How Do You Solve a Problem Like Will Truman?

The Feminization of Gay Masculinities on Will & Grace

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Although many gay men do not engage in effeminate behavior, they still may be feminized in social interaction. This article illustrates the importance of this distinction through a two-method study of the popular sitcom Will & Grace. The show includes multiple representations of gay masculinities, from the effeminate gay man to the more masculine “very straight gay.” However, a comprehensive content analysis shows that both gay primary characters frequently are feminized by other characters on the show, often in efforts to castigate them. Very few of these feminizing moments occur as a result of the characters acting in effeminate ways, thus emphasizing the immanent femininity of gay men. Focus group participants’ interpretations of this phenomenon include obliviousness to these moments, anger over their inclusion, and acceptance of their role in the show and in real gay life.

Keywords: homosexuality; gay men; masculinities; media; camp

While hegemonic masculinity remains the idealized form of masculinity within American culture, recent changes in gay masculinities have challenged this form. In his volume on gay masculinities, Nardi (2000) observes, “Although rejecting hypermasculinity and effeminacy, many gay men embrace a ‘very straight gay’ style by enacting both hegemonic masculinity and gay masculinity in their daily lives” (p. 6). If many gay men are “as conventionally masculine in their dress and demeanor as most heterosexual men” (Lorber 1994, 62), the boundaries between the forms of masculinity may become blurred, causing significant cultural angst (Colman 2005). By engaging in some of the behaviors of hegemonic masculinity,
gay men are able to contest it (Anderson 2002). As Connell (1995) suggests, “The ‘very straight gay’ is a contradictory position in the politics of gender” (pp. 162-63). If gay men do their gender in hegemonic ways, does this destabilize the gender order as we know it (West and Zimmerman 1987)?

Hardly. The gender order remains stable, with hegemonic masculinities firmly ensconced at the top, because American culture does a thorough job of connecting gay masculinities to a more broadly subordinated gender form: femininities. While many gay men may no longer act effeminately, they remain feminized. This distinction between effeminacy and feminization has been overlooked, since much of the research on gay men has concentrated on their behavior (Green 1987; Kleinberg 1987; Levine 1998). In speaking of the effeminacy of gay men, one implicitly lends agency to the actor: An effeminate gay man is one who does his gender in feminine ways. While a gay man’s personal comportment is an important aspect of his gender identity, he is not the only one who constructs this identity. Indeed, the social construction of gender implies a process of interaction (Hollander and Howard 1996). Gender may be done to him by others. Even if a gay man does not engage in effeminate behavior, he still may be feminized by others. Regardless of a gay man’s comportment, his sexual object choice is not heterosexual and is therefore subordinated. Often, this subordination is manifested by feminization. Some of this feminizing is accomplished by heterosexual men who, as arbiters of hegemonic masculinity, hold an interest in clarifying this gender divide. However, feminizing can also occur through interactions among gay men themselves or interactions among gay men and women. Studying such feminization provides an opportunity to address an important question posed by Chen (1999):

Two themes in particular have received substantial attention: how subaltern men are exploited and how subaltern men resist their exploitation. But comparatively less is known about how subaltern men . . . can contribute to their own oppression and the oppression of women. The subaltern has been understood as a victim and a resistor, but how fully has he been understood as an accomplice or even a perpetrator? (P. 587)

The meaning behind these feminizing instances may vary. Feminization could be read as praise for the gay man for embracing femininity and denying aspects of hegemonic masculinity, many of which involve harmful behavior (Kimmel and Messner 2000). Feminization also could be considered an element of camp. Definitions of camp abound and include a wide-ranging set of behaviors that many consider a potent source of power for oppressed groups (Meyer 1994; Ross 1989). Using this lens, feminization among gay men could be considered a form of political parody: Rigid gender roles are deserving of ridicule. When hegemonic masculinity puts gay men down, they are able to fight back by camping it up and in a sense taking ownership of their oppression.

However, feminization may also serve to castigate the gay man, stigmatizing him as “no better than a woman.” These latter moments simultaneously oppress women
and gay men. In his classic essay “It’s Being So Camp as Keeps Us Going,” Richard Dyer (2002) captures the conflict inherent in camp feminization:

... [T]here is something rather suspect about this habit [of camping]. Isn’t it tantamount to saying gay men are inferior to straight men, just as women are? Isn’t it really a put down of gay men, and of women? It’s hard to decide and in the end I think I’ll go on doing it because I’d rather gay men identified with straight women than with straight men, since most of the values associated with masculinity in this society (aggressiveness, competitiveness, being “above” tenderness and emotion) I reject. Yet the whole practice, like so much of camp, is deeply ambiguous. So much depends on what you feel about men and women, about sex, about being gay. (Pp. 50-51)

In this ambiguity simultaneously rests potential political power as well as the possibility of a harmful cycle of self-oppression.

The feminization of gay men attests to the links between homophobia and sexism, especially among heterosexual men. Heterosexual men are markedly more homophobic than heterosexual women (Fone 2000; Kite and Whitley 1998). Fulfilling the demand to be seen as neither feminine nor gay sharply affects male behavior:

Homophobia is intimately interwoven with both sexism and racism. The fear—sometimes conscious, sometimes not—that others might perceive us as homosexual propels men to enact all manner of exaggerated masculine behaviors and attitudes to make sure that no one could possibly get the wrong idea about us. (Kimmel 1994, 133)

The role of gender becomes even clearer when one realizes that heterosexual men’s attitudes toward gay men are significantly more negative than they are toward lesbians (Herek 2002). It is not only the same-sex sexual acts that repulse some heterosexual men but also the various gender transgressions that are assumed to accompany gay identity.

