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On being good gay: ‘covering’ and the social structure of being LGBT+

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses Cyril Ghosh’s analysis of the notion of ‘gay covering’ as an act of downplaying one’s gayness in the face of public expectations, and its countermove of ‘reversing cover’. I acknowledge, along with Ghosh, that both the demands to ‘cover’ and ‘reverse cover’ are problematic from the perspective of LGBT+ authenticity. I aim to show, however, that such acts of covering, and reversing cover, are borne from complex social relations that involve (often conflicting) expectations, self-identifications, and modes of *being treated as*. This social structure of what it is to be ‘gay’ may help explain, not only why such demands to cover, and reverse cover, are problematic, but also why, in the world we live in, the harm and oppression of the two demands are very different.

KEYWORDS Covering; LGBT+; social identity; expectations; self-identification; being treated as; oppression

‘Gay covering’, in line with Yoshino’s (2002, 2006) work, refers to the acts of gay persons to disattend or tone down their sexuality in order to fit better (or easier) into the mainstream society. The demands of gay persons to ‘cover’ are recognized, both by Yoshino and by Ghosh (2018), as constituting a system oppression by which LGBT+¹ persons are coerced to act in certain ways, with substantive threats of punishment for failing to do so. For Ghosh, these demands to cover are not, however, the only oppressive demands that LGBT+ persons are subjected to. To the contrary, Ghosh argues that Yoshino’s critique of covering incorporates another demand on LGBT+ persons, this time to ‘reverse cover’ – to flaunt and signal – that, according to Ghosh, is ‘just as oppressive as the oppression it is mobilized to dismantle’ (p. 73).

Ghosh’s critique of Yoshino’s work is grounded on an observation that ‘being gay’ may be multiply manifested. As Ghosh rightly recognizes, not all gays who would seem to be covering are in fact doing so, but may simply be trying to be themselves. Ghosh criticizes Yoshino for falling into essentialist notions of what it (really) is to be (a good) gay. In Yoshino’s work, the

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stereotypical dichotomies of straight vs. gay (e.g. heterosexual monogamous relationships vs. gay promiscuity, gender typical vs. gender atypical presentations, interest in straight vs. gay culture) are used, not only to illustrate the hidden assaults on gays to cover, but incorporate a deeper, and more problematic, meaning of what it is to be gay. For Yoshino, homosexuals can decide *how gay they choose to be* (Yoshino, 2006, p. 79; Ghosh, 2018, p. 86) that incorporates another hidden assault on LGBT+ persons: a demand to reverse cover – *to act more gay* – that, according to Ghosh, is just as oppressive as the initial demand to cover that Yoshino so forcefully criticizes.

In this essay, I do not challenge Ghosh's reading of Yoshino's work in regards to its essentialist tendencies or underlying injunction to reverse cover. Rather, I develop a more systematic analysis of why, given the complexities of how our social identities are produced, both the demands to cover and reverse cover are problematic. By way of such analysis I proceed to show why Ghosh is ultimately wrong in equating the oppressiveness of the two demands, and why, more controversially, some such demands may be acceptable.

The structure of social identities

Following Kwame Appiah's (2005, pp. 65–71) work on the structure of social identities, we can understand social identities, such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'trans', but also 'black', 'woman', 'philosopher', etc., as referring to the *kinds of persons* that are brought about simultaneously by the creation of a label for them. Social identities, e.g. 'gay', incorporate three elements: (1) There must be a social conception of a label, 'gay', and a relatively common acceptance that it makes sense to categorize some people under this label. This social conception includes certain ideas and expectations of what it is to be 'gay', although the contents of these expectations may be contested. (2) There must also be some persons who self-identify as 'gay', and let this identification operate as (a partial) reason for their behavior. (3) There must also be occasions when some people are treated as 'gay'.

