

## STRAIGHT(JACKET) FOR A DAY

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### PAUL PURCELL

*“Ironically, I was the ideal candidate for this study – except of course that I happened to be in the wrong demographic. Signing up for the study was not a problem. After all, they clearly had no litmus test to judge my heterosexuality over the phone. No, the real challenge would be working out how to ‘act straight’ once I arrived.”*

In 1895, Oscar Wilde was handed a calling card which read: “To Oscar Wilde – posing as a sodomite.” It was intended by its writer, Lord Queensberry, to be an insult. But Queensberry didn’t just get the spelling wrong; he also misunderstood the word’s meaning. If Oscar Wilde was guilty of posing as anything, it was as a straight man – not as a sodomite. Of course, unbeknownst to the public, he was secretly leading a very gay life. Unfortunately for Oscar, he wasn’t a very good poser. He was eventually caught out and the ensuing scandal ruined his reputation and his life.

These days, you’re not as likely to ruin your reputation or your life if you get caught out for acting straight. But few self-respecting gay men would pretend to be something they are not. And I’ve never seen the logic in pretending to be a card-carrying heterosexual, especially when I’m happy and gay. But there was one occasion when I faked being straight for a day.

The occasion was a market research company looking for straight (though they didn’t actually use the word) men, between the ages of 30 and 40, who were married with a child between 6 and 12. While normally I

wouldn’t bother with such a masquerade, the incentive was 30 dollars an hour. Hell, for that sort of money I’d pretend to be lassie!

Better yet, the topic of the market research was shopping. Now this was one area of human experience I feel comfortable classifying myself as an expert. Whether it was shopping for clothes, books, DVDs or just having a coffee in a cafe, I spent a significant amount of time in shopping malls – they were like a second home to me. Ironically, I was the ideal candidate for this study – except of course that I happened to be in the wrong demographic.

Signing up for the study was not a problem. After all, they clearly had no litmus test to judge my heterosexuality over the phone. No, the real challenge would be working out how to ‘act straight’ once I arrived. I already knew a few unspoken, straight-acting rules to help me out:

- Don’t show strong emotion
- Avoid “Chick flicks”
- Don’t use your hands to make a point
- Don’t cry
- Don’t ever desire other men

There, of course, are a few caveats to these rules. You can show strong emotions if they’re ‘male’ emotions – like, for instance, anger. You can also cry (quietly) while mourning a death in the family or celebrating victory on the sports field. Then you can grope, kiss, cuddle and fondle all you like, but you have to follow the three second rule: full body contact is permitted for up to 3 seconds. Any more than that, and you might be ‘gay.’

Observing the “straight acting” rules in a straight environment wouldn’t be a problem for me on a conscious level. But I couldn’t speak for how my body would behave on an unconscious level. Normally, I don’t check how my legs, hands, eyes, mouth, or eyebrows behave every single minute of the day. But now, expected to present as heterosexual, I would have to control myself in ways in which my body wasn’t accustomed. It would be like wearing a straightjacket.

I anticipated encountering at least one problem – I have a natural tendency to gesture with my hands when making a point. While straight men tend to let their voice speak for themselves, many gay men (including myself) find it useful to let our bodies reinforce our words. Of course, I could always claim I was a fiery Italian or expressive French man – if I only had a convincing accent up my sleeve. Similarly – and equally troubling – I have a natural tendency for my voice to go up slightly in pitch when I get enthusiastic. I'd have to shoot for monotone if I was going to convince anyone I was hetero.

On the eve of my big debut, I realized I had yet another hurdle to jump – a wardrobe problem, specifically. How exactly do you dress straight? I did my best to avoid anything stereotypically “gay” by selecting what I thought was suitably masculine attire: a pair of sexy, three-quarter length blue shorts with a matching tight, white T-shirt. Observing my outfit in the mirror, it occurred to me that straight men don't wear anything tight unless it's designed to impress “chicks” at a social function. As seeing as how there wouldn't be any of said chicks at this function, wearing something tight might be seen as too “gay.” I ditched the tight look for something more comfortable and conservative: a pair of beige, linen pants and a navy polo.

Expecting my outfit to blend in like camouflage, I marched into the foyer of the hotel where the market research was being held with my head held high and my face as free of expression as possible. Much to my dismay, I quickly realized that I'd clearly overdressed for the occasion. Two of the five men wore shorts and loose t-shirts with thong sandals – like they had just walked over from a Sunday afternoon barbecue in their backyard. Another two looked like they were ready to head down to a ranch in their matching boots, beige moleskin jeans and plaid shirts.

There was, however one man who notably stood out from the others. He wore a tight grey T-shirt with tight, blue jeans – normally a gay uniform. I kept my eye on ‘Grey Top’ for the rest of the afternoon to see if he would give away any clues to his persuasion, so to speak.

