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**The Discourse System of American Lesbians and Gays**

**by**

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**Spring 1998**

**The Discourse System of American Lesbians and Gays**

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**by**

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University of California, Berkeley

Spring 1998

## Abstract

The discourse system of American lesbians and gays

by

Anita Carolyn Liang

Doctor of Philosophy in Linguistics

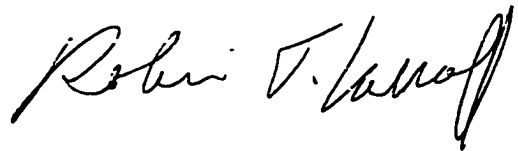
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The present study seeks to explicate American lesbian and gay identity by examining the forms and functions of four discourse genres associated with lesbian and gay self-presentation. The discourse genres that are investigated are the speech act of coming out and the genre of advice literature that addresses the problems of coming out; the coming out story, and gay implicature. The aim of the study is to show how these discourse genres emerge out of certain shared beliefs—about the self, interpersonal relationships, and the functions of language—that give participants a sense of identity as lesbian and gay. These shared beliefs, along with the norms of behavior to which they give rise, constitute a discourse system.

Each individual is a member of multiple discourse systems (e.g., ethnic, religious, gender, generational). The norms of behavior operative within each of these discourse systems may conflict with each other. Indeed, it is these conflicting discourse systems, for example, the lesbian and gay discourse system, on the one hand, and the fundamentalist Christian discourse system, on the other, within which the individual is a member, that potentially create difficulties for the individual's ability to define her/his identity. Depending on which discourse system is dominant in a given situation, certain ways of speaking and relating to others will be emphasized and others suppressed.

The analysis reveals that lesbian and gay identity are not simply outcomes of individually-motivated acts but emerges out of a more complex pattern of ideology, socialization, and politeness norms (face systems). The category of lesbian and gay identity forms a more or less coherent discourse system that espouses certain beliefs (e.g., sexual orientation is a major defining trait of who a person "really" is), has characteristic ways of enculturating members (e.g., coming out self-help books and pamphlets), and emphasizes certain types of interpersonal relationships (e.g., honesty and openness between parent and child).



## Table of Contents

|                                                                          |                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Acknowledgments</i>                                                   | <i>page iv</i> |
| Chapter 1 The linguistic analysis of identity                            | 1              |
| Chapter 2 Methodology                                                    | 68             |
| Chapter 3 Coming out                                                     | 96             |
| Chapter 4 Coming out self-help literature                                | 113            |
| Chapter 5 Coming out stories                                             | 154            |
| Chapter 6 Conversationally implicating American lesbian and gay identity | 194            |
| Chapter 7 Conclusion                                                     | 221            |
| References                                                               | 231            |
| Appendices                                                               | 247            |

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# Chapter 1

## The linguistic analysis of identity

### 1.0 Lesbian and gay self-presentational discourse genres

This work investigates lesbian and gay identity via an analysis of four discourse genres associated with lesbian and gay self-presentation—coming out and coming out advice literature, the coming out story, and gay implicature. There are three main reasons that the study of each lesbian and gay self-presentational discourse genres is worthwhile.

First, the study of lesbian and gay self-presentational genres is interesting for its own sake. But in addition, they have not been studied together as different realizations of the same social category.

Second, analysis of these categories of self-presentation can reveal aspects of the experiences of individuals as lesbian or gay that provide evidence for the cohesiveness and stability of lesbians and gays as a group, and lesbian and gay identity as a social category. In other words, the existence of differentiated categories of lesbian and gay self-presentation implies that certain types of interactive experiences, both among lesbians and gays and with others, are common and recurring, and that these experiences help to define who is and who is not lesbian or gay.

Third, these forms of discourse implicate a certain set of communicative practices, obligations, values, beliefs, and assumptions about what it means to be a good person, about appropriate uses of language, and about interpersonal relationships. Investigation of these genres can shed light on what those practices, obligations, values, beliefs, and assumptions are. More generally, the investigation of these genres can help identify the cultural norms and values that give rise to the social category of sexual orientation.

Taken together, the discourse genres of lesbian and gay self-presentation can be viewed as part of what Scollon and Scollon's (1995) term a *discourse system* that defines membership within a community of American lesbians and gays through the encoding of a

shared set of beliefs about, for example, morally proper conduct (i.e, ideology), and about ways of interacting among ingroup and outgroup members (i.e., interpersonal or face relationships), and about ways of enculturating individuals into membership. The communicative means through which individuals can present themselves as lesbian and gay constitute the linguistic correlates of a cultural group sometimes known as “the gay community.”

### **1.1 Organization of the chapter**

The organization of this chapter is as follows. First, I specify the connection between language and identity, especially as it pertains to lesbian and gay identity. Next, I discuss a tripartite structure of identity, and then consider how specific instances of gender identity can be understood in terms of this rubric. I then use Agar’s notion of “culture” as an emergent, dynamic outcome of interaction by which norms of appropriate behavior are negotiated. Hymes’ parameters of interpretability, reportability, and repeatability are helpful in assessing the status of a given communicative behavior, and hence, self-presentation, as being appropriate or not. After discussing the issues of language, identity, and culture, the next topic addressed is the theoretical background that informs the present discussion. The two main subdisciplines from which the pertinent theories are drawn are linguistic pragmatics, which subsumes Searle’s speech act theory, Grice’s conversational logic, and politeness theory; and discourse analysis, with the units of interest being the coherence principle and the frame. Discourse genres similar to the ones under consideration are then examined.

### **1.2 Lesbian and gay identity**

Recent social changes (e.g., the de-medicalization of homosexuality by American Psychiatric Association in 1973, the increased visibility of lesbians and gays in public life, the election of a US President who is more or less open in his support of lesbians and gay

rights) in the US have culminated in the emergence of sexuality as a social category. Because utterances communicate identity in addition to propositional information (Goffman 1959), one can access identity via the study of language. The goals of this study are to show how lesbian and gay identity constitute a discourse system with its own ideology, processes of socialization, forms of discourse, and face system.

It is necessary in the first place to determine whether the display of lesbian and gay identity can (or should) be studied through linguistic analysis. The concept of ethnicity, to which lesbian and gay identity has been compared (Epstein 1987), is usually based on socialization processes occurring at an early age. One's sense of self as Asian, as an American, as a native speaker of Boston English, as female, are grounded in socialization processes which happen early, and are normally reinforced throughout one's life. Moreover, ethnic identity is often strongly associated with characteristics that can be perceived, such as language or physical features. In contrast, identification as lesbian or gay occurs during and after secondary stages of socialization, usually after one has entered into a community whose values regarding homosexuality are negative. There are no overt identifying features that can be associated with the sense of being lesbian or gay, other than self-naming. The fact that coming out stories commonly include events where the protagonist "could hardly say the word 'gay'" attests to the social and psychological impact which uttering the word would have upon the speaker's sense of self. The absence of overt physical features with which such an identity can be associated in fact compels the intentional use of language as the vehicle through which to bring into being such an identification. Whereas an Asian American who denied her ethnicity or a man who, notwithstanding all physical evidence to the contrary, claimed to be a woman would be looked at in askance, a speaker may assert or deny her lesbianism, and this assertion or denial in itself has immediate ramifications for whether she is treated as a lesbian or straight. A woman is a lesbian (or straight) because she says she is, but a man is not a woman simply because he says he is a woman. While both sexual identity and ethnicity or

## **racial identity**

**can be said to be socially constructed, the former are performed, acted out, and produced, often in individual routines, whereas the latter tends to be more obviously “written” on the body and negotiated by political groups. (Takagi 1996:25)**

**Identification as lesbian or gay resides in the declaration “I am lesbian (or gay)” to oneself first of all, and to others secondarily, over and above any concrete homosexual behavior. The reason that lesbian and gay identity is defined, at some level, by a declaration akin to “I am lesbian” or “I am gay” is that it implies a way of making sense of one’s psychic life in terms that are specific to late twentieth century American society. While it is likely that there have always been people who have engaged in homosexual behavior and who may very well have established relationships based on their homosexual attractions and desires, their understanding of themselves was achieved within the social, historical, and cultural circumstances particular to their lives. This understanding may not have included (and probably did not include) the same notions of identity, let alone sexuality, as exists in present day US society. In other words, it is likely that whatever categories existed across history and cultures to make sense out of homosexual behavior and those who engaged in it, they surely did not involve identifying sexuality as a basis for identity; thus a declaration of one’s sexuality was not in question. In American society, sexuality is a basis for identity, but given that it is “invisible” compared to other social categories such as Chinese, where identity has a set of physical correlates, identification of oneself as lesbian or gay occurs via a declaration.**

**External sociocultural evidence also points to the linguistic basis of lesbian and gay identity. For instance, the infamous “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy concerning gays in the military which prohibits a sincere declaration that one is lesbian or gay indicates that it is really the words more than anything else that have the most far-reaching social effects: people don’t stop being lesbian or gay just because a law prohibits their saying so under specified conditions. In popular culture, the brouhaha among lesbians and gays on the one hand and among the religious right on the other over the utterance of the words “I’m gay”**

by a fictional character such as Ellen Morgan also supports the linguistic basis for lesbian or gay identity. The coming out self-help material introduce ways to perform the speech act or manage its perlocutionary effects. They do not suggest strategies for dealing with, for instance, catching someone or being caught in the act of have same-sex sex.

Interestingly, the debate among the members of the APA who voted, in 1973, to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual, was largely political (Bayer 1987), a matter of deciding whose definition of homosexuality was to prevail, rather than medical or scientific. Thus, evidence at all levels, from the lesbian or gay individual's experience of reconciling her or his feelings with the available cultural categories to a variety of domains at the sociocultural level, suggest that it is the linguistic act which is constitutive of gay identity. For this reason, a linguistic analysis of lesbian and gay self-presentation is appropriate.

### 1.3 Approaches to the study of language and identity

Historically, the study of the relationship between language and identity can be traced to early observations in the phonological, morphological, and/or lexical differences in forms used according to the gender of the speaker and the addressee. Haas (1944, cited in Fasold 1990:89-90), for example, observed that Koasati verb paradigms exhibited slight phonological variations in verb forms correlated with the sex of the speaker. These variations were maintained in reported speech where the forms reflected the sex of the speaker being quoted. However, during this period, the concern with this differentiation in forms did not extend to the question of what the forms signified in terms of the relative social statuses among the sexes.

Nonetheless, the interest among linguistic anthropologists and the ethnographers of speaking in what it means to be a member of a given culture was consistent with the anthropological tradition of which Haas was a product. Cultural identity is defined in part by knowledge of how and when it is appropriate to engage in certain kinds of talk. This

view of language as an indicator of cultural membership was further developed in large part in response to Chomsky's definition of linguistic theory, whose object of inquiry was linguistic competence, the ability of the speaker to interpret and produce grammatical sentences in her/his native language.

### 1.3.1 Anthropological perspectives on language and identity

For Dell Hymes, linguistic competence did not go far enough in specifying what the native speaker had to know in order to be able to use language.

A child from whom any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language might come with equal likelihood would be of course a social monster. (Hymes 1974)

Crucially tied to the individual's ability to function as a member of her/his culture was her/his communicative competence, a notion, introduced by Hymes (1974), that subsumed linguistic competence.

Hymes (1972:59-65) devised the SPEAKING rubric as a guide for the comprehensive investigation of a culture's linguistic practices. The rubric was an acronym for the parameters that the ethnographer of speaking might look for when plotting out the speech events of a given culture through which a member's communicative competence could be specified. The rubric is as follows:

S = setting: the physical location and time in which the speech event takes place, and the ongoing speech event itself (i.e., the psychological setting).

P = participants: the participants of the speech event.

E = ends: the respective goals of the participants, locally (within the talk that makes up the speech event) and globally (the overall function of the speech event).

A = acts: the sequence of messages that make up the speech event, including their form and content.

K = key: the manner in which a speech event is executed (e.g., ironically, seriously).

**I = instrumentalities:** the medium of communication by which a message is transmitted (i.e., the channel), and the language (i.e., the form of speech).

**N = norms:** social expectations governing the ways of conducting oneself appropriately, in both communication and interpretation.

**G = genre:** a discourse unit defined by co-occurring language forms and functions.

Of greatest concern for the present work are the norms of speaking as instantiated both by participants of an interaction, and what they can and do say. Whether one speaks appropriately and acceptably depends on the norms of the social groups, or the speech communities<sup>1</sup>, to which a speaker belongs. Communicative conventions which come about as a result of common interactive experiences are symbols of social identification.

Yet language and group membership are often not coextensive. By reviewing a range of cross-cultural research, Hymes (1984 [1967]) provided evidence showing that neither a given language nor its speakers can properly be taken as given and that the relationship between the two is far more complex than the “one language—one culture” (or, for that matter, “one linguistic variable—one social category”) boundary relationship (Hymes 1984 [1967]:9). No necessary relationship exists between a social unit and a language (e.g., within the same family, the children may speak a different language from their parents). Likewise, speakers with access to the same discourse genres may not share identical codes (e.g., both a speaker of Cockney English and American English may tell coming out stories but may not be mutually intelligible to each other), and even if they do share identical codes, they may not realize the internal structure of the genres identically (e.g., strategies used by Asian Americans to tell coming out stories differ from those used by white Anglo-Americans).

Gumperz (1982a) reinforces Hymes’ analysis by showing that social identity cannot behave solely as an independent variable that can predict linguistic behavior,

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<sup>1</sup> A speech community is defined by how and which meanings are expressed and interpreted, and may or may not involve the same linguistic variety (Saville-Troike 1982:20, cited in Fasold 1990:41-42).

especially in view of the context-boundedness of interaction, and the range of linguistic choices which are constrained and created by the cumulative effect of the interaction. Indeed, Gumperz, Aulakh, and Kaltman (1982:23) have contended that the relationships displayed by participants to indicate their meanings do not depend on objective measurements of a given linguistic behavior, but on the aggregate of communicative choices made by each participant. Group membership is, in other words, conveyed over time.

Moreover, according to Gumperz (1982a, 1982b), a speaker's identity is made up of the ways in which s/he signals and interprets meaning. These signalling and interpreting conventions are learned from the speech community into which the speaker has been socialized. In order to understand the various levels of meaning of an utterance, the words uttered cannot be separated from who the speaker is because the speaker's signalling devices frame the utterance in culture-specific ways. However, rather than being locked into systems of communication that are irreconcilable with others, interlocutors of different cultural backgrounds are able to understand each other because of communicative flexibility, the ability to accommodate the needs of one's interlocutors by adjusting one's communicative and interpretative strategies. Communicative flexibility is both required and possible because of the indeterminateness of language, which accommodates multiple meanings and interpretations. When achieved, it can "expose enough of the implicit meaning to make for a satisfactory encounter between strangers or culturally different speakers" (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 1982:14).

### 1.3.2 Labov's sociolinguistic perspective

While many of the major works in language and identity stem from the anthropological tradition, Labov's (1972a, 1972b) sociolinguistic research represents yet another approach, that deriving from the tradition of the dialectologists in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, on linguistic variables (variant pronunciations of

the “same” form). He showed that it was possible to discern regularities in the apparently infinite variability in linguistic forms both within and across speakers if both the linguistic system and social milieu were taken into account. Although his primary interest was on the connection between synchronic variation and diachronic change, his quantitative research has been pivotal in research on language and identity. In his Martha’s Vineyard study, for instance, he observed that a tendency to centralize vowels was correlated with a strong sense of islander identity, which manifested itself most conspicuously with the influx of summer tourists. In later studies, he linked the use of linguistic variants with socioeconomic characteristics. For instance, in his work on New York City dialects, he found that members of the lower classes tended to use [d] more frequently over a range of styles, where members of the middle class would use [D]. Likewise, there were patterns of use associated with gender. Males tended to use standard forms less frequently than females did. According to Labov, women used prestige forms because it was one of the few ways by which they could achieve some degree of social status.<sup>2</sup>

While Labov’s research emphasized this critical connection between language and identity, some of the assumptions upon which his findings were based were problematic, especially the implied fixity of social identities (e.g., gender while undefined, was treated as a monolithic, one-dimensional category), and their logical relationship to the linguistic behavior with which they were associated (e.g., gender was thought to precede and therefore cause certain linguistic behaviors). He assumed that a social category is one for which a linguistic correlation can be found; and, conversely, that the linguistic correlate can serve as a basis upon which the group can be identified.

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<sup>2</sup> Counterclaims to this explanation take note of the fact that in works such as Labov’s and others demonstrating a similar difference correlating the differential use of vernacular forms between the sexes, men’s behavior is presumed to be the norm despite the fact that it is their behavior that would appear to be aberrant. As Janet Holmes (1992:174) puts it, “Why would standard or ‘correct’ behaviour be regarded as requiring explanation? It is men’s speech which uses fewer standard forms — not women’s. Instead of asking ‘why do women use more standard speech forms than men?’, it makes more sense to ask ‘why don’t men use more standard forms?’”

### **1.3.3 R. Lakoff's perspective on language and identity**

Approaching the issue of identity from a formal linguistic tradition, Robin Lakoff (1973a, 1975) wrote her landmark treatise on the linguistic subjugation of women, *Language and woman's place*. Applying introspective techniques to address the issue that Mary Haas left unexplored, Lakoff concerned herself with the social origins of gender differences in language use; and further, the semantic differences in language about women versus men. She contended that certain kinds of linguistic forms were "grammatical," being in co-occurrence relations with each other and with the gender of the user. Women avoid making direct assertions, instead using tag questions and indirect forms. Lakoff speculated that socialization into an inferior status resulted in these types of linguistic behaviors that differentiated women from men by suppressing the ability of the former to express themselves fully. To dispel the implication that use of these devices was the exclusive behavioral province of one gender or the other, she (1979) finessed her analysis by situating them within a constellation of behaviors which, taken together, constitute style.

### **1.3.4 Conversational style and social identity**

Lakoff's work inaugurated a whole body of research in language and gender studies which continues to flourish not only in the guise of language and gender research, but also in work on identity in general. For example, the concept of style has been a useful one in the linguistic study of identity because it implicitly takes into account the fact that speakers have and make linguistic choices that cooccur in a more or less consistent way, and are consequential for the kinds of selves they present. Tannen's work on New York Jewish conversational style (1979b, 1981) is illustrative. She applies the methods of interactional sociolinguistics to the concept of linguistic style to analyze identity as a dynamic construct that is realized in interaction. While style can be personal, social and cultural, Tannen is mostly concerned with the expression of social identity. Members of

the same social group have some, usually a subset, of a cluster of linguistic behaviors in common, such as the “machine gun question” (Tannen 1981). Cultural membership is reflected in ways of behaving shared ubiquitously among members of different subgroups that are part of the same culture; thus, a southerner and a Californian would both use the term “corn” to refer to the vegetable, while in British culture, a Liverpudlian and a Londoner would both use maize. Personal style is represented in elements of behaviors which, in combination, are unique to the individual, and not attributable to an identity that is shared among individuals forming a cohesive group. For instance, a breathy voice, a mild Chinese accent, a large vocabulary, a broad pitch range, etc., together would form a linguistic composite for which it would be possible for a hearer to specify the speaker as a particular individual (e.g., “That sounds like Charlotte.”). Therefore, any utterance reveals all these aspects of identity, but in a way that is temporally situated, both with respect to how the speaker has presented her/himself before and how s/he projects her/his intention to continue behaving along the same lines.

#### **1.4 Identity as anatomy, biography, performance**

It is necessary at this point to refine the definition of identity and outline three major facets, first, in order to determine where lesbian and gay identity fits within these understandings of identity; and second, in order to determine which aspects of identity lend themselves more readily to linguistic analysis.

Identity, in general, can be examined from the perspectives of visible traits, or physical attributes; a biography; or a performance.

##### **1.4.1 Identity as visible traits**

A distinction based on visible traits is warranted because, as anyone who fills out an affirmative action survey form knows, social categories based on reproductive roles, physical attributes such as skin color and facial features, and visible disabilities, have social significance in this culture. The visual salience of physical traits makes them more concrete, and therefore, more basic, than other attributes upon which identity may be based. Typically, with the exceptions of disabilities incurred during one's lifespan, hormone treatments, cosmetic surgical procedures, and the inevitability of natural processes such as those associated with aging, these personal characteristics, on the whole, cannot be altered at the whim of the individual.

When comparing identity categories based on physical attributes and those based on social psychological traits, it sometimes appears that the former have more reality and legitimacy than the latter. For example, the inclusion of sexual orientation within an anti-discrimination clause is considered by some members of historically discriminated groups (e.g., non-whites in the US) as an illegitimate claim to legal protection. The reason for this is that it is difficult to conceal visually detectable characteristics based on traits such as racial stock or physical disabilities, whereas no equivalent external indicators corresponding to sexual orientation exist. Lesbians and gays are able to "pass" despite their discreditable personal trait of homosexual orientation, and are consequently, according to this perspective, in no need of the same kind of protection.

The issue of identity can become confusing, however, when individuals can choose their physical attributes and thereby shift from one category to another. Transsexuals who have undergone hormone treatments can develop more or less successfully the physical attributes of the opposite sex. Yet, membership within their chosen sex is rarely taken for granted when the individual's transsexual status is known, as was the case with the male-to-female transsexual tennis player, Renee Richards. In her case, the issue concerned that of her strength and whether her erstwhile manhood would confer upon her an unfair disadvantage against her female opponents and thus influence her ability to play

professionally as a woman. In recent years, at the annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, a contingent of lesbian participants, led by the lesbian separatist folk singer Alix Dobkin, has raised objections against the participation of lesbian-identified male-to-female transsexuals on the grounds that the latter, as biological males who have experienced male privilege, are intruders of women's space.

The above examples capture a distinction that exists between how physical characteristics versus social psychological traits are perceived in the definition of social categories. The visual salience of the former appears to render them more accessible and basic than the latter. However, the examples also demonstrate that the distinction is not necessarily dichotomous. Physical attributes traditionally the basis for defining identity may be overridden by other considerations, such as the perceived choice that the individual had in changing what was ostensibly unalterable. Here we can see how even physical attributes are negotiable sites for determining identity.

#### 1.4.2 Identity as biography

If identity conceived as physical traits answers the question "What am I?", identity conceived as narrative or personal biography answers the question "Who am I?".

Anthony Giddens (1991) characterizes the modern self as one who has "a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people" (Giddens 1991:54). This self is different from that of a traditional society whereby the latter "offers an organising medium of social life" where "the past inserts a wide band of 'authenticated practice' into the future" (Giddens 1991:48). Instead, conditions of modernity, including "the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice" make available a wide range of options for the individual. The self of modernity is characterized by the reflexivity inherent in the process of making choices about how the individual will carry out her/his life. The ability of the individual to incorporate the

decisions s/he makes from among the diversity of choices into a continuous narrative constitutes her/his sense of self.

A distinguishing trait of the individual's biography through which the self is established is fragility, "because the biography the individual reflexively holds in mind is only one 'story' among many other potential stories about her development as a self" (Giddens 1991:54). However, while this fragility creates a risk of an unstable sense of self for the individual, paradoxically, it also affords stability by allowing her/him to "continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self" (Giddens 1991:54). So a person with a stable sense of self-identity has a biography that is also robust, "because a sense of self-identity is often securely enough held to weather major tensions or transitions in the social environments within which the person moves" (Giddens 1991:55).

While Giddens articulates a description of the self of modernity in terms of a biography, and implies that individuals undergo a continuous process of adjusting their narratives to accommodate new experiences and new interpretations of old experiences, narrative therapists like Michael White and David Epston use this understanding of identity as biography as the basis for their approach to psychotherapy. According to White and Epston, the obligation of each individual is to ensure that her/his biography is coherent.

In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. (White and Epston 1990:9-10)

The understanding of the self is achieved linguistically, through the construction of a narrative that organizes experiences about ourselves and others that we and others can understand. People experience psychic pain "when the narratives in which they are 'storying' their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience 'storied' by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and ... significant aspects of their lived experience ... contradict these dominant narratives" (White and Epston 1990:

14-15). Therefore, if the self can be thought of as a continuously evolving narrative, then therapy is a “form of intentional re-storying” that takes place “when life’s natural re-storying becomes too painful or our resistance to it too powerful; or when one or the other of our family story, couple story, or personal story is no longer working” (Randall 1995:247). The identity as biography metaphor permits the focus of attention to shift from the individual psyche to the individual as a participant in interaction, and likewise, from internal mental structures to external linguistic behaviors.

#### 1.4.3 Identity as performance

Finally, the question of performance can be phrased as “Who am I trying to be in relation to my audience?” This question has received a great deal of attention from sociologists, linguists, and anthropologists. The notion of identity as performance and identity as biography are closely related given that the latter is realizeable through the former.

Goffman (1959) offers a sociological analysis of the selves that participants intend and do project to others. Using theater as a metaphor for interaction, he maintains that the ways in which the individual relates to her/his fellow interlocutors constitutes the analogue of a performance. The individual’s role as performer comprises

all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. (Goffman 1959:22)

Individuals engage in displays that differ according to their occurrence in “front region” or “backstage.” Performances take place within the former, and constitute “an effort to give the appearance that the [individual’s] activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards” (Goffman 1959:111) when interacting with others (which he designates as politeness) and when not interacting but still in the presence of others (which he designates as decorum). In contrast, the back region or backstage is “the place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly

contradicted as a matter of course” (Goffman 1959:112). It is, in other words, the area to which the “audience” has no access and where, therefore, the performer is no longer obliged to uphold the norms characterizing the front region. S/he can cease the activities that are associated with maintaining the impression conveyed by her/his performance.

Goffman’s use of the dramaturgical model suggests that he is skeptical<sup>3</sup> about the reality of the impressions that people give when interacting with others, and that he believes that there is only performance, that is, that the self is nothing but a performer, in interaction. Selves that are displayed are fragile, to use Giddens’ descriptor for the personal biography. For instance, Goffman remarks that

... some French Canadian priests do not want to lead so strict a life that they cannot go swimming at the beach with friends, but they tend to feel that it is best to swim with persons who are not their parishioners, since the familiarity required at the beach is incompatible with the distance and respect required in the parish. (Goffman 1959:137)

By keeping his audiences separate, as it were, a priest can keep his performances separate so that he can project the identity appropriate to a given context without too much trouble. Goffman’s conception of performance emphasizes how closely tied to the social circumstances a given presentation of self is, and that the two cannot really be separated irrespective of the question of whether a real or essential self-identity exists.

The notion of performance is not new to either anthropology or linguistics. But, from the perspective of linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes, the ways in which members of each discipline had understood it was flawed. For example, folklorists and cultural anthropologists considered the texts that were elicited from native informants as performances, despite a lack of attention to the roles of the participants and the surrounding context in how the text was realized. In the field of formal linguistics, Chomsky held the opposite view and, introducing the concept of performance to designate

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<sup>3</sup> Goffman writes: “In attempting to escape from a two-faced world of front region and back region behavior, individuals may feel that in the new position they are attempting to acquire they will be the character projected by individuals in that position and not at the same time a performer. When they arrive, of course, they find their new situation has unanticipated similarities with their old one; both involve a presentation of front to an audience and both involve the presenter in the grubby, gossipy business of staging a show” (1959:132-133).

the flawed realizations of the speaker's internal grammar, dismissed it as irrelevant to the study of grammar. For Hymes, though,

Performance is not a wastebasket but a key to much of the difference in the meaning of life as between communities. (Hymes 1981:84)

Placing the notion at the center of his analysis in his investigation of the tellings of Chinookan myths, Hymes defined performance as

...cultural behavior for which a person assumes responsibility to an audience ... (Hymes 1981:84)

So his notion of performance is rooted in the specific ways that people interact with each other as communicatively competent members of a given culture. Within instantiations of traditional myths, he attempted to pick out "authentic" performances from nonauthentic ones, specifying the personal, linguistic, and situational factors giving rise to authentic, authoritative performances. According to Hymes, there is no ideal text, only variants made up of "material that has continued to be relevant to the ethos of the community, to its moral and psychological concerns" (Hymes 1981:133).

Hymes is concerned with locating a dimension of behavior that represents part of the overall repertoire of acceptable and appropriate behavior within a culture. Although his interest in textual variants is more focussed than Goffman's more general discussion on the impressions people make on each other, through verbal and non-verbal means, Hymes's work is relevant to the study of identity to the extent that the factors influencing how traditional texts are realized include not only the texts themselves, but the teller's history, their significance to the teller, the teller's relationship to the audience, and the circumstances of the telling. In other words, performance of a text in this sense can be thought of as a manifestation of how the individual identifies her/himself (her/his actual and desired identities) in relation to her/his audience.

### 1.5 Gender as anatomy, biography, and performance

Rusty Barrett's (forthcoming) work on African American drag queens illustrates the three different notions of identity I have just reviewed, and especially, helps pinpoint how language fits within these conceptualizations. According to Barrett, drag queens, gay men who present an image of femininity to lesbian and gay audiences, illustrate the fact that biographical and performed identity do not have to coincide. Drag performances in fact exhibit a tripartite distinction between anatomical sex, the gender of the performer, and the performance. Both drag queens and drag kings, biological women who present themselves in public as men, exemplify the contrast between, on the one hand, anatomical sex and gender identity, and, on the other hand, gender performance. In the case of transsexuals, gender identity and gender performance are coextensive with each other but contrast with anatomical sex. Further, the incongruity between gender identity and gender performance that is exhibited by a drag performance is in itself another configuration of gender<sup>4</sup>.