This article examines how this feminization plays out within an element of American popular culture. Most of the data on gay masculinities come from in-depth interviews or life histories focusing on the individual as a site of gender construction (Anderson 2002; Connell 1992; Nardi 2000). However, it is important not to overlook other sites where gender is constructed. American media products offer the public many examples of gay masculinities. For many Americans, this may be their only exposure to the lives of gay men. Historically, these images tended toward representations of effeminate gay men (Capsuto 2000; Russo 1987). Dyer (2002) warns of the danger in allowing mainstream media to engage in camp, arguing that the media “pick up the undertow of self-oppression without ever latching on to the elements of criticism and defiance of straightness” (p. 51). As the number of gay characters in the media flourished in the last years of the twentieth century, images of gay men did become more varied. Studying these images in a systematic way
remained difficult, though, since the gay characters were minor and/or fleeting. However, in the fall of 1998, a mainstream network show debuted and became a mainstay of American popular culture. That show is *Will & Grace*. The show is notable not only for its success but also because it features multiple representations of gay masculinities. As I will show below, *Will & Grace* raises an interesting question: When a corporate media product engages in camp feminization, does it effect political progress or simply reinscribe long-standing oppressions?

In its first year, *Will & Grace* immediately received accolades and found a steady audience. In its second year, it won several Emmy Awards, including Best Comedy Series. In its third season, its network moved the show to a coveted time slot, dramatically increasing its ratings. The show ranked twelfth for this season, having experienced a 44 percent increase in viewship from the previous season, with an average of 17.3 million viewers each week (Snierson 2001). Since this zenith, the show has decreased in ratings popularity, drowning in a sea of reality television. For the 2004-2005 season, the show ranked forty-first, pulling in an average of 10.2 million viewers (*Entertainment Weekly*, 2005). However, this still makes it the third most popular sitcom, and it was renewed for an eighth and final season. The show has also achieved the holy grail of sitcoms: rerun syndication. It provides the American viewing public with the most constant current stream of media images of gay men (at least upper-middle-class, white, urban gay men). It is also politically relevant, since analyses of the 2004 elections sometimes referred to the blue states as *Will & Grace* states.

The show is also important because it provides millions of viewers with multiple representations of gay masculinities. The title character fits the description of Connell’s (1992) “very straight gay” or Seidman’s (2005) “normal gay.” Will Truman—note the last name—appears to be a poster boy for hegemonic masculinity. He is a corporate attorney, a profession occupied disproportionately by men. For most of the time he is on-screen, he is wearing a suit and tie. He is often portrayed as emotionally reserved but with a tendency for lashing out, the emotional traits characteristic of straight masculinity described by Dyer (2002) above. Shugart (2003) has argued that Will even functions as a father figure for his friend Grace, constantly serving as a source of logical advice or as a way out of a predicament. His friend and sidekick Jack McFarland embodies Connell’s (1987) “emphasized femininity”: he in several ways complies with his subordination and accommodates the desires of men. He proudly and continually declares his financial dependence on Will. He is obsessed with body image and skin tone. He worships celebrity divas who are iconic images of female beauty. *Will & Grace* is mainstream American media’s first real and long-standing attempt at depicting multiple gay identities. The formula seems clear: Take one effeminate gay man, one very straight gay, and add two of their female friends (Grace Adler and Karen Walker).

On closer examination, though, the gendering of the two gay characters is not so distinct. I show that the very straight gay is verbally feminized more often than the
effeminate gay character. While the show does have diversity in the gay characters it has developed, it ultimately reemphasizes the divide between hegemonic masculinity and the masculinities embodied by gay men. *Will & Grace* eases tensions in the gender order by pushing its gay characters again and again into the realm of femininity. On the surface, Will Truman may embody hegemonic masculinity, but he is gay and therefore feminized. Other research on *Will & Grace* (Cooper 2003; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002) has commented on this but only in passing. In contrast, I have conducted a content analysis of the 162 episodes from the first seven seasons of the show.

While analyzing these messages elicits important findings about the feminization of gay men, it is also paramount to understand how audiences interpret these moments. I take seriously one of the mantras of media studies: Audiences are active viewers who bring to their watching different sets of experiences and beliefs that affect how they interpret cultural products (Gamson 1998; Gamson et al. 1992). With this in mind, I also conducted a set of focus groups with both heterosexual and gay and lesbian audiences of a variety of ages to assess how audiences grapple with these representations.

Method

Content analysis is useful for identifying patterns in various media (Weber 1990). For this project, my research assistants and I analyzed the 162 episodes from the first seven seasons of *Will & Grace*. The source material comes from videotapes of the episodes as well as verbatim scripts from a fan’s Web site (Durfee 2005). I first located every instance in which a male character was the subject of a feminine reference. Two research assistants and I then coded these instances for object (who is being talked about), source (who says it), type of reference, context, and provoking behavior.

