Gay Until Proven Straight: Exploring Perceptions of Male Interior Designers from Male Practitioner and Student Perspectives

Carl Matthews, M.S., University of Texas at Austin and
Caroline Hill, M.S., Texas State University-San Marcos

ABSTRACT

Given the small percentage of men studying interior design versus the higher percentage of men in the profession, and misperceptions of male designers among the general public, there is a need to examine sexual identity and stereotyping in the interior design industry. While researchers have explored the experiences of gay men working "straight jobs" and men doing "women's work" (e.g., nursing, teaching), very little research to date has focused on the experience of men (gay and straight) in careers that are stereotypically identified with gay men (e.g., hairstyling, dance, flight attendance, fashion design, interior design). The purpose of this paper is to address this gap and explore how sexual orientation influences the experiences and perceptions of male interior design students and professionals. Practitioner participants were identified through membership lists of ASID and IIDA, while male interior design students were contacted through the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC) "listserv" with faculty assistance. Potential subjects were invited to complete an online survey (30 questions for students, 32 questions for practitioners) in the spring of 2008 using SurveyGold, an online survey tool. One hundred sixteen students completed the survey ($N = 116$) while 51 practitioners responded ($N = 51$). Researchers anticipated that male interior designers encountered stereotyping regarding their sexual orientation, and that this in turn may affect their attitudes toward their career, relationships with colleagues and clients, design perspectives, and self-comfort. Survey responses generally supported these assumptions and serve to quantify and bring to light the complexity of this important and unexplored issue.

The dialogue “scenes” used as literary framing devices in this paper are based on actual conversations that the authors have engaged in at various times with a variety of people (names have been changed). This technique is implemented to humanize the subject matter of this paper and connect readers to the people behind the text.

Scene: New York City, large corporate interior design firm

Characters: Brett, Ned, and Clark—3 gay men ages 27 to 32.
2 architects, 1 interior designer

Brett: Clark, you’ve gotta check out the hot guy sitting in the reception area. It looks like he’s here for an interview!

Clark: Brett, can’t you see I’m busy here. These drawings are due tomorrow. Is he gay?

Brett: I don’t know. He’s just sitting there with his portfolio in his lap. He looks well-groomed.

Ned: Come on guys. Don’t you know that in interior design all men are gay until proven straight!

Introduction and Purpose

Given the small percentage of men studying interior design versus the higher percentage of men in the profession, and misperceptions of male designers, there is a need to examine and consider sexual identity and stereotyping in the industry. The Council of Interior Design Accreditation reports that less than 7% of students in accredited programs from across North America are male (CIDA, 2010) and a
Until we eradicate sexism and heterosexism in our society, or change the public perception of our discipline, we will have few male students.

A recent survey of university students found a majority of students see the discipline of interior design as “feminine.” While some respondents identified the discipline as “gender neutral,” none described it as “masculine” (Hill, Matthews, & Grogan, 2008). Yet of 3,527 respondents to a recent survey by Interior Design, a premier professional trade journal of the discipline, 31% of practitioners in the United States are male (Universe Study, 2010). A vibrant discussion at a recent “Town Hall” meeting of the national conference of interior design educators focused on the desire to attract more men into their degree programs. As the discussion progressed, a member of the organization made his way to the microphone and with great emotion asserted, “I think we are ignoring the giant pink elephant in the room. We have a minority of men in the major partly because the discipline is perceived as one for women and gay men. Until we eradicate sexism and heterosexism in our society, or change the public perception of our discipline, we will have few male students” (Interior Design Educator’s Council (IDEC) Annual Town Hall meeting, personal communication, March 31, 2006).

While great political and social strides have been made by gays and lesbians in the past two decades, the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy limiting service to heterosexuals and closeted homosexuals in the United States military was only recently abolished. In addition, 18% of hate crimes are based on sexual orientation bias (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009). Organizations offering same-sex partner employment benefits are still an exception rather than the norm, and gay male adolescents are up to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2010). Deeply entrenched attitudes about appropriate gender expression also persist. A recent controversy over a 2011 J. Crew advertisement that featured a 5-year-old boy with pink painted toenails is just one example of these still pervasive attitudes. These statistics and social occurrences suggest that North American society has not come as far in terms of eradicating stereotyping and stigmas as one might like to believe.

Several researchers (Friskopp, 1996; Winfield, 2005) have studied the experiences of gay men working “straight jobs” and the impact homophobia may have in the workplace. Focusing on issues of sexism in the workplace, research has also studied men doing “women’s work” (Williams, 1995) in the fields of nursing, library management, social work, and elementary education. Still other studies have delved into issues of sexual orientation and workplace dynamics (Friskopp, 1996) while other research has focused on the experiences of men (gay and straight) in careers that are stereotypically associated with gay men (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997). This paper and associated research project is presented in hopes of eliciting an expanded conversation around issues of stigmatization, stereotyping, and identity in regard to male interior designers and public perceptions of the interior design profession.

Literature Review

The literature review presented here, although by no means exhaustive, seeks to ground the reader in a basic historical context of gay identity and the interior design profession as well as current research and theories related to stigmas, stereotyping, and masculine identity and the impact of sexual identity on people in the work environment.

Historical Context

The history of interior design as a profession and the emergence of a collective gay male identity coincide in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Betsky, 1997; Kimmel, 2005). This visible gay male subculture that emerged in American cities around the turn of the twentieth century (Kimmel, 2005) occurred at the same time the iconoclastic Elsie DeWolfe was birthing the profession of interior design (Sparke, 2005). During this time period, men began leaving agricultural life for work in factories and offices. This shift may have led to a sense of loss of traditional roles of masculinity, counteracted by the increasing interest in sports and the founding of organizations like the Boy Scouts of America (Kimmel, 2005).
Acceptance of women in traditionally female professions has historically been more readily accepted than men entering traditionally female professions.

As men returned from World War II, major port cities such as New York and San Francisco became havens for men unwilling to return to their small town origins and they instead chose to remain in the cities and embrace a gay urban lifestyle. Many of these men pursued creative careers in fields such as interior design, decorating, and the arts (Sherry, 2007). Concurrent with this creative evolution, a backlash was occurring in conservative political and social circles with warnings of a “homosexual mafia” conjuring up visions of a queer menace (Sherry, 2007, p.1).

The 1960s saw a great evolution in acceptable expressions of what it meant to be masculine and “the proliferation and acceptance of androgyny” (Pleck, 1982, p.47) yet social and political leaders such as Richard Nixon still ranted against queerness. A recorded phone conversation where Nixon is referencing gay men’s influence on society ended with him saying, “Decorators, they got to do something. But we don’t have to glorify it” (Sherry, 2007, p. 6). Interestingly, this statement seems to clearly assume all male decorators to be gay. Throughout the 1960s feminist advocacy challenged traditional sexual stereotypes resulting in an increase of women in the workforce and challenges to notions of traditional gendered professions. Yet acceptance of women in traditionally male professions has historically been more readily accepted than men entering traditionally female professions (Williams, 1992). Also in the 1960s, gay male consciousness reached a fevered pitch with the 1968 Stonewall riots in New York City giving unprecedented power and visibility to the collective gay subculture.