From a linguistic point of view, gender identity corresponds to the personal identity of the individual, or as suggested above, the individual's biography. Performed identity can not only manifest traits different from those related to personal identity, it can also involve the display of traits different from those typically associated with the identity whose performance is in question. In other words, a drag king may still pass as a man even if, say, his interactional style is such that he asks questions, encourages responses, uses positive minimal responses and personal pronouns (as is typical of females; cf. Maltz and Borker 1982:197-8) rather than interrupting or challenging his interlocutor, or trying to control the topic (as is typical of males; cf. Maltz and Borker 1982:198), because the rest of his performance is sufficiently convincing to the audience that the latter will not

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<sup>4</sup> A recent photo session of RuPaul, arguably the most well-known African American drag queen, shows him modelling both the women's and men's clothes of a well-known fashion designer. When I reported this to a friend familiar with gay male culture, my friend marvelled at how he had never seen RuPaul dressed as a man before. My friend's reaction is suggestive: It indicates that RuPaul's performance as a gay man in drag is felt to be more deeply incorporated into his gender identity than in the case of those who do drag solely as a performance.

notice the inconsistencies. Thus, the success of the performance relies on the audience's interpretation of the performance (cf. also Chapter 6).

Lesbian and gay identity falls within the category of biographical identity to the extent that individuals have a sense of themselves as lesbian or gay that is relatively constant, considering the normativity of heterosexuality within American culture. Having an internal account of "How I became lesbian (or gay)" can be presupposed by an actual performance of coming out or of telling a comprehensible coming out story, or by implicating one's sexuality, simply because the opposite, for example, telling a coming out story without having come out, would be impossible. Indeed, the basis for lesbian or gay identity is largely linguistic. I am lesbian because I can and do say that I am (in view of what I identify as my same-sex desires and how society defines people who have such desires). If I cannot say that a lesbian is what I am, neither can anyone else impose upon me a lesbian identity, unlike other social categories associated with auditory (e.g., dialectal features) or visual cues (e.g., skin color).<sup>5</sup> Further, my addressee, if s/he is willing to listen, knows that I am lesbian because I say that I am and provide an account of how I came to be one. While there are other symbols of lesbian or gay identification that can be recognized by others, such as non-verbal (e.g., characteristic clothing and hairstyle) and paralinguistic (e.g., voice pitch) cues, no other symbols of lesbian or gay identity are as basic or unequivocal as the discursive self-presentational genres.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I might look and

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, anecdotally, it appears to be a fairly prevalent attitude among some lesbians that even a verbal declaration may not be altogether persuasive, particularly if the declarant has had a history of heterosexual relationships. Lesbian self-identification by women who state that they have known from an early age that they were lesbian, despite any intervening heterosexual relationships they may have had, appear to be more credible. This attitude suggests a view of sexual orientation as primarily biographical, over and above other personal characteristics (e.g., physical traits, gender of sexual partner, choice of clothing and haircut, lifestyle, sexual behavior, etc.) although these latter are important in reinforcing a sense, to oneself and to others, of one's sexual identity.

<sup>6</sup> Gaydar, a morphological blend of the words gay and radar, is a slang term used among lesbians and gays to refer to the intuition that a designated individual might be lesbian or gay. Because there is usually no evidence to confirm or disconfirm the observer's intuitions, the notion of gaydar underscores the idea that there are few unmistakable markers of sexual orientation other than linguistic ones.

Thus, the basis for lesbian or gay identity is linguistic because, unless the lesbian or gay-identified individual states that she or he is so identified, any conclusions about that individual's sexuality, rest more or less on speculation. In addition, it is difficult to pinpoint what (and whose) criteria to use in

act like, and be mistaken for, a bulldagger dyke<sup>7</sup>, but I may very well be heterosexual, unless I give some clear sign affirming my sexual orientation.

As with any social category, identification as lesbian or gay depends on the existence of communicative norms which permit the expression of these categories. These norms are established through interaction, and can be transformed through interaction. In the next two sections, I adopt Agar's definition of culture as a dialogic process, and then examine Hymes' parameters of interpretability, reportability, and repeatability for assessing the appropriateness of an utterance within a given culture. These parameters are important because they provide a way of thinking about the status of an act of coming out, and other acts of lesbian and gay self-presentation, within their cultural context.

### 1.6 Culture as dialogic process

The following observation by Michael Agar, excerpted from his book *Language shock*, summarizes the processes and relationships that underlie the present work.

Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, "culture" is what you're up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture.

If you do start to see things this way, you change. The old "self," the one in your heart and mind and soul, mutates as it comes into relationships with others. The self stretches to comprehend them all. A life of Being turns into a life of Becoming. You turn into a sailor and an immigrant for as long as you live. (Agar 1994:28)

Culture is, as Agar and other anthropologists (cf. also Tedlock and Mannheim 1995) have noted, not a thing, but emerges through a dialogic process between two individuals, each

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defining whether or not someone is lesbian or gay. For instance, if a woman is erotically and emotionally attracted to women, but does not define herself as a lesbian, then from the perspective of some who believe that a person has a right to define her own sexuality, she is whatever she says she is (or isn't). However, from the perspective of others who believe that the realization or acceptance of one's homosexuality is a gradual process, such a person is a lesbian-to-be, in denial, or still in the closet. That is, her own lack of awareness does not preclude others' definition of her as a lesbian who will eventually come out. But until she herself is ready and willing to utter the words "I am lesbian," it is unlikely that she will be accorded the same treatment as those who are ready and willing to produce such an utterance.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, some styles of self-presentation among presumably heterosexual women in the midwestern United States, especially in the Farm Belt, resemble those of butch lesbians who adopt stereotypically masculine traits.

of whom is, in Holland and Quinn's (1987) words, "culture bearers." To this extent, the study of language use in interaction is germane to the study of self-presentation. Realized through the process of achieving mutual understanding, Agar's definition of culture is made salient with respect to lesbians and gays because they are, in the most explicit sense, constantly forging paths, trying to reconcile their own expectations of their identities as lesbian and gay with the continual reinforcement of heterosexuality to which their membership in their heteronormative culture exposes them, and with others' expectations of who and what a normal person can be.

The multiple discourse genres of lesbian and gay self-presentation reflect the dialogic nature of lesbian and gay self-presentation. These genres—emerging from common interactive experiences of lesbians and gays—embody conventional ways of dealing with in-group members (other lesbians and gays) and out-group members (heterosexuals whose attitudes are positive, negative, undetermined), and have also become ways of enculturating individuals into in-group membership. Thus, while each of these genres functions specifically as a vehicle for presenting or facilitating an identity based on sexuality, they also presuppose certain kinds of interpersonal relationships among members and between members and outsiders. The discourse genres of lesbian and gay self-presentation can be seen as indices of change, as reflected in the relationships, on a culture-wide level.

#### 1.6.1 The interpretability, reportability, and repeatability of lesbian and gay identity

One of the ways to ascertain the status of an instance of talk (such as coming out) within a given culture is via the parameters of interpretability, reportability, and repeatability. In any culture, language is assigned certain functions, which can be enumerated as a set of rules of "appropriate language usage and interactive behavior in particular types of situations" (Gumperz 1984:127). The dimensions proposed by Hymes (1981)—interpretability, reportability, and repeatability—are useful for characterizing the

status of lesbian and gay identity within American culture based on the distribution of abilities (i.e., expected communicative behaviors) associated with coming out, the coming out story, and gay implicature regarding who can say (and interpret) what, when, and how.

Interpretability means being able to “recognize [behavior] as culturally possible and structured” (Hymes 1981:83). Within the category of interpretability are subsumed the abilities to classify and to explain. An example of the former would derive from native speaker competence to make grammaticality judgments, although Hymes points out that grammaticality is problematic when the forms being assessed are extracted from their social and cultural contexts. The latter encompasses “the more complex judgment of acceptability” which Hymes deems “the true object of investigation” (Hymes 1981:83). The issue of interpretable behavior is pertinent to lesbian and gay speech genres because it is a necessary condition upon which the production of those speech genres is based. That is, the interpretability of any given speech behavior rests on the presence of those in the speech community who are able and willing to interpret that behavior. Homosexuality as behavior and identity is culturally possible within American culture, but how it is evaluated differs according to the interpreter. The interpretability of an act says little about its acceptability.

Reportability means the ability to “recognize [behavior] as having occurred.”

Hymes discusses the distinction between reporting and interpreting as follows:

Someone may be unable to report that an act of event has occurred because to him, it was not interpretable; because of the circumstance of not having been present; because in the nature of the phenomenon it is not something he is able to report; because it is not culturally appropriate or permissible for him to report it. (Hymes 1981:83)

Not only are the minimal requirements of linguistic competence included in what the speaker is able to report, but her/his ability to report or describe an instance of behavior is also a function of knowing what is acceptable to report. Reportability is of interest because what is under discussion is speech, and its status in relation to the reporter and the original speaker. The reportability of an instance of lesbian and gay self-presentation is

what, I would argue, represents the shift from the status of taboo to that of partial acceptance (whereas, perhaps, prior to the early 1960s, it was either not interpretable by most people, or interpretable but not culturally appropriate to speak of it). Even those who find homosexuality distasteful can and do report it. As far as lesbian and gay self-presentation is concerned, the relationship that Hymes posits between them, i.e., “what persons can or will report is less than what they can interpret,” is reversed. For lesbians and gays, it is easier to report an act of coming out (i.e., “That was an instance of my interpreting my behavior as that of a lesbian” or “I told myself that I was a lesbian”) to someone than to classify themselves as lesbian or gay (i.e., “I interpret my behavior as that of a lesbian” or “I am lesbian”).

Finally, Hymes identifies the dimension of repeatability as characterized by “a polarity between voluntarily *doing* and *performing*” (Hymes 1981:83). Here he distinguishes between behavior that is repeatable but only meant as a demonstration, such as a recitation of the alphabet, versus behavior that is performed, “when the standards intrinsic to the tradition in which the performance occurs are accepted and realized,” where, in other words, the communicative competence of the performer emerges (Hymes 1981:84). Thus, in some contexts, one of the obligations of a lesbian or gay individual is display, or at least, not to make efforts to conceal, her/his lesbian/gay identity. It is worth pointing out what appears to be an ambiguity in the performance and the interpretability of behavior. When I classify myself as lesbian to myself, I am applying a culturally determined interpretation of my own behavior. But the act of interpretation also brings into being a lesbian insofar as none existed prior to my interpretation of my behavior. So the interpretability or classification of my behavior is also a performance (particularly in the sense of speech act theory) of it, if only to myself; it is perhaps for this reason, the isomorphism of interpretability and performance, that the relationship between interpretability and reportability in the case of self-classification as lesbian is reversed. Otherwise, the relations posited by Hymes between interpretability, reportability, and

repeatability, namely that “if what persons can or will report is less than what they can interpret, what they can or will do is less than what they can report” (Hymes 1981:83), hold for instances of identifying oneself as lesbian to others. Coming out is most restricted in terms of who can actualize such an act, less restricted as far as who can report on it (although not unrestricted—for instance, lesbians and gays who come out to their parents, place the burden of their disclosure on their parents, who are then obliged to decide whether or not to conceal their offspring’s homosexuality to others), and least restricted regarding who can interpret it.

I have just reviewed some of the linguistic and anthropological literature on language and identity, specified some of the ways of understanding identity, and gender identity, in particular, and discussed a definition of culture that I believe is pertinent to the present study. Now I would like to discuss in detail the theoretical background that informs the study of lesbian and gay self-presentational discourse genres.

### 1.7 Theoretical background

The theoretical underpinnings necessary for the study of lesbian and gay identity consists of approaches from linguistic pragmatics and discourse analysis. Within the former tradition, I draw from speech act theory, politeness theory, and conversational logic, each of which, in their own way, attempts to specify not only the sociocultural knowledge that permits speakers to produce and hearers to interpret speech, but also to enable hearers to fill in gaps left by what speakers leave unsaid. I also employ some tools of discourse analysis à la Linde (1993), whereby I examine the coherence principles that are operative in the realization of each genre. I review several theoretical approaches and specify some theoretical constructs which I believe are of use for the investigation of the lesbian and gay self-presentational speech genres in light of the categories of ability I sketched above using Hymes’ parameters.

### 1.7.1 Speech act theory

The first discourse genre of concern is coming out.<sup>8</sup> The basic form of coming out is a single statement, "I am lesbian (or gay)." For this reason, I categorize it as a speech act as opposed to a speech genre since I am mainly interested in the conditions under which a speaker is able and willing to utter the statement, rather than its role as a discourse strategy to be interpreted in reference to a larger speech event such as psychotherapy.

As we will see, though, speech act theory is only concerned with the fulfillment of necessary and sufficient conditions for a felicitous utterance of a given speech act, not with the effects that social or cultural factors have on its production. For one thing, the proposition being expressed must be socially legitimate. There is a difference in the sayability of "I am a member of the National Organization of Women" versus "I am a member of the North American Man-Boy Lovers Association," the latter of which transcends the fulfillment of all of the conditions laid out by Searle. In such a case, questions of felicity may be overridden by the sheer unacceptability, under normal, everyday circumstances, of the self-presentational act *qua* proposition. Nonetheless, as a point of departure in the analysis of discursive self-presentations, speech act theory is useful to the extent that it recognizes that language is used for a purpose, and that the success of individual speech acts (and hence all discourse units) depends on shared underlying rules and assumptions.

Speech act theory is an attempt by John Austin (1962), its originator, to capture the idea that speech produced under specific social and psychological conditions effects changes in social reality. The original motivation for his work was to counter the logical

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<sup>8</sup> Other forms of self-disclosure may be subsumed under the term "coming out", such as "coming out as HIV positive," or "coming out as an S/M dyke [i.e., a lesbian who engages in sadomasochistic erotic practices]," or even, in usages not associated with sexual orientation such as "coming out as schizophrenic," but I am using the term in what I believe to be its most common contemporary usage, namely, "coming out as lesbian or gay."

positivists' view of language, which distinguished between statements that could be empirically verified (constatives), and statements that were acts (performatives). Austin argued that the distinction was in fact spurious and that statements such as "The sky is blue." were as much performatives as "I'll pick you up at 10a." Further, such statements were not so much true or false as they were (un)happy (e.g., an insincere promise is still a promise, albeit unhappy) or (in)felicitous (e.g., an utterance of "I now pronounce you husband and wife" by someone pretending to be a justice of the peace is an infelicitous performative and does not result in marriage) .

A student of Austin, John Searle refined Austin's exposition, clarifying the rules and criteria for taxonomizing the types of illocutionary acts—the functions that can be achieved through an utterance of speech, usually the size of a sentence—that can be found in any given language. As envisioned by Searle (1979), speech act theory is a way of formalizing language in use in terms of the internal states of the speaker and hearer, and in terms of syntactic correlates.

One criticism of speech act theory is that it pays little attention to the social statuses that inhere in the uses of and responses to speech acts. For instance, in his analysis of narratives in which reported instances of talk escalate to violence, Labov (1981) found that the common elements motivating the narrative progression in each are the rights and obligations, and responses thereto, that are associated with the illocutionary act of requesting. Requests are legitimately made not only when the appropriate internal and external conditions, specified in Searle (1969:66), are fulfilled (that is, the ability of the hearer to perform the requested act and the speaker's belief in the hearer's ability, along with the speaker's desire that the hearer perform the act), but also that the speaker believes s/he has the right to ask the hearer to perform the act in question, and the speaker believes that the hearer believes s/he has the right to ask.

Speech act theory also idealizes the individuality of the speaker, and further holds that the relations holding between speaker and addressee are cooperative and egalitarian.

The speaker's intentionality is privileged as the sole determinant of the meaning of the speech act and rules out the hearer's role in choosing from a range of possible meanings and even in constructing the speaker's turn. But Goffman's (1981:47) example illustrates how the "respondent can coerce a variety of objects and events in the current scene into a statement to which he can now respond."

A: [Enters wearing a new hat]

B: [Shaking head] "No, I don't like it."

In other words, the hearer can construct a speech act attributable to the speaker, more or less independent of the speaker's intention.

Other scholars who have criticized the speech act theorists' lack of interest in social and cultural context have pointed out how rights to speech acts are distributed asymmetrically, in accordance with institutional definitions of social roles. Fairclough's (1989) analysis of a police-witness information-gathering interview demonstrates how social roles are defined and reproduced according to the kinds of speech acts to which each has access. Not only are rights to questioning and obligations to answer differentiated according to social status, but the forms they take, whether they are mitigated or not, also reflect the social roles being enacted in the discourse and thereby signal the kind of discourse in progress. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) show how the illocutionary acts of an utterance depend not on their form but the relative social statuses of participants. A declarative sentence uttered by a teacher in a rigidly hierarchical classroom setting might consist of the force of a directive, whereas the same statement made by a student would not.

Approaching speech act theory from a cross-cultural perspective, Rosaldo (1982) offers a thorough and pertinent critique. She contends that Searle's analysis, rather than deriving a set of universal principles on language use, yields an ethnography of western society that hinges upon "how our deeds - or utterances - are shaped by what the individual 'intends' or 'means,' without attention to the social and cultural contexts in

which meanings are born.” Searle tends “to view familiar acts of speech not primarily as social facts, but as the embodiments of universal goals, beliefs, and needs possessed by individuated speakers.” She further observes that his analysis of promising, as paradigmatic of speech acts, reflects a world “where privacy, not community, is what gives rise to talk” (Rosaldo 1982:211).

These and other works have been effective in critiquing the philosophical approach to speech acts by examining them within the empirically-oriented perspectives of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. They treat speech acts as actually occurring entities that are uttered by individuals in interaction, both in terms of their local functions over a stretch of speech, and the specific social roles and relations that they establish and reinforce on a global, ideological level.

Nonetheless, speech act theory can provide the tools to define precisely the kind of speech act that coming out is, the forms that it can take, and the minimum requirements for its acceptable production. But the theory of speech acts as envisioned by the philosophers of language binds them to a western conception of language and of the individual. We can anticipate that a knowledge-based approach to coming out, on its own, is inadequate for specifying how the discursive presentation of lesbian and gay selves can be accomplished. A more extensive treatment requires consideration of broader contextual factors, such as sociocultural expectations of social roles and when these roles can be adopted.

#### 1.7.2 Grice’s Conversational Logic

The western cultural understanding of communication is to be as informative as necessary, because knowledge is seen as beneficial or good (Sweetser 1987). In view of this understanding, the ordinary language philosopher H. Paul Grice observed that when people are engaged in conversation, they often deviate from informational language use by failing to say what they mean, and yet, they remain understandable. Grice (1975)

attempted to supply an explanatory theory for how hearers arrive at the meanings conveyed by speakers apart from and beyond the literal meanings of their utterances. In other words, he was formalizing the cultural understanding of language use as informational and knowledge-producing. He termed his theoretical rubric conversational logic.

The mainstay of conversational logic (and indeed, of any communicative behavior) is the Cooperative Principle (hereafter abbreviated CP). CP holds that people will make whatever efforts they have to make in order to calculate another person's intended meanings, and will make whatever efforts they have to make in order to communicate their own meanings in such a way so that the hearer understands them. In Grice's words:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. (Grice 1975:45)

One instantiation of CP consists of the Maxims of Conversation, precepts of conversational behavior which we observe in accordance with our cultural understanding of language behavior as informative. The maxims include, briefly, injunctions against lying or exaggerating (or the maxim of quality), against verbosity or indirectness (the maxim of manner), against offering superfluous or insufficient detail (the maxim of quantity) and against straying from the topic at hand (the maxim of relevance). Adherence to the maxims is one manifestation of CP.

Usually, though, conversational contributions are less than direct, often superfluous, not entirely truthful, and irrelevant. In such cases, listeners will try and fill in the gap between the literal and intended meaning of an utterance. In other words, they will look for a meaning that complies with the maxims at some unspoken level. Grice termed the process of linking apparently uninformative utterances to their informative equivalents *conversational implicature*. Since conversational implicature is another way of conveying and interpreting the speaker's meaning, it is also a manifestation of CP.

### 1.7.2.1 Different Interpretations of the Cooperative Principle

In ordinary conversation, when the maxims are observed, the exchange of information is theoretically at its most efficient. The speaker's intended meaning requires no calculation on the part of the listener because it is purportedly in exact correspondence with utterance meaning. But when the maxims are violated, speaker meaning and utterance meaning do not coincide. It is only on the basis of the mutual assumption of CP that listeners can fill in the gap to make what is implicated by speakers conform with the maxims.

The supposition of CP stems from the fact that all interactions in which any information is exchanged entail some degree of cooperation among participants:

our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts. (Grice 1975:45)

To put it differently, if, in a given interaction, both interlocutors observe CP, then they will be able to engage, to some extent, in the mutual exchange of information. If one of them thwarts communication by deliberately misinterpreting everything the other says, or by deliberately saying things that s/he knows the other will not understand (as doctors sometimes do to their patients), communication of meanings at the propositional level is less likely to take place (although participants may draw conclusions about such behavior at the metacommunicative level).

In Grice's sense, cooperativeness does not appear to mean "being agreeable" or "showing willingness to get along." Rather, it is the rule of behavior that is observed when clear communication occurs successfully. An interlocutor who observes CP may be in complete violation of politeness norms (cf. Lakoff 1973b, 1995a). Thus, adherence to CP, a requirement for social interaction, may, paradoxically and simultaneously, be anti-social.

Indeed, from the perspective of S. K. Sarangi and Stef Slembrouck (1992), Grice's notion of cooperation warrants further analysis and clarification. If cooperation is viewed simply as the production of utterances which conform to the cultural ideal of informativity, whether via adherence to the maxims or the generation of implicatures calculable by the hearer, then such a definition fails to situate interaction in general among humans with emotions, fluid identities, demeanors to upkeep, and social conventions to follow. Speakers from this perspective are mere agents—or perhaps, more accurately, conduits—of information exchange. Citing Pavlidou (1991:11), Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992:119) suggest that cooperation be seen as involving the sharing of social goals that proceed beyond mere exchange of information (which Pavlidou terms “substantial cooperation”) and/or as action in accordance with the maxims (“formal cooperation”). Where the relationship is enforced by one party, the maxims may be formally observed, whereby all participants convey mutually comprehensible propositions, but interactional goals such as the preservation of face, securing one's emotional or material needs, self-expression, ensuring one's authority, and so on, may not be shared. While Pavlidou (1991:12) observes that “it may be exactly the convergence of distant goals that makes disagreements or the breaking of rules of formal cooperation locally possible without threatening the communication partners,” so too does the opposite hold true, namely, that interactions can take place in which the rules of formal cooperation are unequivocally observed by all participants but which entail severe threats by the more physically and socially powerful to the autonomy and well-being of the less powerful.

For Lakoff (1995b), the distinction between substantial and formal cooperation is analogous to that between politeness and clarity. So long as speakers intend that hearers can interpret their utterances, CP still holds, regardless of whether such communication adheres to politeness principles or not. Further, CP and politeness principles are not necessarily equivalent. In her analysis of the following example,

A: Fred is wearing the most ridiculous tie, isn't he?

(Unbeknownst to A, Fred is within earshot.)

B: Yeah, Zelda sure knows how to throw a great party! (Lakoff 1995a:5)

Lakoff states that “Not only does B’s response avoid offending Fred, but it also avoids directly hurting A’s feelings as would be the case if B were to have said, ‘Shh! Fred’s right behind you!’, but does convey indirectly that A’s contribution does not merit a lawful response.” In this sense, abrogation of CP is done in the service of politeness, at least in this case. Lakoff does go on to posit a higher-level CP which encompasses adherence to the strictures of politeness. This perspective allows us to make sense of B’s contribution: Because it “is intended to be interpretable by A, B’s superficially undecodable utterance is not in violation of CP as a whole” (Lakoff 1995a:5). As mentioned, maxim-adherent, informative behavior that is clearly intended to be interpretable, hence conforming with CP, may be altogether rude. Both Lakoff’s account of CP and Sarangi and Slembrouck’s substantial/formal cooperation recognize that informativeness is not necessarily ideal or even valued in cases where smooth social interaction holds priority over clarity. But Sarangi and Slembrouck’s dichotomy, in addition, provides a useful way of distinguishing between maxim violations which are uncooperative but in keeping with social goals (such as polite social fictions and fibs), and those which are clearly uncooperative and anti-social (such as malicious lies). Their terminology will be employed in the analysis that follows.

Finally, conversational implicature is the process of inferencing that relates background knowledge directly to what is unspoken in an interaction. The assumption that a speaker is being cooperative, that is, observing CP by adhering to the maxims of conversation enables a hearer to draw conversational implicatures. If D asks C, “How does it feel when they insult you like that?” and then C responds, “Oh it feels super,” D has the option of interpreting C’s response literally and of coming to some sort of conclusion about D’s masochistic tendencies. More likely though is that D will interpret C’s utterance to mean the opposite of what it says. She can do so based on the assumption that C is being cooperative, and that, therefore, at some level, her response conforms with the maxims. Given that it is improbable that people appreciate being

insulted, D can calculate that C's response means the converse, namely that C implicates that it does not feel *super* to be insulted, and that D's question warranted, for some reason, a response such as C's<sup>9</sup>.

Grice's theory of meaning is explicitly concerned with the inferencing process people use to reconcile the discrepancy between what is said and unsaid. If the exchange between C and D took place within the context of psychotherapy, then C's response might have been appropriately given a literal interpretation by D (and the unexpectedness of her response would then require an explanation).

### 1.7.3 Politeness theory

Politeness theory attempts to provide an account for the strategies people use to minimize conflict and maximize harmony in social relations, as balanced with the strategies they use to achieve other interactional goals. It is a profitable avenue by which to gain an understanding of which speech acts are appropriately uttered in what situations. If talk always involves self-presentation, then an understanding of what is appropriately uttered can be informative regarding which roles are normative in western society and under what circumstances they can be displayed, in a given set of social circumstances. In view of the fact that coming out is problematic precisely because it is a public statement about one's sexuality, a topic that is reserved for private discourse, politeness theory is relevant to the study of coming out.

As set forth by Lakoff (1973b), politeness theory holds that smooth interaction between interlocutors necessitates behaviors that are conventionalized ways of serving the

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<sup>9</sup> Note that one of the requirements for the calculability of the implicature generated by C's response is the existence of a cultural category of sarcasm. In a study of interpretations of utterances that seemed to reverse expectation, Ervin-Tripp (personal communication) showed that in France, American children, when speaking French, understood conversational dares like "go right ahead, pour milk into the carpet" as prohibitions, but when speaking English, did not. After the age of 7 or 8, children are able to interpret such utterances as sarcastic.

Other cues to a non-literal interpretation include paralinguistic behaviors, such as the contrastive stress on the adjective *super*.

basic human needs for belonging and for freedom from imposition. Cultures differ in the relative amount of emphasis placed upon one or the other. Those that ascribe more importance on the former employ what Lakoff terms a camaraderie-based system of politeness while those stressing the latter emphasize distance politeness. A camaraderie based system encompasses norms of conduct that value relationships of solidarity. Linguistic correlates of such a system include the use of first names, informal register, involvement strategies such as repetition, tag questions, references to shared backgrounds and experiences. A system based on distance politeness respects the social boundaries of others (i.e., does not impose) and is characterized by formality and restraint. Linguistically, distance politeness draws upon the use of such strategies as title last name, technical terminology, and impersonal ways of speaking such as avoidance of personal pronouns.

Lakoff contrasts systems of politeness, which fulfill social needs, with Grice's conversational logic, which satisfies informational needs. Maximally efficient communication is theoretically achieved when certain communicative precepts, termed the Maxims of Conversation, are observed. Communication is direct, concise, and unambiguous. But directness comes at the risk of interpersonal conflict and confrontation, just as the indirectness of politeness may result in misunderstandings. Whether clarity or politeness is given priority in an utterance depends on the relative statuses of the interlocutors, the function of the speech event, the topic of communication, and so on. In reality, observes Lakoff, most talk consists of both social and informational dimensions, pure clarity and pure politeness being extremes of a communicative continuum.

Brown and Levinson (1978) elaborate upon Lakoff's theory and, recognize a distinction similar to hers, although instead of referring to norms of behavior, see them as aspects of universal human needs. The concept central to their analysis is face,

the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, consisting in two related aspects:

(a) negative face: the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction— i.e., to freedom of action and freedom from imposition

(b) positive face: the positive consistent self-image or 'personality' (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants (Brown and Levinson 1978:66)

The concepts of politeness corresponding to Lakoff's camaraderie and distance politeness are positive and negative politeness, respectively. The norms of behavior exemplified above for camaraderie politeness correspond to positive politeness strategies, while those specified for distance politeness correspond to negative politeness strategies. When negative or positive face needs are ignored or violated via a verbal or non-verbal act of communication, then a face-threatening act is said to have occurred. Face threatening acts may be positive or negative, or both, depending on which face need(s) is (are) threatened. Face threatening acts done "baldly, without redress" (Brown and Levinson 1978:74) correspond to Grice's maxims and Lakoff's clarity.