The codes for type of reference concerned the specific substance of the reference. The codes, developed inductively, are as follows: basic (reference uses a basic term that a female is called, such as *she*, *girl*, *woman*, *lady*, and so on); classic (reference was one of five words that have been used since the earlier part of the twentieth century to feminize gay men: *sissy*, *fairy*, *Nancy*, *Mary*, and *queen*); bitch (a word used frequently enough to merit its own category); body (reference implied that the object had female body parts or desired to be of the female sex); family (reference was related to mothers or other family members); celebrity (reference compares the object to a real-life celebrity); pop culture (references to popular culture, such as movies, books, operas, and other television shows); clothing (reference concerns the object wearing female clothing, makeup, or accessories); and other (reference did not fit into the above categories).

Context refers to the tone in which the reference was delivered. The codes for context are as follows: banter (reference delivered in the course of playful banter or
as a joke); conflict (reference delivered in a moment of conflict, a fight, or an attempt to express disdain for the object); love (reference delivered during a loving moment or if the source was paying the object a compliment); hello/goodbye (reference was part of a greeting); and other (reference did not fit any of the above categories).

For provoking behavior, we coded whether the reference was made in response to feminine behavior on the part of the object. For example, in an episode in the third season, a frightened Will screams in a high-pitched voice in an effort to scare away a burglar. After doing so, he asks Grace, “Did I just scream like a woman?” to which she replies, “Don’t flatter yourself; you scream like a girl.” We coded these references as being in response to feminine behavior because the object, Will, was indeed engaging in behavior that most would find feminine.1 In another example, Karen calls Jack “Miss Fire Island” after Jack puts on her tiara and earrings and pretends to be a beauty pageant winner. A final component of the content analysis involved using stopwatches to assess the screen time allotted to Will and Jack.

We also conducted seven focus groups—one pretest focus group and six real ones—to assess audience interpretations of both the show and the results of the content analysis. We conducted these groups near the end of the third season of the show. The six real groups were as follows: (1) gay and lesbian youth group members, (2) heterosexual high school students, (3) gay and lesbian college students, (4) heterosexual college students, (5) gay and lesbian adults, and (6) heterosexual adults. The six groups involved thirty-nine participants recruited through a variety of channels: introductory sociology classes, gay and lesbian support groups, and personal contacts. All were familiar with the show, but not all were ardent fans. Nineteen were female; twenty were male. Twenty identified as gay or lesbian; nineteen identified as heterosexual. Eleven were nonwhite; twenty-eight were white. Although the participants were a diverse group, they in no way are statistically representative of any larger population. Focus groups are not meant to elicit generalizable results (Hollander 2000, Morgan 1988). The results, then, should be viewed as descriptive and suggestive.

The focus groups lasted from one hour to two-and-a-half hours. To protect the identities of the participants and to facilitate transcription, we gave each participant a letter of the alphabet to place in front of himself or herself and asked each to choose a pseudonym that started with that letter. Prior to the discussion, the participants filled out a sheet that included questions about their viewing habits, what they like and don’t like about the show, whether they consider the show to be important, how they describe the two gay characters, and whether they consider Will and Jack to be accurate portrayals of gay men. After we discussed their answers, we told the group that the first question on the second sheet was “What did all of these scenes have in common?”

The group then watched a thirteen-minute tape with twenty-five clips from the show, each having a feminine reference in it. These clips were arranged chronologically, and I developed a random sampling method that produced a representative sample of moments, stratified by object, source, context, and type of reference. After
watching the clips, the participants filled out a second sheet that asked them what the scenes had in common, whether they had noticed these moments before, how frequently they thought these moments occurred, how they felt about these moments, and who (Will or Jack) they thought was the object of such references more often. Unexpectedly, members of some focus groups had difficulty with the first question. In these instances, I described what the clips had in common, and they finished filling out the sheet. We then discussed these questions as a group.

Next, I presented the group with eight graphs from the content analysis. These graphs contained data from all of seasons 1 and 2 and the first two-thirds of season 3. We looked at each graph together, and I addressed any questions they had. The group then filled out a final sheet, which asked them about their reactions to the results. Finally, the group discussed these reactions.

I transcribed all the tape-recorded conversations. For analysis, I coded a few answers from the sheets they filled out, but I concentrated primarily on the discussions. To code the discussions, I gave each prominent theme (e.g., “it’s just a sitcom” and “variety of gay portrayals”) a separate sheet and then listed instances of each theme on the sheet, keeping track of which types of participants were more likely to discuss certain themes.

Results: Content Analysis

Some argue that Will & Grace offers positive depictions of the lives of gay men. Indeed, the show has been a recipient of numerous honors from the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, a media watchdog organization. However, as the content analysis illustrates in several ways, Will & Grace consistently feminizes the gay men on the show, often in potentially harmful ways. In the first seven seasons of the show, male characters were referenced in the feminine 625 times. Of these references, 605 were directed at gay men on the show. At an average of 3.5 times per episode, the show equates gay men with women. There is a fair amount of variation in the number of references per episode: Twelve episodes contain no references, while three episodes contain 10 or more references. There is also some variation on a season-by-season basis, with each of the seven seasons having the following number of feminizing references: 94, 90, 103, 78, 86, 97, and 57.