Importantly, there may be discrepancies both in the demarcation of the group of persons who are categorized as 'gay', and in the contents of the expectations and modes of behavior that are expected of 'gays'. Some self-identified gays may not always be recognized as gays by others (e.g. homosexuals who are, for whatever reasons, hiding their being gay), and some non-identified gays may also be misrecognized as gay (e.g. bisexuals who are judged to be either gay or straight depending on their present partner). The issues of group demarcation aside, the contents of expectations towards 'gays' may also differ, both among self-identifiers and others. This is where the 'being themselves – critique' (cf. Ghosh pp. 76–77) draws its force. For some self-identified gays, what it means to be gay – how they view their

authentic selves to be – may be manifested precisely by establishing a traditional partnership and an (at least relatively) frictionless engagement in the mainstream society. For other self-identifiers, being gay may be far more subversive, challenging many of the traditional expectations and conventions around intimacy, partnership and social engagement. For them, their authentic selves would, no doubt, be covered should they have to conform to these expectations, or to tone down the ways in which their sexuality is expressed. Importantly, for both groups of self-identifiers, their views of what it is to be gay may simply be reflections of the kinds of persons they themselves are, rather than instances of trying to cover or, for that matter, reverse cover.

It should thus be clear that, from the perspective of LGBT+ authenticity, any univocal demands to either cover or reverse cover are problematic. As Ghosh and Yoshino agree, the cultural, as well as legal, norms on gays to cover – to hide or tone down some aspects of their sexuality – are both harmful and unjust. Anyone, whether gay or straight, should be able to express their sexuality² and be their authentic selves without this engendering an unjustified burden, social stigma or disadvantage for them. However, as Ghosh carefully points out, the countering demands for gays to reverse cover – to signal and flaunt – may also be harmful, as for some gays, such signaling or flaunting is not at all part of who they are. Here, I believe, lies the crux of Ghosh's critique of Yoshino's work. While Yoshino never explicitly claims that those gays who do not signal or flaunt would necessarily be covering, Ghosh nevertheless argues that Yoshino's criticism is based on a tactic that shames anyone who does not signal or flaunt. Recall that, for Yoshino, homosexuals can decide *how gay they choose to be*, thus incorporating another normative notion of what it *really* is to be gay. In effect, Yoshino imposes an opposite demand on gays to reverse cover – to signal and flaunt – regardless of whether those persons refraining from signaling are, in fact, aiming to cover, or simply being their authentic selves.

Demanding to 'cover' and 'reverse cover' – a false equation

So far, the threefold structure of social identities has helped us understand why, from the perspective of LGBT+ authenticity, any univocal demands to cover or reverse cover are problematic. To demand a flaunting homosexual to tone down (cover) or a more traditionalist gay to camp up (reverse cover), is to ask them to be something they are not. These demands are, of course, also connected to the kinds of expectations that others may have for recognizing any particular person as gay – thus also explaining why, at times, people may be misrecognized as gay (or not gay).

But are these two conflicting demands (to cover and reverse cover) equally oppressive, as Ghosh claims them to be? In order to answer this question, we

need a working definition of oppression. Unfortunately, Ghosh never provides such definition, thus making his claims about the oppressiveness of the two demands difficult to assess. For our present purposes, let us nevertheless adopt the following working definition: Oppression refers to a relatively broad, institutionalized system of disadvantage that inflicts unjust harm to members of the oppressed group (Cf. e.g. Cudd, 2005). This working definition aims to capture something both about the consequences of oppression (group-based unjust harm), and about its scope, being embedded in a variety of social institutions, including, although not necessarily so, formal state institutions (e.g. the court system).

In the light of this definition, there are two ways to understand the oppressiveness of the two demands. On the one hand, we can think of both demands as part of a broader system of oppression by being two instances of sexuality-based policing of gays. Being contradictory, the two demands create impossible expectations of gays who – in order to be ‘good gays’ – would now need to simultaneously both cover *and* signal their sexuality. According to this understanding, Yoshino’s injunction to reverse cover can be seen as *being part of* the already existing system of oppression that subjects gays to harmful, coercive, and often untenable expectations of how they should act and behave.