Brown and Levinson also posit a universal Model Person. The Model Person is an individual who has the need for independence and for involvement, and who recognizes the same needs in others. The Model Person is also aware that the need for efficient communication (through cooperation, as defined by Grice (1975)) may be inconsistent with or even counter to the requirements of smooth interaction. Depending on the speaker's goals, s/he may find it worthwhile to incur the risk of conflict for the sake of clear communication, or vice versa, to risk clarity to preserve social harmony.

A culture may be a positive politeness culture or a negative politeness culture. The differences can be understood, according to Brown and Levinson (1978:248), in terms of the concept of ethos, a culture's preference for satisfying positive versus negative face needs, or vice versa, and adopting the corresponding politeness strategy. In their words,

To the extent that types of social relationship are repetitive throughout a society — that there is a constancy, a stability, in such relationships — it is possible to generalize about the kinds of relationships that prevail in that society — for example, whether they generally reveal a heavy emphasis on status differentiation .... or alternatively an egalitarian emphasis. ... 'Ethos' in our sense, then, is a label for the quality of interaction characterizing groups, or social categories of persons, in a particular society. (Brown and Levinson 1978:248)

One way of understanding the ethos of a culture is in terms of a formula through which MPs compute the imposition of an act. The seriousness of a face threatening act is assessed along three dimensions: the relative power between the speaker and hearer,  $P(S,H)$ , the relative social distance between speaker and hearer,  $D(S,H)$ , and the imposition of the act based on a culture-specific ranking of the face threat that it provokes. These variables determine whether a culture is warm and accessible, or stand-offish and distant. A positive politeness culture has small  $P$ ,  $D$ , and  $R$  values, which renders the value for face threatening acts small. In comparison to say, the Chinese, the culture in the western US can be characterized as one with egalitarian relations (low  $P$  value), in which face threatening acts are not too impositional (low  $R$  value), both of which compensate for any amount of social distance, to yield an overall low risk to both the speaker and hearer's face (low  $W$  value). However, as Brown and Levinson point out, the formula is context-sensitive. So therapeutic discourse would be characterized by a high differential in power relations between therapist and client (high  $P$  value), intimacy (low  $D$  value), and if the ongoing speech act is a confession, a face threat to the speaker (Brown and Levinson 1978:73, 81). The weightiness of some parts of therapeutic discourse may then be assessed as damaging to the speaker's face.

Scollon and Scollon's (1995) discussion of face indicates that the concept encompasses both positive (involvement) and negative (independence) dimensions, rather than one or the other. In other words, serving the need for independence entails a risk to the need for involvement, and vice versa. Indeed, any act of communication involves a balancing act, between serving the positive and negative face needs of both speaker and addressee:

We have to carefully project a face for ourselves and to respect the face rights and claims of other participants. We risk our own involvement face if we do not include other participants in our relationship. ... If we include others, we risk our own independence face. Looking at it from the other person's point of view, if we give too much involvement to the other person, we risk their independence face. On the other hand, if we give them too much independence, we risk their involvement." (Scollon and Scollon 1995:38)

The claim I would like to make in the present study is that confession as a speech act has undergone a change in status in western American society. Whatever threat it has previously entailed to the speaker's face, that threat has diminished to such an extent that saying what you mean and feel has become a norm of interaction. These conditions can give rise to speech genres like coming out and coming out advice literature, the coming out story, and gay implicature.

I have just reviewed some of the theories that I will be using to analyze the lesbian and gay self-presentational discourse genres. In the following section, I specify the theoretical constructs that pertain to the present study.

## **1.8 Theoretical constructs**

### **1.8.1 Coherence**

Some of the seminal work on textual coherence was done by A. L. Becker (1979), who observed that the structure of texts was arbitrary insofar as it is culturally determined, and not a representation of human thought processes. His analysis of the wayang, for instance, revealed that the organizing principles according to which discourse is constructed does not necessitate one that is causally motivated or temporally linear. Rather, the coherence principles operative in the wayang were coincidence, which drove the action, and movement through specified places.

Inspired by his work, Linde (1993) refined and developed the concept. She examined a group of life stories in order to ascertain how and why they made sense to participants within the interaction in which they were told. In other words, her concern was with outlining the factors that made them coherent. Coherence is defined by Linde and others (e.g., Fairclough 1989) as the internal relations of a text, and the relations of the text to other texts like it, and to the world. Certain kinds of texts require certain kinds of relations to make them coherent. In life stories, the construction of coherence involves organizing events such that each event as well as the chronological sequence within which

the event falls is sufficiently motivated (Linde 1993, Ch. 5). Moreover, in dyadic reciprocal conversation, coherence is negotiated. Whether or not these criteria for coherence have been fulfilled depends upon the acceptance by both speaker and hearer of the set of premises upon which the criteria are based. These premises are supplied by what Linde terms coherence systems.

The basis for Linde's conceptualization of coherence is the explanation, which is akin to C. Wright Mills' (1984 [1940]) vocabulary of motives. Conceived in this way, a text is coherent to the extent that it makes use of explanations which are agreed upon by participants as acceptable reasons. These agreements are negotiated and reached among participants in an interaction. In other words, coherence is as much a property of texts as it is of interaction. Linde identifies two requirements which must be met to achieve coherence in texts: adequate causality and continuity. In a life story, the sequence of events must follow logically from one another, with some degree of agency on the part of the protagonist, yet neither too much nor too little. A text in which all the events contributing to who the protagonist is today were reported to be in the control of the protagonist lacks plausibility, although in an individualist culture such as this one, such a story would be more plausible than one where all the events are motivated by forces other than the actions of the protagonist. In the latter case, such a narrative would give the impression that the protagonist's life was an outcome of destiny. Continuity is the expectation that the protagonist remains essentially the same person as s/he was in the past. Too drastic a difference must be explained, lest the teller present a seemingly fragmented self.

Finally, coherence may be understood in terms of what Tannen (1989) describes as a process of creating involvement through repetition. A basic human need is to understand and be understood by others. Repetition facilitates the achievement of this goal because it creates "sound and sense patterns" in whose rhythm (Tannen 1989:17) listeners become involved. In Tannen's view, the understanding of discourse is achieved

cognitively (via the propositional content of what is said) and aesthetically (via the form through which participants become involved in meaning-making). Coates (1995) also explores the notion of coherence in terms of its apparent boundaries. Maximal coherence, or repetition, is redundancy, while maximal incoherence, in the form of either direct contradiction or textually incohesiveness, becomes nonsense. However she demonstrates that when discourses that exhibit those characteristics are considered with respect to their sociocultural context, the bounds of coherence yield texts that are acceptable. Thus, she concludes tentatively that “where speakers are cooperating in talk as a joint enterprise, there seem to be no limits to what can count as coherent: speakers are able to exploit the fact that hearers will work hard to extract meaning from what they say” (p. 56-57).

### 1.8.2 Frame

Another related semantic structure that pertains to the interpretability of what is unsaid is the frame. The relationship between frame and coherence is that culture can be experienced to the extent that frames are perceived as coherent with one another. The reason I believe it is pertinent to introduce this notion is that it is critical to an understanding of the problems posed by the existence of lesbians and gays, and how their presence within American culture is nonetheless rendered coherent. The speech genres under investigation can be seen as solutions to the irreconcilability of a heteronormative versus non-heteronormative frames.

The notion of frame originates with Gregory Bateson (1954), who formalized the concept based on his observations of animals who displayed behavior that was overtly aggressive yet intended as playful. Based on Bertrand Russell’s theory of logical types, Bateson introduced a distinction between the communicative level, where surface meaning was expressed, and the metacommunicative level of meaning, which defined the relationship between interlocutors and guided the interpretation of what was expressed at the communicative level. Bateson confirmed what the ordinary language philosophers

(Austin 1962, Grice 1975) studying language in use understood, and what linguists discovered when encountering the limitations of autonomous syntax, namely, that the interpretability (or grammaticality) of a sentence depends on the ability to ascertain the speaker's intention. Literal meaning is insufficient to make this determination.

Frames are also necessary for the interpretation of conversational implicatures (cf. §1.7.2.1), given that the successful calculation of an implicature depends on shared assumptions. For instance, the frames for a woman in this culture are activated by a whole range of cues, both verbal and non-verbal. These frames constrain the kinds of meanings that may be implicated by speakers. If your frame for a woman includes the idea of heterosexual marriage, then when in response to your question, "What'd you do during break?" I reply "Well we went to the Gallapagos" without explaining who "we" refers to, you will understand, based on my having violated the maxim of quantity by providing less information than necessary, that I mean a couple that includes my boyfriend or husband, and myself. My maxim violation is justified because at a more abstract level, I am being cooperative and adhering to the maxims, and I expect that you can calculate the implicature based on my assumption that we share the same frame for woman.

Agar discusses the direct link between frames and identity terms of a process which he describes in terms of the acronym MAR, the word for *sea* in Spanish, his metaphor for culture: Mistake, Awareness, and Repair.

The kind of mistake I'm talking about is *frame based*. Something happens that you don't expect, and what happens can't be fixed by more drills with the imperfect tense. What happens is that people aren't acting right, the situation isn't working the way it's supposed to. ... *A mistake means that other frames are operating, frames you aren't using, frames you may never have imagined existed.* Awareness means that buried frames are brought to consciousness and changed, maybe with just a little tinkering, maybe with elaborate new additions. ... Changing frames is what *repair* is all about. ... Repair stretches consciousness in two directions: sideways, to accommodate new frames for the new languaculture, and upward to grow a biographical self that includes what you used to be and organizes what you've become. (Agar 1994:242-244, italics original)

If a woman who used interjections such as "Oh fudge!" also turned out to be an auto repair mechanic, then our frame for women would require at least "a little tinkering" to

resolve the conflict between the image of the woman as passive, non-impositional, and powerless, and that of the active, goal-directed auto mechanic who exerts influence upon the world.

The present study, as mentioned, concerns itself with reconciling different or even conflicting frames, specifically, the frame through which lesbians and gays are understood as abnormal, unnatural, deviant, and the frame through which they are seen as one of many ways of being. What is of interest, in other words, is how people make sense of themselves and others as lesbian or gay in view of the existence conflicting frames. My assumption is that in order to make sense they have to do so by trying to create or discern coherence in themselves and the concept of an identity based on homosexuality. And this, they do linguistically.

#### 1.9 Narrative and the self

One way to make sense of one's experiences is by narrating them. Whether one's experiences can be shared or not depends on the observance of and the capacity to implement communicative conventions as a vehicle for the expression of those experiences. What we perceive, how we conceptualize ourselves and our worlds depends on how we talk about them; and how we talk about the world depends on our interactions with it. Indeed, Gergen and Gergen (1986) go so far as to contend that word and referent are indistinguishable, and to argue that the separation is unwarranted. This understanding of language in relation to experience has led some psychoanalysts, beginning with Freud (Freud [1937]1965:266, cited in Spence 1982; in addition to Spence 1982, cf. also Schafer 1980, 1992) to give primacy to narrative truth, or coherence in communicative (usually narrative) acts, over historical, or objective, truth. Thus a principal objective in this form of psychoanalysis is not to establish the accuracy of memories or to find out "what really happened," but to uncover the gaps and clarify the distortions in the patient's life story.

What takes place in psychoanalysis is a specialized form of what happens in the presentation of self through narrative in everyday interactions. Because language is inherently ambiguous, any communication entails a process of negotiation until speaker and addressee can settle upon a meaning that each is more or less satisfied by. To the extent that the communicative process results in the removal of gaps and distortions (which are themselves an outcome of negotiation), a personal narrative makes sense, or is coherent for the participants of the interaction in which it is told. Since language is public, and readily available for empirical analysis, more so than the individual's abstract conception of her/his self, the study of the narrative can lead to a concrete understanding of the social factors that constrain a presentation of self.

Linde (1986:344) defines the life story as a specific type of first person narrative which "makes a point about the speaker, not the way the world is" and "is tellable over the course of a long period of time." She (1993:100) identifies three characteristics of the self which are maintained and expressed through the life story.

- continuity of the self
- the self's separateness from and relatedness to others
- the reflexivity of the self

Continuity of the self refers to the sense that one's previous experiences are related to one's later experiences, and that the past bears on who one is at the moment<sup>10</sup>. Since, according to Linde (1993:101),

The ability to perceive or create a sense of historical continuity is an achievement of a normal personality.

the narrative presupposition itself is fundamental to the creation of a coherent self-presentation.

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<sup>10</sup> In western cultures, continuity of the self is constructed linguistically through the narrative presupposition (Labov 1972a, 1972b), whereby the events in a narrative are assumed to occur in a temporal sequence analogous to that in which they are reported. Further implicit in the narrative presupposition is the relationship of causality. Events which are temporally ordered permit the inference that those events are causally related to each other.

That historical continuity (and causality) in the life story is personally necessary is apparent in the phenomenal success of talk therapies, whose essential function is to alleviate the psychic pain originating from the inability to verbalize repressed emotions, or, to put it in modern terms, from a personal narrative riddled with gaps and discontinuities. That it is also socially and culturally necessary is demonstrated by the discomfort experienced by normals who have to interact with such individuals, and also by the existence of an illness category for those who cannot account, according to the cultural categories of adequate causality and continuity, for how they arrived at their present circumstances from past experiences<sup>11</sup>.

The second property of the self that, according to Linde, may be established and maintained linguistically is the self's relationship to others. All languages appear to have a way of distinguishing the speaker (first person) of an utterance, the addressee (second person) to whom the speaker is directing the utterance, and the nonparticipants (third person) of the speech event in which the utterance is being made; hence, all languages recognize the existence of distinct persons. Linde points out that the "reuseability" of pronouns by any speaker to refer to the self, her/his addressee, and others who are neither the speaker nor the hearer, establishes the self as also related to others.

...I is not a name, like Susie or Jack, that refers to the same person, no matter who uses it. Rather, I changes its reference depending on who uses it. To understand this is not merely to understand an arbitrary fact about language use—like the fact that we do not say **childs**, but instead say **children**. To understand the shifter nature of I is to come to comprehend that others exist in one's world who have the same nature and who must be seen as separate but fellow beings. (Linde 1993:112, bold original)

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<sup>11</sup> For example, someone who believes that she has, for the past decade, been living in another galaxy and consistently interjects in her conversations casual statements to that effect is likely to cause uneasiness in her interlocutors. In such cases, where gaps in self-presentation are sufficiently pronounced, an identity category will be imposed, typically by an institutional authority such as a medical practitioner, priest, judge, and so on, or the individual may undergo psychotherapy for "narrative repair" (Robinson and Hawpe 1986:121-123). In everyday interactions among "normal" individuals, too many discontinuities in a teller's history will be noted, if not considered suspect, and will require some sort of clarification to fill in the gaps and thereby render the narrative convincing. Likewise, a member of western society who believes that every event that has ever happened in his life had already been destined to happen prior to his birth will be socially obliged to adjust his story to meet the requirements of this culture that one's life happens to a great degree through self-determination.

At a more abstract level of linguistic structure, the personal narrative (and other self-presentational genres) functions, on the one hand, to present the speaker's self as distinct from her/his addressee, while on the other hand, engaging in a social process in which the interpersonal relationship between speaker and addressee is evoked. (For instance, the telling of the narrative may serve to demonstrate how the addressee herself should behave in similar circumstances; or an individual may evidence her/his group membership by modelling the structure of her/his narratives after that of the group (cf. Silberstein 1982, cited in Linde 1993:113); or s/he may also make direct reference to interests s/he shares with her/his interlocutors (Linde 1993).)

Finally, Linde (1993:121) identifies the reflexivity of the self as a third property established by the narrative. The reflexivity of the self is the ability to take a step back from one's experiences and evaluate them.

All questions of "How am I doing?" whether in relation to one's own standards of in relation to the standards of others if such a distinction can even be made, require the ability to make evaluations, and the evaluations cannot be done by the immediate liver of the life; the task requires a watcher and narrator who is related but not identical.

It is through this feature that the self can change. The individual can look back on her/his life, even if it was just a moment ago, and put it into narrative form, to be revised and edited in accordance with the norms and values shared by her/himself and her/his audience. The extent to which the individual can take on the role of the other from whose standpoint s/he can view the protagonist permits her/him to adjust her/his story according to the narratives s/he perceives the others to be imagining. S/he can consequently not only tell a life story that is intelligible, but s/he and her/his audience are likely to reach more or less the same understanding of the point of the story than if s/he refrained from engaging in this process.

As we shall see, the coming out stories reveal all of the characteristics enumerated by Linde. They establish a link, via, for example, coherence principles, between the protagonist in the narrative prior to, during, and following coming out; between the

protagonist who is struggling and the teller who has to some degree achieved some level of acceptance of her/his homosexuality, and between the teller and her/his audience. The structure of the stories also reveals the speaker's multiple group identifications, including the broader cultures (European or Asian; American; gay) within which s/he is a member, as well as the local group in which coming out stories are exchanged, and of which s/he is a participant. The speaker's ability to narrate and evaluate the actions of her/his protagonist is patterned according to the norms and values of the groups to which s/he belongs.

#### 1.10 Self-presentational discourse genres

In order to propose a method of analysis for the lesbian/gay discourse genres under consideration, it is necessary to define more precisely what those discourse genres are in relation to other self-presentational genres which are culturally recognized.

##### 1.10.1 Confession

The act by which previously concealed thoughts and acts are converted into public knowledge, confession is motivated by the desire to recreate or recontextualize the self. It is well-known among philosophers of language that to speak is to act (Austin 1962, Searle 1969). By naming the transgression, the individual exerts some control over it, and publicly affirms her/his intentions to bring about self-transformation. In each institution in which it is found, such as the Catholic confessional, the psychotherapist's office, and the courtroom, to less formal contexts such as the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s, confession consists of or includes the verbalization of private experiences, out of which (often after appropriate shows of contrition and expiation) materializes the renewal of recreation of the self. This is why "bringing the 'pathogenic secret' into the open is considered therapeutic in itself" (although, as in the case of legal settings, the external consequences can be less than beneficent for the confessant) (Bok 1989:77). The speech

act of coming out as a presentation of self will be clarified through comparison with related genres such as therapeutic confession, religious confession, and criminal confession.

In her book *Secrets*, Bok notes the following about confession:

Practices of confession have provided, throughout the centuries, a setting for some of the most intimate and highly charged confrontations between insider and outsider. (Bok 1989:73)

This characterization of confession highlights the disjunction between the speaker, i.e., the confessant, and hearer, i.e., the confessor, prior to confession. Once the speaker has confessed, the listener himself becomes an insider. Moreover, it is this aspect of confession, the sharing of something previously concealed about oneself and for which one thereby provides evidence of taking some degree of responsibility, that functions to indicate to the listener that the speaker is prepared to make the transition from a status of deviance to one of normality, whether in a moral, social, or religious context. In order to explore the content of coming out with reference to varieties of confession, it is necessary to address the following issues: The nature of confession, the extent to which the confessor has become an insider, the roles of the confessor and the one who confesses, and the significance of such a confession.

#### 1.10.1.1 Religious confession

James ([1902] 1961:360) defined religious confession as “part of the general system of purgation and cleansing which one feels one’s self in need of, in order to be in right relations to one’s deity.” The obstacle to right relations between the one who confesses and the confessor, typically a member of the clergy, is a transgression against what Aquinas defined as “a word, act, or desire against the eternal law” (Bok 1989:75). By confession, the individual whose behavior has set him/her in disharmony with accepted norms, displays his/her intention to “align with ... sacred forces” so as to combat the predisposition toward infractious behavior (Bok 1989:76). Harmony is restored once the

confessant has “exteriorized his rottenness” (James [1902] 1961:360), done penance for it and received absolution.

For “ex-gays,” coming out is equivalent to religious confession. Ex-gays confess to their “sin” of homosexuality so that they can secure help, through the process of penance and absolution, converting to heterosexuality. Because homosexuality is equivalent to rottenness, the confessant is usually subjected to treatments, which are often punitive, that discourage or modify homosexual behavior. These treatments, although religiously motivated—most conversion therapists are fundamentalist Christians—have the appearance of therapy, in fact are known as aversion therapy, but the conversion process conforms with the confession-penance-absolution sequence.

As part of the therapy, [the client] had to present himself before a board of counselors every week and give updates on his sexual activity. If he abstained for that week, they let him go. If he had had intercourse, he had to describe it in intimate detail and then listen to a lecture on his personal failings. The man says that none of the people who attended the therapy sessions with him were converted. “It was a shameful, horrible experience,” he recalls. If the subjects had same sex sex, they had to recount every detail, etc. (Phil Campbell, *The Memphis Flyer*)

Absolution follows in the form of approval and cessation of punishments once the sinner has abstained from the sinful (i.e., homosexual) behavior.

My definition rules out instances of coming out for the purpose of rejecting homosexual identity. In fact, as I define it, the external speech act of coming out presupposes an internal process of acceptance of self as lesbian or gay.

#### 1.10.1.2 Therapeutic confession

Freud ([1940] 1949:64) adamantly denied any connection between religious and therapeutic confession. In his view, the critical distinction rested upon the fact that the analysis extracts not only what the patient willfully and knowingly has concealed, but also what s/he does not know that s/he has concealed. However, there appear to be principles underlying psychoanalysis that are analogous to, if not derivative of, religious confession. For instance, the patient enters therapy more or less voluntarily (unless under court order

for criminal behavior) because of psychic pain, much as is the case with the religious confessant. Both experience pain because of what they cannot say, the former because of repression, and the latter because s/he has committed a social transgression. Further, in both instances, the interaction is typically private between layperson and institutional representative. The institutional representative heals the layperson in part by sharing the layperson's burden and, in virtue of her/his authority, by providing interpretations of the layperson's revelations, i.e., imparting them with meaning. However, in one case the reward is here on earth, while in the other, later, in heaven. In Freud's words,

Nothing takes place in a psycho-analytic treatment but an interchange of words between the patient and the analyst. The patient talks, tells of his past experiences and present impressions, complains, confesses to his wishes and his emotional impulses. The doctor listens, tries to direct the patient's processes of thought, exhorts, forces his attention in certain directions, gives him explanations and observes the reactions of understanding or rejection which he in this way provokes in him. (Freud [1935] 1943:19-20)

The therapeutic setting is established to help the client verbalize the things that s/he would find difficult to do so in other, everyday settings. In fact, the setting is designed to encourage, if not compel, the client to express her/his feelings without fear of the ordinary social consequences that the client would suffer were s/he to express them in other settings. Coming out, in the sense in which I intend to use it, is most like therapeutic confession, and least like religious confession in this respect. That is, in the psychotherapeutic situation, confession is inherently healthy and should be done, even if the client's improved state of health results in disrupting the confessant's family and other social networks; while religious confession is healthy to the extent that it is the first step to reestablishing the "status quo." Furthermore, coming out is similar to both therapeutic confession and religious confession insofar as (contrary to what lesbian and gay historians and activists might believe) the cultural context (in which coming out as a speech act exists) compels the act of coming out. While it is very difficult at first for most lesbians and gays to come out, it is probably even more difficult, in many instances, not to. As I will show in the next chapter, American cultural conditions have evolved such that a

cultural value is that good relationships are based on the mutual verbalizations of feelings, including sexuality.

#### 1.10.1.3 Criminal confession

Confession partly functions to restore harmony to the individual's sense of membership within her/his community. Religious confession is a way of unburdening one's sins, and therapeutic confession a way of learning to communicate such that one feels understood, can understand another, and feels therefore socially apt. In both cases, confession is more or less a volitional act.

In legal settings, confession is, generally speaking, not volitional. Although the Fifth Amendment protects the individual from "compelled" self-incrimination ("no person...shall be compelled in any criminal case to be a witness against himself"), and thus against coerced confession, the notion of a voluntary confession comes into question. While confession involves an institutional representative, s/he is not there to share the confessant's burden, but to restore law and order. One of the ways s/he does so is by inducing confession in the criminal defendant. There has consequently been much dispute regarding the validity of confessions in terms of their voluntariness. According to Wertheimer (1987), the first theoretical discussion of confession was *Ashcraft v. Tennessee*, where the defendant confessed after having been questioned for 36 hours, without rest or sleep, by investigators who worked in contiguous shifts. The court ruled that the confession was involuntary. But the dissenting opinion held that interrogation for 36 hours, or for even one hour was coercive, and therefore there was no criterion for judging whether or not a confession was voluntary. More recently, partly as a result of the aforementioned dissenting opinion, the Court has held that interrogation, in contrast to physical violence, is not inherently coercive, upholding the validity of confessions extracted via interrogation. Thus, it is recognized that no legal confession is voluntary in the same way as psychotherapeutic or religious confession is (although there are coercive

elements in these forms of confession as well) but that this does not preclude the legality of confessions extracted by interrogation.

Obviously, one of the problems faced by interrogators is that they may induce an innocent person to confess due to the real or perceived threat or imminence of physical violence or because of fatigue. However, another inducement to confession is the need for a sense of coherence, prompting what the psychoanalyst Theodore Reik calls the “compulsion to confess.” Lakoff (1996) has considered the confession of a defendant who, confused and disoriented by the interrogation, confessed, not because the confession was necessarily true, but because it gave him a stable sense of self.

Of all the confessional presentations of self, only criminal confession is involuntary by virtue of the fact that it can be forcibly extracted against the will of the confessant, in a way that, at least in theory, therapeutic and religious confession, cannot (the client and sinner have the option of abstaining from confession altogether). Criminal confession is not done for the benefit of the self’s psychological well-being but for the security of society, and therefore enhances rather than reduces the disparity between insider and outsider. The act of coming out and the criminal confession are similar in that both present a socially disapproved self, on the one hand, wrongdoing in the eyes of the law, and on the other, an infraction against cultural sensibilities of what is normal.

### 1.11 The life story

Narrative is nearly as fundamental to everyday talk as ordinary conversation. Just as ordinary conversation serves as the basis for many other dyadic discourse units (e.g., psychotherapy), so does the structure of narrative form the basis of other monologic discourse units (e.g., explanations). Following on the heels of ordinary conversation, the narrative appears in early stages of language acquisition. Children as young as two and a half (Shatz 1984) can perform a rudimentary version of a narrative. They recognize and produce the formulaic phrases (“Once upon a time..”) which begin a narrative, and make

use of structures such as continuity and resolution. Sacks (1972) has shown that a narrative produced by a three-year-old is amenable to analysis from a conversation analytic perspective. Like ordinary conversation, narrative has been extensively studied not only by linguists, but also by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics. Spoken narrative in particular has been a fertile site for research into how cognitive, social, and cultural constraints influence the production and comprehension of the use of language in face-to-face interaction.

The conception of the narrative as the way we make sense of ourselves is of particular interest to this study, considering that someone who is lesbian or gay can be understood as possessing a personal narrative in which lesbianism or gayness is integrated. The social psychologists Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen (1985:26) write that "the rules for narrative construction guide our attempt to account for human actions across time ... both in informal relationships where we attempt to make ourselves intelligible to each other, and in the scientific attempts to guide describe and explain human behavior." Articulating a psychoanalytic view, Spence (1980:21) observes that "a well-constructed story possesses a kind of narrative truth that is real and immediate and carries an important significance for the process of therapeutic change." Linde (1993:98), a sociolinguist whose work is pivotal to the present study speaks of the narrative iconicity of the self, observing that the self is "constructed by various aspects of narrative structure and by the social process of narrative exchange." The sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) notes that the modern self, lacking the traditions which in the past clearly delineated social roles, is, through the developments of modernity such as mass media, constituted by the ability to sustain a narrative.

A lesbian or gay individual who comes out will likely have an account of an instance of when s/he divulged her/his homosexuality to someone else, or a description of the process by which s/he arrived at self-awareness or self-acceptance. This verbal rendering is termed by lesbians and gays the "coming out story." The coming out story is

of interest for its own sake but also because it serves the function of reinforcing the speaker's homosexual identity in a culture where any form of sexuality deviating from heterosexuality is usually perceived as a threat to the social order (e.g., the "family" as defined by the Christian right), or to what is "natural" (Geertz 1983). Religious conversion stories are likewise exchanged among group members, and can occur either in a group or in private, among friends (cf. Stromberg 1993). They may be seen as criterial for group membership, something each member is expected to have.<sup>12</sup> Both the diary and the autobiography are written genres. Autobiography is a public presentation of a self that is often a prominent public figure; one who is associated with and can reveal something about such a figure; or one who has overcome some experience common to the everyday person. While the subject of an autobiography is typically restricted to those who can present selves distinguished by virtue of their fame or an unusual accomplishment, the other discourses are readily available to the average person. The diary can be written by anyone—usually, the writer is also exclusively the audience.

#### 1.11.1 The religious conversion story

In his study of Christian conversation narratives, Stromberg (1993) noted that Christians reformulate behavior that is otherwise socially dubious in terms of carrying out intentions associated with their relationship with god. Once an unacknowledged behavior is reformulated into "canonical" language, the language itself comes to have a special significance for the believer thereby increasing her/his commitment to it. In conversion stories, the subject expresses and resolves the same conflicts operative before the conversion.