One might expect that the majority of these references would be toward Jack, the more effeminate character. However, this expectation is not confirmed by the data. Will has been the object of feminine references 282 times; Jack has been the object 249 times. There have been 94 references to other people (74 of these to other gay men). This is the first instance of an important message sent by the show: Regardless of comportment, there is something immanently feminine about gay men. Despite other aspects of Will’s life that are representative of hegemonic masculinity, he is gay and thus feminized.
One possibility is that Will is referenced more frequently simply because he is a primary character. In early seasons of the show, Will had significantly more screen time than Jack (in season 1, for example, Will was on screen for 323 minutes compared to Jack’s 153 minutes). Later seasons are more equal, although Will still gets more screen time. Taking this into account, an interesting trend develops, illustrated in Figure 1. In season 1, based on time between references, Jack was referenced more frequently (every 3 minutes) compared to Will (every 8 minutes). This difference held for the next three seasons. Since season 4, Will has been referenced more frequently.

Now I move on to the substance of these references, providing examples to illustrate their varied nature. A large proportion of the references (22 percent of the references to Will and 28 percent of the references to Jack) are basic: The characters are referred to as women in the course of interaction. For example, after Will suddenly
leaves the country at the end of season 2, Jack explains to Grace, “Yeah, she’s exhausted. Her life, like her hair, had become unmanageable.” On Will’s return at the beginning of season 3, the first thing he says to Jack when he sees him is, “Hey, lady!” Some of the references in this category are subtle, such as when Karen’s Latina housekeeper Rosario refers to Jack as *chica* or *amiga*. The subtle nature of these references arises in the discussion of the focus group data.

Classic references account for 9 percent of the references to Will and 13 percent of the references to Jack. These references are either single names (e.g., “Bring it on, Nancy” and “What about you, Mary?”) or more elaborate combinations (e.g., “blouse-wearing fairy” and “the book of Genesissy”). After Will beats Grace in poker, he jokes, “In this house, a queen beats a straight every time.” These classic references link a current cultural product to a historical feminization.

The body category arose only twenty-two times (ten for Will and twelve for Jack). However, it is an important category, because it implies what some assume about gay men: They desire to be women. In the very first episode of the series, Will says to Jack, “It must be hard for you, trapped in a man’s body like that.” In the middle of season 2, he exclaims, “Congratulations, Jack! I wish you a long, happy life as a woman.” There are several references to female physical processes that are impossible for men to go through. Twice, Will makes reference to himself being pregnant. When Jack is asked how his grieving process over the death of his father is proceeding, he obtusely replies, “I have light days and heavy days. I can ride a horse now.”

Somewhat similar to the body references are the clothing references, which imply that gay men dress or at least want to dress in women’s clothes. Will complains to Jack about his slovenliness thus: “You put on a maid’s uniform, but you never clean.” Jack campily compliments Will’s attire as follows: “Nice shirt. Somewhere a ballerina is shivering.” In season 4, Grace feminizes Will’s lack of a boyfriend as: “You’re an old maid in a threadbare caftan.” Such references are quite frequent, making up 13 percent of the references to Will and 12 percent of the references to Jack.

Mother-oriented or family-oriented references make up 6 percent of the references to Will but only 3 percent of the references to Jack. This difference is most likely because Will is portrayed as responsible and Jack is not. For example, Will responds to Jack’s beeper message, “What’s with the page ‘Baby Bear needs Mama Bear’?” Sometimes, he is considered annoyingly responsible. When Karen is talking on the phone at Grace’s office, and Will and Grace enter, she says, “Oh crap, I gotta go. Mom and Mom are home.” Will aspires to have a family. However, these references imply that he will be a mother, not a father. In one moment in a car when Will is questioning his ability to someday parent, Jack comforts him by saying, “You just did the soccer mom arm save!” There are also several references to Will’s similarities to his mother, such as “I’m two highballs and a tight dress away from being Mom.” Seldom does he compare himself to his father.
The celebrity category favors Jack. Ten percent of the references to Jack are about celebrities, whereas this category makes up only 6 percent of the references to Will. In the episode in which Karen sets up a surprise meeting between Jack and the man she thinks is Jack’s father and Jack subsequently makes the moves on him, Jack exclaims in disgust, “I hit on my father! I’m Soon-Yi!” When Karen does not cooperate with Jack’s production of an award acceptance video, Jack warns her, “Don’t make me get all Whitney on your ass.” The feminizing message is conveyed also through the dearth of masculinizing references, since Jack infrequently compares himself to male celebrities.

The next category is similar to the last, but these references deal with fictional characters rather than real-life celebrities. They constitute a large proportion of the overall number, representing 19 percent of the references to Will and 14 percent of the references to Jack. More so than the other categories, many of these references are subtle and difficult to catch in the midst of a single viewing of the show. Also, one must know a fair amount about both popular and high culture to understand them. For example, at the end of season 2, when Jack moves in with Will, Will tells him to “... take your bags and your menagerie, Laura ...” If one did not know Tennessee Williams’s play, one might not figure out this reference. This reference also illustrates another commonality among some of the references in this category: They make allusions to gay history and culture. Here is another example of this: Kidding Will about his temporary celibacy, Jack says, “Stuck inside the nunnery while all the other girls run around in their miniskirts and take the pill. How do you solve a problem like Will Truman?” making reference to The Sound of Music, a favorite musical among some gay men. Such subtle references reward viewers who have high levels of (gay) cultural capital.