But this is not what Ghosh seems to have in mind when he critiques Yoshino’s work for being ‘just as oppressive as the oppression it is mobilized to dismantle’. For Ghosh, Yoshino’s injunction is not only part of the broader system of oppression against gays, but constitutes a different, alternative, mode of oppression that gays are now subjected to. As such, the oppressiveness of the two demands needs to be assessed differently. Drawing from our working definition, we can now think of the two demands separately, and assess the extent to which each demand correlates with the two above-mentioned elements of oppression: its broadness/institutional embeddedness, and the consequences/harm inflicted.

In order to do so, let us again return to the threefold structure of social identities, and the third element of *being treated as ‘gay’*. Recall that the first element – a social conception of a label ‘gay’ – already incorporates ideas and expectations of what it is to be ‘gay’. These ideas, however, not only provide us with cues for categorizing persons under the label ‘gay’, they also operate as reasons to act and behave in certain manners, both *as gays* and *towards gays*. For example, should I recognize you to be gay, I may let this operate as a (partial) reason for inviting you to my next queer dinner party, for introducing you to my attractive gay single friend or, should things be less joyful, for helping you out in your court case against sexual orientation-based employment discrimination. In short, I let my knowledge of you being gay operate as a reason for treating you in a certain way – for treating you *as gay*.

Such *treatment as* may, of course, be both positive and negative, and operate on both personal and institutional levels. Me inviting (or failing to invite) you to my next dinner party may not, however, say much about the possible system of oppression that you, as a gay person, are subjected to, while the existence of your court case against sexual orientation-based employment discrimination may already provide us with some cues about it. Recall that oppression refers to a relatively broad, institutionalized system of disadvantage that inflicts unjust harm on members of the oppressed group. And while one's personal actions – prejudices, biases etc. – may not be entirely separated from any particular system of oppression, for such a system to occur, these actions need to be sufficiently widespread, grounded in social and (possibly) legal institutions, and have substantive, harmful and unjust consequences.

Let us now assess the two demands (to cover and reverse cover) in light of (1) the broadness and institutional embeddedness of each demand, and (2) the kinds of consequences (the harm inflicted) on those affected. As Yoshino goes into great lengths to demonstrate, there have been, and still are, widespread cultural expectations for gays to cover.³ These range from common everyday expectations (e.g. to refrain from showing same-sex affection in public) to more specific instances (e.g. to not write about LGBT+ issues while striving for tenure in academia), with potentially substantive consequences for failing to comply (threat of violence; lack of tenure). On occasions, these expectations are also manifested in legal contexts. Yoshino provides examples from child custody and civil service employment cases (Yoshino, 2002, pp. 851–863). In these cases, one's failure to cover – to tone down, be more discreet about one's sexuality – has resulted in losing custody or losing employment. Notably, in these cases, the relevant *treatment as* does not only refer to one being treated as gay, but to a notably differentiated treatment depending on what *kind* of gay one is (or is perceived to be). Compliance with the demands to cover (to be 'a good gay') is rewarded, while the failure to do so (to be 'a bad gay') is punished. The widespread social expectations for gays to cover are transferred into coercive, response-rewarding treatment that further reinforce our ideas of how it is 'appropriate' for gays to act and behave: *to be 'good gays'*.

The same, however, does not apply to the opposite demands to reverse cover – at least not to the same extent as in the case of demands to cover. While Yoshino gives a number of social, as well as institutionalized and legal examples of the demands to cover, Ghosh's examples of the opposite are largely restricted to Yoshino's work: how Yoshino's critique of covering incorporates an injunction to reverse cover. This is not to say that there could not be (more) such examples. Some gays may well be subjected to social pressures to signal and flaunt (e.g. from within LGBT+ community), be socially sanctioned for not doing so, or be subjected to a number of (no doubt

annoying, even disrespectful) questions and comments about their 'seemingly straight' behavior. But these injunctions to reverse cover are typically not transferred to broad cultural, institutionalized or legal demands, nor do they thus entail sanctions that would be on par with the sanctions for failing to cover. To put it bluntly: while many gays may have lost their jobs for failing to cover, not many have lost their jobs for failing to flaunt.⁴ These two issues – the broadness/institutional embeddedness, and the level of sanctions for failing to comply – I believe, make Ghosh's claims about the equal oppressiveness of the two demands ultimately misguided.