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<sup>12</sup> Some Evangelical sects of Protestant Christianity, emphasizing the personal relationship with their deity (v. the mediated relationship between god and human beings in Catholicism), require "not so much a conversion—by its nature a transformation of the soul that occurs outside of the public view as a conversion narrative."

Stromberg analyzes the stories in terms of the style in which the story is narrated. In one speaker's narrative, he observes that the speaker's parapraxis reveals evidence of her ambivalence concerning her family. For instance, when she talks about her twin brother with whom she has boundary problems (it is claimed) due to her twinhood, the author notes her confusion regarding how to formulate her brother's age (Stromberg 1993:39):

Jean: ((some text omitted)) kind of like an: office clerk  
when he was #we were about-# #he was about# seven- sixteen or seventeen

When she discusses her conversion, her speech is considerably more fluent. The ambivalence experienced while still present can be worked out in terms of language relevant to her relationship with her deity.

The coming out story bears a great deal of resemblance to the religious conversion story. Just as conversion narratives can be exchanged in adult Sunday school classes or in more intimate settings among friends (cf. Stromberg 1993:6), coming out stories can take place in public, both in oral and written forms (*viz.* in newspapers, the plethora of anthologies on coming out stories, rap groups); or in private conversations among gay acquaintances. Both types of stories, unlike institutionalized forms of self-disclosure, are not told for an explicitly externally defined objective. Instead, they tend to be told for an internal sense of self and group cohesion.

Like the conversion stories, the reasons that individuals give for having revealing their gayness to themselves and to others stem from certain cultural values. Because speakers are aware that coming out is not always information that intimates in particular want to hear, they need some way of rationalizing it. The following speaker, a white male in his early twenties, was a participant in a coming out rap session.

That's the really unselfish part about coming out,  
that you want to share with your life with your parents.

The notion of filial piety, not all that strong in western culture, though still not wholly rejected, is the principle employed by this speaker.

### 1.11.2 The autobiography

According to Lyons (1978), the autobiographical genre did not appear until the mid-eighteenth century, and the word “autobiography” itself wasn’t coined until 1809 by Robert Southey. As a literary presentation of self, the autobiography differs according to notions of the individual as well as the other discourse genres prevailing during the era in which a given work was written (Linde 1993:38; Giddens 1993:76). Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, the personal narrative was written “to make one’s peace with God; afterward it was to make one’s peace with himself” (Lyons 1978:55). Thus, the autobiography had its beginnings in religious confession. Lyons notes that autobiographies written before the eighteenth century had primarily didactic functions or were written as an instantiation of human essence, rather than being written for the sake of self-discovery or of the mere act of presentation of self, as they are now. Furthermore, in ancient times, the concern with universal qualities of human beings precluded discussion of the individual and therefore of the autobiography as we know it. The absence of the public/private dichotomy as we know it also made the autobiography an unlikely form.

In the autobiography’s precursors, the writer is an individual who is distinguished, by virtue of some miraculous achievement or radical spiritual conversion from the lowly masses. In modern western capitalist culture, another reason that autobiographies are written by distinguished individuals is the profit motive: Presumably, the disclosures of a famous individual would be more interesting to the general public, and therefore generate substantial enough sales to make such disclosures more worthwhile (and lucrative) than those of the woman or man on the street. Since they typically have mass appeal, autobiographies are mostly written. It is easier to disseminate them more efficiently in written than in oral form, which are subject to time and space constraints (although technological developments in Internet technologies may give rise to new autobiographical forms).

Generally, but not always, the writer of an autobiography must be a former president, professional baseball player, guru, and so on. But non-famous individuals associated with a public figure can also write autobiographies. For example, there exist innumerable books written by former and current photographers, lovers, managers, producers, musicians, and other associates of the Beatles. Other nonfamous individuals might write autobiographies based on how they were diagnosed with cancer and were abruptly and spontaneously cured of it, or found the secret to everlasting youth.

One of the major differences between the coming out story and autobiography is that of scope. A coming out story can form a part of an autobiography, while the reverse, an autobiography forming part of a coming out story, is unlikely. The former comprises a narrative about the teller's discovery of being a lesbian or gay, which is just one of many facets of the teller's life. The latter comprises the teller's life as a whole, which may subsume her/his sexual identity. For instance, several years ago, an umpire for the National League wrote a book describing the emotional strain he underwent in concealing his homosexuality during his baseball career, and the discrimination he confronted after he came out. Several factors contributed to his writing the autobiography. First, although umpires are usually not publicly recognizable as prominent figures, this particular umpire's employment within a profession with a high degree of public exposure and that is quintessentially American, the uniqueness of his position as a gay man in a profession that is also rabidly homophobic, and his association with famous baseball players like Pete Rose made his story worth telling. Coming out comprised only one of many facets of his autobiography<sup>13</sup>.

Given that one main difference between a coming out story and an autobiography is one of scope, the latter is likely to be longer than the former. Since the only qualification necessary for writing a coming out story is that the narrator be lesbian or gay,

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, at the book reading he gave at Cody's, among those in the audience were 9 or 10 year old boys with baseball caps on waiting to have the author sign their baseballs.

more people are qualified to tell a coming out story than can write an autobiography. This is one reason that coming out stories, when written, appear in anthologies rather than occupy an entire length of a book in their own right.

In addition to scope though, there is a difference in function between telling or writing one's coming out story and writing (telling?) one's autobiography. Originating from a tradition begun by the consciousness raising groups of the 1960s, the anthologies of coming out stories are patterned after a variety of forums that promote the telling of oral coming out stories. Group and individual counselling sessions regarding coming out issues, coming out rap group meetings, campus events celebrating coming out all recognize the psychological benefit of telling one both to others and to oneself. Just as in the psychotherapeutic setting, the coming out stories group gives individuals the opportunity to justify their lesbian and gay existence by giving voice to their private experiences. By making these experiences understood to others, they establish some sense of coherence to their lives as well as affirming the gay identities of others who share similar experiences.

On the market are many anthologies of coming out stories, written by nearly any combination of ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic class.<sup>14</sup> These anthologies are, on the one hand, counter to the theme of the "typical" woman or man on the street achieving self-realization, instead, recognizing the multiplicity and uniquenesses of experiences (e.g., the Asian American butch lesbian's experience of coming out is not the same as that of the white working class lesbian separatist). On the other hand, while differences in experiences are recognized, the anthologies also typify, perhaps paradoxically, the coming out experience as being intrinsically personal. The stories function as testimonials for the benefit of readers undergoing the same process that the tellers of these narratives once experienced. The writers whose stories make up an

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<sup>14</sup> Anthologies of South Asian, Asian, and Pacific Islander women's coming out stories include: *A lotus of a different color*; *Coming out stories*; *The very inside: An anthology of writings by Asian and Pacific Islander Lesbian and Bisexual Women*; *Bi any other name*.

anthology of coming out stories are not public figures in the usual sense, but, in the tradition of the consciousness raising group, people just like the reader facing the same kinds of problems.

#### 1.12 Indirect presentations of self

In contrast to the presentations of self I discussed above, there are also self-presentations that are based less on what is said than on what is implied. Rather than being clearly delineated speech genres with cooccurring forms and functions, they involve the use of strategies that create, point to, activate, or modify semantic constructs for identity categories.

A recent influential work is Elinor Ochs' (1992) cross-cultural research on Western Samoan and American childrearing practices. She shows how mothers' interactional behavior with their children socialize the latter into contrasting notions of "mother," and by implication, "woman." American mothers use Motherese or Babytalk, a simplified form of message production not found among Samoan caretakers. When their children vocalize, American mothers tend to attribute meaning to their children's utterances by speaking for their children, or "ventriloquating." Mothers may also engage in negotiation with their children by asking them questions about what they meant. They may help them say something that makes sense by taking their perspectives and referring to things they are holding or looking at. In Samoa, children are expected to make themselves understood. Caregivers offer no scaffolding (Ochs 1992) and merely point out that the child is being unclear. When American mothers praise their children, they diminish or deny their role in tasks accomplished by both mother and child or by primarily the mother. In Samoa, praise of the child is reciprocated with praise of the mother. These different childrearing behaviors, child-centered versus adult-centered, accommodating versus non-accommodating, socialize the child into different constructions of "mother." According to Ochs, these distinctions in verbal strategies lead to differences in relative

prestige of mothers within each culture. While Samoan mothers tend to hold high prestige among caretakers, American mothers, through their own interactional behavior, become devalued and even invisible, as Ochs puts it.

Both indexing (and other related conceptions of identity, such as those reviewed in Tannen 1994, including alignment, footing, display, positioning, and framing) and gay implicature socialize the addressee into an understanding of the speaker's social role.

Strategies of the former type

...don't communicate in the narrow sense of the term; they don't enunciate something through a language of symbols openly established and used solely for that purpose.  
(Goffman [1976] 1979:1)

While the activities constituting indexing are not intended to convey a specific proposition (e.g., a mother does not have the conscious intention of saying "I am your mother" when she diminishes her own role in a task conducted jointly by herself and her child), any single instance of gay implicature, to the extent that it is conscious and strategic, is intended to convey the proposition "I'm lesbian (or gay)."

I have been discussing the ways in which people may identify themselves in ways that are recognizable to themselves and to others via both explicit and implicit forms of self-presentation. Underlying this discussion is the assumption that the process of self-presentation is one that is worked out by the individual and her/his fellow interlocutors in more or less informal settings. But the kinds of selves that can be presented are subject not only to the individual's intentions but also to the situational, or cultural, constraints of what can be presented and in what form. When selves cannot be presented in accordance with social and cultural constraints, a culture may make available resources to provide help in (re)socializing the individual into membership within that culture. I would now like to discuss the concept of the US as a therapeutic culture, and some of the therapeutic discourse genres through which that therapeutic culture is realized. I believe that such a discussion can shed light on how individuals come to adopt a lesbian or gay identity, and

on why the discourse genres through which sexuality is expressed as an identity have emerged in the US as opposed to elsewhere in the world<sup>15</sup>.

### 1.13 "Therapeutic" culture

Americans place extreme importance upon self-reliance and individuality. Although an indepth sociological analysis is beyond the scope of this work, it is worthwhile to consider a few peculiarly American developments out of which its therapeutic culture (and coming out, coming out self-help literature, and the coming out story, several of its concomitants) can be seen to have emerged.

While separation and individuation are universal processes that every individual must contend with, the American emphasis on self-reliance manifests this process in the shedding one's traditional ties to family and community for the sake of becoming autonomous individuals. In fact, as Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (1996:58) put it, "However painful the process of leaving home, for parents and for children, the really frightening thing for both would be the prospect of the child never leaving home."<sup>16</sup> As one of the virtues taught in childhood, self-reliance is one of the qualities that establishes a person's sense of self as an individual whose achievements are won because of her/his own efforts, without aid or assistance from others.

The basis for kinship and community ties is the breaking away from them. The kinds of communities that are subsequently formed are what Bellah *et al.* call "lifestyle

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<sup>15</sup> Lesbian and gay identity, along with the genres "coming out" and the coming out story appear to be American cultural constructs. Although I do not have direct evidence for this contention, several things nonetheless lead me to this conclusion. First, many of the world's lesbian and gay communities have adopted concepts that began in the US. For instance, in French Canada, there is a magazine for lesbians and gays called *Sorti*, the past participle of the verb *sortir*, corresponding to a literal translation of "to come out." Additionally, several websites in languages other than English such as German and Dutch import the term "coming out" directly from the English. Gay pride parades and coming out stories anthologies are appearing in cultures as farflung from the west as Hungary and China.

<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to cultures such as in China and Italy where the expectation is "staying home—living with one's parents until their death and worshipping parents and ancestors all one's life." (Bellah *et al.* 1996:57)

enclaves” which are less communities founded on a common sense of inclusion “celebrating the interdependence of public and private life and of the different callings of all,” than groups that are formed around shared features of private lives. Lifestyle enclaves comprise “loosely knit organizations” (Scollon and Scollon 1995:218) that “form and disperse along the lines of common interests, needs, and issues.” (p. 219), relations of their choosing, rather than “the traditional relationships of family, community, or business” (p. 218), relations into which they are born or in which common circumstances find them.

One way of coping with the increasing scarcity of relationships on which one could rely for “unconditional acceptance” was “friendliness,” or in terms relevant to the present study, camaraderie politeness.

Less than ever could they count on relating to others simply on the traditional grounds of kinship, local community, or inherited status. In the new, mobile middle-class world, one autonomous individual had to deal with other autonomous individuals in situations where one’s self-esteem and prospects depended on one’s ability to impress and negotiate. Social interactions under these conditions were often intense, but also limited and transient. “Friendliness” became almost compulsory as a means of assuaging the difficulties of these interactions, while friendship in the classical sense became more and more difficult. (Bellah *et al.* 1996:118)

These interpersonal stresses of modern life simultaneously gave rise to a malaise that Bellah *et al.* (1996:117), adopting the term from George Beard’s (1881) book, call “American nervousness,” an affliction of urban, educated, and well-to-do Americans confronting massive technological changes around the turn of the century.

The new world of intense, but limited, relationships that required a great deal of effort to establish and maintain and the decline of more traditional supportive relationships that could simply be taken for granted put an enormous strain on the individual and were among the main causes of nervousness that so frequently afflicted middle-class Americans before and after the turn of the century. It is in this context that we should interpret the emergence of the therapeutic culture and therapeutic relationships that became even more important in the twentieth century. Such therapy was probably more a support for those placed under unprecedented psychic demands than a cure for new mental ills. (Bellah *et al.* 1996:118-119)

The therapeutic relationship since then has become the substitute for those relationships on which the individual counted traditionally for “unconditional acceptance.” The

therapeutic relationship par excellence in the US is that between psychotherapist and client.

### 1.13.1 Psychotherapy

When Americans experience problems, rather than seeking help from friends (and returning the favor with reciprocal offers of help), they prefer to solicit the advice of “experts,” whose knowledge they can draw on and whom they can pay in exchange, and with whom they can end the relationship once the advice has served its purpose. When those problems are specifically interpersonal or emotional, they may consult self-help books, read advice columns publishing solutions to “typical” personal problems submitted by real people (and whose popularity feeds on the voyeurism of the column’s readers), watch talk shows which often have experts, or solicit the services of psychotherapists.

In psychotherapy, the individual, or client, learns to voice her/his feelings to an empathic listener, the psychotherapist, in a “neutral” environment within a circumscribed place, time, and duration. In exchange for listening, the psychotherapist receives remuneration from the client. The relationship, at once intimate and distant, takes place abstracted away from any social or historical context so as to achieve the chief therapeutic goal, the clear and truthful communication of feelings. The social and emotional resources available through, for example, the individual’s kinship ties are viewed as hindrances to the individual (if not yet a direct source of the individual’s pain), particularly to her/his ability to express her/his “true” self<sup>17</sup>. These two characteristics, the empathic element of

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<sup>17</sup> On the role of the family in analysis, Freud complains:

In psychoanalytic treatments the intervention of relatives is a positive danger and a danger one does not know how to meet. One is armed against the patient’s internal resistances, which one knows are inevitable, but how can one ward off these external resistances? No kind of explanations make any impression on the patient’s relatives; they cannot be induced to keep at a distance from the whole business, and one cannot make common cause with them because of the risk of losing confidence of the patient, who—quite rightly, moreover—expects the person in whom he has put his trust to take his side. No one who has any experience of the rifts which so often divide a family will, if he is an analyst, be surprised to find that the patient’s closest relatives sometimes betray less interest in his recovering than in his remaining as he is. (Freud

psychotherapy and the goal of promoting communicative clarity of expression are the main characteristics of therapeutic discourse, and are considered next.

### 1.13.2 Therapeutic discourse

Every human being has both the need to for involvement and the need for independence. Discourse is therapeutic to the extent that it serves both needs at once without, on the one hand, extending the individual's uniqueness to the extreme of utter isolation and aloneness, or, on the other hand, defining her/his problems as nothing more than commonplace. Lakoff puts it thusly:

A successful therapeutic allusion has three properties. First, it links the client's psychic reality with a larger universal truth. Second, it belongs wholly to the two who create it. The therapist who provides the same warmed-over analogy for everyone is not giving the client something equal in effort to the latter's sacrifice—of comfort and security. Finally, it represents a collaboration between therapist and client, each contributing a meaningful part to its creation. (Lakoff 1990:75-76)

For instance, Lakoff (1990) has discussed the various forms that develop as the relationship between the therapist and client become more intimate. As meanings become shared, references become less explicit.

#### As language learning

Brudner's (1977) formulation of the communicative process in psychotherapy elucidates the ways in which language and truth are currently understood both in therapy and as a general perspective on interpersonal relations. Adopting Bernstein's terminology of restricted and elaborated code, she views therapy as a process which involves "assisting the individual in subordinating his expressive behavior to the linguistic code." As the individual makes the transition from the use of restricted to elaborated code, he "begins to understand that in the past his own style of communication has often not been intelligible to many other speakers". Emotions and intentions begin to be clearly distinguished with the increasing use of elaborated code. Psychotherapy thus involves, for the client, a

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[1917] 1966:570-571)

process of “language enculturation” whereby the therapist serves as the authority who defines the norms of communication towards which the client strives (Brudner 1977:272; cf. also Lakoff 1990:79-80). These norms involve the fulfillment of an ideology based on camaraderie politeness that places emphasis upon direct self-expression. By the end of a successful process, the patient will have internalized some of the linguistic behavior of the therapist.

This conceptualization of psychotherapy implies that the coherent expression of one’s feelings corresponds to speaking the truth, and supports Foucault’s (1978) observation that the status of confession, especially sexual confession, has been, beginning with Freud’s work, raised to a form of data elicitation, upon which the therapist can conduct her/his analysis of the client. Psychotherapy, specifically therapeutic discourse, ultimately serves to enrich relations because they end up being based on the sincere and undistorted expression of the speaker’s real feelings rather than on the superficialities and insincerities of convention. First and foremost is the individual’s need for self-expression, whose “truth” takes priority over the social disruption that uttering it might cause. Because this need is not self-evident but part of a cultural ideology, one way of encouraging its realization and fulfillment is through advice literature.

### 1.13.3 Background on advice literature

Advice literature consists of messages addressed to a general audience, transmitted usually via books and pamphlets, but now, also via the Internet. Its main function, under which all other functions are subsumed<sup>18</sup>, is to advise the reader on how to solve problems, both practical and psychological, that s/he encounters in the course of her/his life and to provide information that is relevant to the solution to that problem. Advice literature ranges from instructions on how to repair the roof to achieving happiness. The

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<sup>18</sup> Conveying information about the origins of the problem, persuading the reader of the soundness of the advice, reinforcing cultural norms are just some of the other functions.

distinction is roughly captured in the terms *do-it-yourself* (e.g., auto repair, home improvement) and *self-help* literature (e.g., recovery from codependence), respectively. There are, in addition, hybrid forms of literature that combine both practical and psychological elements (e.g., eating the right foods can lead to happiness). The content and the form of the literature vary according to the problem to be solved, who the intended reader is, the objective(s) of the writer, the social norms, and the legal constraints regulating this kind of literature<sup>19</sup>.

Most self-help literature seem to be characterized by the following properties:

- (i) the absence of critical thinking, logical reasoning, and sound scholarship<sup>20</sup>
- (ii) an individualist perspective
- (iii) an emphasis on personal rights
- (iv) the metaphor that “thoughts are things” (Linde 1993:199)
- (v) the implicit assessment of the reader as a good or bad person

The first point about self-help literature is that the materials make claims that there is something wrong with the reader (e.g., s/he is not assertive enough), or the reader’s life (e.g., s/he has been stuck in the same job for the last five years) without supporting evidence for them. In her discussion on self-help literature, Linde maintains that being caught in possession of self-help literature is, for the intellectual, “embarrassing.” As she puts it,

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, if the problem to be solved is automobile repair, then the text may exhibit a variety of properties. The reader may be expected to have some familiarity with concepts or at least the motivation to learn about them. The text is likely to be linearly structured with instructions laid out one after the other, and the information given is likely to be factual rather than emotional. The writer may be a consumer advocate whose objective is to educate the reader about cars so as to minimize the likelihood of deception by auto mechanics. Thus, it may be acceptable for her/him to adopt a perspective that views auto mechanics in general as preying upon the uninformed consumer, although legal considerations prevent her/him from going so far as to commit libel.

<sup>20</sup> Greenberg excerpts an endnote citation from a bestseller on codependence:

I read about this concept—negotiating with people who don’t play fair—in a magazine article at the doctor’s office two years ago. I got the phrase from it, but I can’t remember the author or article. (p. 207) (Beattie, in Greenberg 1994:28)

**The root problem for intellectuals is the noncritical stance of self-help materials—the extreme assertion of propositions about the world without proof—as well as the nature of the propositions themselves. (Linde 1993:199)**

**Because it makes assertions without proof, self-help literature is confined to stating propositions that the reader already accepts rather than making new claims. Therefore, they establish and reinforce beliefs constituting the modern American common sense system because what is stated cannot deviate very far from what the reader thinks about the way things are or should be.**

**In addition, several assumptions underlie self-help literature. The ones relevant to the present discussion are, as mentioned, individualism; the understanding of ethics in terms of individual rights rather than duties and obligations, and the notion that “thoughts are things.” The assumption that renders possible self-help literature is individualism.**

**Individualism holds that the primary reality is the individual. The individual is both responsible for and the product of her/his own choices and efforts. Indeed, “individualism is reflected in the very existence of success literature since the presupposition of such literature is that you can, unaided (except by a book that enables you to help yourself) change your individual circumstances without changing your environmental conditions” (Linde 1993:20). Since her/his external circumstances (e.g., socioeconomic class, ethnicity, upbringing) have very little to do with the opportunities that are made available to her/him, each individual has an equal chance at securing the same opportunities.**

**Another aspect of individualism is the understanding of ethics, or moral principles, from the perspective of individual rights. According to this view, individuals conduct their lives from the perspective of their rights (e.g., to self-expression, to happiness, to psychological well-being), rather than out of a sense of moral obligation to family or a sense of civic duty. The notion of rights implies a split between the individual and the world, and that her/his rights exist independently of her/his interaction with others in it.**

**Another tenet of self-help literature is grounded in the metaphor that thoughts are things. As long as one thinks properly, which nearly always requires changing one’s**

thoughts, everything that the individual wants is within reach. Greenberg (Interface Foundation, Inc., in Greenberg 1994:39-40) cites an excerpt out of a description of a self-help center that exemplifies the metaphor:

The methodology of the Empowerment Workshop has been created to bring fuller consciousness to the power our thoughts have in creating the reality of our lives. Initially, we examine any limiting thoughts we may hold in each of the vital areas. Then, through comprehensive and advanced work with affirmation/visualization tools, we build and mold powerful new thought forms that provide the impetus for manifesting what we want in life. (1991:13)

As Linde observes with regard to this literature, the mind is instrumental in shaping the world. "Limiting" thoughts can be transformed, i.e., "buil[t] and mold[ed]," into "powerful new thought forms" that make available the objects of one's desires.

The last characteristic of self-help literature to be considered is its evaluative quality. Although discussing codependence texts, what Greenberg (1994:7) asserts about them, namely that "the rhetoric of sickness and death encoded in 'codependence' and 'recovery' will turn out to conceal what is really a language of good and bad, right and wrong, sin and redemption," applies to some extent to all self-help literature. He observes that the advice given is grounded in a worldview that comprise advisory "oughts" that are strongly or weakly evaluative. He says of weakly evaluative "oughts" that they occupy "non-ideological, non-controversial realm of 'objective truth.'" (Greenberg 1994:102):

To say I ought to change the oil in my car every 3,000 miles, or to save a certain percentage of my paycheck, is to make practical judgments regarding automobile maintenance or thriftiness. What these evaluations have in common is that they do not necessarily refer to any particular shared understanding of the Good; they do not need to rely for their recommendations on a publicly held hierarchy of values which makes it clear that one action is "better" than another, except insofar as good health is a valued goal.

He continues.

When considerations of the good life enter the picture, however, the nature of the ought changes.

When changing the oil becomes evaluated as more than a matter of automobile maintenance, in terms of a higher good, whereby, for instance, the desire to change the oil is definitive of a noble life, such an evaluation is what is termed "strong." To give an

example that is closer to self-help literature, Greenberg shows how “strong” and “weak” evaluations are manifested in codependence texts,

...the language of the [codependence] texts makes it clear that ... the kind of “illness” they are discussing is not merely a matter of weak evaluation. Codependence is not just a matter of “health”; it is a matter of “maturity,” of “rights and dreams.” The language of strong evaluation creeps into the codependence authors’ invocation of standards of sickness and health; those claims must then be understood as an invocation of a quality of life to which we ought to aspire. (Greenberg 1994:104)

So codependence is framed as an illness, for which the self-help literature offers ways of recovery. But underlying the medical model of sickness and health are notions of what constitutes a meaningful and fulfilling life, of who is or is not a good person.

All of the abovementioned characteristics are pertinent to the definition of the sub-genre of self-help literature on coming out that is of present interest. The main purpose of all coming out self-help literature is to help the lesbian or gay reader through the process of lesbian or gay self-identification (1) to her/himself by defining what a lesbian or gay is so that the reader her/himself can determine whether s/he is lesbian/gay or not; and (2) to others by giving guidelines (a) that help her/him ascertain that the appropriate psychological, social, and environmental conditions have been fulfilled before making any disclosures, (b) that help her/him predict possible consequences of her/his disclosure, and (c) that help her/him manage the consequences, especially negative reactions to the disclosure.

## Chapter 2

### Methods

#### 2.0 Introduction

The present study seeks to explicate lesbian and gay identity by examining the forms and functions of four discourse genres associated with lesbian and gay self-presentation. The aim of the study is to show how these discourse genres emerge out of certain shared beliefs—about the self, interpersonal relationships, and the functions of language—that give participants a sense of identity as lesbian and gay. These shared beliefs comprise what Scollon and Scollon (1995) call the discourse system.

Each individual is a member of multiple discourse systems (e.g., ethnic, religious, gender, generational). The norms of behavior operative within each of these discourse systems may conflict with each other. Indeed, it is these conflicting discourse systems, for example, the lesbian and gay discourse system, on the one hand, and the fundamentalist Christian discourse system, on the other, within which the individual is a member, that potentially create difficulties for the individual's ability to define her/his personal identity. Depending on which discourse system is dominant in a given situation, certain ways of speaking and relating to others will be emphasized and others suppressed. It appears to be the case that the category of lesbian and gay identity arises from a more or less coherent discourse system that espouses certain beliefs (e.g., sexual orientation is a major defining trait of who a person "really" is), has characteristic ways of enculturating members (e.g., coming out self-help books and pamphlets), and emphasizes certain types of interpersonal relationships (e.g., honesty and openness between parent and child). Under at least some social situations within American culture, it has become a dominant discourse system, where the presentation of a lesbian or gay self is not only possible, but mandated. For instance, lesbians and gays who are not generally open in their everyday lives about their sexuality or who otherwise behave in a way that presuppose heterosexual norms and

values as a positive standard<sup>1</sup> are often subject to sanctions by those who are openly lesbian and gay.

The discourse genres that are investigated to shed light on the lesbian and gay discourse system are the speech act of coming out and the genre of advice literature that addresses the problems of coming out, the coming out story, and gay implicature. The analysis reveals that lesbian and gay identity are not simply outcomes of individually-motivated acts but arise out of a more complex pattern of ideology, socialization, and politeness norms (face systems).

Because each of the different genres serves slightly different functions within the lesbian and gay discourse system, each is associated with different kinds of texts. Accordingly, four types of texts are analyzed. To shed light on the genre known as coming out, both the speech act "I am lesbian (or gay)" and excerpts from self-help texts that socialize a speaker into producing such an utterance, including those published as books and on the World Wide Web, are analyzed. For the investigation of the coming out story, oral and written coming out stories told by Asian and white narrators are used. The comparison highlights the sometimes very different norms that are operative in self-presentations associated with the narration of the story. In the case of gay implicature, the texts analyzed comprise the responses to a survey and examples found in books and articles. Descriptions of each genre, data, and method of analysis follow.

## 2.1 Coming out and coming out self-help literature

I examine the speech act of coming out in two parts, both in terms of the utterance itself, and also in terms of the self-help texts that give instructions to the individual on

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<sup>1</sup> I once described myself as "straight-looking" to two openly lesbian women, who responded by claiming not to know what I meant by the term. These kinds of social "sanctions" are interesting because they provide concrete evidence of the existence of a community that has its own norms of appropriate behavior.

whether, how, and when to come out. First, I give a definition of coming out, and then follow it with a description of the analysis.

#### **2.1.1 Definition of *coming out***

For the purposes of the analysis, I define *coming out* as a speech act, specifically one that is subsumed under the illocutionary category of an assertive (cf. Searle 1979). Although coming out can and does take many forms, both verbal and non-verbal, direct and indirect, my analysis defines coming out as the utterance of the statement corresponding to the proposition “I am lesbian (or gay).”

