dictate what is an appropriate (or inappropriate) expression of pride or visibility? What are our responsibilities to the queer community as members of it? While none of these questions are answerable within the short period of my summer research, I will continue to investigate them as I work on my honors project during the upcoming year.

Faculty Mentor: Sara Dickey

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