As the 1980s and 1990s unfurled, the AIDS crisis focused attention on male interior designers and in response, the design community founded Design Industries Foundation Fighting AIDS (DIFFA) in 1984 (DIFFA, 2011). Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the pendulum of liberalism and challenges to hegemonic views of masculinity swing toward more liberal attitudes, an equal and opposite more conservative view frequently emerges as a counter balance. Tracking U.S. election of presidents is one way to gauge popular views of masculinity. The macho Theodore Roosevelt was followed by the intellectual Wilson, Nixon was followed by Carter, Reagan by Clinton, and Bush by Obama (Kimmel, 2005). “It is widely believed that American culture has entered a new era of feminization [as evidenced by the] opposition to military adventures . . . a deepening concern for the devastation of the environment, the impressive gains registered by the women’s movement and the gay movement in challenging traditional sexual scripts, and the growing trend toward a surface androgyny” (Kimmel, 2005, p. 101).

Stigma and Stereotyping
An approach to qualifying the experience of both gay and straight men in interior design is the Interpersonal Diversity Disclosure Model (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005). Based on Goffman’s Stigma Theory (1963), this model focuses on the decision to disclose invisible stigmatized identities and the dynamics involved with this decision. According to Clair et al. (2005), individual differences (e.g., identity development and personal motives) in combination with contextual conditions (e.g., work climate and professional norms) play a role in whether an individual discloses a stigmatized social identity. Further, disclosure decisions are balanced between “the tensions of wanting the benefits of disclosure and fearing its possible costs” (Creed, 2006, p. 379).

Sociologist Gerhard Falk describes two categories of stigma, existentia stigma, which he defines as “a stigma deriving from a condition which the target of the stigma either did not cause or over which he has little control” and achieved stigma, which he defines as “a stigma that is earned because of conduct and/or because they contributed heavily to attaining the stigma in question” (Falk, 2001, p. 11). Males practicing interior design may face both types of stigma—the existential stigma of their gender and sexual orientation and the achieved stigma of their profession.
In the world of interior design, one can argue that there are multiple invisible stigmas present.

Despite a pattern of gender integration in the workplace that began during World War II and continues today, notions of “men’s work” and “women’s work” persist in our society. Men and women who enter into gender-inconsistent occupations (those typically associated with the opposite sex) are stigmatized (Buckner, 1998; Williams, 1995) also, “in studies of children, there is a slight preponderance of evidence that boys are more rigidly sex typed than girls” (Pleck, 1982, p. 72). Men in gender-inconsistent occupations face unique challenges that are unlike those faced by women in the same fields, resulting in both positive and negative consequences. Men in these fields may be pressured to pursue specialties and perform specific job tasks that are considered to be more “manly.” Literature indicates that men in female-majority fields often benefit from their minority status, taking their gender and the privilege it provides with them into the workplace. They tend to receive preferential consideration in hiring and promotion and may be fast-tracked into leadership roles and management positions, “their gender is construed as a positive difference” (Williams, 1992, p. 259) and sociologist Christine Williams defines this as the “glass escalator effect” (Williams, 1992, 1995).

In this context, the stigma attached to men in gender-inconsistent occupations may be seen as a “prestigious stigma.” Prestigious stigmas may exist within organizations when the stigma is worn with pride rather than shame (Moore & Love, 2004). Because the qualities associated with masculinity are highly valued in North American society, characteristics or attributes that distinguish men from women are actively sought after and emphasized by men as a source of advantage and prestige. Further, there may be a presumption that males are more competent than females even in fields that are predominantly female (Williams, 1995).

Masculinity and Sexual Identity

Although there are some advantages to being the gender minority in a profession, there are also disadvantages. “Since the early nineteenth century, the quest for manhood has revolved around a flight from women, a relentless effort to avoid all behaviors that might remotely hint of the feminine” (Kimmel, 2005, p. 19). Men in gender-inconsistent occupations run the risk of being regarded as unmanly, not conforming to the script of hegemonic masculinity, and therefore may be questioned in their sexual identity (Nordberg, 2002). As Cockburn states, “men who cross into traditional female areas of work at the female level will be written off as effeminate, tolerated as eccentrics or failures” (Cockburn, 1998, p. 40). Men in gender-inconsistent occupations report strain between internal and external pressures to be masculine and the stereotype of their occupation, and report experiencing discomfort, embarrassment, or shame over their career choice (Simpson, 2005). Men in these fields may experience dissonance between their personal identity as a man and their professional identity. Men may employ a variety of coping mechanisms to reconcile this contradiction ranging from assimilation and full adoption of the female tradition of the profession to disassociation. In the latter case, men may go as far as misrepresenting or even lying about their major or profession (Hicks, 2001; Nordberg, 2002; Williams, 1995).

In the world of interior design, one can argue that there are multiple invisible stigmas present. In a 2007 study, researchers provided a group of Central Michigan University students with written job descriptions for three job titles: interior decorator, interior designer, and architect. Respondents were asked their perception of the design professional’s sexual orientation based on the written job titles and job descriptions and the professional’s gender. Results indicated that if the interior designer was male, there was a significantly higher tendency to perceive the designer as homosexual (Wood-Nartker, Sepanski, McCrady, & Gligor, 2007).

This indicates that both gay and straight men working as designers must deal with the negative stigma of homosexuality in a world that continues to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation.
Media images of gay men... have reinforced the idea in popular culture that gay men generally possess a range of impressive talents that straight men (and to a lesser degree, straight women) seem incapable of developing.

Consequently, heterosexual men could be concerned that others may stereotype them as “gay” and consider the field itself a stigma while straight men in interior design could consider their heterosexuality a negative stigma. There is a societal view that homosexuality correlates to creativity and contributes to a unique design sensibility and methodology, thus making gay men superior designers. Media images of gay men such as those in Bravo’s popular reality show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy have reinforced the idea in popular culture that gay men generally possess a range of impressive talents that straight men (and to a lesser degree, straight women) seem incapable of fully developing (Hart, 2004).

These conflicting social identities (e.g., “I am a heterosexual” vs. “I am an interior designer” vs. “I am a man”) could produce cognitive dissonance for some male students considering interior design as a career and, as a result, influence the decision to disclose their sexual orientation or select their preferred major. For certain male practitioners, this source of dissonance, may negatively impact professional relationships with colleagues and clients.

Work Environments
The public often perceives the professional practice of interior design as both a creative profession and a female-dominated profession. In terms of creative professions, allied design fields include architecture, landscape architecture, product design, graphic design, and advertising. Female-dominated professions include nursing, hair dressing, primary and secondary school teaching, flight attendance, social work, and floral design. Although an in-depth history of each of these disciplines is outside the scope of this paper, there is value in briefly considering the evolution, status, and gender composition of these professions as it relates to the present study.