##### **2.1.1.1 Analysis**

The analysis of the statement “I am gay (or lesbian)” employs speech act theory and syntactic theory in order to ascertain the structural conditions under which it can be non-defectively uttered. When these approaches are found to be limited, politeness theory is then proposed for the analysis of the speech act of coming out. Politeness theory is able to provide a means of describing the social norms that are operative within interpersonal relationships between, on the one hand, open lesbians and gays, and on the other hand, those who are heterosexual when an act of coming out is implemented. However, it is difficult if not impossible to gain access to actual occurrences of coming out, as well as to the immediate and broader social values that motivate an act of coming out at any given instant. The coming out self-help texts, which guide a reader’s execution of an act of coming out, are useful in this respect. These, along with their data collection and analysis, are described next.

#### **2.1.2 Definition of coming out self-help literature**

The fact that the speech act of coming out is socially disruptive is indicated in the phenomenal amount of advice literature, both in the form of print media and especially on

the Internet, that is available to deal with homosexual identity and its expression or suppression. There is literature directed to lesbians and gays on what a lesbian or gay is; on what coming out is and means; on how the reader knows if s/he is really lesbian/gay; on how, why, and when to come out, and to whom; on lesbian and gay issues related specifically to the workplace, the classroom, and the military; on how to lead a fulfilling life as lesbian or gay; on typical questions that are asked about homosexuality, to name a few. In addition, parents, spouses, children, and friends of lesbians and gays may find self-help material that help them cope with acts of coming out with which they have been confronted.

Coming out self-help literature is of interest because it reframes a problematic speech act in acceptable terms within the context of therapeutic discourse. While the ostensible purpose of these guides is to give information and advice, and to help the reader feel less isolated, they are, less explicitly, ways of socializing the lesbian or gay person into the norms and values implied by this new identity. Interestingly, with a few exceptions, the literature tends not to instruct the reader *not* to come out, and in fact, not coming out is highly discouraged. The present study seeks to examine the underlying assumptions of texts that guide the lesbian or gay reader through the process of self-disclosure to designated recipients (especially family members)<sup>2</sup>.

#### 2.1.2.1 Data collection

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<sup>2</sup> The titles alone are revealing. One suggests that coming out is something that should be done but that it entails some degree of difficulty and thus requires a "how-to" guide: *Outing Yourself: How to come out as lesbian or gay to your family, friends, and coworkers*. Another implies that coming out is an expression of love rather than something that is meant to be disruptive: *Coming out: An act of love*.

Other books recognize that it is disruptive to family relations, especially relations with parents: *Straight parents, gay children: Keeping families together*, *Coming out to parents*, *Parents matter: Parents' relationships with lesbian daughters and gay sons*.

Yet others suggest that hearing other people's experiences helps with managing one's own experiences as a recipient or a producer of an act of coming out: *The family heart: A memoir of when our son came out*, *Beyond acceptance: Parents of lesbians and gays talk about their experiences*. Still others assume that much of the information available is shrouded in mystery or false stereotypes and that parents and others would want to know the real truth. Notably these titles adopt the voice of the parent: *Why is my child gay?*, or directly address the parent, in sympathetic personal fashion: *Now that you know*.

The literature of present interest comprises the guides that are addressed specifically to the lesbian and gay reader, and that deal specifically with the issue of her/his own coming out, to self and to others. Identification of texts from which excerpts were taken was based on (1) their topic, (2) their intended addressee, and (3) on their estimated importance. Very little was mentioned in the selected texts about the other social categories, for example, ethnicity, age, or socioeconomic status of the authors themselves or that of the intended addressees. Example criteria of how and which coming out self-help publications were selected include

topic: Usually a given publication had some variation on the verb “come out” in it, such as “coming out”, or “outing,” e.g., “Read this before coming out to your parents.”

intended addressee: Often there was a direct statement by the authors indicating that the publication was intended for lesbians and gays, e.g., “When you do begin to come out, etc.”

estimated importance: Publications that are considered “classic” often have gone through multiple printings, and/or have been listed as recommended reading by more than one source, e.g., the book *Coming out: An act of love* was listed in several coming out reading lists.

One other point must be raised. Although there are similar kinds of self-help texts disseminated in other parts of the world, particularly those that have been posted on the Internet, including Canada, South Africa, and England, I chose to confine my analysis to those written and published in the US. There are two reasons for this. First, I believe that different cultural assumptions would be operative in texts written outside of the US for a native audience that might influence the form of the texts. Second, it is not clear, in any case, that the ones that have been written in other countries have not been influenced by those that have been written in the US.

Accordingly, I arrived at six texts dealing explicitly with coming out, the whole or a representative part of which I subjected to analysis. The analyzed texts are reproduced

in Appendices A-F. Each of the six texts was written under the auspices of different organizations, by individuals with different sources of expertise (personal experience and/or professional training), with slightly different motivations (e.g., one of the brochures may also have had the intent of soliciting the reader to become a member of the organization). While each text appeared in different forms—there were two brochures, two books, a newspaper article, and the text from a set of telephone recordings made by a lesbian and gay switchboard—on the whole they address more or less the same topics (i.e., what coming out is, reasons for coming out, and how the reader should come out), serve approximately the same function (i.e., to persuade the reader to come out), and arise out of the same ideology (i.e., the prioritization and positive valuation of individual expression, the correspondence between [personal] truth and feelings). The excerpts examined are the brochures from Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays' (PFLAG) "Read this before coming out to your parents," and the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) "Coming Out Resources"; the books *Coming out: An act of love*, and *Outing yourself: How to come out as lesbian or gay to your friends, family, and co-workers*; the text corresponding to the University of Florida's Gay and Lesbian Switchboard's "Introduction to Coming Out" telephone messages, and an op-ed piece from the *Bay Area Reporter*, "Coming Out - The right way."

#### 2.1.2.3 Analysis

In order to locate and incorporate social and cultural elements into the analysis to support my claim that the face relationships that are privileged by the lesbian and gay discourse system, I analyze self-help texts specifying why and how the reader should come out.

The parameter I use to analyze the texts is politeness because it can reveal cultural norms of interaction (cf., e.g., Gesuato 1997). That is, it can specify the face system, including the concept of the self as well as ingroup and outgroup relations, that is

associated with the lesbian and gay discourse system. I examine the uses of strategies in each of the texts that are consistent with positive and negative politeness. Thus, positive politeness strategies are those that attempt to establish a friendly relationship among interlocutors. Examples are: using personal pronouns, slang, contractions and ellipsis, repetition, indicating agreement, presupposing knowledge of other's wants, joking, giving approval, and discussing familiar topics. Negative politeness strategies are used with the objective of creating distance between speaker and hearer in order not to impose on the latter's autonomy. They correspond with what most of us know as polite behavior, and may involve using impersonal verbs, avoiding personal pronouns, using technical terms, avoiding the assumption of the other's needs or wants, apologizing for imposing, nominalizing, and hedging. Because politeness strategies are ubiquitous in interaction, the examination of their linguistic instantiations will ultimately provide a global, synthetic understanding of coming out advice texts.

### 2.1.3 Limitations

A text analysis of this sort is always vulnerable to the problem of subjectivity. How I interpret something will not be how you interpret it. For instance, there is the problem of what Scollon and Scollon (1995) deem the paradox of face. Any utterance that serves one face need will inevitably violate the other. The use of the imperative creates involvement between the speaker and hearer, but is also a violation of the speaker's negative face. When interpreting whether an utterance is an instance of primarily serving the hearer/reader's face need or of the corresponding face violation, it is necessary to consider the content of the utterance, as well as its relation to the overall text. In the PFLAG pamphlet on coming out to parents (cf. Chapter 4), for example, there are many occurrences of the imperative. While the frequent uses of the imperative could be a violation of the reader's autonomy, in view of the overall function of the PFLAG pamphlet, namely, to give the reader help with a situation she has never before faced (else

she would not need to read the pamphlet), the imperative is primarily serving her positive face need, and, secondarily, if at all, damaging her negative face. Other aspects of the text contribute to the emphasis on positive politeness, such as the writer's reassurances to the reader that, for the most part, parents end up continuing to love their children even if the former may have difficulty accepting their homosexuality. So, internal consistency is one contributor to the plausibility of an analysis.

This brings me to another point, which is the danger of being biased towards evidence that confirms one's hypothesis. If I, as the analyst, expect to see positive politeness strategies in a certain text, then I run the risk of interpreting the text only in terms of the presence of strategies that will confirm my hypothesis. Since all interpretation of language is subject to misconstrual because of the inherent indeterminateness of language, the risk of "exuberant" (i.e., ascribing more meaning than intended by the speaker) or "deficient" (i.e., overlooking meanings that were intended by the speaker) interpretations, to borrow A. L. Becker's (1979) terms, is very real. However, other constraints exist to reduce the danger of misinterpretation. In face to face interaction, what interlocutors think they are doing in a given speech event, the talk that has preceded and that is projected, the topical progression, the setting, the roles participants are assuming, their attitudes toward each other, and the linguistic choices they make, all constrain the kinds of meanings that can be interpreted. In written texts, a similar interpretive process takes place, although where visual (e.g., facial expression, gestures), aural (e.g., intonation, pitch), and linguistic (e.g., repetition) cues are missing, other aspects of the text compensate (e.g., use of public discourse that presuppose little shared experience, formal constraints such as the hierarchical arrangement of topics). By looking at linguistic form, relating it to its function within the text, to the purpose of the text as a whole, and to its sociocultural surrounding, I, as the analyst, am more likely to make a persuasive case for my interpretation than if I were to rely on introspection or an interpretation bolstered by only one or two contextual factors.

There is also the problem of representativeness of the sample. It could very well be the case that the texts I have chosen with which to confirm my hypothesis would, with better more appropriate data, be disproved. In other words, the sample texts I have selected may be aberrant. However, once again, it is the context that provides the constraints against an unduly subjective analysis. The relations within the text (e.g., linguistic strategies) and between the text and its social surroundings (e.g., the function of the text and the characteristics of the readers to whom the text is addressed, the text and other texts like it) help constrain the theoretically limitless possibilities for what a text can mean. Thus, in addition to linguistic factors, non-linguistic aspects of the surrounding context can be introduced into the analysis to support (or disconfirm) any claims being made about a given text. A cross-cultural comparison could also bring into relief the validity of an interpretation.

## 2.2 The coming out story

### 2.2.1 Definition

Unlike coming out whose function is to inform the addressee of the speaker's homosexuality, regardless of whether the addressee is receptive to the speaker's homosexual identity or not, the coming out story is told to establish social cohesion among individuals who are receptive to the speaker's homosexual identity, such as those who have shared similar experiences of coming out, or with those who are otherwise gay-friendly. Because coming out can be considered an event about the speaker that can be told over and over again (i.e., has extended reportability, to use Linde's (1993) words), a story about coming out is classifiable as a subtype of the life story. How the coming out story differs from the life story as Linde (1993) has defined it is that the former involves a kind of crisis of self-definition. The coming out story describes the speaker's internal experience of recognizing and acknowledging her gayness, and the external experience of revealing that information to others. Structurally, it may consist of accounts of one or

both forms of coming out, as well as a list of those to whom the speaker has or will come out. That coming out stories exist at all and are recognized by members indicates their centrality in justifying a lesbian or gay identity as well as defining a lesbian and gay culture. Along with the speaker's self-acceptance and self-definition as lesbian or gay,<sup>3</sup> an important presupposition made by the speaker when telling a coming out story is participants' knowledge of her/his homosexuality. This presupposition is one of the central evaluative components of the coming out story.

### 2.2.2 Data collection

The stories that are analyzed are those narrated by Asian American and white subjects ranging in age from 19 to 63 located in Northern California and upstate New York.<sup>4</sup> The stories came from three main sources: the rap session, interviews, and written stories published on the World Wide Web.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be added that an account of recognition of homosexual tendencies does not in itself constitute a coming out story. Coming out implies a commitment to a gay identity. Accounts related in aversion therapy or in the Catholic confession booth, or more recently, in Ex-gay Ministries (cf., e.g., *SF Weekly*, March 1, 1995) are confessions of social transgressions, whereby homosexual proclivities are equated with disease or addiction of which the speaker seeks to be cured. The only commitment being made is to the heteronormative status quo.

Although I am not concerned with an analysis of stories of those who reject their lesbian or gay identity, a cursory examination reveals features arising out of the teller's perspectives on homosexuality that suggest that the stories are different in form and function from coming out stories. (Excerpts are from stories published on a website called *Stonewall Revisited*, 206.160.206.77, established to help a person "set aside a homosexual identity with God's help, strength, and love.") Some of the same topics are addressed as in the coming out story (e.g., internal orientation, topics such as conflict are addressed, attempts to change). However, because they are told from the perspective of a person who has resolved not to be gay, the evaluations of the events are different from those of exhibited in coming out stories. For instance, the "ex-gay" narrator exhibits distance from her/his formerly lesbian/gay self (e.g., "I slipped into the gay lifestyle"), and by viewing homosexuality as a problem (e.g., "overcome homosexuality", "struggled with homosexuality"). And whereas in the coming out story, the ending, implied or expressly stated, is that of lesbian or gay self-acceptance, in the stories of ex-gays, the ending is that of a heterosexual, or non-homosexual identity.

For the purposes of this chapter, the distinction hinges on the speaker's intention.

<sup>4</sup> My categories "Asian American" and "white" reflect the tendencies I observed; although they appear to be useful for the analysis that I conduct on the stories, they are problematic given that they lump together members of different Asian groups into one category, abstracting away from possibly significant differences in self-presentation that may be attributable to the specific ethnicity of the individual. Likewise, I did not differentiate the white speakers along ethnic lines.

#### **2.2.2.1 Rap session**

Many of the narratives (ten) were told in a one-time rap group session held in celebration of Coming Out Week, in April 1994. Most of the participants were university students or alumni. Nearly all of the speakers were male, with the exception of one female from Germany. The actual collection of this particular set of data was accomplished as follows: I had my audiotape recorder with me at the rap session in the hope that I would be permitted to record the session. I identified myself to the facilitators as a graduate student in linguistics who was doing research on language and lesbian/gay identity. The facilitators reacted favorably to the idea, and one even suggested that I could collect more data from a gay Christian rap group scheduled for later that evening. The facilitators then put the issue of my tape-recording the session to a voice vote. In response to participants' queries, I assured them that identifying features such as names and locations would be changed, and that further, no one would hear the tape except me, although the session would be transcribed, and excerpts presented at conferences and perhaps published. I volunteered to make myself available at the end of the session in case anyone changed their minds about being recorded. During the session, I sat in the back row as the stories were told in rounds. Following the session, as people were filing out of the room, I waited around in case anyone had second thoughts about being recorded, but I was not approached.

##### **2.2.2.1.1 The rap session as a speech event**

A rap session is a speech event in which individuals who share common, often intimate, experiences, but are otherwise unacquainted with each other, convene to tell their stories and hear others'. The main function of the rap session is to alleviate the individual's feeling of isolation through verbalization of experiences to others and listening to the stories of others with similar experiences. Among the participants is usually a group facilitator who is present to guide, but not preside over the interaction, and also to

participate in it. He or she is typically someone who has also undergone the same kinds of experiences being verbalized by the other members of the group. Participants are often seated in a circle facing each other. They take turns telling stories.

In the following sections, I elaborate on the therapeutic function of the coming out rap session, and follow it up with a description of how it compares and contrasts with psychotherapy. I then consider how participants evince their awareness of the rap session. To conclude the discussion on narratives told in the rap session, I discuss how the story round influences the form of the narratives told in the rap session.

#### **2.2.2.1.2 Therapeutic function of the rap session**

The function of the rap session is therapeutic, and resides both in the telling of one's private experiences to those who, on the basis of their own similar experiences, are likely to understand, and in the ratifying of the private experiences of those who are listening. In telling and listening, participants not only provide an example of how an act of coming out can be verbalized and subsequently talked about, but they help each other reduce the guilt and discomfort accompanying such a verbalization. The guilt and discomfort stem in large part from the gay speaker's awareness of the disruption of social relations that an act of coming out creates through its violation of distance politeness regarding the topic of sex. A consequence of the rap session is the establishment of empathy surrounding, in particular, the individual's right to verbalize his sexual feelings. One could say an outcome of the rap session is making it possible to mutually express one's sexual identity (and more generally, one's feelings), and that a larger goal is to change participants' notion of what a good human being is. Hence, the rap session creates a socialization process that values a conception of self that can both listen to and understand what others experience, and can expect that others will do the same in return. And the rap session is democratic insofar as participants have occasion to hear others' stories and tell their own.

#### **2.2.2.1.3 Resemblances to and differences from psychotherapy**

The circumstances of the group setting also bear resemblances to psychotherapy. It is typically the case that everything that happens within such meetings is off the public record (or so the participants are reminded). As a result, the kinds of topics that are discussed in therapy, such as feelings, conflicts, and embarrassments, are revealed in the rap group as well. To this extent then, coming out stories can resemble the private discourse of psychotherapeutic conversation.

Nevertheless, such groups are public gatherings, and are often publicly advertised. Unlike the psychotherapeutic setting, where a relationship of mutual trust has evolved over regularly scheduled sessions between the therapist and client, and where the client is encouraged to disclose the details of her/his private life, in the coming out stories group, the basis for the public disclosure of sometimes painful emotional experiences is one of reciprocity and potentially mutual exchange. Participants convene under the assumption that each has been or is in the process of undergoing somewhat similar experiences in coming to grips with their gay feelings and thereby have their own accounts, which they may or may not offer, depending upon their inclination to speak. Again, unlike what happens in a therapy session, the topic under discussion is confined to experiences relevant to coming out: Only certain emotional experiences and events are appropriate for description in this setting.

#### **2.2.2.1.4 Rap session frame**

In the coming out stories, speakers evidence awareness of the rap session frame (cf. Tannen 1979b) in the telling of their stories. Remarks such as "My name's Kane," which precede the storytellings allude to the fact that the gathering is among individuals who have not previously met. Others like "Okay, I'll go next" signal the nature of turn-taking in the rap session. Less linguistically salient, though still manifest, is the awareness

that turn length should be such that everyone be permitted the opportunity to decide whether or not they want to speak. Speakers tell their stories without diverging from the subject under discussion or occupying the floor for too long, in order to leave enough time for as many potential speakers as want to volunteer a story. There is the sense among participants of an “acceptable” turn length for discussion of an “acceptable” topic.

Individuals have the option of volunteering a story or yielding their turn to the next person. When speakers are done, they indicate this with remarks such as “That’s it.” Although this kind of remark is atypical of narratives more generally, it appears here because it makes up one narrative in a series of stories, rather than a story that is more overtly co-constructed among participants over a sequence of turns. The story round is the major feature of the rap group session, and is discussed next.

#### 2.2.2.1.5 The story round

As mentioned, speakers’ awareness of the rap group frame is evidenced in how stories are told by participants. Speakers tell stories in a story round, which has a powerful effect on the structure of the stories. Because the stories were told in these story rounds, all participants but the first were able to listen to at least one story before they told theirs. As a result, a structure after which they could model their own stories was made available. This led to the consequence that the internal structure and themes of each story was not only more or less uniform across narrators, but mimicked that of the facilitator, the first speaker to tell his story.

The facilitator stated that he had participated in the coming out stories rap groups before, though not as a facilitator. This statement, coupled with his occupying the role of facilitator, indicates that he considers it important to tell his coming out story. Having already told it at least once and probably more times, and having heard others tell their stories, his narrative had assumed a stable structure with clearly defined boundaries. So

his description included the topics of initial awareness of homosexual feelings, internal conflict, self-acceptance, and disclosure to others.

Because the stories in the rap session were told in rounds, each story tended to address the topics introduced by the first speaker, either implicitly or expressly, in approximately the same order as the first speaker did. Moreover, the influence of both the first speaker's story and the public nature (insofar as participants were previously unacquainted with each other) of the rap session speech event itself meant that the narratives exhibited many of the properties of the performed narratives that Labov elicited in interviews with African American urban youths. Labov's discussion of the elicited narrative is described next.

#### 2.2.2.1.6 Labov's narrative analysis

First, I will briefly outline Labov's analysis of the narrative. Then, I will give several reasons why it is applicable to the coming out stories told in the rap session.

Labov (1972a:359) described the narrative as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which (it is inferred) actually occurred." Those clauses describing the events of the narrative (usually indicated with the use of the simple past tense or historical present) are termed narrative clauses, whose change in sequence alters the meaning of the event sequence (and hence, creates a different narrative). The structure of the narrative can include the following:

- abstract: a brief summary of the story and why it is being told,
- orientation: an identification of the circumstances immediately prior to the first narrated event, often signalled with past progressive verbs,
- resolution: the last narrative clause prior to the coda,
- coda: the signal that the narrative has ended and that establishes the link from the narrative back to the present,

• evaluation: how the speaker makes her/his points and establishes her/his reasons for telling the narrative.

A minimal narrative consists of two ordered narrative clauses, which Labov termed the *complicating action*.

The pertinence of Labov's conceptualization of the personal narrative to the present analysis rests on the fact that, like the narratives upon which his analysis was based, the coming out stories examined herein had first-person protagonists, concerned events in the past, and were elicited. The elicited quality of these stories is reflected in their fleshed out, discrete structures. In actual conversation, however, spoken narratives are much less distinguishable from the surrounding conversational context<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to the elicited characteristics of the narratives he considered, Labov's formulation of the narrative also exhibits the properties of a performance. In fact, the data on which he bases his formulation are the stories told by interviewees whom he describes as particularly engaging storytellers (1972b). Likewise, the coming out stories in the rap group setting are told in a social setting which predisposes the speaker to perform rather than simply tell his narrative. Although he reports on private experiences, he does so before a group of strangers with whom he and they have only their homosexual identities in common. This necessitates that he use public register (rather than, say, allusive references or ellipsis) to the extent that his personal history is not shared by his audience, even if their experiences can all be subsumed within the category of the coming out story. Additionally, devices such as repetition, metaphor, reported speech, humor, detailed

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<sup>5</sup> Additionally, spontaneously told narratives may often consist of no more than a single statement describing a past event. They may involve multiple tellers (cf. Polanyi 1985), whereby participants share both audience and storyteller roles in the production of a single story. Furthermore, one story may encompass a chain of others, each of which elaborates or provides additional information for the overarching story being told. Finally, not all narratives of personal experience involve a first person protagonist (cf. Ervin-Tripp and Küntay 1997). The subject of a narrative may, for instance, be an inanimate object (although such narratives are usually told with explicit or implicit reference to their relation to and interest for participants). It is therefore questionable as to whether the narrative structure proposed by Labov is representative of those usually told in ordinary conversation.

imagery, all of which appear in the coming out stories examined here convey the impression that the speaker is performing rather than simply telling his story<sup>6 7</sup>.

#### 2.2.2.2 Interviews

Interviews, both spontaneous and scheduled, comprised the second source of coming out stories. The methods I used to solicit interviews were by asking acquaintances, by sending out a post to lesbian and gay email groups, and by accosting people with my tape recorder (Sony VOR) during gay pride events and simply asking them if they would tell me their coming out story. The distribution of respondents is listed in Appendix G according to method of solicitation and ethnicity.

In order to supplement the material from the rap session, rather than wait for another rap session to record, or for a conversation in which to capture a spontaneously told coming out story, I conducted interviews. The decision to use the interview as a method of analysis is based on its efficiency for eliciting the data I needed.

When conducting the interviews, I followed, loosely, a script containing the information that I wanted to elicit, and which I believed would be most conducive to prompting the interviewee to speak. The need for a script emerged because the forms of coming out stories told during one-on-one interviews were not organized as I had believed they would be. Although everyone whom I interviewed knew that I was interested in their coming out stories, the stories themselves did not simply burst forth (as I had expected) from the speakers' mouths with ready-made structures. In a way, this should not have

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<sup>6</sup> The narrators of the coming out stories in the rap group are, like Labov's, males, and thus more able and accustomed to perform or narrate publicly (cf. Maltz and Borker 1982 on women's versus men's socialization and speech strategies.).

<sup>7</sup> In contrast to this more public setting, coming out stories produced under circumstances somewhat more removed from the immediacy of public attention, say, in one-on-one interviews, in conversation, or in written form (cf. e.g., Penelope and Wolfe 1980), do not necessarily exhibit the narrative structure posited by Labov (1972a, 1972b). This suggests that the structure outlined here is not intrinsic to the narrative itself but is a product of the social circumstances of a story's telling. And these formal differences correlate with formal and functional differences in the ongoing speech event. For instance, a coming out story told in response to a question posed in conversation by one participant to another may be embedded within the conversation, evolving over the course of several turns.

been surprising. The form of the coming out story, like any other discourse genre, is socially situated, adapted according to the interlocutors' expectations of what is transpiring in the interaction. Thus, the well-delineated coming out stories that were told in the rap session were, to a large extent, not realized in the interviews. Rather, the narrative elicitation reflected the form of the speech event, answers to questions rather than parts of sustained, fully developed narratives consisting of the coming out to self event and instances of coming out to others, that I had been anticipating. They exhibited "certain expectancies about thematic progression, turn taking rules, form, and outcome of the interaction as well as constraints on context" (Gumperz 1982a:166) that are associated with the interview. Thus, it was only through the question-answer format that the coming out stories emerged, and my own expectation for what a coming out story should include which influenced what the interviewee told. The script that I used as a guide for eliciting the interviews, both those that were scheduled and those that were conducted spontaneously at gay pride events, is listed in Table B.

TABLE B. SCRIPT OF INTERVIEW.

1. Where would you place yourself on the Kinsey scale, zero being exclusively heterosexual, and six being exclusively homosexual?
2. When did you first hear the term (gay, fag, etc.)?
3. How did you learn the terms?
4. What are some instances of coming out to others?
5. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you didn't want to lie but you also didn't necessarily want to reveal your sexuality? What did you do in those instances?
6. Have you ever told the stories before that you've just told me?

In administering the script, I attempted to minimize my own interjections and to take turns at apparent transition relevance places where it seemed clear that the interviewee had finished his turn. However, I was looking for different aspects of coming out, such as the internal psychological process and the external social processes. Thus, if these were not addressed, I queried the subjects about them, even if the interviewee himself may not have provided of his own accord the information I sought. Or when I felt

a response was inadequate and asked for elaboration, I may have ascribed more importance to the topic than the speaker himself would have.

#### 2.2.2.3 Published stories

Finally, since I had considerably fewer Asian subjects, particularly females<sup>8</sup>, represented in the data, I sought written versions to complement the data. I was able to locate on the Web four additional written coming out stories narrated by Chinese American tellers.

Just as the speech event in which a coming out story is told must be considered in the analysis of the coming out story unit, so too must the modality be taken into account in order to ascertain its effects on the form.

The stories in question were published on the World Wide Web in a website that was originally created to fulfill a class requirement on Chinese American history. The aim of the authors was to add a lesbian and gay perspective to the topic of Chinese American history. Thus, on the face of it, the website appears to be directed toward a general audience, although the actual reader is presumably the grader of the course for which the website was a requirement. However, in actuality, since the website has outlived its status as a class project, and since websites devoted to the interests and concerns of lesbian and gay Asians link to it, its function seems to have narrowed to helping other Chinese lesbians and gays who are in the process of lesbian and gay self-realization.

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<sup>8</sup> I also interviewed female respondents, with the expectation that I would compare Asian and white females with each other, and with Asian and white males. However, it was extremely difficult to find Asian American female lesbians who were willing to be interviewed. Additionally, two interviewees were what I would consider to be bisexual rather than lesbian. For instance, one identified herself as bi-curious, and another categorized herself as 4 on the Kinsey scale and was regularly engaged in affairs with men. Neither told stories that "sounded" like coming out stories. The former simply told me she liked the people in the campus gay Asian group and was interested in dating a woman there. The latter identified herself as a lesbian, but her coming out story did not contain the usual elements of self-recognition and self-disclosure that constitute a coming out story. Rather, her interest in women appeared to have been based on a conscious decision to include women as her sexual partners in addition to men.

It is not clear how the stories were elicited, that is, whether coming out stories were requested without any further elaboration, or whether the narrators were prompted to address specific topics, such as the issue of ethnicity, in view of the theme of the website, or even whether the stories were elicited orally first and then later transcribed. In other words, the actual circumstances of narration, where it took place, who the audience was, when it was told, are not known. There is also the question of how much editorial intervention there was in the stories. What can be determined, however, is how the stories resemble and differ from orally told narratives.

Some formal characteristics of the stories resemble those narrated in the rap session. In the rap session, speakers tell their stories without interruption from other participants. If there are questions, they are posed following the end of the story. Moreover, the rap session brings together participants who are typically not acquainted with each other. Thus, tellers of coming out stories make certain assumptions about their audience's background knowledge based on common experiences and the immediate context. They refer to familiar concepts such as first realization, parents, concealment, and emotions, as well as the context in which the rap session takes place (the university, the lesbian and gay group on campus, coffeehouses surrounding campus). In the written stories, even fewer assumptions can be made given that the teller is both spatially and temporally removed from the audience.