It is, however, one thing to say that Ghosh is wrong to equate the oppressiveness of the two demands, and another to suggest that the latter demands to reverse cover – to flaunt and signal – might sometimes be acceptable. While I cannot develop a thorough argument to such effect here, I wish to end this essay by pointing towards such possibility by focusing on the differentiated consequences⁵ of the two demands on the opportunities of LGBT+ persons to be their authentic selves.

Take, first, the widespread cultural, social and (at times) legal demands on gays to cover. As demonstrated by Yoshino, and agreed to by Ghosh, these demands are harmful and oppressive, and have especially acute negative consequences on those gays who fail to comply. While such demands no doubt apply to all gays (whether 'flaunting' or 'traditionalist'), the concrete effects of such demands on the 'traditionalists' are far more subtle. After all, their being themselves already aligns with the existing norms and expectations of how 'good gays' are supposed to act and behave, as these demands are the norm – the status quo – of the contemporary society. In the world that we live in, not (much) is gained, or lost, for the 'traditionalist gays' from such demands that, in effect, ask them to be their authentic selves.

A very different picture, however, would seem to occur with the 'injunction to reverse cover'. While one needs not deny the potential harm done unto those (in this case, 'traditionalists') for having to face such demands to flaunt and signal, these harms, as I have tried to show, are relatively minor in comparison to the extent and magnitude of the harm done unto those who fail to cover. On the other hand, there is a lot that could potentially be gained from such demands to reverse cover, in a society where being 'a good gay' is predominantly understood in traditionalist terms. For such demands to reverse cover – to flaunt and signal – are set to shake the status quo and, by doing so, open up the possibility also for the 'flaunting gays' to be their authentic selves without the commonly attached stigma and fear of punishment for doing so.

In sum, while I do not wish to critique Ghosh for highlighting some of the problems and potential harms of Yoshino's 'injunction to reverse cover', I nevertheless hope to have shown two things. First, there are important asymmetries between the conflicting demands to cover and reverse cover

that make Ghosh's claims about them being equally oppressive ultimately misguided. Second, and more tentatively, when looking at the actual consequences – the potential harms and benefits of the two demands in the world that we live in – the balance of scales may just turn out to be such as to make such injunction to reverse cover, while not entirely unproblematic, nevertheless as catering, rather than constraining, the opportunities of LGBT+ persons to be their authentic selves.

Notes

1. I follow Ghosh in using the term LGBT+ as an inclusive umbrella term for a variety of non-heterosexual orientations and non-conforming gender identifications. Many of the examples, as well as the generic language of this essay, nevertheless refer to gay males, although I see no reason why some of the same issues could not also apply to the other subcategories of LGBT+.
2. Not all expressions of sexuality, e.g. by way of unwanted sexual advancements or sexual harassment should, of course, be allowed, although this applies regardless of one's sexual orientation or gender identity.
3. As my focus here is on 'covering', I leave the other possible – and historically also prevalent – demands to 'convert' and 'pass' aside.
4. The same, arguably, applies to the two other examples mentioned above: while many gays have been beaten up for showing affection in public, not many have been beaten for *not* doing so; and while refraining from writing on LGBT+ issues may be detrimental to those applying for tenure in e.g. Queer Studies, I'd suspect the opposite to be more commonly true in areas where LGBT+ issues constitute a legitimate yet marginalized topic of research.
5. My focus on consequences follows that of Ghosh's (and Yoshino's) focus on the potentially harmful effects of such demands.

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