In terms of the creative professions, Csikszentmihayi’s (1996) study of creativity describes 10 dichotomous dimensions of creative people. One of these dimensions states:

In all cultures, men are brought up to be “masculine” and to disregard and repress those aspects of their temperament that the culture regards as “feminine,” whereas women are expected to do the opposite. Creative individuals to a certain extent escape this rigid gender role stereotyping.... This tendency toward androgyny is sometimes understood in purely sexual terms, and therefore gets confused with homosexuality. But psychological androgyny is a much wider concept.... Among the people we interviewed, this form of androgyny was difficult to detect.... Perhaps the most noticeable evidence for the “femininity” of men in the sample was their great preoccupation with their family and their sensitivity to subtle aspects of the environment that other men are inclined to dismiss as unimportant. (pp. 70–71)

One creative profession, landscape architecture, bears a little more investigation because of its parallels with interior design. Yet in spite of the many similarities between the professions important distinctions in relation to gender also separate the two fields. Landscape architecture, like interior design, is often considered in relation to the more dominant profession of architecture. Both the landscape architecture and interior design professions were established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Piotrowski, 2008; Way, 2009). At the beginning of the twentieth century, Massachusetts Institute of Technology was the only existing landscape architecture program (Way, 2009). This time frame coincides with the beginning of interior design education at the New York School of Applied and Fine Arts in 1904 (Piotrowski, 2008). Landscape architecture, like interior design, enjoys a public fascination with its work coupled with great misunderstanding among the general population of the realities of the profession due, at least in part, to popular media. Additionally, landscape architecture also started as a gendered profession, but its origins are masculine in contrast to interior design’s..
Although there is a body of literature on gay history, stigmas, stereotyping, masculinity and gender issues in the workplace, few studies address interior design specifically.

feminine roots. Of the founding members of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1899, only one member, Beatrix Jones Farrand, was female (Way, 2009). The fact that landscape architecture is historically a masculine profession may explain why male landscape architects do not endure the same sexual stereotyping as male interior designers. This is not uncommon among historically gendered professions. Men entering female-dominated disciplines are looked at much differently than women entering male-dominated disciplines. For example, a parent’s announcement that her daughter is a doctor, as opposed to her son being a practicing nurse, may be viewed more positively.

To some extent these societal views, perceptions, and pressures have an impact on what professions men and women choose. According to Williams (1992), “men are less likely to enter female sex-typed occupations than women are to enter male-dominated jobs” (p. 253).

Scene: Gay male interior design professor talking with gay male graduate landscape architecture student about studio culture in a multidisciplinary school of architecture.

Landscape Architecture Student: It’s interesting that the men in my studio do not have to deal with the same pressures as guys in the interior design studio do even though my studio is two-thirds women and half the men are gay and half are straight.

Interior Design Professor: Why do you think that is?

Landscape Architecture Student: It’s complex. First of all landscape architecture in America was “fathered” by burly straight men such as Frederick Olmstead. Weren’t the “mothers” of interior design society ladies and fruity guys? My discipline grew up in prestigious Ivy-League schools like Harvard, which did not even admit women until the 1940s. Or, in land grant universities in the colleges of agriculture, also historically male domains. Where were some of the first programs of interior design?

Interior Design Professor: Art schools like Parson’s and Pratt and public universities within the colleges of Home Economics.

Landscape Architecture Student: And no matter how wrong-headed it is, within the public consciousness, digging a hole and planting a tree is much more manly than picking colors and hanging a curtain.

In terms of the association of interior design with traditionally female-dominated professions, these professions typically have lower pay rates and lower social prestige than male-dominated professions. Men who choose to enter these professions are often marginalized by Western societies that still privilege male domains over female domains. The masculinity and sexual orientation of men who choose these professions are often called into question. (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, Williams, 1995). According to Williams, “this particular form of discrimination may be most significant in explaining why men are underrepresented in these professions” (1992, p. 262). However, as previously stated, men in gender-inconsistent professions can also be benefactors of preferential treatment within their workplace depending on the unique demands and skill sets valued in the field.

Although there is a deep and broad body of literature related to gay history, stigmas, stereotyping, masculinity, and gender issues relative to the workplace, the researchers found few studies that addressed interior design specifically. For that reason, a survey tool targeting men studying and practicing interior design was developed and administered. The survey tool was not designed or intended to address the full scope of this complex cultural issue, but rather supplement the broader discussion here with an interior design specific focus and shed light on what, if any, areas might warrant further research and discussion.
Method

Procedures

Given the potentially controversial nature of the survey, a pilot version was first sent to a small group of reviewers representing a broad spectrum of academic and philosophical perspectives (i.e., educational psychologist, social worker, academic advisor, career advisor, an architecture and interior design historian, and several interior design students and practitioners). The pilot group included both gay and straight men. Upon receiving feedback, some survey language was modified. For example the word “queer,” which reflects some more current academic and political attitudes, was replaced with what was perceived as a less controversial term “gay.” The final version of the survey tool utilized was submitted for review to the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at Austin and approved for use with human subjects.

Survey participants received one of two versions of an electronic survey containing multiple-choice and short answer questions, as well as one open-ended question asking participants to share additional thoughts on the topic with the research team. The student survey contained 30 questions while the practitioner survey contained 32 questions. The differences between the two surveys acknowledged subtle differences between academia and practice, but topics addressed were consistent across the two instruments. The survey was delivered electronically to all participants in the spring of 2008 using SurveyGold, a customizable proprietary online survey software.

Participants

Practitioner participation was solicited by searching membership lists of the two primary, national interior design professional organizations (American Society of Interior Designers and International Interior Design Association). Using first names as an indicator of gender (e.g., David and Robert representing male names), an e-mail list of 300 males practicing interior design was compiled. The use of first names as a gender indicator was not perfect. After receiving and reviewing the survey, one woman (named Marty) contacted the research team to clarify and confirm that she was not the target audience for the survey and, accordingly, she did not participate. The final participant e-mail list included practitioners working in both small and large U.S. cities in all geographic regions of the United States and the survey response distributions reflect this diversity (Table 1). The practitioners were sent one e-mail enlisting their participation in the study and asking them to follow a link to the online questionnaire. Fifty-one practitioners responded to the survey (N = 51), which reflects a 17% response rate.

Male interior design students were contacted through the IDEC list serve. IDEC is the primary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Demographics</th>
<th>Male practitioners (n = 51)</th>
<th>Male students (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age range</td>
<td>22–66</td>
<td>19–49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual identity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>60.8%</td>
<td>44.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographical region</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>15.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South/Southeast</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwest/West/Northwest</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unreported</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm size</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (1–11)</td>
<td>21.57%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (12–49)</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (50 or more)</td>
<td>54.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of practice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The purpose of the study was to gather data on the sexual orientation of student and professional male interior designers and solicit their perceptions of gender-related issues relative to the interior design profession.