Nonetheless, there are many cues that point to (1) specific assumptions about the audience made by the narrators, and (2) the spoken register that was governing the narration of the coming out stories. First, there are unexplained references to entities (e.g., MAHU) that are not likely to be understood by anyone but those affiliated with the local community (e.g., gays at UCLA). There are also assumptions that the audience is familiar with Chinese culture (e.g., "I chose to remain anonymous due to the fact that I have parents, you know the Chinese kind").

Second, there are uses of personal pronouns, spellings of words (e.g., *gonna*), the use of contractions (e.g., *didn't* instead of *did not*) that suggest spoken forms, and intensifiers (e.g., *No seriously.*), attention-getters (e.g., *you know*) that suggest face-to-face communication. The complex syntax, such as embedding of modifiers, of written language is largely absent (e.g., *All my friends know. I mean my really good friends, ...*). Topicalization (e.g., *the other people I don't really care [if they know about me]*), repetition (e.g., *I wanted more than for her to accept it, I wanted her to understand it. I wanted her to understand. . . I wanted her to understand. . .*), mitigating devices (e.g., *I guess you could say. . .*), uses of print to represent paralinguistic cues iconically (e.g., *I LOVE being out*) all signal the influence of spoken register on the tellings of the stories.

Yet there are still traces of written forms of language. For instance, statements about impersonal topics are made as though they were factual, without evidential verbs such as *I think* or *it seems* to indicate that they originate from the speaker's own perspective (e.g., *Catholicism buries sexuality under the rug by teaching everyone to abstain from sex*). Uses of latinate verbs (e.g., *educate ourselves and advocate the education of other counselors*), formal discourse markers (e.g., *however*), phrases associated with written genres (e.g., *in an effort to*), and quoting from published books, all reflect the written channel.

It is possible that the merging of oral and written registers that is evident in the forms of the coming out stories is due to the influence and prevalence of electronic mail, and that coming out stories, given their personal nature, is primarily a spoken genre. Nonetheless, the discussion of topics associated with self-realization and self-disclosure to others as lesbian or gay define the stories as coming out stories. And what the narrators choose to verbalize in their stories and how they do so is consistent with the ways that other Asians tell their stories, despite the differences in the contexts in which the stories are told.

### 2.2.3 Analysis

As with any instance of talk, narrative devices communicate information and say something about what the speaker is like. Narrative devices include such phenomena as emphasis on moral state versus social harmony, concern for consistency of self-presentation across social contexts versus adaptation to different social contexts, and internal versus external orientation. I examine the narrative devices used by Asian American and white speakers to tell their coming out stories. In addition to investigating the coming out story for its own sake, another aim is to determine whether or not the form of the narratives is influenced by the teller's social group membership. The analysis reveals that these devices are not randomly distributed in the speech of members of each ethnic group.

### 2.2.3 Limitations

It is immediately noticeable that the sample size is relatively small for both whites and Asian Americans, that there is a disproportion of white to Asian subjects, that the distribution of subjects across situations is uneven.

For instance, the ages of subjects range from the late teens (19) to the early sixties (63). Regional origin spans the breadth of the US. Subjects were from the East Coast, Western NY, the Midwest, and Northern and Southern California. Furthermore, whether subjects actively volunteered to provide data (e.g., the email respondents) or not (e.g., those who were spontaneously confronted by me at the Gay Pride events and did not want to seem rude), are all to some extent self-selected in terms of being more or less able and willing to talk in public or with a stranger about what could be thought of as very personal topics. (Presumably, there are people who have coming out stories to tell who tell them only to friends or associates, and not in front of a group of strangers.) All of the subjects

were residents of urban areas where there is ample exposure to an active lesbian and gay community, and many were affiliated in some capacity with a university. Hence, it is not clear that the findings can be extended to all members of the ethnic groups in question, or that ethnicity is a relevant variable to consider in the analysis. Other factors which affect the type of story told include their various levels of comfort with their identities as gay or lesbian, different lengths of time having elapsed since their first awareness.

However, even with the uneven data, and the sample size, I believe that the data are suggestive, and that the study is worthwhile. In the context of the investigation of the other lesbian and gay self-presentation genres, coming out and gay implicature, the analysis of the coming out stories elicited for this study provides evidence against which to compare the validity of the findings related to the other speech genres, and against which to be compared with the analyses of the other two speech genres. Any act of lesbian or gay self-presentation is contingent upon the development of certain cultural conditions. To the degree that these cultural conditions are consistently reflected in individual instantiations of the speech genres under investigation, and across instantiations of different speech genres, the analyses of each speech genre mutually confirm each other. For example, many Americans believe that the expression of feelings, akin to therapeutic confession, is the basis for deep and genuine relationships. These social conditions have given rise to coming out, another genre of confession, as a speech act. This finding would appear to be consistent with that revealed in the analysis of the coming out story, where, in the data, nearly all white speakers reveal that they have come out to their parents, and only one of the Asian speakers has deliberately and successfully self-disclosed to both parents. It is reasonable to surmise, even with the analysis of limited data, that white speakers, as full-fledged members of the therapeutic culture, are concerned that their relationships with their parents be “genuine,” while Asian speakers, who are under the influence of their deference/distance culture, indicate their preference for negative politeness insofar as their relationships with their parents are concerned.

Once again, however, because this is an interpretative analysis, it is subject to the kinds of problems similar to those of the text analysis of self-help texts.

In addition to the problems of interpretation, the analysis of oral coming out stories involves spoken discourse, which poses its own problems distinct from written texts in terms of data collection and analysis. In order to render the data in analyzable form, I had to tape record and then transcribe the stories. The introduction of two factors that inevitably distort the data and the analysis conducted must be considered.

When speech is tape-recorded, it often has the psychological effect of making people feel self-conscious about their speech. This is reason for casting doubt on the “naturalness” of the data elicited, and indeed, Labov has spent much of the first part of his career trying to devise ways of overcoming this problem.

In the present study, I believe that the effect of the tape recorder is minimal. As far as the rap group session was concerned, participants were arranged seated in a circle, parts of which were two rows deep. I myself was seated behind someone else, diametrically opposed to where the facilitators were seated. My tape recorder, which I kept in my satchel, was not visible to any of the participants. To capture the stories, I used a small clip-on microphone attached to the strap of my satchel. After the facilitators elicited permission on my behalf to record the participants, there was no more mention of the tape-recorder. This is the main reason that I believe that the stories elicited from the rap session were “natural.” I had the impression that people had forgotten about it. There was no orientation toward me or my potential research when tellers told their coming out stories. Participants appeared to be involved with both their own and others’ stories.

As far as the interviews were concerned, most of which were conducted spontaneously during Gay Pride events, I simply accosted people, with my tape recorder slung over my shoulder, and asked informants if they would tell me their coming out stories. Those who were willing were aware of the tape-recorder—I held the microphone in front of them—but there was no reason to believe that it created unusually unnatural

speech or stories. Since the interviews were conducted spontaneously, outside, amidst a great deal of surrounding activity (preparation to march), speakers might have been less focussed on the tape-recorder than they might have had the interview been scheduled in a room specially assigned for the interview.

#### 2.2.5 Transcription

The transcription conventions I used were based on Gumperz and Berenz' (1993) system. I was mainly interested in the factors that I believed to contribute to the speaker's discursive presentation of self. In view of my research questions, I encoded lexical information, prosodic cues, and paralinguistic information. I used a mixture of standard orthography for pronunciations that were predictable, and eye dialect to indicate pronunciation (or parts of words, with dropped portions indicated with an apostrophe, as in '*cause* for [kHÃz]) that seemed to be instances of stylistic variants, rather than other conventions such as phonetic transcriptions, which encoded more detail than was necessary for my analysis. I encoded prosodic cues such as duration (vowel lengthening), fluctuating intonation over a single word, and pitch and loudness (emphasis or stress). The most common paralinguistic signal that I could detect in my recordings was laughter. If a narrator produced an utterance laughingly, the laughter was symbolized with the word "laughs" in square brackets, and the stretch of speech upon which it was imposed bracketed off with curly brackets (e.g., Narrator: {[laughs] No.}).

Each line of transcription was broken off impressionistically, at boundaries that were ascertained according to a combination of cues, such as falling intonation and syntactic unit, and perceived breath group. The theoretical justification for this arrangement is given by Chafe (1994:69), who has contended that the cognitive correlates of discourse production appears to suggest that one idea unit (i.e., "the linguistic expression of information that is, at first, active in the consciousness of the speaker") corresponds to one intonation group. However, following Gumperz and Berenz

(1993:96), I include one or more phrasal units per line to minimize the length of the transcript and improve readability.

Although the presence of the tape-recorder itself did not seem to interfere psychologically with the quality of the elicited data, the conversion of the data into analyzable form causes some serious problems. First, as mentioned, is the problem of context. Context is critical to the correct interpretation of speech. Yet when speech is tape-recorded, the non-verbal behavior (e.g., gestures, gaze, body position) of the speaker and the addressees, ongoing activities (e.g., movement of chairs into a circle), and the physical surroundings, that serve as contextualizing frames for what is said are excised out. Only the vocalizations are retained. Additionally, the nature of speech itself is that it is lost the moment it is uttered. When it is preserved on tape to be replayed over and over, the analyst may place undue significance on linguistic behaviors that the original speaker may not have intended. In this case, every repeated listening creates a new context that did not exist during the actual production of speech.

The transcription of spoken language into written language adds yet another level of distortion to the data. Probably the most obvious transformation is that between aural and visual stimuli. The former consists not only of the verbal components of speech but also of prosodic information, such as pitch, length, and amplitude, and paralinguistic cues such as laughter. But another transformation involves representing time-bound phenomena in spatial terms. Thus, a major problem with transcription is that it is an attempt to represent speech, a continuous multi-layered time-bound phenomena using linear, discrete graphic segments. The result is the ever further removal of speech from its original context and form.

Yet in spite of these limitations, recording and transcribing samples of spoken language are the best ways of preserving spoken data for analysis, given the transient nature of speech. Used together, written transcripts and tape recordings can supply accurate enough data for useful analyses of discourse so long as what is kept in mind is

that transcription is a heuristic device, and not an accurate representation of the actual data itself.

## 2.3 Gay implicature

### 2.3.1 Definition

In addition to the speech act of coming out and the coming out story, the third form of lesbian and gay self-presentation in which I am interested is a specific form of the inferential process known as conversational implicature. Because the implicature generated is the speaker's gay or lesbian identity, I termed this specific type of implicature gay implicature (Liang 1995). I define gay implicature as subsuming a range of strategies that lesbians and gays use to avoid a commitment to a heterosexual self-presentation without an outright display of a lesbian or gay one.

### 2.3.2 Data

I examine the presentation of lesbian and gay identities within more or less egalitarian social interactions, in which the recipient's opinion of lesbian or gay identity is unknown to the speaker. The data came from several sources. I solicited strategies via posts to lesbian and gay email groups, by querying interviewees, and by asking friends. To exemplify what I wanted, I gave the example of the lesbian who had not been seeing any men lately (cf. §6.6.3); or I simply asked my addressee whether he or she had ever lied or equivocated about his or her sexuality, and if so, how. Nearly all of my interviewees readily admitted to having lied or equivocated, and some of them supplied some relevant examples. One additional source of data was the book *Corporate Closet*, which contained a chapter devoted to what the author called "verbal dodges."

### 2.3.3 Analysis

In the first part of the analysis, I construct my own examples to demonstrate how speakers could be uncooperative without seeming to be. The point is to define how gay implicature can be distinguished from other forms of communication motivated by varying manifestations of cooperativeness. Thus, I distinguish cooperative behavior (where the hearer can and is meant to infer the speaker's intention) from that which is uncooperative though superficially cooperative (where the hearer cannot and is not meant to infer the speaker's intended meaning although the former is made to think she can and has), from behavior that is characteristic of gay implicature, where speaker cooperativeness is equivocal (where the hearer is given a chance to infer the speaker's intention) .

In the second part of the analysis, using the Maxims of Conversation as the standard of communicative behavior, I show how, for each example of gay implicature, which maxim is being violated and why, and therefore, how a gay implicature is being triggered.

### 2.3.4 Limitations

From a methodological and theoretical point of view, these data may be problematic insofar as they may reflect neither what actually happened—that is, as self-reports, the examples are tantamount to being constructed examples—nor may they be representative of the behavior of lesbians and gays as a group. Nonetheless, the point remains that the examples cited do indicate the extent to which the devices in question are consciously aimed toward the avoidance and transformation of a difficult social situation

Because the strategies themselves are within the conscious awareness of speakers, I feel that the channel in which I elicited the information is not as crucial as it is for the coming out story, where the immediate context would have an impact upon the shape of the story. I treat the data I elicited from informants as constructed examples (rather than stories in their own right). My methods are therefore intuitive and introspective, although

I introduce, as in the analyses of coming out, and the coming out story, elements of the sociocultural surroundings to support my claims. The analysis could be improved by checking to see how gay implicature operates within the context of an interaction, if indeed, a continual non-commitment of the heterosexual presumption would lead to an inference on the part of the hearer of the speaker's homosexuality.

## Chapter 3: Coming out

Dear Miss Manners: I have several gay friends. A few of my friends inquire about the sexual preference of every person I mention in the course of normal conversation. I find this very rude. It is none of their business and is usually irrelevant to the conversation. If I answer "It's none of your business," it is taken as "Yes."

Gentle Reader: Surely the obvious answer is a cold "Why I have no idea. I wouldn't dream of asking about anything so private." This is also the correct answer when one is asked why one's friends don't get married, divorced, or pregnant and how much they paid for their house. (Martin 1989:106)

What [Ellen DeGeneres] hasn't been able to bring herself to do, until now, is use the word *gay* along with "I am" in public. Indeed, for a lot of men and women whose livelihood depends on the goodwill of millions, those may be the three scariest words in the English language. (Bruce Handy, "Roll over, Ward Cleaver", *Time*, April 14, 1997)

### 3.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the particular class of speech acts subsumed under the category of coming out that take the form of "I am lesbian (or gay)". It attempts to specify the social and psychological conditions that render this set of speech acts (and more generally other assertions of self-identity) sayable<sup>1</sup> in relation to a given cultural setting. First, coming out is investigated and specified initially in terms of speech act theory (whereby well-formedness is stipulated by the internal consistency of preparatory conditions for speech acts). Next, the issue of sayability of the statement "I am lesbian (or gay)" is considered through an attempt at specifying the felicity conditions of the utterance. Then, a syntactic analysis is applied in an attempt to discover what it can illuminate about the speech act. Reportability of coming out is addressed. And, politeness constraints (whereby the sayability of any statement depends on the context, or, more explicitly, the extent to which it conforms with the requirements of smooth interaction, neither imposing on nor creating excessive distance from one's addressee) are considered. Heterosexuality is then considered in terms of a mitigated face threat.

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<sup>1</sup> By sayability, I mean what persons will say in particular contexts, as distinct from what they can say in principle (cf. Hymes 1981:83). While the former entails the latter, it is not necessarily the case that the reverse holds.

The objective is to arrive at a general understanding of what can be said within a culture's requirements of politeness, and how forms of identity such as those based on same-sex erotic and emotional attractions are constrained by these requirements. My main contention is that in a society such as that of the western US where, for the most part, camaraderie politeness prevails, the kind of communication that is valued is "clarity-brevity-sincerity" (not coincidentally coined by an English and rhetoric teacher in California; Lanham in Scollon and Scollon 1995: 94). These circumstances foster "confessional" type speech acts and genres such as psychotherapy and coming out.

### 3.1 Defining coming out

Coming out is a specific kind of self-presentation whose basic proposition is "I am lesbian (or gay)". It can be as direct as uttering "I am lesbian (or gay)," or it can be as indirect as making reference to or participating knowledgeably in discussions on concepts specific to lesbian and gay culture (e.g., "outing"); it may also consist in revealing activities associated with lesbians and gays (e.g, participation in Gays and Lesbians Outreach to Elders); and wearing symbols of gay pride on one's person or placing them on one's belongings (such as a rainbow sticker on the bumper of a car); or even a casual allusive mention revealing one's same sex orientation (e.g., when a lesbian says to another woman whom she believes to be lesbian, "Gee, not much chance for checking out the girls around here, is there?").

As of mid-1997, the status of homosexuality as a legitimate identity within American society continues to be dubious given that there is still considerable ambivalence, to put it mildly, of homosexuality as a social category.<sup>2</sup> Since the act of

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, the document "Continuing the dialogue: A pastoral teaching of the House of Bishops to the Church as the Church considers issues of human sexuality," was the outcome of a mandate of the 70th General Convention of the Episcopal Church for the House of Bishops to outline the history of discussions and teachings on human sexuality that have characterized the Church's thinking, to review the opinions of Biblical scholars on the issue of sexuality and homosexuality in particular, and to note discontinuities in parishioners' lived experiences and church precepts. The purpose of the document was to promote informed dialogue among congregations in preparation for the 71st General Convention. The

asserting one's lesbian or gay identity implicates the previous withholding of unsociable information about oneself, it has the qualities of the speech acts of telling, self-disclosure, and confession. I therefore examine these three speech acts in order to define how coming out resembles and differs from them. I then discuss how the characteristics of coming out might pose a problem for the uttering of the statement "I'm lesbian (or gay)."

The speech act closest in function and form to coming out is the assertion. Therefore, as a starting point to the present analysis, it is profitable to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for the illocutionary act of asserting (what Austin had previously termed *representative*), as conceptualized by Searle (1969:66):

Propositional content: Any proposition *p*.

Preparatory: 1. Speaker (S) has evidence (reasons, etc.) for the truth of *p*.

2. It is not obvious to both S and H (Hearer) that H knows (does not need to be remind of, etc.) *p*.

Sincerity: S believes *p*.

Essential: Counts as an undertaking to the effect that *p* represents an actual state of affairs.

The substitution of the proposition "I'm lesbian (or gay)" for *p* defines, in speech act theoretical terms, an act of coming out. Having a basic set of conditions for coming out, we can further compare it with other, similar, speech acts.

Wierzbicka (1985) distinguishes between the speech acts of revealing, confessing, and telling. Her analysis is useful for refining the definition of speech act of coming out. For instance, she observes that speech act verbs such as *confess* and *reveal*, unlike *tell*, cannot have an internal dative.

Why can one "tell someone a joke" but not \*"reveal someone a secret" or \*"confess someone one's sins"? Presumably, in all three cases, the addressee is affected by the action (i.e., comes to know something). But reveal and confess differ from tell in their implications with regard to the message: Revealing a secret to somebody crucially affects the secret, as well as the addressee, because the secret comes into the open.

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document is remarkably thorough and balanced in its coverage of the range of textual references to sexuality in the Bible, scientific research on human sexual behavior, the diversity of beliefs and attitudes within the Church itself. In the recently convened 72nd Convention, however, a resolution in support of same-sex marriage failed to pass. Yet, not only was the defeat of the resolution a narrow one, but the Church subsequently issued an apology to its lesbian and gay parishioners for its defeat (San Francisco *Bay Times*, August 7, 1997).

Similarly, if I confess my sins to somebody, my sins cease to be secret, they cease to be a burden on my soul, they may even be “wasted away” by an act of absolution. It is quite different with tell: Tell doesn’t imply that the message is secret, as reveal does, and it doesn’t imply that the message is a guilty one, as confess does. (Wierzbicka 1985:498)

This syntactic difference is attributed by Wierzbicka to the relative importance of the message in confessions and disclosures in comparison to the addressee, via the change in status of the message with the speech act.

In view of her analysis, coming out can be seen as having characteristics of all three speech acts: confession, revelation (i.e., disclosure), and telling. It is a confession insofar as what is confessed, usually a sin committed by the speaker or information about her that Goffman (1963) calls “discreditable,” sets the individual apart from the group. Once confessed, however, the imparted information changes the speaker (by unburdening her/his of her/his secret), the addressee (in terms of her/his state of knowledge), and creates a bond between the speaker and addressee (because they now share the speaker’s secret) (cf. also §1.10.1). In many cultures, any topic of a sexual nature, particularly one such as homosexuality, which violates expectations for what a normal (that is to say, normative) person is, renders any recognition of such a trait within oneself as something shameful and to be kept hidden. In other words, because confession conveys discreditable information, utterances of declarative sentences such as “I’m lesbian (or gay)” which do convey information about the speaker that could potentially lower the esteem of the speaker in the eyes of the listener give the impression that coming out can be categorized as a type of confession.

When a confession is made, what is confessed is typically revealed to designated institutional representatives (e.g., therapists, police interrogators, priests) who have the authority to absolve the individual and/or to preserve the social order. Contrastively, the act of coming out is potentially directed to everyone with whom the individual interacts. However, because the information conveyed (i.e., the speaker’s sexual identity) retains the cultural status of nonfree goods, coming out in that sense has the characteristics of a disclosure, rather than, or in addition to a simple telling.

Indeed, the act of coming out has the quality of a disclosure above and beyond the normal transformation of the secret which Wierzbicka specifies for the act of revealing. In coming out, a speaker not only says something about her/himself, but s/he also changes the meaning of homosexuality by coming out. A comparison of the act of coming out and a disclosure of what one does for a living may be illustrative. When an individual reveals that she is, for example, really a CIA agent, as with the confession, she changes the status of the information insofar as it is now shared. To the extent that the disclosed information might generate profound disbelief, surprise, or other reactions, “commonsense knowledge is capable of reintegrating it into the unproblematic sector of everyday life” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:25), even if the addressee has an only partial understanding of what a CIA agent does, or how one gets to become one. The occupation of CIA agent falls within the realm of possible social categories, no matter how far removed from the individual’s everyday experience, without violating the addressee’s worldview as a whole. When a speaker reveals that she is lesbian, she shares the information of her identification as a person with same-sex erotic attractions. As with the disclosure of the CIA agent, by coming out, the speaker invokes the concept (e.g., the addressee’s stereotype) of a lesbian (or gay) person, and changes that concept by instantiating the social role of lesbian (or gay) identity in such a way as may violate both the hearer’s stereotypical expectations of what a lesbian (or gay) person is as well as her expectations of the speaker’s heterosexuality. However, in activating the concept of homosexuality in the addressee’s mind, the speaker calls into question the addressee’s default view of society, whose organization is founded upon the heterosexual presumption. The addressee is forced to confront “a problem that transcends the boundaries of the reality of everyday life and points to an altogether different reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:25), namely one in which not all people, including one’s own acquaintances and intimates, can be assumed to be heterosexual, and in which traditional (i.e., heterosexual) notions of the couple must be rethought.

In conclusion, coming out is defined as not simply a type of assertion, but, additionally, as a speech act similar to a confession to the extent that it involves the disclosure of information that is socially problematic for the speaker, though is different from a confession since it is told to everyone, not just someone who will absolve the speaker. Moreover, it is like a disclosure because the information that the individual reveals has been kept secret and becomes shared once the disclosure has been made; yet it is unlike a disclosure since the message itself changes not only the relationship between the one disclosing and the recipient of the disclosure, but specifically the addressee's heterosexual worldview. Finally, to the extent that the individual is openly lesbian (or gay) and is comfortable with her (or his) sexuality, it is neither a confession nor a disclosure but rather a telling insofar as the speaker believes that her homosexuality is not discreditable information but merely an aspect of her self in much the same way as her ethnic, professional, regional, and other identifications are<sup>3</sup>.

### 3.2 The problem of unsayability

The most basic linguistic presentation of self is a speech act whereby a speaker states

(1) "I am \_\_\_\_\_."

the proposition of which is completed with either a noun phrase or adjective. The declarative form of the proposition is the grammatical correlate corresponding to what Searle (1979) calls an assertive. In informal terms, the utterance is felicitous (Austin 1962), if the speaker both believes and assumes that the hearer does not have the information expressed in the utterance. Thus, if the speaker believes that she is a lesbian, and assumes that her audience both does not know that she is lesbian and would not know unless she told them, uttering the declarative statement

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<sup>3</sup> Iván Kovács (personal communication) recounts the story of a student who came out to her class. One of her fellow students' responses was "Thanks for admitting that," to which the lesbian student replied, "I'm not *admitting*. I'm *telling*."

(2) “I’m lesbian (or gay)”

would be a successful, non-defective<sup>4</sup> illocutionary act of asserting.

However, this approach of enumerating the conditions for coming out raises several problems. For one thing, it is not clear, in speech act theory terms, why asserting this particular proposition would have a special designation, namely, “coming out,” while asserting others, such as “I’m female,” do not.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, as exemplified by the tellers in (3)(a) and (3)(b), although all of the conditions for producing utterance (2) are fulfilled (i.e., relative knowledge states of speaker and hearer, beliefs of the speaker, and “normal input and output conditions”), it is not knowledge of the words *gay* and *lesbian* which is at issue in whether or not (2) is or even can be uttered.

(3) (a) “I couldn’t get myself to say the *gay* word.”

(b) “Well, I fell in love with a woman, conscious that I was doing that when I was thirty-two, it was in Berkeley, but even at that point, I thought, ‘Oh, I’ve fallen in love with a woman. I didn’t categorize it as being lesbian although at other levels I knew that’s what it was. It wasn’t that I was appalled at being lesbian or opposed to it, I just didn’t leap to that conclusion or adopt that identity right away.”

For the speakers in (3), the difficulty appears to originate not from the unawareness of the words *gay* and *lesbian*, but, in the case of (3)(a), from the possibility that uttering the word *gay* would facilitate the formation of a severely problematic and dangerous proposition; and in the case of (3)(b), the problem is one of access.

So the speech act of coming out is one that can be but is often not uttered, or is uttered with great difficulty, and often with weeks, months, and sometimes years of

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<sup>4</sup> Searle (1969) uses the term “non-defective” to refer to successful illocutionary acts. The term used by Austin (1962) for the equivalent concept is “felicitous.”

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this raises doubts about Searle’s contention that his taxonomy of speech acts (Searle 1979) represents a universal set covering the possible range of speech acts appearing in any given language. His claim is based on the fact that each category within his taxonomy is based on currently existent speech act verbs. This guarantees however that speech acts for which there are no English counterparts are likely to fall by the wayside of Searle’s taxonomy.

deliberation before the actual act of identification (to one's self and to someone else) is carried through. In other words, the problem with the production of (2) appears to have to do with factors extrinsic to the necessary and sufficient conditions for uttering the speech act.

### 3.3 Factors influencing an act of coming out

Continuing to focus my discussion of coming out in terms of speech act theory in the hopes that it can provide the apparatus to explain why the statement "I'm lesbian (or gay)" is problematic, I now examine some properties of assertives that can lead to defects (and hence, nonsayability).

As mentioned, the felicity of an assertion depends not just on the rules for the illocutionary act of asserting; there are also other constraints. In his paper "On declaratives," Ross (1970) employs the methods and assumptions of transformational grammar in order to provide evidence for a performative main verb in the deep structures of declarative sentences. In other words, each declarative sentence, on the surface an independent clause is, according to Ross, actually a subordinate clause governed by a higher clause containing a performative verb, a noun phrase subject *I*, and a noun phrase indirect object *you*. What is relevant for the present analysis is one sentence, based on a sentence given in Ross (1970:234).

(4) I am lurking in a culvert to kill you.

From a syntactic perspective, the utterance in (4) when uttered with a first person subject is ungrammatical because "*lurk* is a verb which one may predicate of others, but not of oneself" (p. 234). Ross reasons that "*lurk* must be constrained so that it does not appear in deep structure where its subject is identical to the subject of the next higher verb in the

tree.” Positing a first person subject in a higher clause in the underlying deep structure would provide an explanation for why the grammaticality of sentences like (4) is dubious<sup>6</sup>.

Ross’s analysis can be extended beyond the realm of syntax by taking into account the theory of speech acts, which distinguishes between the illocutionary force of an utterance, and the proposition upon which the illocution operates. Utterance (4) is not sayable to the addressee because lurking describes an action carried out in stealth, without the knowledge of others. For the speaker to communicate to the addressee what s/he wants to keep secret from the addressee, namely her/his own behavior of lurking and her/his unsavory intention to kill the addressee, is self-contradictory and would be equivalent to saying “I state to you, thereby making you cognizant of the following fact: that I am lurking in a culvert, which is to say that I am engaging in behavior of which I do not want you to be cognizant, in order to kill you.” As an assertion by the speaker to her/his addressee, the utterance as a whole cannot be said without incurring the specified internal defect (unless the speaker “pretends” to address her/his hearer but just whispers to her/himself for the purpose of self-monitoring or releasing tension). More generally, in terms of speech act theory, an assertion can be defective due to an internal contradiction between the act of asserting (Searle’s *F*), and the proposition asserted (where Searle’s *p* contains a semantic feature in contradiction to one or more of the conditions defining the illocutionary act *F*). Other verbs with similar constraints include *stalk*, *prowl*, *lie in wait*, and *hide*.

As a class of utterances, discursive self-presentations of the form of (1) do not manifest this kind of defectiveness of internal inconsistency between the proposition and the assertion thereof. That is, the assertion that one is a lesbian and the proposition of one’s being a lesbian, or more succinctly, between one’s informing (Searle’s *F*), and one’s being (Searle’s *p*) poses none of the difficulties exhibited by (4).