Some references, though, are easier to catch, such as the twenty-two times (eleven each) that Will and Jack are referred to as bitches. Although it represents a small proportion of the overall number of references, the use of this term is important when considering the context during which the reference is uttered, as I discuss below.

There were a number of references that didn’t fit these categories: twenty-seven to Jack (making up 11 percent of his references) and forty-six to Will (making up 16 percent of his references). Some are references to random women’s names (“Wrong-o, Mary Lou”) or made-up names (“Betty McUseless” and “Arrogancia”). Others are feminized adjectives, such as when Will tells Jack to “just sit there and look pretty.”

Which characters are responsible for all this feminizing? It is seldom heterosexual males, who have played a secondary role on the show. There are two findings of note: First is the proportion of the references that are self-references: 21 percent for Will and 33 percent for Jack. These self-references illustrate an acceptance of femininity and a level of comfort with being thought of as a woman. Second, a significant proportion for each character comes from the other gay major character on the
show: Twenty-five percent of Will’s references come from Jack; 33 percent of Jack’s references come from Will. The message is that this is a common way gay men interact: They do femininity to one another.

It is also critical to know the context in which the characters deliver these references. A large proportion of the references are delivered with levity as part of a moment of banter between characters. This only makes sense, since it is a sitcom. Banter makes up 37 percent of the references toward Will and 47 percent of the references toward Jack. For example, when Jack asks Will how his new glasses look, Will responds, “Guys don’t make passes at girls who wear glasses,” a line merely meant to provide a laugh. When Will seems surprised that Grace is doing something with a woman friend, she responds with a smile, “I have girlfriends besides you.”

A key finding of the content analysis is that over a quarter of the references occur in a moment of conflict or in an effort to show disdain toward the object. Twenty-six percent of the references toward Will and 25 percent of the references toward Jack are at such moments. The overall percentage rises to 32 percent when I remove the self-references (for which only 8 percent were conflict oriented). This shows that such references are a common way to make the gay characters feel bad: I am currently mad at you, so I am going to put you down by calling you a woman. An exemplary series of these references comes from an episode in which Will and Jack are giving a sensitivity seminar to a group of police officers. When Jack ruins their presentation, Will angrily attacks him:

**Will:** I just asked you to abandon that queer voice.  
**Jack:** Queer? Who you callin’ queer, you blouse-wearin’ fairy?  
**Will:** This from the homo who minces around the gym in a Lycra onesie!  
**Jack:** Grace wears one!  
**Will:** She’s a woman, you girl!  
**Jack:** Don’t call me a girl! Eyebrow-plucker!  
**Will:** Leg-waxer!  
**Jack:** Lady!  
**Will:** Tramp!

Other references are not quite as dramatic in nature, but they still are meant to express anger at the object. For example, when Grace is trying to give Jack clues while playing a game and Jack won’t stop yelling possible answers, she shouts with an angry look on her face, “Let me give you a clue, woman!” When Grace is upset with Will for demanding that she pay for things, she scowls at him, “Petticoat petty, peppermint petty.” When Karen isn’t happy with Will’s performance in the courtroom, she demands, “Get your ass out there and litigate, bitch!” As might be expected, the word *bitch* is often used to put down: Seventeen of the twenty-one times it is used to describe a gay man, it is used disparagingly. On a regular basis,
the feminizing references are meant to castigate, thus doing harm to both gay men and to women. This is made all the more egregious by the fact that many of these castigating references come from the women on the show (33 percent of the references from Grace and Karen are conflict oriented).

Sometimes, these appellations are more celebratory in nature and are used to express love or at least a compliment. However, only 15 percent of the references to Will and 9 percent of the references to Jack are of this type. On a day when Karen is feeling better about Will’s legal abilities, she declares, “I’ve got the best lawyer in town in my corner, one Miss Wilma Truman!” In an attempt to cheer him up, Will asks Jack, “Who’s the prettiest lady in this room?” Overall, though, few of the references celebrate the gay characters’ femininity. It is much more likely to be viewed as a weakness.

The final element of coding regarded provoking behavior. Were the references made in response to the objects acting in a feminine manner? For the vast majority of these moments, the answer is no. Only 12 percent of the references to Will and 14 percent of the references to Jack are responding to the character acting like a woman. This implies again that there is something about gay men that is inseparably feminine regardless of their comportment. One does not need to wait for feminine behavior to call a gay man woman or she.

With regard to trends over time, besides the shifting of references toward Will and away from Jack, there is one more trend of note: the referencing of heterosexual men in the feminine. This occurred four times in season 6 and fifteen times in season 7, making up 21 percent of the references in that season. Nine of these references in season 7 were part of a running joke. Jack, now an executive at a gay television network, consistently feminizes his heterosexual male assistant:

Jack: Thank you, Elizabeth. Just show her in, please.
Dave: Uh, you know my name’s Dave, right?
Jack: Listen, it’s bad enough I’m the only one here with a straight assistant. Do not make me call you that ridiculous name.
Dave: Yeah, but . . .
Jack: That will be all, Elizabeth!