The purpose of the study was to gather data on the sexual orientation of student and professional male interior designers and solicit their perceptions of gender-related issues relative to the interior design profession. Because many students were “undecided” about post-graduation goals and the area of design they intended to pursue, the research team decided that the reliability of feedback from students on this issue was weak and would not parallel the feedback from practitioners on the same question. However, this topic probably warrants further study, as well. Male designers practicing residential design may have significantly different perceptions and experiences compared with those practicing commercial design. While specific questions were not posed in the present survey to explore residential versus commercial designer experiences, several written responses to the open-ended question on the survey broached the subject. Because the present study was tapping into an unexplored topic in the interior design profession, the research team was interested first and foremost in the participants’ common experiences as male interior designers rather than their nuanced differences by practice area.

Delimitations

Specifically, the purpose of the present study was to gather data on the sexual orientation of student and professional male interior designers and solicit their perceptions of gender-related issues (e.g., stigmas, stereotyping) relative to the interior design profession. There were several variables that were deliberately not explored in this preliminary study for a variety of reasons. An obvious delimitation is the purposive sampling method that excluded women from the study participant pool. The subject and focus of the survey and its exploratory nature justify this nonprobability sampling method. Admittedly, this purposive sampling method limits the interpretations of the findings to the self-determined gender boundaries. However, after reviewing the findings and considering the topic from a broader vantage point, the researchers acknowledge that future studies soliciting women’s (straight, bisexual, and gay) perceptions and experiences relative to these issues would be relevant and insightful especially considering their majority status in the profession. While some writing has explored the legacy and experiences of lesbians in the interior design profession (Spark, 2005), more work can be done exploring the experience of this particular group of designers.

Also, although the survey did ask practitioners to identify their primary practice areas (e.g., residential, commercial) and students were asked to indicate their post-college goals in hopes of discerning their practice area of interest, this data was not processed. Other variables not included in the present study were the salary levels of practitioners and the grade point averages of interior design students. These variables, which could potentially speak of achievement or “success” within the field, may be interesting to explore in subsequent studies. Williams’ (1995) observation of men in traditionally “women’s professions” being fast-tracked into managerial roles highlights the need for further investigation of this topic relative to interior design. Finally, although information relative to age, geography, and religious affiliation was collected as part of the present study, analysis of this data is ongoing and will be disseminated in future publications and presentations.

Results and Discussion

In terms of demographics, while all regions of the United States were well represented (Table 1), the largest percentage of the responses was received from the south and southeast (note: one practitioner declined to identify location). Regarding sexual orientation, 60.8% of male practitioners identified as gay, 33.3% as straight, and 5.9% were unsure,
The majority of both student and practitioner respondents reported that most people stereotype male interior designers as gay.

while 44.7% of male students identified as gay, 50% straight, 2.6% bisexual, and 1.7% were unsure. Theories of sexual orientation suggest a scale of sexual expression from 1 to 6 (with a rating of 1 being absolutely heterosexual and a rating of 6 being absolutely homosexual) (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948), the survey simplified categorization of sexual orientation by the terms “gay/homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, questioning/unsure.” While Kinsey’s research would suggest a larger percentage of men identifying as bisexual, respondents to the current study were most comfortable describing themselves in one of the more culturally prevalent dichotomies of “gay/homosexual” or “heterosexual” rather than “bisexual.” Sanders posits that “interior design—like two allied design fields, fashion and theater—attracts a disproportionate number of gay men because gay men, already marginalized for their apparent femininity, are less reluctant to assume occupations that have traditionally been deemed feminine” (Sanders, 2002, p. 6). Popular media reinforces this position. In an ABC News report aired on September 15, 2006, John Stossel stated, “There is research that suggests gay men do prefer certain professions, like fashion, interior design and hair coloring . . . and gay men tend to prefer more feminine occupations” (Stossel & Binkley, 2006, p. 1). The report also referenced a study of professional dancers, which found that half the male dancers were gay. When questioned about why this might be the case, the author of the study replied “because dancing is a feminine occupation” (Stossel & Binkley, 2006, p. 1). While popular culture is increasingly presenting more openly gay men and straight men who challenge hetero-normative stereotypes, attitudes about and percentages of men in female-dominated professions should continue to be monitored.

### Table 2. Distribution of practitioner participants by U.S. city size (based on 2010 U.S. census data)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population range</th>
<th>Male participants</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;30,000</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,001–550,000</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550,001–1 million</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;1 million–3 million</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;3 million</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stigma and Stereotyping

The majority of both student and practitioner respondents reported that most people stereotype male interior designers as gay (98%). Similarly, most respondents reported that people make assumptions about their sexual identity because of their career or major (77%). Sexual identity appears to play a role in these perceived stereotypes as gay and bisexual student respondents were significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to indicate that they are stereotyped as homosexual because of their career (Table 3). In reference to this issue, a practitioner stated, “I’ve resolved myself to the fact that some people make assumptions about interior designers and are ignorant about the actual job description.” Approximately one-third of combined survey respondents have experienced verbal abuse or teasing because of their career choice. This finding was confirmed when a similar percentage reported that friends have “poked fun of them” because of their career choice. The three terms/phrases “verbal abuse,” “teasing,” and “poked fun of” were specifically used in the survey to acknowledge possible ranges of social interaction severity. Responses to both statements revealed that students endure a bit more teasing than practitioners. Also, straight students reported experiencing more teasing than gay students (Table 3). While the researchers have not probed the gender of those doing the teasing, men are “reputed to avoid emotional intimacy with others of the same sex and have greater fears of homosexuality” (Pleck, 1982, p. 140). Teasing is referred to by sociologists as negative sanctions (or sometimes simply sanctions). “Such negative sanctions help produce conformity to social norms . . . males with extremely feminine occupational activity interests or personality characteristics are less well liked than other males” (Pleck, 1982,
Within the realms of psychology, sociology, and anthropology, there are many theories to explain and analyze masculinity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument item</th>
<th>Gay/bisexual/unsure students (n = 58)</th>
<th>Heterosexual Students (n = 58)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most people stereotype male interior designers as gay.</td>
<td>4.10*</td>
<td>3.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have experienced verbal abuse or teasing because of my major.</td>
<td>1.76**</td>
<td>2.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People make assumptions about my sexual identity because of my major.</td>
<td>3.57**</td>
<td>3.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have made deliberate design decisions to avoid being thought of as “gay” or</td>
<td>1.36*</td>
<td>1.66*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“too gay.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people believe that gay men make the best interior designers.</td>
<td>3.52**</td>
<td>2.98**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends have poked fun of me because of my major.</td>
<td>1.55**</td>
<td>2.29**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay men have more freedom to try new ideas in design.</td>
<td>2.45**</td>
<td>1.79**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have emphasized my masculinity to other students so as not to be perceived as</td>
<td>1.71**</td>
<td>2.22**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gay.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people think that I am straight.</td>
<td>2.91**</td>
<td>4.16**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10, **p < .05.