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<sup>6</sup> The term *lurk* has come to mean, in the context of electronic mail groups, “to read without posting a message.” A sentence such as “I’ve been lurking (on this newsgroup) for a year now” is acceptable.

However, another reason that an assertion might be defective is due to what Searle (1969:141-149) terms the assertion fallacy. He posited the assertion fallacy because linguistic philosophers had made claims about concepts such as knowledge or voluntary action by looking at sentences in which words associated with those concepts are used. Thus, the argument goes, according to Searle, a statement such as “I remember how to speak English” (Searle 1969:141) is ostensibly a claim about the concept of remembering. Searle observes that these philosophers mistake

the conditions for the performance of the speech act of assertion with the analysis of the meaning of particular words occurring in certain assertions. (Searle 1969:141)

According to Searle’s analysis then, assertions of identity such as (5)

(5) “I’m female.”

are defective under normative face-to-face conditions because they state what is already apparent to speaker and addressee.

I believe that Searle’s argument, however, is flawed. That is, it is to assume that a word has meaning independent of its use. To assert in a given context that one is female is indeed to say something about what it means to be female in that context. If the speaker’s assertion appears merely to be stating the obvious, then the fact that the assertion does not inform (or informs at a metacommunicative level) does indicate something about the concept of female, namely, what the concept of femaleness is that prevails in the culture, of which the speaker presumes herself to be an instantiation, and presumes the hearer’s ability to arrive at a similar conclusion. The strangeness, if not defectiveness, of assertion (5) is nothing if not about the concept of gender itself, and its ubiquity and multiplicity of forms of expression. (However, with the increasing popularity of gender-bending self-presentations made possible through sex-change technologies, drag performances, fashion trends such as androgyny and lesbian chic, and the advent of computer-mediated, i.e., non-face-to-face communication, identifying one’s gender in light of these developments may not be as rare as it once was prior to the blurring of gender dichotomies.)

What Searle terms the assertion fallacy hinges on the “obviousness” of the context in which an illocutionary act of assertion is executed. The problem with Searle’s analysis is that he does not define what obviousness is, because he is uninterested in factoring social and cultural context into his understanding of speech acts. From the cultural anthropological perspective, what is obvious, or commonsensical, is what participants agree to be the default condition of individuals and their surroundings. These are often tacit, in the forms of assumptions and expectations.

### 3.4 The reportability of homosexual identity

Labov’s (1972a, 1972b, 1981) various discussions on evaluations, Linde’s (1987, 1993) notion of coherence systems, Tannen’s (1979b) concept of frame, all approach the issue of normativity from different angles, often taking the oral narrative as the object of analysis. Labov examines them in terms of the events that are worth reporting; Linde’s interest is in the organization of life stories, and what interlocutors consider to be reasonable reasons; while Tannen’s comparative analysis of oral narratives told by Greek and American women reveal expectations, regarding the function of storytelling, the narrative, and the selves that they present in telling, that divide themselves according to cultural affiliation (Tannen 1980). All of these approaches suggest a baseline notion of normativity. I will use Labov’s rubric to illustrate what I mean since the others are based to some extent on his.

Labov contends that the reportability of events recounted in a narrative is a social requirement that must be fulfilled. In other words, the speaker is obliged to justify taking up the floor for an extended period of time by relating events which are out of the ordinary, or by indicating how ordinary events lead or contribute to why the story is worth telling. As he puts it, “... do listeners accept this occupation of conversational time as justified? If the response to a narrative is ‘So what?’ or ‘What are you getting at?’, it must be considered a failure ... ” (Labov 1981:227). Although he concedes that it is

difficult to establish objective criteria in order to formulate a rigorous definition of reportability given its relativity to a given culture, one measure of whether an event is reportable is the kind of response elicited from the audience. Expressions of “ordinary surprise” (versus understanding) can be interpreted as indicating the telling of a reportable event.

Moreover, the reportability of a narrative is established throughout the story in the form of evaluatives. They can be explicitly stated, as in “Here’s the funny part,” or involve the use of detailed imagery, expressive phonology, etc. According to Labov, these are all ways to obviate the “So what?” response.

The question “So what?” is useful to the extent that it can also be taken as a test of normativity. It can illustrate, dialogically, the deviance of homosexuality and hence, the “naturalness” of heterosexuality. In the following exchange, if A believes that she is disclosing information to B of which B is unaware, and the following exchange takes place,

- (6)    A: I’m lesbian (or gay).  
          B: So what?

B’s reaction would indicate that A is guilty of providing information that was obvious, redundant, or expectable. The unreportability of A’s announcement would imply that the speaker’s homosexuality is unproblematic. In fact, coming out as a special form of self-presentation would have outlived its usefulness. A would then be required to justify why she felt compelled to make this uninformative contribution in the first place. Yet that this sort of exchange is routinely reported in coming out stories implies that it deviates from the expectations of the teller (and the audience). The reported exchange suggests that something other than an assertion - agreement/nonchalance/disinterest pair is the norm; namely, a more dramatic reaction on the part of B in view of the seriously problematic proposition expressed by A. Indeed, that any response to an act of coming out is reportable, whether positive, neutral, or negative, suggests that coming out itself is

problematic, both psychologically and socially<sup>7</sup>. The fact that a large part of lesbian and gay American culture has evolved around the peculiar speech act of coming out<sup>8</sup>, its preparatory conditions (see below), and its possible perlocutionary effects in itself indicates the non-normativity of what is conveyed through coming out, namely, lesbian and gay identity. Therefore, the newsworthiness of the exchange in (6) is suggestive of the newsworthiness of the utterance of (2) "I'm lesbian (or gay)," (although in actuality, (2) must be seen dialogically, as a contribution to a social interaction, and not in isolation).

Specifically, the utterance of (2) necessarily engenders often unpredictable perlocutionary effects which both the speaker (as her own hearer), from a psychological point of view, and the hearer, from a social point of view must contend with: How is the hearer going to take the news? And how is the speaker going to take the hearer's reaction both in view of the former's own ability to identify with it (especially if negative) and in view of the former's identification as lesbian (or gay)?

The utterance of (2) to the speaker's interlocutor affects the speaker through her anticipation and perception of her addressee's response to her utterance apart from the speaker's subjective experience of herself that she gains via reflection. In other words, even if, prior to uttering (2) to her interlocutor, she has already defined herself as lesbian (or gay), her (or his) experience of not only the other but also of herself (or himself) in social interaction is a factor in whether she (or he) can utter (2) or not.

Both of us hear what each says at virtually the same instant, which makes possible a continuous, synchronized, reciprocal access to our two subjectivities, an intersubjective closeness in the face-to-face situation that no other sign system can duplicate. What is

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<sup>7</sup> One website ([www.oasismag.com/issues/9608/storybill.htm](http://www.oasismag.com/issues/9608/storybill.htm)) consists only of a list of responses to the author's announcement of his homosexuality.

<sup>8</sup> An advocacy group for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, called the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), has organized a project revolving around the speech act of coming out. The National Coming Out Project organizes events such as National Coming Out Day to increase lesbian, gay, and bisexual visibility, conducts public education campaigns, and enlists the help of openly lesbian and gay celebrities to encourage lesbians, gays, and bisexuals to come out. The ideological impulse of such an organization is based on the widespread notion among lesbians and gays that "The act of coming out is political. Statistics show that those who know someone lesbian or gay are far more supportive of gay issues." and that "coming out is the single more important action that any of us can take to further the civil rights of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals." (<http://www.hrc.org>)

more, I hear *myself* as I speak; my own subjective meanings are made objectively and continuously available to me and *ipso facto* become “more real” to me. ... as I objectivate my own being by means of language, my own being becomes massively and continuously available to myself at the same time that it is so available to him, and I can spontaneously respond to it without the “interruption” of deliberate reflection. It can, therefore, be said that language makes “more real” my subjectivity not only to my conversation partner but also to myself. (Berger and Luckmann 1966:38)

Since language makes one’s “subjectivity ‘more real’” to both the speaker and listener, if the hearer rejects the speaker’s utterance through cessation of communication about it (e.g., by changing the subject, or by ending the relationship), then to that extent the speaker’s sense of herself as lesbian is “less real.” These perlocutionary effects (or social and psychological consequences) influence not merely the success of coming out and subsequent acts, but bear on whether the act of asserting one’s lesbian or gay identity can even be implemented.

What is at stake, therefore, and what speech act theory is not equipped to explain, is how any act of coming out (and indeed of communication) is a double-edged sword (cf. Scollon and Scollon 1995:38). The kind of person that the speaker wants to present (such as lesbian or gay) to her/his interlocutor conflicts with the imposition on the hearer that such a presentation entails. If we return to the conditions enumerated above for coming out in speech act theoretical terms (cf. §3.1 above), it is evident that such interpersonal factors are not significant considerations. While speech act theory can specify some of the conditions distinguishing an act of coming out from other similar speech acts (or genres<sup>9</sup>), and establish some criteria differentiating defective from non-defective acts, it cannot explain why both speakers and hearers have difficulty with the act of coming out nor can it identify what in particular the difficulty is. We can conclude, then, that the problems lesbians and gays have coming out to themselves and to others are inherent in more

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<sup>9</sup> I understand speech acts to be sentence-based, whose scope comprises a single proposition. In contrast, speech events are larger units, social activities that have a well-defined beginning and end within which speech acts and discourse genres are embedded. Because coming out involves a single proposition, I will treat it as a speech act even though in actual practice, the act of coming out may involve much more than the uttering of a single sentence, including other, subsidiary speech acts and discourse genres leading up to the actual disclosure. A speech genre, however, may have an overall function that corresponds to a “head speech act” within a culture (Ervin-Tripp, personal communication, in Gesuato 1997).

explicitly social factors, such as aspects of interpersonal identity, that may foster or discourage the sayability of (2).

### 3.5 Politeness and coming out

In western society, the topic of sex has a peculiar social status in conversation. On the one hand, sex is normally taboo and a topic around which all individuals are enjoined (through convention) to exercise restraint. As far as the topic of sex is concerned, distance politeness is in effect. When a speaker makes mention of her/his sexual orientation (by coming out), s/he raises the subject of sex and places pressure on the hearer to respond to the broaching of an uncomfortable topic. Hence, coming out is a threat to the addressee's negative face (or her/his desire not to be imposed on). But in addition, by failing to exercise restraint, a speaker who comes out also signals her/his indifference to her/his addressee's positive face when s/he alludes to her/his same-sex emotions and thereby broaches taboo topics such as sexual orientation. So the coming out speech act is a face threatening act, performed baldly without redress, that intrinsically violates both positive and negative face of the addressee. Furthermore, the close resemblance of the speech act of coming out to a confession is potentially damaging to the speaker's positive face given that its content can result in a (temporary) loss of ingroup membership and the privileges associated with it (e.g., parents' financial support). The only face need served by coming out is the speaker's own negative face, or "his basic want to maintain claims of territory and self-determination" (Brown and Levinson 1978:75).

### 3.6 Heterosexuality as mitigated face threats

One problem with the sayability of the utterance "I'm lesbian (or gay)" is that the words are suggestive for straights exclusively of the sexual practices of lesbians and gays, whereas for lesbians and gays, they are also a means of identification with the group. The

distinction is analogous to the difference in the terms “deaf”<sup>10</sup> and “Deaf.” Outsiders (i.e. hearing individuals) assume that those who are hearing-impaired are identified solely by their deafness (or deviance from the normative hearing culture), while those who identify as Deaf see themselves as a member of a culture with its own language, discourse genres, and shared understandings and experiences (Rutherford 1983, 1985, 1988). Likewise, when lesbians and gays identify their sexual orientation to outsiders (i.e., heterosexuals), they are perceived as making a statement about their sexual practices rather than indicating their membership within a subculture consisting of the shared experiences and understandings, and the ways of dealing with the specific problems of being lesbian or gay in a heteronormative culture.

The relationship between lesbian (or gay) speaker intention in the issuing of an utterance of “I’m lesbian (or gay)” and straight listener understanding can be further clarified by considering the heteronormativity, or perhaps, hegemony of heterosexual relations within western society. When a heterosexual woman says that she is going to get married, the reaction is usually one of celebration and congratulations. The act of sexual intercourse entailed by her announcement, or the fact that she is entering into, to put it bluntly, “a sexual contract (for the exclusive use of a spouse’s genitals)” (Woods 1993:66), is sanitized. Because western society has built itself around different-sex sexual relations, it has established ways of thinking about them via its ritual and institutional practices. Reference to these different-sex sexual relationships can be accomplished metonymically using a variety of technical and euphemistic terms, without having to stress their sexual basis. For example, mention of events even as innocuous as the birthday party of one’s offspring or the filing of a joint tax return implicates the act of copulation, yet are not infractions against distance politeness. There exist terms for heterosexual sexual

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<sup>10</sup> Those who are hearing-impaired but are not members of Deaf culture may identify other bases for group membership.

intercourse itself, independently of the institutions that validate them, that vary in the degree to which they impose on the listener.

Meanwhile lesbians and gays cannot produce utterances such as (2) “I am lesbian (or gay)”, that is, statements of their sexual orientation, at least to most heterosexuals, without violating politeness strictures. There are few, if any, common euphemisms for same-sex emotional and erotic relations (other than allusions that only lesbians and gays can decode)<sup>11</sup>. In the absence of culturally-recognized institutions acknowledging and supporting homosexual relationships within legal, economic, and kinship systems, attention cannot be diverted away from the sexual aspect of homosexual relations through analogous sorts of metonymic or synecdochic relationships as are possible for heterosexual relations. Instead, any disclosure of one’s lesbianism or gayness is viewed by heterosexuals exclusively in sexual terms. This poses a difficulty for the ability of lesbians and gays to assert (2). The confusion implied in Miss Manners’ statement is illustrative not merely of how straights see an affirmation of one’s homosexuality but of the ambiguity of the concept of sexual practice and social role: the issue of being gay is “so extremely private” because, as suggested by Miss Manners’ reply, it has to do with one’s sexual practices. The advice seeker, however, had simply inquired about the propriety of disclosing her friends’ sexual orientation (or social role), not of describing their sexual practices per se to which she presumably has no access anyway<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, while the term *homosexuality*, which was coined by a German physician in the mid-nineteenth century, is normally avoided by lesbians and gays when self-identifying because of its overly clinical connotation, it is used by proponents of the Religious Right, and other individuals for whom heterosexuality is clearly normative, to refer to same-sex sexuality. The use of this term is partly, one presumes, in conformity with distant politeness strictures (to the extent that such conformity is possible when mentioning same sex erotic relationships), but also perhaps to distance the concept from themselves, as ostensibly distasteful as it is to them (cf. Lakoff 1973b).

<sup>12</sup> In a sense, the distinction made by lesbians and gays, exemplified in a letter to the editor written by Vito Russo (Russo, in Woods 1993:290) to the *Village Voice* (April 24, 1990, p. 4), is one that, from the perspective of anti-homosexual groups, is irrelevant. ANY talk about sex is problematic, whether it’s sexual orientation or one’s sexual practices, whether for the individual who is in the process of coming out or the one who is the recipient of such an act.

## Chapter 4

### Coming out self-help literature



#### 4.0 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the discourse properties of American advice literature on coming out, using politeness as a parameter. More specifically, I identify and characterize the function of linguistic features that I use to describe the sample of coming out self-help literature; and develop a hypothesis about plausible connections between the textual practices evident in the advice literature and the cultural background they're a product of.

My claim is that coming out self-help literature is not only therapeutic insofar as it reduces the lesbian or gay reader's isolation, but, on the one hand, it also upholds an ideology about what constitutes (1) truth; (2) legitimate uses of language; and (3) a good person (and what her/his relationship is to the group), that underlies all coming out self-help texts, and, on the other hand, the texts serve to enculturate the reader into that ideology. As a type of therapeutic discourse, coming out self-help literature is based on the kind of communication that occurs in psychotherapy, and simulates face-to-face communication, and the therapist's empathic understanding and non-judgmental attitude. To the extent that the client/reader's problem is seen to originate from within, personal change is achieved by helping the client/reader to verbalize emotions of which s/he was previously unaware. However, in therapy, the therapist may move beyond paraphrasing

the client's utterances and, instead, begin to interpret them. At this point, the line between therapy and enculturation (into the values represented by the therapist) becomes blurred. As we shall see through the analysis of the linguistic instantiations of politeness strategies, coming out self-help literature does indeed go beyond mere empathic recognition of the lesbian and gay readers' problems, and asserts norms of behavior by assigning moral values to behavior with respect to those norms and appealing to the reader's emotions.

The order in which I will analyze the texts are as follows: PFLAG's "Read this before coming out to your parents"; Laura Siegel's "How to come out—correctly"; an excerpt from *Coming out: An act of love*; an excerpt from *Outing yourself: How to come out as lesbian or gay to your family, friends, and coworkers*; and an excerpt each from the Human Rights Campaign's "Resource Guide on Coming Out," and the University of Florida's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual switchboard messages on coming out. The first two were written by parents for lesbians and gays who intended to come out to their parents. The last four were written by gays for gays.

#### 4.1 Analysis of PFLAG's "Read This Before Coming Out To Your Parents"

The first text to be considered is a pamphlet disseminated by an organization called Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) called "Read This Before Coming Out To Your Parents" (in Appendix A). The pamphlet describes the ideal conditions for an act of coming out directed to parental addressees in particular (though it applies to other recipients as well), and outlines the range of likely perlocutionary effects and how the reader should handle them.

##### 4.1.1 Overview of the pamphlet

Upon first glance of the pamphlet, most notable is how comprehensive it is. It gives (1) an overview: KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT; (2) a set of question-answer pairs to help the reader determine whether she has achieved the requisite state of mind for

coming out: QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF, (3) an outline of the parents' experience: THEY'LL EXPERIENCE LOSS; and (4) the emotional stages that parents can be expected to undergo: STAGE 1: SHOCK, STAGE 2: DENIAL, STAGE 3: GUILT, STAGE 4: FEELINGS EXPRESSED, STAGE 5: MAKING DECISIONS, STAGE 6: TRUE ACCEPTANCE. Under each of the section headings above (designated in upper case) are subheadings, followed by detailed descriptions associated with the subheadings. The clear linear development of topics, the chunking up of topics into subtopics, and the detailed descriptions which specify what the reader should expect and what she should do in response serve the reader's positive face by creating a reader-friendly document, thereby treating her as "a person whose wants ... are known and liked" (Brown and Levinson 1978:75). This is in contrast to cultures where the direct and literal specification of behaviors would be deemed insulting and invasive to the listener/reader because, among other things, it assumes the listener/reader cannot think or act for herself<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 Conventionalized intimacy

This publication builds up a relationship of closeness between the writer of the pamphlet and the reader that is signalled in the first line, "Read this before coming out to your parents," which sets the conversational tone through its direct or implied references to the reader as "you," and "your parents," and the shared deictic reference of "this" to the pamphlet.

In the first section, the headers alone contain devices that assert familiarity and common ground between reader and writer. For instance, shared parts of phrases are elided; yet it is expected that the reader can decode the implicit referents: [your]

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<sup>1</sup> Gesuato (1997) has observed that a difference in American and Italian texts is that American ones provide information that can be ascribed to common sense, or at least that can be discovered with a little effort, while Italians assume a level of resourcefulness on the part of the individual. Scollon and Scollon (1995) observe how this difference is manifested in business transactions between American and Chinese businesspersons through the negative impressions that one group acquires of the other. For instance, the American tendency to spell everything out is viewed as insulting by the Chinese who operate on a distance/deference system where many assumptions may be taken for granted.

**KNOWING WHAT TO EXPECT [from your parents], Most [parents] Follow Typical Stages, They [i.e. parents] Go Through Stages Differently.** The first subsection titled **Most Follow Typical Stages** is also explicit in specifying the purpose of the pamphlet, the assumptions about the reader (that she has “wrestled with the issue of whether or not to come out” to her parents) and her parents (that “one or both ... will be understanding, if not supportive, given adequate time”), whom the pamphlet may not be helpful for (if the reader has “serious reservations about their ability to cope and ... suspect[s] they could sever their relationship” with him/her). The second subsection, **They Go Through Stages Differently**, presents the reader with a caveat, namely that she should not expect the pamphlet to specify precisely her own parents’ reactions to her coming out, but that it can serve as a rough guide to help the reader know what to expect. “Differently” also acknowledges the uniqueness of the reader and her family, and in doing so, fulfills the reader’s negative face need (i.e., she and her family are not completely predictable). Stating explicitly the intent of the pamphlet and the reader to whom it applies comprises, once again, positive politeness insofar as it protects the lesbian or gay reader from making the mistake of coming out to her or his parents in case some or all of the assumptions fail to hold in the reader’s case .

The second section, **QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF**, is followed by an explanatory subtitle, **Be Clear in Your Own Mind**. The section consists of a series of questions that serve as criteria to be fulfilled by the reader before she comes out to her parents. Again, positive face is served because the purpose of these questions is to enable the reader to (a) present a persuasive case for the coming out (1. *Are you sure about your sexual orientation?*, 2. *Are you comfortable with your gay sexuality?*, 4. *Are you knowledgeable about homosexuality?*), (b) minimize any psychological damage in case of parents’ negative reactions (3. *Do you have support?*, 9. *Are you financially dependent on your parents?*), (c) anticipate their reaction (5. *What’s the emotional climate at home?*, 8. *Do you have available resources?*, 10. *What is your general relationship with your*

*parents?*, 11. *What is their moral societal view?*), and (d) establish the proper state of mind on the part of the reader (6. *Can you be patient?*, 12. *Is this your decision?*).

In addition, references to the reader using the second person, in both the section header title and subheader title, are devices involving the reader. The questions are posed as though the writer were asking the reader (e.g., *Are you sure about your sexual orientation?*). The use of the imperative in the subtitle and in the responses (e.g., “Don’t raise the issue. . . ,” “Have available at least one. . . ,” “Don’t be pressured. . . ”), also establish connectedness with the reader. Statements such as “Confusion on your part will increase your parents’ confusion and decrease their confidence in your judgment” violate the reader’s negative face by defining how the speaker’s behavior will lead to predictable results. However, since they are meant to preclude counterproductive behavior on the reader’s part, they also show concern for the reader.

The third section, **THEY’LL EXPERIENCE LOSS**, is divided into three subsections: **Parents and Children Switch Roles**, **Separation and Loss**, **Not An Absolute Progression**, and **A Traumatic Discovery**. Again, many of the same involvement devices are used as occur throughout the pamphlet. The elided forms evoke shared knowledge (e.g., **Separation and Loss** of children, rather than of parents). Pronominal referents such as “they” in the section title refers to the reader’s parents, and conveys the sense that the writer and reader are the participants in a conversation about “them”, i.e., the parents. Contracted forms (“they’ll,” “you’ll,” “you’ve”) signal the informality between writer and reader. Indexical expressions reinforce the relevance of the writer’s statements to the reader. For example, phrases such as “your experience” are used as though their referents were shared by both the writer and the reader, and, to the extent that the writer understands a range of coming out experiences, such referents are indeed shared. The appearance of the present perfect (e.g., “...you’ve been working on this issue for years!”) presupposes that up until the time of the reader’s reading, there has been an internal process of thinking through the reader’s sexuality, and places the reader at

the center of reference. Other uses of tense serve positive face by demonstrating to the reader that her experiences are neither unusual nor, therefore, uncontrollable. The habitual present tense grounds (that is, interprets) the experiences of the reader and her parents as part of a typical set of events (e.g., “Many families take the news as a temporary loss, etc.”). The future tense functions as a way of expressing likely outcomes following the disclosure (e.g., “It will be easy for you to become impatient”). Since parental reactions are to some extent predictable, the reader can acquire some sense (with the help of the writer) of what to do. They involve the reader insofar as they require a response from her either in the form of a verbal reply or the course of action the reader should take.

In the next subsection on **Separation and Loss**, the experience of the parents upon receiving their child’s disclosure, an authority (presumably a psychologist) is cited to support the point that coming out provokes the same kinds of reactions in parents as the death of their child. The citation of an authority is impositional, and violates the speaker’s negative face in that it is implied that she wouldn’t believe the writer without such authority. But the comparison of the reader’s coming out with her death also makes the experience of grief that her parents might experience more vivid. The reader is then equipped to handle her parents’ reaction with more understanding. This subsection also introduces the first use of a first-person pronoun. The first-person reference to the writer and his personal experience as recipient of their son’s coming out enhances the impression that someone is personally addressing the reader. Furthermore, the writer is also someone like the reader’s parents, and therefore, someone whose experiences that the reader can trust and use as a guide for how their own parents might react.

The following subsection, **Not An Absolute Progression**, contains no reference to the reader. Rather, the statements consist of general references to “parents” and “their child.” The effect achieved is that of slight distance between the writer and the reader for

the purpose of explaining in general terms why parents behave the way they do when their children come out.

In the last subsection, the reader's coming out is described from the parents' perspective as "a traumatic discovery," thereby alienating the reader by characterizing her actions as engendering undesirable effects. But this is once again mitigated with reassurance that "the relationship [between parent and child] can be restored" and can even "improve" because "it's based on mutual honesty." Ultimately, the reader's coming out is seen in a positive light. Another point that is noteworthy is the use of "they" to refer to parents in general, as in the previous section (e.g., "Most parents think they know, etc."), and to the reader's parents, as in the present section, **A Traumatic Discovery** (e.g., "They sense the separation -- which you've probably been aware of for years -- for the first time."). The polysemy of "they" situates the specific situation of the reader within the larger more universal context.

I have just enumerated some of the strategies used in the pamphlet that reflect evidence of adherence to the principle, "Be friendly," that is operative in many parts of American society, without which the pamphlet would not exist in its present form (if at all). An outgrowth of this orientation toward "friendliness" is what Plummer (1995) views as the therapeutic orientation (Plummer 1995) of American culture, by which he means that individuals can fix problems that occur in their relationships (e.g., by consulting a psychotherapist) (cf. also the discussion in §1.13). Because nearly two thirds of the brochure deals specifically with the emotional stages that parents are expected to go through when their child discloses her/his sexuality, and because the reader is advised on how to respond to each of these stages, I will consider the stages in a separate section, contextualizing them within a discussion on therapeutic discourse.

#### 4.1.3 The PFLAG pamphlet as therapeutic discourse

We have already had ample evidence of how the PFLAG pamphlet employs politeness strategies that acknowledge both the uniqueness of the reader (thereby serving her need for independence) and her similarity to others (thereby serving her need for involvement). The overall tone of camaraderie inherent in these strategies is suggestive of the therapeutic function of the text. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, three main characteristics of psychotherapy are: (1) empathic communication; (2) clear and direct expression of feelings; and (3) an enculturation process that fosters (1) and (2). For this part of the discussion, I will focus on the last quarter of the pamphlet which describes each of the six “typical stages” that parents may go through.

The main thrust of this section is to describe a given emotional stage, including the ways in which parents may manifest and experience it, and then suggest ways that the reader may respond when their own parents exhibit the emotions in question. To personalize and lend weight to his points, the writer may provide some examples from his own experience.

#### 4.1.3.1 Empathy for the reader

Lakoff (1990) has discussed the various forms that develop as the relationship between the therapist and client become more intimate. As meanings become shared, references become less explicit. I have already provided some examples, such as the use of elided forms, the mentioning of new referents as though they the reader and writer already shared a history, the use of pronominal forms to give the impression that the writer and reader are engaged in a conversation about the reader’s parents. These create intimacy between the reader and writer insofar as they give the impression that both the reader and writer are collaborating on the problem of how to deal with the parents’ reactions when the reader comes out to them. In other words, the writer appears to be displaying empathy for the reader.

The empathy that is characteristic of psychotherapy is found throughout the descriptions of the six states. Generalizations (e.g., “Shock is a natural reaction that we all experience (and need for a while) to avoid acute distress and unpleasantness.”) remind the reader that it is a coping mechanism to be anticipated and that therefore, the reader should not be alarmed when confronted with such a reaction from her parents. Reassurances that imply a happy ending also manifest empathy for the reader (e.g., “Although they may not initially respond positively to your profession of love, it will penetrate in the hours when they are alone and thinking about it.”). Finally, anticipating the reader’s feelings is also an indication of the use of empathic language (e.g., “This [i.e., role reversal between you and your parents] will not be easy. You’ll want them to understand and grasp this important part of your life right away.”). These kinds of statements anticipate and acknowledge the reader’s emotions.

#### **4.1.3.2 Empathy for the reader’s parents**

As I have mentioned previously, psychotherapy is in large part a language-learning process, whereby the client learns to verbalize her/his own feelings, and to recognize that others have the right to verbalize theirs. Likewise, the reader of the PFLAG pamphlet must know what to say when verbalizing her/his feelings, and be able to recognize the other’s emotions so that s/he can respond appropriately (i.e., empathically). What is striking about these six sections outlining the emotional “progression” is how the writer, in presenting solutions to the reader, leaves very little room for the reader’s imagination to devise solutions for her/himself on how to handle her/his parents’ reactions. S/he is given very explicit instructions on what to say (e.g., “You can help them by explaining that although homosexuality is not the norm, it is what is natural to you. Point out that all of creation has exceptions to the norm; while most people are right-handed, some are left-handed; although most people have two eyes of the same color, some have a different color in each eye.”). Direct quotes are even proffered (e.g., “Gently raise the subject

when they appear relaxed: ‘Dad, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about this for years; please don’t push me out of your life. I can no longer bear the burden of lying to you. I love you and want you to continue to love me in return.’”). Thus, the communicative behavior that is “taught” (or perhaps more precisely, spoonfed) to the reader by the writer is direct self-expression of feelings and thoughts that also recognizes and is responsive to the reader’s parents’ emotions.