Because Dave works in a queer space but does not practice queer sexuality, Jack decides that he will queer Dave’s gender instead. Although these references make up a small proportion of the total, they are important because they segue nicely with developments in popular culture, such as the rise of the metrosexual and the increasing tendency to put down straight men by referring to them as bitches (Heffernan 2005).

While the findings from the content analysis may be intriguing, it is important to understand how these references are interpreted by various audiences. One of the potential pitfalls of content analysis occurs when the researcher imbues findings
with too much subjective meaning. Therefore I now turn the interpretation over to the audience by presenting some of the focus group results.

**Results: Focus Groups**

The focus group data reveal that audiences often consume the show in ways that prevent the problematizing of the feminization of gay men. While sometimes angry over these references, this anger often fails to identify the simultaneous oppression of women and gay men. That is, many focus group participants did not see the misogynistic impulse underlying some of these feminine references. Often, rather than anger, focus group participants offered enthusiastic acceptance of this feminization of gay men, arguing that the feminine references should be included in the show. Perhaps most surprising, though, is the extent to which the focus group participants were oblivious to these references.

**Obliviousness.** I first deal with an unexpected finding: the inability on the part of some of the participants to notice these references, even when presented with twenty-five of them back-to-back. Although I warned all groups that they would be asked, “What did all these scenes have in common?” before showing them the clips, just over 40 percent (sixteen out of thirty-nine) of the participants answered this question with the desired response (“men referenced as women,” “female references,” and so on). Another ten participants were on the right track, mentioning stereotypes or clichés but not mentioning the specific feminine nature of them. Another five were only slightly close, mentioning “gay jokes” or “references to homosexuality.” Eight participants were completely off. While this may be considered a methodological problem, given that audiences interpret media in a wide variety of ways and thus should not be expected to be able to find this single element, I argue that it can also be considered a finding, since the obliviousness was patterned. The gay and lesbian participants were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to notice the feminizing. Half of them completely got it, compared to 32 percent of the heterosexual participants. Another 30 percent of the gay and lesbian participants were on the right track, compared to 21 percent of the heterosexual participants. Of the six heterosexual participants who were completely on track, five of them were from the college student group. In this group before I showed the clips, one of the participants explained what he didn’t like about the show:

Another thing, they go too far with the jokes, like Karen, for example, always has the same type of jokes. It’s like, get some new material or whatever. Like, it was funny the first time she called Will “Wilma,” but, you know, after she does it all the time, you know, it’s not so funny anymore. (group 2)
Because this type of reference was brought to this group’s attention prior to the clips, this may have biased their perceptions toward such references.

During the discussion of the clips and the data, a number of participants from both the gay and straight groups admitted that they had never noticed these references before. A gay male student commented:

She (another participant) pointed out that the thing that helped her notice it was that the clips were so repetitive, and it took me, like I said, a long time to realize what was happening, and actually when I really noticed it was when we got to the series of very short, quick clips—that’s when I found it. And I think that says something about this too, I mean, we’re talking about something that, I always laugh at it, I think it’s funny, but I’ve never noticed, like, they’re doing this all the time. And so it’s subtle, and I think that makes a difference. (group 1)

Because these references are parsed out, they simply slip through some people’s consciousness as they lounge on their couches enjoying the show. As one heterosexual participant said, “I really don’t go into too much thought. There’s not too much analysis going on” (group 2). After viewing the data, some said they wouldn’t watch the show the same way now that this had been brought to their attention.

**Anger.** So what are the participants’ interpretations of these references once they do realize they exist? Some were angry or at least concerned about the possibility that these references could reinforce stereotypes. The participants were not concerned that the stereotypes could affect their own attitudes. Rather, they expressed dismay that less sophisticated people might get the wrong idea. Those with limited exposure to openly gay men might base their perceptions only on what they see on television, and the participants saw this as a dangerous prospect. Many concerns of this type were voiced, but a typical example of this comes from an older female heterosexual participant:

Well, it’s reinforcing for people who are homophobic, the female aspect of gay guys, and from that point of view, I don’t, it’s meant to be funny, but it also could be not so funny . . . For some part of the audience, I think it’s reinforcing perhaps what they like to think about gay men. (group 5)

One of the heterosexual high school males was upset about the frequency of the references, implying that they may be connected to antigay speech he hears at school:

. . . [I]t’s an easy way to get a laugh from the audience; it’s like a cheap way. I guess it’s good that it makes the show funny, but it’s really inconsiderate for the writers to do that, if they’re not thinking about how it could really affect, you know, people who go to school the next day and try and be funny. (group 6)
Both the gay and heterosexual groups raised this theme, mostly concerned with the possibility that antigay people would use this to perpetuate the stereotypes they held. However, many discounted the probability of this occurring, positing that such people probably would not watch the show at all.

Only one group—the gay and lesbian adult group—went beyond these notions of stereotype reinforcement and exposed the multiple oppressions implicit in many of these references. A gay man voiced, “Using feminine terms to put down men is degrading to both sexes. I love verbal volleyball, but I just don’t like the use of feminine names to put down a man. I just think it’s rude. It means that they’re trying to put you down. I think it’s just rude to both sexes” (group 3). One of the lesbian participants was the only one in this group who did not notice that all of the references were feminizing. This disturbed her fiercely:

Lesbian 1: But in retrospect thinking back on it, it’s like, oh yeah, and it’s kind of interesting, feeling like I’m a very feminist person, but missing all of these comments that were degrading to women and it’s like, ew, that’s not a good feeling missing that, but I guess I was just trying to enjoy it.