Pleck (1982) also cites a 1978 study by O’Leary and Donoghue that found “a male pursuing studies in special education on scholarship at Harvard is not ostracized; in contrast, a male majoring in interior decoration or home economics is” (Pleck, 1982, pp. 144–145). Although these studies were done several years ago and appear to compare men at different universities, one may call into question their relevance today. However, the recent development of the “It Gets Better Project” focused on encouraging GLBT students struggling with teasing, bullying, and ostracism suggests that, unfortunately, these issues are still prevalent in North American culture. In terms of the source of harassment, Williams notes that “most of the discrimination and prejudice facing men in the ‘female professions’ emanates from outside those professions” (1992, p. 263). Even with the teasing experienced by male interior designers, many find their sexual identity to be an advantage in the field with students (66%) viewing their sexual identity as slightly more advantageous than practitioners (55%).

Although respondents did not believe in the notion of a “gay design gene” they admit that the myth is alive and well in public consciousness. Eighty-three percent of combined survey respondents agreed with the statement “other people believe that gay men make the best interior designers.” A straight practitioner extended this statement to associate perceived gay male design aptitude with female design aptitude. He noted, “I’ve often had conservative clients bring in their wives to give my ideas the thumbs up (on the interior) despite the fact that they weren’t afraid to have my opinion on the color of the exterior.” This statement underscores the societal perception that gay men and women are more adept or trusted for certain jobs. Sherry notes that Americans have denigrated and exaggerated gay male interior design prowess to serve political and social points of view (Sherry, 2007, p. 2).

Masculinity and Sexual Identity

Masculinity is constructed and views of masculinities vary across time and place depending on cultural norms and a host of other factors. “Generative concepts of masculinity have been destroyed over the last several generations (however) in their place a little-known defective mythology about masculinity has been indelibly encoded into our social structures and psyches. Men live and breathe this myth on a daily basis” (Kimbell, 1995, p. xiv). Within the realms of psychology, sociology, and anthropology there are many theories to explain and analyze masculinity. A recent article (De Visser, 2009) in
Men and Masculinities explored the issue of whether masculinity is perceived in binary or pluralistic terms. Although a thorough investigation of the constructs of masculinities is outside the scope of this paper, male interior designers clearly wrestle with the issue. Interior design is seen not only as a women’s profession but also as a gay profession and by extension, male interior designers must choose whether or not to participate in hegemonic expressions of masculinity.

Scene: A graduate architecture student is talking to one of his thesis advisors, a gay male interior design professor.

Student: You know, I really wanted to major in interior design but my parents were so freaked out by their fears of my sexuality that they forbade it. They told me they would pay for my education if I majored in architecture but not if I majored in interior design.¹

To explore the issue of societal constructions and individual expression of masculinities, the survey asked participants to respond to a simple statement. For practitioners the statement was, “I have emphasized my masculinity to professional contacts (engineers, contractors, architects, clients, consultants, etc.) so as not to be perceived as gay.” For students the statement was, “I have emphasized my masculinity to other students so as not to be perceived as gay.” The findings were not surprising. Approximately one-third of respondents have “emphasized their masculinity” to professional contacts or other students so as not to be perceived as gay. More often than gay students, straight students reported emphasizing their masculinity to avoid stereotyping (Table 3). However, gay practitioners emphasized their masculinity slightly more than straight practitioners with one practitioner commenting,

I think that as a male in the interior design field I may receive a bit more credibility versus my female counterparts because unfortunately our society is still sexist at times. I feel this is true when dealing with both men and women in the field. I also feel that even in the workplace, male designers may receive more credibility and cooperation from the contractors and workers as long as they are not flamboyant. In that respect I think women receive a better response than flamboyant men.

The statement suggests a hierarchy on construction sites. “Masculine” men are at the top of the respect pyramid, women occupy the next tier, and overtly feminine men are least respected. Men, gay, bisexual, and straight, “can be seduced by the lure of a higher position in the hierarchy of power” (Clarkson, 2005, p. 194), which may speak to the temptation to “cover” reported by some respondents. The point of view shared by the previous survey respondent was one of the few comments that discussed sexism as well as heterosexism. A gay practitioner stated, “I don’t actively try to play it straight, but one of my challenges is I’m generally allergic to conflict. I could admit to covering.” Williams notes that “openly gay men may encounter less favorable treatment at the hands of their supervisors. Stigma associated with homosexuality leads some men to enhance, or even exaggerate their ‘masculine’ qualities” (Williams, 1992, p. 259) and according to Gilmore “flamboyance will always be marginalized” (2005, p. 4).

When asked to respond to the statement “outside perceptions of my sexual identity are important to me,” more than one-third of respondents agreed that the statement was true. Straight students were more concerned with outside perceptions than any other group. One student noted, “I almost didn’t go to school for interior design because of the stereotype” while another said, “Prior to coming out, I attended a university and got a totally different degree instead of interior design solely because I didn’t want people to know I was gay.” Steve Glassman, a Baltimore architect and gay-rights activist commented, “I think it’s a little like Hollywood... because creative people are so afraid to be identified as gay, they internalize their feelings and externalize [i.e. act out] the image of the macho male’” (Betsky, 1994, p. 36).
A segment of male interior design students admitted lying about or qualifying their major to avoid sexual stereotyping.

Approximately one-third of students admitted lying about or qualifying their major to avoid sexual stereotyping. One student admitted “[to] males [I say] Architectural Design, to females Interior Design.” Another student stated that he usually gauges how conservative the person he is talking to might be and explained that he uses the term “interior design” for liberals and “architecture” for conservatives. Another stated, “I hate that male interior designers are thought of as only gay. I am a conservative straight Christian male. I tell people . . . ‘interior architecture’ rather than ‘interior design.’” Professionals (15%) felt less compelled to misrepresent compared with students (34%). Straight students lied more than any other group. A practitioner noted,

I clarify to others that I’m a ‘designer’ not a ‘decorator’ and explain that I do commercial design not residential. I do this partially because I don’t want to be thought of as a ‘fruity’ gay decorator (even though I’m openly gay), but also the work I do is much more complicated than people think.

According to Sherry (2007), “Americans created modern antihomosexuality in part by examining queers and queerness in the arts. They bequeathed to us images of gay people as curiously both silly and sinister, protean and perversive, creative and corrupting, invaluable and insidious, as both outside and inside American life” (p. 2). Sanders (2002) extends the thought by stating, “It is no wonder that many architects might find picking upholstery and curtains uncomfortable; this seemingly inconsequential activity is tainted by its deep-seated associations with women and homosexuality” (p. 8). Some male interior designers find that “coming out of the closet” is equally relevant to their choice of career as their sexual orientation. A student shared,

It was really difficult to select interior design as my major years ago. I would simply say I was an art major to family so as to not seem gay. But over the years I’ve opened up and while I’ve not come out (as gay) to my family, I do say I’m an interior design major. I recently graduated from a Christian University, and to say that being an interior design major there wasn’t easy is a huge understatement.