While we waited for the focus group to begin, I noticed that all of the other men were practicing their best strong, silent routine. None of them greeted or chatted amiably with their neighbor. Normally, I would be outgoing and chatty, but I followed their straight example and did my best to act the part. Thankfully, this awkward and (to me) unnatural silence was cut short when a female moderator greeted us and invited us to join her in a function room. We followed her into the other room, where she offered us sandwiches and orange juice before getting stuck into the research proper.

After the light refreshments, we were given an icebreaker in which the moderator asked us each to say something about ourselves. This was it – the moment I would have to confess my ‘straightness.’ I was a little nervous and hoped that my outing would be convincing. As we went around the table, most of the men mentioned their wives and kids – but not ‘Grey Top.’ Curiously, he instead referenced his partner, without any pronoun attached. When my turn came, I decided to play it safe by just using a non-gendered, ‘we’: That ‘we’ lived in a outer Canberra suburb, that ‘we’ had lived in Sydney and the Gold Coast before, and that ‘we’ both enjoyed shopping at Woden.

Since the proceedings were being videotaped, I took extra care to look and sound convincing enough as a faux straight man. I made sure that I kept my hands under the table so that they did not flap around. I also tried to keep the pitch in my voice monotone, repressing any impulse to raise it too revealingly high when I talked.

As the focus group wore on, we all relaxed and I found it easier and easier to pretend to be straight. At one point, during an exercise requiring us to select positive and negative images about potential shopping centre development in the nation's capital, I picked up the stereotypical image of a happy family going shopping. When my turn came, I waxed lyrical about them: “This photo makes me think of my seven year old boy, and myself going shopping. This photo makes me think of my wife and myself holding hands and walking through the shopping centre.” Of course, the seven year old boy I mentioned was really my seven year old cat, but my story was met with the approval of the other men.

At some point during my story, I realized that my hands had unconsciously appeared from under the desk and were attempting to speak on my own behalf, punctuating my verbal sentences with corresponding hand gestures. Immediately, I whipped them back under the desk and resumed without the visual accompaniment. Thankfully, I don't think anyone particularly noticed.

I won extra points for my straight performance when I choose an image of an attractive woman dancing to the accompaniment of a violin player. As it turns out, most men picked this one (as apparently did the women's group). I played my straight card by saying that I thought she was attractive, which got a pretty good response from the blokes! They also said that they wanted to see more attractive women dancing in shopping areas!

I caused some minor controversy when I said that "my wife" and I both liked the post-modern National Museum of Australia in Canberra. My straight pals seemed to think that it was ugly. Being the good husband that I was pretending to be, I jumped to my 'wife's' defense by saying that many people probably said the same thing about the Eiffel Tower 100 years ago. Much to my surprise, 'Grey Top' agreed with me, noting that this was indeed the case.

'Grey Top' also had another clue to send my way when it came to his selections: they were, shall we say, a bit 'different.' While most men picked out stereotypical images of happy, cuddly, hetero family ones, 'Grey' selected images foregrounding the architecture of the place, rather than the people. Perhaps his most revealingly deviant selection was that of a woman with her tongue pierced. He was the only participant to make this selection.

While I might not have been clear about 'Grey Top's' sexual orientation, I was quite sure about the other men in the group and what they wanted out of shopping – from a market research point of view. In a perfect world, they wouldn't shop at all, opting instead to sit at home watching television sports programs. But since they were occasionally obligated to accompany their wives, they wanted shopping centres that they could get into and out of as quickly as possible (no multilevel car parks!).

Unlike my fellow marketing research participants, I loved to shop. I could spend hours shopping - looking for that wonderful new shirt to go with that sexy and tight pair of jeans. But – at least based on this group of men – to be straight required two things: a hatred for shopping and a love for sitting in front of the TV watching sport. Yuck!

I wasn't the only other deviant shopper in the group, however. 'Grey Top' admitted that he loved going to shop at Newtown. But wait – it gets worse. He didn't just love to shop; he loved to shop for *second hand books!* A silence came over the group. Obviously, the other men were not used to hearing straight guys ever admitting, publicly at least, that they loved to shop.

By the time the focus group ended, I had managed to pass as the real thing: a straight, married man with kid right under the noses of my straight colleagues. My performance ended as soon as I picked up my pay check and headed out the door. Oscar Wilde would have been impressed!

While I was happy to have succeeded in my efforts, I was relieved to remove the straight jacket that had been hindering my behaviour for two hours. If the experience taught me anything, it was that to keeping up such an act all your life would be exhausting, if not impossible. I knew that no matter how hard I prevented my hands from flying into the air, the pitch of my voice going above a bass level, or avoiding 'chick flicks', there would always be something that would give me away – I love to shop. Give me the wide, open, air-conditioned malls, Sale Time and my MasterCard over a place on a couch watching boring TV sports programs about hot, sweaty men playing with their balls any day!

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Paul Purcell is a 40-something gay man who's been working in the gay media since the early nineties. He lives a quiet, domesticated life with his partner and two cats in a charming terrace in the colourfully queer inner-city, Sydney suburb of Newtown, Australia. In his writing he loves to find the humorous, offbeat and just plain ridiculous things to be discovered in everyday life.*