Lesbian 2: It’s disguised.

Lesbian 1: Yes, it’s very much disguised, but that in itself is kind of dangerous.

Gay Man: Well, and we’re immune to it too, I think.

Lesbian 1: Yeah. I’m feeling so desensitized. (group 3)

This theme was completely absent from the other focus groups, illustrating an apparent inability to make critical links between the oppressions that various groups face.

Acceptance. More common than anger was acceptance. There are several ways in which the participants justified the inclusion of the feminine references. First, some participants considered the source of the feminine references. They used the fact that a disproportionate number of the references came from the gay characters, either referencing themselves or targeting the other gay character. Because it is an in-joke, it is acceptable. But some still realize the danger in this, since people not in the in-joke group may not realize that it is unacceptable behavior for them. A gay youth explains,

I totally think, as a gay audience, it’s OK, and I’m sorry I do have a double standard here because as gay people, like, I feel comfortable, like, I will call, I’ll be like, “Oh, you’re such a fag,” and I feel it’s OK for me to say that. However, a lot of people probably, of course they have contact with gay people, but if they’re not out, they don’t know this. I think when you examine it like that, it’s a very dangerous presentation of what most, a lot of people will accept as the truth about the whole gay community, you know, through this TV show, like, that they don’t understand, since they’re not in the subculture, they don’t understand where it comes from. (group 4)
Many participants brought up the fact that some of the show’s writers are gay themselves. This too makes it more acceptable, as a heterosexual college student explains:

That’s key. Because if it was all straight writers, I could see how, like, NBC could come under fire, you know, straight writers are making fun of, you know, this is their outlet, you know, what better way to express your inhibitions than, you know, make it a TV show. You could say, oh, I’m just using my creative license or whatever, but I think it’s better that if they do actually have people who are homosexual writing the show and making the jokes. Then people in the gay community who do have a problem with it, saying it’s disrespectful, then that can always be their show’s backup. You know, “Well, the writers are gay, and they obviously don’t have a problem with it, so...” I think if nobody associated with the show was gay, I would have a little more problem with the show. (group 2)

Many participants made the connection between the differential acceptability of these references and the similar way African Americans can say things about themselves that whites cannot. However, few pointed out that on *Will & Grace*, a good proportion of the references are made by heterosexual characters, which suggests a flaw in this analogy.

Another way the participants justified the references was by claiming that they accurately reflect reality. This strategy was used disproportionately by gay men and lesbians, especially the younger participants. Gay men do talk like this, so why not make it a part of the show? Some gay participants, such as this college student, felt very strongly about these references:

These were like moments where the producers, the writers were reaching out to the gay audience. That’s what I thought. I thought OK, these were moments where, because most of the audience is going to be composed of gays and lesbians, so these are moments where they’re reaching out to them and saying, “OK, this is for you, this is where you will relate to the characters.” And I think like he (another participant) said that he enjoyed them, and I do too, because these were instances where I could put myself in their shoes and I could understand what they were going through. (group 1)

Later on in the same focus group, a lesbian participant stated that she was in the process of developing a more positive attitude toward these references, because she was realizing (based on the discussion) that they do happen in reality. Another lesbian, this time from the gay youth group, commented on the relationships she has with her gay friends. She was the first to speak after being presented with the content analysis data:

Lesbian: I was surprised by, like, the actual breakdown, like, of the number, the actual number, but if I really think about it, like, the times I refer to my gay male friends as actually being males are few and far between. Like, I probably call them girl, or, you know, refer to them in the feminine way, way more than they do on *Will & Grace*. 
TL: So if someone kept track of your life like we have done here, it would be off the charts?
Lesbian: Oh, most definitely. In fact, I don’t think, I can’t remember any time recently where I have referred to them as being male (laugh). It’s always, like, “Hey, girl!” or “What’s up, girl!” (group 4)

The heterosexual participants who spoke of having gay friends also appreciated these references, because it made them feel closer to their friends and because they knew their friends liked such references. One of the women from the heterosexual adult group stated, “If you’re in the know, or you’re in the lives of homosexuals, then you will really find this funny, because it’s referring to something that is clearly a part of their lives and their culture, and so it’s kind of the hidden community” (group 5). Another woman from the same group posited that the gay community would be upset if these references were not present, since it then would not accurately reflect their lives.

Discussion

On leaving the focus groups, a few participants suggested that I might be taking television a bit too seriously. When it comes right down to it, they said, Will & Grace is just a sitcom. However, the show’s uniqueness and popularity make it worthy of careful scrutiny to see what it offers to our understanding of gender and sexuality in American popular culture. Gamson (1998) suggests that any mainstream media depiction of gay men and lesbians is likely to be a double-edged sword, with positive and negative aspects intertwined. Walters (2001) argues that old stereotypes sometimes morph into new forms that elicit different although not necessarily less damaging forms of homophobia. This article contributes to our understanding of the importance of the show and the sharp edges and morphed stereotypes hiding in it.