Gambone’s study of mostly urban gay men found that transitioning to college was a major step in terms of gay self-awareness (2010, p. 10). A writer who Gambone interviewed for his research poetically spoke about the evolution of personal growth and acceptance, “Identity is an issue that is never ending, simply because, as a human being, I keep growing. I take on new layers, shedding old layers. Identity is never fixed in stone, but something, constructed, earned, garnered” (2010, p. 12). But this is not unique to gay and bisexual men, all human identity is in flux and relative to time, environment, and experiences. Toward that end, “The current generation of men faces a unique moment in history. While most men are still trapped by economic coercion, and the psychological co-option of the masculine mystique, many men are beginning to see that they can no longer submit to the dictates of a social system steeped in the masculine mystique” (Kimbrell, 1995, p. 311).

Scene: An architecture professor talks to one of his male first year students.

Professor: You seem more sensitive to human condition than formal expression.

Have you considered changing your major to interior design?

When the student relayed this story to a male interior design professor, he perceived the coded message to be, “You’re gay. You should change your major to interior design.” While the architecture professor’s observation and advice in the previous scenario is tainted with stereotypical ideas, he is certainly not alone in the thoughts. Sanders (2002) describes the unique relationship between gay male residential designers and their female clients. “Decorators quickly learned to take advantage of this union of décor and ‘womanly intuition,’ employing professional empathy as a strategy to distinguish themselves from ‘arrogant’ male architects reputedly indifferent to client needs. Unlike stubborn architects who willfully impose their own ideas and values on
Sexual identity did not play a role in selection of career/major among respondents, but gay practitioners perceived a stronger relationship between their sexual identity and career than straight practitioners.

While the majority of practitioners and students indicated that their sexual identity did not influence their design perspective, more than one-third of respondents reported that their sexual identity did influence their design perspective. Gay practitioners were more likely than straight practitioners to acknowledge this connection. Overall, gay respondents believed that gay men had more freedom to try new design ideas, while their straight counterparts disagreed with this statement (Tables 3 and 4). One practitioner noted, “Artistic ability is universally accepted as an attribute that does not discriminate based on sexual orientation.”

The gay American classical composer Robert Helps dismissed the notion of ‘artistic difference’ based on sexuality, but admitted, “Who knows what affects us subliminally?” (Sherry, 2007, p. 3)

The majority of survey respondents reported that most people in our society think gay men make better interior designers. As illustrated by the previous scenario, even faculty can hold this view. These types of exchanges also support the finding that the gay survey respondents viewed more of an affinity between their career and sexual identity than straight men. Given the escalated suicide rates of gay teens and increasing hate crimes based on sexual orientation bias, those teaching interior design can take some comfort that the discipline has provided a haven of validation and comfort for many young gay men. However, if the survey results are reflective of the larger male interior design student population, approximately half of male interior design students

Table 4. Significant practitioner survey questions and means

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instrument item</th>
<th>Gay/bisexual/unsure practitioners (n = 20)</th>
<th>Heterosexual Practitioners (n = 31)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My sexual identity played a role in choosing my career.</td>
<td>1.74**</td>
<td>1.12**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My sexual identity influences my design perspective.</td>
<td>2.38***</td>
<td>1.47***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have made deliberate design decisions to avoid being thought of as “gay” or “too gay.”</td>
<td>1.76*</td>
<td>1.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People make assumptions about my sexual identity because of my career.</td>
<td>3.41****</td>
<td>2.29****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clients treat me differently because of my sexual identity.</td>
<td>2.18**</td>
<td>1.59**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people believe that gay men make the best interior designers.</td>
<td>3.47**</td>
<td>2.76**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay men have more freedom to try new ideas in design.</td>
<td>2.91****</td>
<td>1.59****</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most people think that I am straight.</td>
<td>2.88****</td>
<td>4.29****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01, ****p < .0001.
Straight male interior design students are affected by negative internal and external forces. They lie more about their major, are teased more, and emphasize their masculinity to avoid sexual stereotyping more than any other respondent group.

Work Environment

Addressing questions and concerns relative to stereotyping and gender identity on a personal, internal level is part of this broad discussion, but these issues also spill over into the larger work or school environment that is external to the individual. “Cultural conceptions of gender-appropriate work also play a role in the occupational choices of men and women” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, p. 839) and it is not unusual for men working in “women’s professions” to lie about, rename, or misrepresent their profession. In the world of interior design it is often easy to cloak one’s self in the “closet of architecture.” If an interior design student is working on a project on a laptop computer in a coffee house, a casual by-passer might see the CAD images and assume the student is pursuing a career in architecture. Likewise, when an interior design practitioner inspects a job site wearing a hard hat and carrying a role of drawings, contractors will often refer to him as “the architect.” Some men may take the time to correct the inaccurate portrayals of the profession in these scenarios, but many will not. A correction of discipline name is often followed by a qualifier renouncing the notion of “pillow fluffing decorator.” The article “Curtain Wars” (Sanders, 2002) describes the history and tensions between the professions of interior decoration/design and architecture and is valuable additional reading relative to this topic. Sanders argues that the rivalry between the “overlapping design practices evoke deeper cultural conflicts that are themselves bolstered by profound social anxieties about gender and sexuality” (Sanders, 2002, p. 1). Many survey respondents wrote in (on the open-ended question) that they would be much more comfortable if the discipline changed its name to “interior architecture” and numerous discussions, presentations, and articles in the industry have explored this sentiment (Carll White, 2009; Kwallek, 2010).

The discrepancy between the percentage of men majoring in interior design versus the percentage of men practicing interior design/interior architecture, as well as the personal observation of the authors who have worked in major design firms across North America, suggests that some men in the interior design discipline enter through the conduit of an architecture degree. The survey of practitioners stated clearly that the researchers were interested in responses from men who spend “most of their time creating interior environments” regardless of the degree they acquired. While this casual observation warrants focused study and quantification, the formal educational backgrounds of practicing male designers would undoubtedly be interesting and of potential value to interior design undergraduate programs in terms of marketing to potential students and positioning within the university. Another small contributing factor to the discrepancy between the percentages of men studying versus practicing interior design might be attributed to the fact that approximately 57% of college students are women and 43% are men (Marklein, 2005). Additionally, “unlike women who enter traditionally male professions, men’s movement into (traditionally female) jobs is perceived by the ‘outside world’ as a step down in status... Many of the people in my sample identified the stigma of working in a female-identified occupation as the major barrier to more men entering their professions” (Williams, 1992, p. 262).

It would also be interesting to compare the experiences and perceptions of men in our allied disciplines of landscape architecture, lighting design, and product design to enrich this discussion. If “language uses us as much as we use language” (Lakoff, 2004), is it simply the word “architecture” that influences the perception of a profession or is it
If “language uses us as much as we use language,” is it simply the word “architecture” that influences the perception of a profession or is it more about evolution of historically predominantly male versus female profession?

more about evolution of historically predominantly male versus historically predominantly female professions? The authors suspect that sexism and heterosexism are significant impediments to the dissolution of inaccurate perceptions of the interior design discipline.

Within the workplace or classroom most respondents (82%) did not feel discriminated against by clients or faculty because of their sexual identity. However, more gay practitioners than straight practitioners reported that they perceive their clients treating them differently because of their sexual identity (Table 4).

Within the study of men working in “women’s professions” some research has revealed both overt and covert sexist behaviors and beliefs between the men and women working in the fields (Williams, 1995). Little evidence was found in the present study indicating sexist behavior. Overall, practitioners and students felt supported by the women in their field. It must be noted that other than the survey question that asked if the men felt supported by women in their field (95%), the researchers did not pose specific questions to probe how men felt about female practitioners, femininity, and the historically feminine roots of the profession. A graduate student from Korea studying in North America did state, “Sometimes I feel weird being one of the only two guys in class—that makes me feel uncomfortable.”

He also added that gender distribution is more balanced in interior design programs in Korea. Further study is warranted on this topic not only in South Korea but also around the world.

Male interior designers also play with language and masculine representations. It is not unusual for male designers, gay or straight, to use women’s language (Lakoff, 2004) or “gayspeak” (Ringer, 1994) when presenting a finishes and furnishings palette to a primarily female audience (legal assistants, nurses, administrative assistants, etc.). This communication is characterized by use of empty adjectives (Lakoff, 2004) such as “fabulous” and more expressive facial and hand gestures. In presenting finishes and furnishing palettes to a primarily male board of directors, the authors have personally witnessed male designers lowering the tone of their voice, and focusing less on issues of beauty and more on issues of function and cost effectiveness. Are the designers misrepresenting themselves or simply communicating in styles that will be well received by their audience? If they have done their job well, the finishes and furnishings are simultaneously beautiful, functional, and responsive to budget. As one practitioner noted, “Sometimes on job sites I do find myself ‘manning up’ a little bit, but not because I’m trying to prove I’m straight, it’s mostly me trying to get across that I actually know how things are to be built.” Another stated, “I think gay male designers sometimes feel they have to be overly professional (in the field, job sites, etc.) where bias may be more apt to occur.”

Within the workplace or classroom most respondents (82%) did not feel discriminated against by clients or faculty because of their sexual identity. However, more gay practitioners than straight practitioners reported that they perceive their clients treating them differently because of their sexual identity (Table 4).

We generally think of discrimination in reference to or against groups of people outside the cultural mainstream which, in the context of this discussion, would be the gay designer. However, one straight student noted, “I have found many firms frown on straight masculine men in this field. I hope that there are more men like me and that your study will help level the playing field.”

Male interior designers also play with language and masculine representations. It is not unusual for male designers, gay or straight, to use women’s language (Lakoff, 2004) or “gayspeak” (Ringer, 1994) when presenting a finishes and furnishings palette to a primarily female audience (legal assistants, nurses, administrative assistants, etc.). This communication is characterized by use of empty adjectives (Lakoff, 2004) such as “fabulous” and more expressive facial and hand gestures. In presenting finishes and furnishing palettes to a primarily male board of directors, the authors have personally witnessed male designers lowering the tone of their voice, and focusing less on issues of beauty and more on issues of function and cost effectiveness. Are the designers misrepresenting themselves or simply communicating in styles that will be well received by their audience? If they have done their job well, the finishes and furnishings are simultaneously beautiful, functional, and responsive to budget. As one practitioner noted, “Sometimes on job sites I do find myself ‘manning up’ a little bit, but not because I’m trying to prove I’m straight, it’s mostly me trying to get across that I actually know how things are to be built.” Another stated, “I think gay male designers sometimes feel they have to be overly professional (in the field, job sites, etc.) where bias may be more apt to occur.”

Within the workplace or classroom most respondents (82%) did not feel discriminated against by clients or faculty because of their sexual identity. However, more gay practitioners than straight practitioners reported that they perceive their clients treating them differently because of their sexual identity (Table 4).

Within the workplace or classroom most respondents (82%) did not feel discriminated against by clients or faculty because of their sexual identity. However, more gay practitioners than straight practitioners reported that they perceive their clients treating them differently because of their sexual identity (Table 4).

Within the workplace or classroom most respondents (82%) did not feel discriminated against by clients or faculty because of their sexual identity. However, more gay practitioners than straight practitioners reported that they perceive their clients treating them differently because of their sexual identity (Table 4).
An overwhelming majority of male students and practitioners indicated that they rarely or never considered changing their career/major because of others’ perceptions.

When asked to respond to the statement “My sexual identity is an advantage in this industry,” the responses were mixed. Students (66%) view their sexual identity as slightly more advantageous than practitioners (55%) do and gay respondents see their sexual identity as more advantageous in the industry than do their straight counterparts. Two comments highlight differing points of view: “I feel straight men have seen an advantage in the major since it is dominated by women” versus “there are still skeptics that may think a straight man cannot possibly have the ‘design mind’ of a gay man, and therefore is sub-par.” Sanders posits that a gay male residential interior designer’s “intimacy with his female patrons—coupled with his first-hand understanding of the crucial role interiors play in human self-fashioning—permits him to be trusted, to become, in a sense, ‘just one of the girls’” (Sanders, 2002, p. 7).

More than 90% of practitioners and students stated they were very comfortable with their career choice. This finding was reinforced by an overwhelming majority (90%) who responded that they rarely or never considered changing their career/major because of others’ perceptions. Over 93% of practitioners and students reported that they were confident in their interior design abilities, demonstrating a strong resilience of practitioners and students in spite of the potential obstacles presented by sexual identity and stereotypes in the profession. A practitioner stated:

As a straight male in this industry, I have often been a minority in my studios, and sometimes, the only straight male, so it’s interesting to see questions like this that I never would have really thought about or considered to be issues, but I can see how it could be [sic]. I think being on job sites has been the only time I’ve ever really thought about it, and I was even on a job site outside San Francisco where the contractor actually had a pink hard hat that was specifically for the visiting interior designers to wear. The [GC] told me every week I didn’t have to wear it, but I always did. When the designer for that same project, who was gay, would visit, he would wear it as well even though he also didn’t have to. I was always impressed that he would never change his personality from being in the office to being on the job site.

By both choosing to proudly wear the pink hard hats, these men are consciously challenging the hegemonic ideals of masculinity in contemporary American society.

Scene: Coordinator of interior design Internship Program is chatting at a cocktail party with a prestigious, female, high-end residential designer in Texas.