At first glance, the show seems to offer a very important positive component: the depiction of a character that does not resemble the typical stereotype of the effeminate gay man. However, the content analysis shows that Will & Grace reaffirms the close relationship between femininity and gay masculinity. Will—a gay man who in key ways accomplishes hegemonic masculinity—is perpetually feminized. The feminizing of this very straight gay archetype, combined with the finding that very few of the references are in reaction to feminine behavior, alters the connection between identities and behavior. Historically, gay characters achieved a feminized identity by doing gender in stereotypically effeminate ways. Will, regardless of how he enacts his gender, is ascribed a feminized identity because of his sexual identity. In fact, a number of the focus group participants pointed out that the audience knows Will is gay, not because of his engagement in gay sexual behavior (one of the major criticisms of the show is that Will is essentially celibate), but because he is the object of these feminizing references. These moments imply again and again that gay men are women, and feminized men are gay.
Not all of these references are merely part of playful camp exchanges. A significant proportion happen in a moment of conflict and are meant to hurt gay men by calling them women, a slap in the face to all involved. This is complicated all the more by the fact that many of these conflict references come from the women on the show. When an irate woman screams “Woman!” to a gay man’s face, such an interaction encapsulates much of what keeps the current gender order stable. In a way, such moments elevate hegemonic masculinity further above its subordinates, with the work here done by the subordinated groups themselves, as Chen (1999) suggests. The large number of references in humorous contexts could be considered to be in the fine tradition of camp, breaking down rigid gender lines and ultimately making political progress. I argue, however, that these many conflict-oriented references do not lend themselves to a camp interpretation. Camp’s meanings are many, but most involve self-conscious parody. Reviewing these conflict moments, I find little parody and much authentic anger among the characters. Keeping in mind that many straight audiences may not watch the show with a camp sensibility only complicates this picture.

This is one reason why it is critical to go the next step and see how the content is interpreted by its various audiences. Researchers immersed in their data may not even consider the possibility that the cultural trend they have identified goes unnoticed by the audience. Some of the references we identified in the content analysis are subtly delivered, and even when faced with a thirteen-minute stream of them, a number of focus group participants, many of them heterosexual, didn’t catch on. For many, it is just a sitcom, unworthy of their close scrutiny. Researchers who engage in content analyses should at least be cognizant of such a possibility.

Even when forced to confront this characteristic of the show, many focus group participants remained unmoved. While some of them saw potential harm in the references’ ability to perpetuate the feminized stereotype, others justified their inclusion by arguing that the majority of them are in-group jokes that happen in real life. Why should they be concerned about a show representing an aspect of gay culture that is real? Gay men do camp it up sometimes. More problematic, they argue, would be the exclusion of such references. Few questioned why real gay men engage in such behavior, and few saw the misogynist implications of many of the references. This research suggests how stereotypes are perpetuated through feedback mechanisms between media products and real life: The show reflects real behavior, and real people (especially youth) learn from the show that such behavior is acceptable and even expected. Camp feminization is primarily a learned cultural practice, and this may be one of the ways this cultural transmission occurs.

In what direction should research on the media and gay masculinities proceed? First, with regard to Will & Grace, work remains to be done. An expanded content analysis of the show could code the gay characters’ every behavior and even the female characters’ behavior, recording aspects both feminine and masculine. Also, creating codes that somehow measure the camp quality of these moments might elicit interesting results,
but such a task is a formidable one given the extent to which camp is subject to interpretation and does not easily lend itself to objective research (Meyer 1994).

A limitation of the focus group component of this research was that it targeted only people who were audiences of Will & Grace. It is likely that they had more liberal attitudes toward homosexuality than the typical American. As a number of them mentioned, they were unaffected by the portrayals because they had firsthand experience with gay men. Further research on the show should include those who claim no contact. As Larry Gross (1994) posits, “The contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little firsthand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies” (p. 144). In addition, it is possibly more important to understand the construction of the feminized homosexual in antigay cultures, because this is where the stereotype will most likely produce negative behavioral effects (that is, discrimination or hate crimes).

Besides Will & Grace, there have been other recent shows that offer multiple representations of gay masculinities (such as Six Feet Under and Queer as Folk). Will the presence of these characters, several of whom embody hegemonic masculinities, challenge the gender order? Only time and careful study will tell.

Notes

1. This begs the question of what behavior is feminine. We were careful to include only behaviors that we agreed most people would call stereotypically feminine: using high-pitched voices, wearing dresses or makeup, and so forth. The reliability for this variable was .93 (using the percentage agreement method discussed in Neuendorf [2002]). The reliability for the context variable was .87. References with disagreements were watched several times and discussed by the coders until resolution was reached. Season 7 was coded only by me without the aid of the assistants (who, unfortunately, had since graduated).

2. I discuss this problem or finding in depth in the results section.

3. This mean is based on a total count of 173 episodes. Through season 7, there were 162 episodes, but a number of these were hour-long episodes (which I counted as two episodes) and some were “super-size” forty-minute episodes (which I counted as 1.33 episodes). The median number of references per episode is three.

4. I concentrate on the references to Will and Jack, leaving the seventy-four references made to other gay characters behind. Of these seventy-four references, the most common categories were basic (eighteen references) and classic (sixteen references).

5. In fact, two gay participants in two separate focus groups chose female names (Antigone and Betty) as their pseudonyms.

References