Professor: Your firm does terrific work. I would love to get some of my interns or recent graduates working in your office.

Designer: That would be great! However [designer leans in and whispers], I know I shouldn’t say this—it’s sexist and politically incorrect, but I would rather hire a young man. Women tend to get married or have babies and leave me. I can count on men to stay with me longer.1

Scene: Two young designers (one male, one female) in New York talk about their goals and dreams for career advancement.

Female Designer: I sometimes wonder about my potential for advancement at this firm. I’m not sure I can break through the white, gay, male power structure that exists.1

While the survey did not gather specific information to document Williams’ (1992, 1995) notion of the “glass escalator effect” or men in traditionally “women’s profession” being promoted at a faster rate than their female colleagues, an indirect indicator of the effect may be suggested since 90% of the respondents are comfortable with their career choice, 96% have not considered changing their career, and 93% are confident in their design abilities. Presumably, men would not be as pleased with their
Men are likely to find supportive career paths in the complex discipline of interior design, provided they can overcome or make peace with some initial challenges and public misconceptions about the profession.

It would probably be illuminating to engage the “design mafia” and the “design dudes” referenced above in an open, candid discussion about the topics presented here. As the findings reported in our study and related literature suggests, we see clearly defined areas where male gay and straight interior design practitioners not only have divergent opinions and experiences, but also seem to share points of common ground. For example, while gay designers see their sexual identity as more advantageous in the industry than do their straight counterparts, 83% of all respondents agreed with the statement “Other people believe that gay men make the best interior designers.” While there is value in understanding where these men and their experiences in the discipline are different, there is also value in understanding where their experiences are similar and in both cases, these experiences should be addressed and evaluated in terms of their benefit to personal and professional growth. Of course, regardless of one’s unique perceptions and perspectives, success in any field has much to do with self-confidence and taking advantage of opportunities presented and whether male interior designers and students perceive themselves as creatively gifted, technically adept, or “manager material,” they are likely to find supportive career paths in the complex discipline of interior design, provided they can overcome or make peace with some initial challenges and public misconceptions about the profession.

Summary
Survey responses predominately supported the researchers’ initial assumptions regarding sexual identity and stereotype-related male interior designers but also raised some unexpected questions. Generally speaking, the survey results suggest that on an internal level, the majority of men in the study were at peace
Men working and studying daily in the field of interior design are not always at ease discussing gender based topics relative to own profession.

with their identity, representation of masculinity, and chosen major/profession. However, the external issues (e.g., stereotyping, public perceptions of the profession, and at times, workplace dynamics) are where challenges lie for both the individual and, to a larger extent, the profession as a whole. Outside the workplace, men often lie about their major/career to avoid verbal harassment and one-third of men emphasize their masculinity to avoid sexual stereotyping. The survey results begin to quantify and illustrate the complexity of this important and unexplored issue relative to interior design and clearly reveal topics for further research and discussion. Male designers continually deal with multiple stigmas and grapple with conflicting social identities, and survey responses reveal the importance of dismantling invalid stereotypes that may negatively affect one’s choice to practice interior design and, ultimately, the public’s perception of the profession. A student shared, “I believe males in the design world are thought of as gay because there are just more gay males in the media spotlight than straight ones. And we do not like to admit it, but who really educates our society?”

Each year interior design educators meet with anxious young students, male, female, transgender, gay, straight, bisexual, and questioning and try to help them decide whether they should major in interior design or architecture. In doing so, we need to ensure that our advice is free from latent or overt sexism and heterosexism. Interior design educators in particular should carefully consider the way we disseminate information about the field to our students, our expectations and assumptions about students and their unique abilities and interests, and the way we advise them to maneuver through their educational system and ultimately, practice. Upon entering practice, the baton of responsibility is passed from academics to practitioners who mentor and nurture these young designers moving forward. As those of us in interior design know, the discipline is greatly misunderstood on many levels and we must arm ourselves and our students with general knowledge, self-knowledge, and the confidence to continue correcting public misperceptions when they arise.

By way of concluding this discussion and, in turn, opening up new avenues for future discussion and research, this survey appeared to “strike a nerve” with some recipients and their communication with the research team reveals potential generational shifts in people’s comfort levels relative to frank discussion of sexual identity. The survey question that invited respondents to write in additional thoughts relative to this topic generated 105 responses from students and 33 responses from practitioners. Basic content analysis of these comments enabled us to classify them as positive, neutral, or negative. This coding revealed that students (median age 24) responded much more positively to the topic than did practitioners (median age 38). Comments ranged from “I think this is a very interesting topic, and it makes a lot of good points!” to “I think this questionnaire is kinda [sic] weird and a little offensive.”

Some of the most provocative comments were received by men who chose not to participate in the study. Within days of practitioners receiving the questionnaire, the inbox of the researcher’s e-mail was flooded with messages. Excerpts from these messages include “What’s this all about?,” “How did you get my name?,” “You can’t ask these kinds of questions,” and “Men in my office are complaining about this survey—take me off your list.” These comments, which range from mild frustration to slight paranoia, highlight the reality that comfort levels with the topics of human sexuality and identity are not universally high and deserve continuous monitoring and exploration. Even men working and studying daily in the field of interior design are not always at ease discussing these topics relative to their profession.

Final Scene: Male interior design professor is chatting with male graduate architecture student.

Student: You should be really proud of your male interior design students. Be they fierce queens or butch dudes, those
Nothing short of a transformation in the perception of the profession along with dissolution of sexism and homophobia in North American culture will result in less stereotypical attitudes toward male interior designers.

guys don’t take crap from anyone in this school. Their strength of spirit is inspiring.1

It is this type of strength and willingness to challenge the norm that will ultimately move interior design forward. Williams speaks of the essence of this issue stating:

The stereotypes that differentiate masculinity and femininity, and degrade that which is defined as feminine, are deeply entrenched in culture, social structure, and personality. Nothing short of a revolution in cultural definitions of masculinity will affect the broad scale social transformation needed to achieve the complete occupational integration of men and women. (1995, p. 264).

Likewise, nothing short of a transformation in the perception of the interior design profession along with dissolution of sexism and homophobia in North American culture will result in less stereotypical attitudes toward male interior designers. Until this happens, interior design is likely to remain marginalized, feminized, and imbalanced in gender distribution.

References


Kwallek, N. (2010). Time for a change: Interior design or interior architecture? In R. Clearly (Ed.) Traces and trajectories: The University of Texas at Austin School of Architecture at 100 (pp. 94–97). Austin, TX: Center for American Architecture and Design.


Note

The scenarios presented are composite dialogues that illustrate views held by the public, practitioners, and interior design students. They do not represent the qualitative data collected from the survey conducted from the study reported in the article. All scenarios are recollections of actual conversations the authors have had.

Received December 14, 2010; revised May 27, 2011; accepted June 2, 2011