But in order to communicate appropriately, the reader needs to know how to detect nuances in emotions based on language.

Denial responses take many forms: hostility (“No son of mine is going to be queer.”), non-registering (“That’s nice, dear, what do you want for dinner?”), non-caring (“If you choose that lifestyle, I don’t want to hear about it.”), or rejection (“It’s just a phase; you’ll get over it.”).

In the description of the origin of a reaction of shock, how long it might last, and what motivates it, the reader is urged implicitly to monitor her/his parents’ responses so that s/he can respond appropriately (i.e., as defined by the writer). When describing possible negative reactions, the writer reveals a perspective that is characterized by the fine-tuned attention to the parents’ emotions that is expected of the reader (i.e., “An initial state of shock can be anticipated if you suspect that your parents have no idea what you’re about to share. It may last anywhere from ten minutes to a week; usually it wears off in a few days”). In another part of the pamphlet, loss is framed in terms of an internal experience of grief or separation (“Just as in grief, the first reaction of parents of gays and lesbians centers around separation and loss.”).

#### 4.1.3.3 Finding the words

So it is not surprising that not only is the reader taught to assess her/his own preparedness for coming out to her/his parents (through a diagnostic series of questions and answers), and to recognize her/his parents’ responses (through tell-tale signs that can be categorized appropriately), but for each of the problematic responses that a parent may

have upon receiving the news, the reader is given what are virtually word-for-word scripts.

The writer appears to advocate that the reader begin her/his explanations and reassurances to immediately minimize the response of shock ("Explain, etc."). The writer gives the reader instructions not only on what to say, but in one case, the number of times to say it ("Affirm you love for them. Say it more than once."), without regard to the give-and-take of conversation. The perspective is that of direct identification with the individual expressing her/his feelings.

Finally, the reader is urged to tell her/his parents that s/he has not changed ("Remind them that you are the same person that you were yesterday: 'You loved me yesterday, before I told; I haven't changed since then. I'm the same person today that I was yesterday.'"). Once again, the writer reflects his support for the individual and her/his perspective and honesty across interactions.

The presence of the characteristics described above in the PFLAG publication reflects the politeness system that prevails in American culture, namely that of intimacy and camaraderie, where the attitude is one of concern for the reader and her/his addressees (by which it serves the speaker's positive face needs insofar as it involves people important to the speaker). Further, the comparison supports the therapeutic orientation on the individual's right and need to self-expression.

#### 4.1.4 Moral evaluations of parents

The main presupposition of the PFLAG pamphlet then is that the act of coming out is appropriate, though not unproblematic, for the realization of the individual and therefore for growth in her relationships with others, specifically her parents. The speaker's sexuality is referred to as "this important part of your life" and a "reality." And the disclosure is referred to as "sharing," and is said to lead to an improved parent-child relationship because it is based on "mutual honesty and trust." The use of this language

suggests the ideology that (1) relationships are enriched when based on certain kinds of “truth”; (2) that the truth includes one’s (homo)sexual orientation; (3) that one’s relationships with one’s parents are significant; and (4) that if feasible, one ought to share one’s sexual orientation with one’s parents in order to strengthen parent-child bonds. In other words, those relationships are valued that are intimate and based on shared knowledge about oneself, and on attention to positive face. Indeed, the reader is told to “explain that you haven’t been able to be completely honest with [your parents] and you don’t like the *distance* that has occurred over the years” (my italics). Failing to “share” the “truth” about one’s self drives a wedge between the disclosing child and the receiving parent.

Only if the anticipated consequences are dire (e.g., the reader has “serious reservations about their ability to cope and you suspect that they could sever their relationship with you”) or if the reader’s motivation for coming out is due to someone else’s decision or done out of spite is the reader advised not to come out. Otherwise, the act itself is not intrinsically held to be undesirable. In fact, despite the social disruption that the act of coming out is anticipated to cause, it is the reader and her ability to produce this act that are being advocated, and the parents’ reactions, or the perlocutionary effects, that are viewed as problematic, even though it is the speech act that engenders the problematic perlocutions. Indeed, a comparison between how the parents are portrayed versus how the reader is is revealing.

The parent is framed as the one in need, the one requiring “latitude”. Parents are assumed to experience “confusion,” to react “based on a lifetime of information from a homophobic society” whereas the reader has access to “reliable information and research.” The parent is portrayed as someone who is not expected to know the real truth about homosexuality because it “is a subject most non-gay people know little about.”

The therapeutic orientation that advocates the speech act of coming out also applies to the parent insofar as the reader is recommended to give her/his parents “time to

express their feelings and make progress toward new insights.” This approach to communication derives from an individualistically oriented psychology, where individuals may express their true feelings but must also, in reciprocity, accept the right of others to self-expression. In other words, the reader must be prepared to face, nonjudgmentally and patiently, the feelings of her/his parents once s/he discloses the news. S/he must expect that her parents’ “emotional reactions will get in the way of intellectual understandings.” Because the reader is “ahead of” her/his parents in this respect, s/he must (like a therapist) not only be patient but, if necessary, repeat information that the parents may not hear or want to understand. S/he must realize that “their understanding will evolve slowly -- painfully slowly -- at the beginning” in order to reach the desired goal of acceptance. The “most productive dialogue” comes when “parents are ready to ask questions, listen to answers and acknowledge their feelings.” When they finally begin “to express their feelings,” they are “on the road to recovery.” Thus their guilt, self-incrimination, denial are all viewed as sickness, while expression of feelings is a sign of health.

Parents, however, are also subject to blame, if they do not accept their gay child and her/his “truth”. The unaccepting parent, that is, the one who denies the right of the child to self-expression, does not “progress” “due to self-pity” or, when they feel guilty, “they are self-centered” and “too wrapped up in themselves to attend to your concerns.” In other words, if the parents insist on maintaining their own views instead of accepting their child’s homosexuality, they are selfish, concerned with their own negative face needs (with, that is, not being imposed on by their child’s breach of social propriety) at the expense of their child’s positive face (or acceptance of the child’s sexuality). The goal of acceptance is a sign of attention to their child’s positive face. As mentioned, there is no question that the child’s disclosure is anything but a sign of love for the parents (e.g., “Affirm your love for them, etc.”).

The second text that I will examine is also written by a parent directing gay and lesbian children how to come out to their parents.

#### 4.2 Laura Siegel's "How To Come Out - Correctly"

This article was an op-ed piece written in 1993 for a gay newspaper called the *Bay Area Reporter*, published in the San Francisco Bay Area. The article contains many linguistic instantiations of close involvement with and interest in the reader in terms of content and form. Many of the positive politeness strategies are used to stress shared background or values. The title gives the impression of being a guide to coming out, and therefore implies that the intended addressee is someone who is lesbian or gay. The apparent afterthought "Correctly," so indicated by the punctuation (m-dash), has a slightly humorous effect because it is stated categorically, and preenvisioned the parental attitude adopted by the writer in the article. Those familiar with the coming out advice literature know that coming out advice guides do not, in theory, prescribe a "correct" way to come out. By making the assumption that the reader can detect the humor, the writer claims common ground with the reader.

The single sentence constituting the first paragraph informs the reader of the date on which National Coming Out Day occurs, and what transpires on that day. The one sentence states: "October 11th is National Coming Out Day, when gays and lesbians are encouraged to tell someone the truth." The sentence itself is informative, and makes few assumptions about the reader's knowledge of the significance of October 11 or of National Coming Out Day. Although there is a high probability that the reader of the article is lesbian or gay—the newspaper in which the article appeared is, after all, directed to a gay audience—reference is made to "gays and lesbians" rather than to "you," the lesbian and gay audience. So the paragraph, indeed, the article, begins by informing the reader without claiming any social closeness to her/him. Toward the end of the sentence, however, where "the truth" is mentioned, the definite article signals the presence of ellipsis, or the shared belief that one's sexual orientation is the truth, or, "the truth [about the speaker's homosexuality]." Additionally, the topic of "coming out" itself is one that is

relevant to individuals' personal lives, and relevant to the reader, who is undoubtedly lesbian or gay. So a mixture of positive and negative politeness strategies appears to be operative thus far in the article.

The second paragraph in the article reports on a statement made by Congressman Gerry Studds at a PFLAG convention about a hypothetical situation in which all lesbians and gays come out and thereby end "this struggle." Once again, there are detailed descriptions that make no personal appeal to the reader, and require few shared assumptions. The reference to Gerry Studds specifies, as is the convention in news articles, his party affiliation and the state of which he is representative. The mention of the Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is accompanied parenthetically by the acronym, PFLAG, which introduces the reader to a commonly used designation of the organization. The quoted rather than reported statement, "If at 12 o'clock tomorrow, every gay and lesbian person in this company stood up for 2 minutes - in the army, in the Navy, Marines and the Coast Guard, in the House, in the Senate - every doctor, every lawyer, every teacher, every carpenter, every clergyman, then this struggle would be over," although exemplifying the outcome of a positive politeness strategy that lends authenticity and vividness to the report, is a typical journalistic practice. However, there are two levels at which the inclusion of the quote can be seen to be an instance of positive politeness to establish a relationship of camaraderie with the lesbian and gay readers. First, it is likely that most lesbian and gay readers have heard and/or believe the statement. One common belief among lesbians and gays is that the more people come out, the greater the likelihood that misconceptions about homosexuality will cease to exist, and along with that, discrimination, homophobia, and heterosexism. Thus, the quote serves as a reminder of the benefits of coming out. Second, it is therefore a "safe topic," something upon which most lesbians and gays can agree. It is another way of claiming common ground between the writer and the lesbian or gay reader, upon which the writer can base her message. Furthermore, the quoted passage contains a reference to "this struggle." The use of the

proximal demonstrative pronoun “this” presumes that the quoted speaker’s audience, along with the writer, who leaves the entity to which “this” refers unexplained, share with the speaker the same perspective with respect to the intended referent (e.g., “this struggle [for the right to love, against homophobia, against discrimination]”).

The relationship that the writer tries to establish is analogous to that between parent and child. The writer refers explicitly to the reader’s parents (“your parents” “your mom and dad”), makes generalizations about parents (“parents are not stupid”), uses the first person plural pronoun exclusively (“many of us” “we lack the knowledge, etc.” “we don’t know” “no one has told us” “our child”) and contrasts parents with the reader, consequently constructing the reader as a child. The writer reinforces her own role as parent by using relational terms rather than proper nouns (“my son”), mentioning authoritative sources of information on childrearing (“our pediatrician” “our child’s kindergarten teacher” “Parent’s Magazine” “Dr. Spock”).

She tells several anecdotes that exemplify the typical and ineffectual (according to the writer) methods that children use to come out to their parents. The purpose of the stories is to show that the writer is taking the reader’s interests into account by making her point interesting to the reader. In the first story in which she describes how her son comes out to her, she breaks off from the narrative by turning to the reader, responding to the reader’s presumed challenge to her claim that parents in general, including herself, are unable to interpret coming out hints (“OK, so I lied! I did guess he was gay.”). She also quotes her son (““You’ve know for awhile, right?” he asked me.’), and then directs her response to her son’s utterance to the reader (“But I hadn’t. How would I know?”).

In the second story she tells about her son, her son is reported to have “come out” to his father taking a circuitous route home through the gay part of San Francisco. The slightly humorous effect is achieved through (1) the shared understanding that the Castro is a district in San Francisco known for its high concentration of gay residents and businesses, (2) the use of the direct quote to represent the certainty with which the

writer's son believed that he had come out; and (3) the fact that even the lesbian or gay reader is likely to agree with the writer that a mere drive through the Castro is not an effective way of coming out, but also (4) the lesbian or gay reader's ability to identify with the writer's son.

She also gives a hypothetical example of a lesbian insisting that her parents must know given that she has never dated a man. Again, the writer responds to the lesbian's utterance by turning away from the story and explaining that none of the childrearing authorities addressed the issue of a homosexual child; hence, parents cannot be held to interpreting instances of self-disclosures done indirectly.

The last story revolves around a speaker's reference to his lover as "the man I'm living with." Here she leaves it to the reader to infer that even this slightly more explicit description is insufficient to get the message of the speaker's homosexuality across to his parent.

The writer's point in each of these stories, to be clear and direct when coming out, is made more salient to the reader by being presented through the experience of a person who resembles someone (i.e., the reader's parent) familiar to the reader, and who describes the behavior of someone (i.e., the writer's gay child) like the reader her/himself.

#### 4.2.1 Culturally shared values

Indeed, the most remarkable characteristic of this article is the positive value placed on clear, unambiguous, direct communication, which is a major characteristic of camaraderie politeness, and of the cultural ideology of language use. The emphasis on the exhortation "PLEASE, PLEASE, BE CLEAR" signalled by the upper case letters is a dramatic expression of the writer's feeling of urgency about how the reader should come out to her/his parents, and highlights the importance of clear communication. Being clear means "telling the truth" and doing so "simply and honestly." The words used by the writer, "truth," "proudly," "simply," "honestly," assigns positive values to the

communicative behavior she advocates. In several other instances, she characterizes coming out, that is, telling the truth about oneself, as a “gift,” which, with respect to the reader, can enhance her/his “integrity and self-worth”; with respect to “the world” can be educational (“open eyes”) and transformative (“create change”); and with respect to family, can “open lines of communication” in order to “promote a loving family relationship.” Therefore, in addition to being a morally proper act in and of itself, coming out *qua* telling the truth also brings about desirable consequences.

The proposition that telling the truth leads ultimately to an improvement in parent-child relationships is reinforced by the presupposition made by the writer that the reader will actually self-disclose to her/his parents. The use of the definite article in “the step” found in “If you are ready to take the step and come out to your parents,” reveals the presupposition that such a “step” exists, and that telling one’s parents is an expectable and reasonable event. And a clause in her final statement, “whether you choose October 11th to tell your mom and dad or some other day” presupposes that coming out to parents will eventually take place.

Another cultural value that is evident in the article and assumed to be shared by the writer and the reader is that parents are usually unaware of many aspects of their children’s lives, and that therefore, clear communication on the part of children is warranted. Parents “lack the knowledge, the expectations, and the crystal ball,” because no authority on childrearing, “Not our pediatrician. Not our child’s kindergarten teacher. Not *Parents* magazine. Not Dr. Spock,” had ever discussed homosexuality. And, presumably, parents themselves are not usually lesbian or gay. Therefore, parents should not be expected to know about homosexuality, least of all, their child’s. Since parents do not share the same assumption as their gay children with respect to the issue of homosexuality in general and their own child’s homosexuality in particular, gay children must be clear when coming out. The objective, then, is for the gay or lesbian reader to get an unambiguous, interpretable message across to their parent.

The reasonableness of the writer's message regarding clear, direct communication depends on the shared assumptions that revealing one's sexual orientation to parents is a problem of how it is conveyed (the individual hints rather than speaks directly) instead of a problem of what is conveyed, and that the problem can be solved by a change in the individual's behavior. The writer does posit a condition ("if you are ready") in light of which her messages about communicative clarity should be heeded; and she does recognize the lesbian or gay individual's perspective that "coming out can be frightening." But these statements seem to be a nod to the speaker's psychological preparedness for the communicative act instead of an acknowledgment that the content of what is communicated through coming out, the speaker's sexuality, is problematic. They also emphasize the responsibility of the speaker for communication. This emphasis on the speaker is consistent with the abovementioned characterization of coming out as a "gift," which underscores the agency of the speaker, and the unidirectionality that is implied in the communicative act of coming out, as conceptualized by the writer: Coming out is an act that involves the transfer of some object, information, initiated by and originating with the gay or lesbian speaker to her/his parent. The speaker's agency is also stressed in the other consequences of coming out, "opening eyes" and "creating change," both of which, along with coming out as a gift, construct the audience as passive recipients.

Related to the understanding of coming out as a communicative act the success of which the speaker is deemed responsible is a notion of "truth" as corresponding to the speaker's feelings. As with many of the other coming out advice literature, "the truth about who you are" corresponds to the individual's lesbian or gay sexual orientation, and in this case, "who you are" is ambiguous between just the speaker's sexual orientation and the person as a whole, including sexual orientation.

#### **4.3 Analysis of the HRC's "Resource Guide To Coming Out"**

The next document to be analyzed is an excerpt from the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) "Resource Guide to Coming out." The "Resource Guide to Coming Out" (hereafter "Resource Guide") is distributed both as a pamphlet at lesbian and gay events and on the HRC website. In 1996, 10,000 copies were distributed through bookstores, community centers, and local organizations. In 1997, 25,000 copies were distributed through these outlets. Also in that year, the brochure underwent a revision.

The "Resource Guide" provides advice about coming out. But in addition, it points the reader to the names and addresses of gay rights organizations, to on-line resources, to recommended books, and to religious organizations. Because the HRC is a political action committee that also includes legislative and advocacy programs, the brochure as a whole also has a subsidiary goal of prevailing upon the reader to support the HRC by becoming a member, both through an explicit appeal, and implicitly, through the fact that the "Resource Guide" itself and the ideas presented therein are products of the HRC. Nonetheless, the immediate and manifest goal of the "Resource Guide" is to furnish the lesbian and gay reader with information on coming out.

I now proceed to examine the details of the text to point out the use of positive politeness strategies, that is, of linguistic manifestations of interactional behavior directed toward establishing or maintaining intimacy and solidarity. I have chosen the section titled A MESSAGE FROM ELIZABETH BIRCH EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN because it can be considered a self-contained unit within the whole of the brochure; and it furnishes examples of the strategies in which I am interested that demonstrate that coming out is associated with a specific ideology about language, truth, and interpersonal relationships. I will pay particular attention to the parts of the text that have to do with defining coming out and the reasons for coming out.

#### 4.3.1 Layout of the text and image

There are many examples of positive politeness phenomena both in content and in form in this excerpt. Visually salient is the layout of the section itself. To the left of the beginning of the text is a photo of a woman under which appears the caption that identifies her as Elizabeth Birch, the HRC Executive Director. The section heading reveals that the text corresponds to her message. The initial impression is that the depicted woman to whom the text is attributed is speaking personally to the reader, and that she and the reader are engaged in face-to-face conversation. This impression is reinforced by the linguistic strategies described next.

#### 4.3.2 Shared cultural values: Coming out as being honest and open

The text itself exhibits linguistic manifestations of positive politeness features that reinforce the intimacy and closeness with the reader that the writer is trying to establish. The writer claims common ground with the reader by making statements that evoke the culturally shared values of openness and honesty. She defines coming out as being “honest and open” about being lesbian or gay, urges the disclosure of “our true selves,” states that “gay people ... are deciding to live honestly,” discusses the issues of “being openly lesbian, gay or bisexual.”

Furthermore, since coming out is defined as being “honest and open about our sexual orientation,” what one is “honest and open” about, that is, one’s sexual orientation, is equivalent to “truth” itself. Thus, the writer can and does use the phrase “true selves,” to express the concept of “lesbian and gay selves,” as she does in the clause “...the only way we will stop the discrimination we face is to reveal our true selves.” Further evidence that sexual orientation is associated the truth is the way failure to disclose one’s sexual orientation is associated with “lying and hiding.” Thus, the writer applies a moral value to coming out and being openly lesbian or gay, linking it with the American cultural values of honesty, truth, and openness.

However, rather than simply relying on the self-evidence of shared cultural values to motivate the lesbian or gay reader to “live honestly,” the writer also attributes significance to the individual’s act of coming out by placing it within the context of “our community,” and explains that “the only way we will stop the discrimination we face is to reveal our true selves...” Thus, she is “membershopping” the reader into the community as well as eliciting the reader’s cooperation in achieving a common aim (to “stop the discrimination we face”). The statement “...coming out may be one small step for a gay man or lesbian but it contributes to the giant leap we are making for all gay people, today and in the future,” is particularly effective in capturing the relationship between the individual and the group in terms that are familiar to the reader, and in conveying that the individual act of coming out is as momentous as the first step by a human being on the moon. The expectation that the reader will be able to interpret this last statement is another instantiation of common ground.

#### 4.3.3 Other positive politeness strategies

Probably the most salient strategy is the use of the first person pronoun by the writer to show that she is not merely making general pronouncements about a third party, but that she includes herself, and the lesbian or gay reader. She talks about “our sexual orientation,” “more of us,” “our true selves,” “our community,” “we will stop the discrimination we face,” “our friends, our families, and our neighbors.” The first and second person pronouns are used to refer to the writer and reader, respectively, as though they were engaged in face-to-face conversation.

Establishing common ground with the reader is also achieved via point-of-view operations whereby the writer places the reader’s point of view at the center of reference. The phrase “the fact that you are holding this booklet” refers both to the time at which the reader is reading the text (or, more precisely, the phrase in question) through the use of the present tense, and the booklet that is within the reader’s possession at the time of

reading. Additionally, the use of direct quoted speech to represent the reader's thoughts ("What is this going to do to my life? Will my family accept me, will my friends still like me? How do I know if this is the right thing to do?"), shows that the writer shares the reader's point of view. Another strategy employed by the writer to stress common ground is to attend to the reader's interests, wants, needs, and goals. This is evident in other kinds of utterances, such as "you may be questioning," "you know someone," "you're probably wondering." Further, in each case, the writer either provides a response that attempts to fulfill the reader's want ("This booklet aims to answer some of those questions") or to recognize the legitimacy of those wants ("These are all valid questions"). Further, she expresses empathy toward the reader, "you are not the first —nor will you be the last—to struggle with [the questions]," assuring her/him that s/he is not alone. The next statement, "But it's my fervent hope that just as the earliest gay activists paved the way for me, today's lesbian, gay and bisexual leaders are helping to make life easier for you," seems to position herself implicitly in a high status role with respect to the reader. But since the writer was once in the same position as the reader is in now, that is of being helped, and is now in a position of leadership and thus of helping people like the reader, carrying the comparison further means that by coming out, the reader will be in a position to help others.

This latter statement is also probably the most striking sentence in the paragraph, if not the entire passage. By drawing the analogy between her own circumstances and that of the reader, she herself comes out, that is, reveals her own sexual orientation to the reader, and thereby puts into practice her own statements regarding coming out. Coupled with her show of empathy for the reader via the application of positive politeness strategies, her assertions become much more persuasive because she has made herself an exemplar.

Having come out to the reader, the writer issues statements that seem to derive their authoritativeness from personal experience. When she says, "Let me assure you..."

immediately following her disclosure, the juxtaposition of the two sentences give the impression that she knows, from having undergone the experience herself, that “while being an openly lesbian, gay or bisexual person ... isn’t easy, it is so much more gratifying than being in the closet.” The imperative is meant to comfort and guarantee to the reader that regardless of whatever doubts the reader may have about being openly homosexual, “it is so much more gratifying than being in the closet” because the latter “consumes a lot of personal energy and detracts from the quality of a person’s life.” Embedded within the imperative, too, is a concession that “being an openly lesbian, gay or bisexual person isn’t easy” and thus asserts, in the spirit of cooperation, her knowledge of the reader’s wants, needs, and goals. The writer demonstrates that she is aware of and is occupied with the reader’s emotional well-being and quality of her/his life.

Other signals of closeness and intimacy include linguistic forms typically used in verbal interactions characterized by camaraderie such as contractions (“isn’t,” “it’s,” “can’t”), ellipsis (“to make life easier for you [to come out]”), unexplained referents (“Stonewall Inn”), colloquial intensifiers (“so much”).

#### 4.3.4 Testimonial

Common in much of the coming out self-help literature, and advice literature in general, is the use of personal testimony. This is consistent with the understanding that “truth” corresponds to personal experience. As if to ratify what Elizabeth Birch has “just” “said,” the next part of the “Resource Guide” consists of a quote ostensibly uttered by Candace Gingrich, along with a photo of her with some others. Her statement, “There are people who came before you, and people who will come after you,” affirm the words “spoken” just previously by Elizabeth Birch, “you are not the first person—nor will you be the last—to struggle with them.” The impression conveyed is that the reader and the people at HRC are part of the same interaction, with participants taking turns at speaking as though in a conversation.

#### **4.4 Excerpt from *Coming out: an act of love***

**This book falls within the category of self-help literature insofar as it is not only a guide spelling out the reasons the reader should come out but also contains exercises that ostensibly increase self-awareness and self-acceptance, which is a premise for self-acceptance.**

**The book is based on a retreat originally established by the writer to help gay men become more comfortable with their sexuality. The impetus behind the workshops was that their political effectiveness could be enhanced with a positive self-image about being gay. The retreat engendered a series of workshops that eventually included the participation of lesbians, and subsequently, family members of lesbians and gays. Fundamental to the methodology of these workshops is letter writing to those who are most significant in the lives of participants.**

**The excerpt I have chosen to discuss is the Foreward, because it exemplifies the therapeutic genre, the letter, that is considered by the writer as an effective tool through which the lesbian or gay individual can begin to be “open and honest” about their sexuality to their parents and to others. The excerpt lends support to my claim that there are certain ideas about truth, language, and interpersonal relationships that are implicit and prevalent in the self-help guides on coming out, and they can be discovered through the analysis of the politeness strategies employed by the author within the text.**

##### **4.4.1 Strategies of positive politeness**

**Many of the linguistic realizations of positive politeness in the foreward arise from strategies in which the author attempts to claim common ground with the reader. The foreward consists only of a letter, the genre of which is the mainstay of the book. The letter is directed to Abby, presumably of Dear Abby fame, an addressee that is presumably familiar to the reader. The familiarity may intrigue the reader because the letter appears in**

a venue different from the usual journalistic context in which Dear Abby letters appear. The letter is even “signed” at the end—in fact, the name of the letter writer appears in the acknowledgements—to give it the sense of authenticity. It is also set in italics to distinguish the voice of its writer from that of the writer of the main text, and to highlight its special status as a personal letter. Additionally, given that the letter signals, through its familiar addressee and through the signature of an individual, its personal contents, it is likely to be of intrinsic interest to the reader because it means that the contents are also accessible, as must be the case for letters to Abby which are usually published for mass appeal, and, since the letter writer is gay, relevant to the lesbian or gay reader.

The significance of the letter is indicated by its designated function as the foreword. The letter presages the centrality of personal testimony through letters in the rest of the book, and its own role as an exemplar of those letters. The presence of the letter suggests that the author’s voice is not the only one present in the book, and instead, creates the impression of a multi-party interaction.

#### 4.4.2 The reader: The “real” addressee

Although the letter writer is ostensibly communicating with Abby, his addressee, he also seems to convey his awareness of the presence of a third party, the reader, who is, in fact, his intended addressee. Although it is not unusual for writers to Abby to direct their remarks specifically to her readers, their intentions to broadcast their messages are not accomplished until she publishes their letter. In contrast, the reasons for writing stated by the letter writer, that is, being “overwhelmingly frustrated” and being “compelled to write and get this off my chest” are not, in and of themselves, typical reasons for writing to Abby, and in any case, she presumably did not publish his letter since the readers are reading it in a book. In fact, at the end of the letter, he thanks Abby and declares that he is “feeling better already.” This declaration reinforces his purpose for writing stated at the beginning of that letter, namely, that the letter writer’s intention is not to solicit advice or

even a response but to verbalize the reasons for his frustration, and that writing the letter has served its therapeutic function, without any help from Abby herself.

In addition to the fact that Abby herself appears not to be the letter writer's intended addressee, his actual intent, to inform, establish solidarity with, and ultimately persuade the reader, is also revealed in part by the didactic tone of the letter. The letter writer produces statements that are categorical, comprehensive, and thus, authoritative. For instance, although he frames the problems of accessing and paying for AIDS drugs in personal terms (e.g., "my safe-to-take ... drugs," "my life savings..."), he describes the sources of difficulty in general terms. Plural noun phrases that are preceded by the definite article (as opposed to possessive pronouns, which would personalize and limit the scope of the referents), such as "the insurance companies, the federal and state governments," suggest generally known entities which does not require much shared background. Likewise, the pluralization of "American drug companies," is a generalization rather than a specific reference that is pertinent to the letter writer, personally. Moreover, if he were only concerned with describing the sources of his frustration, he would merely describe "having my safe-to-take over-the-counter drugs seized by the FDA" rather than also giving the reason "due to pressure from American drug companies"; and "fighting growing discrimination" rather than also adding the appositional relative clause "which impedes compassion and research for a cure." Providing extra information that is unnecessary to his ostensible reason for writing seems to support the idea that his intention is in part to inform. That he seems to want to make generalizations is evinced in the statement in which he describes how "My wonderful companion ... died this past summer of AIDS." To this clause, he appends a reminder to the reader *qua* Abby that his lover's death does not include the more general case of "all the truly great friends, acquaintances, and talents we've all lost" of which the reader should be aware.

He also makes categorical, and hence, factual sounding statements about gay men as a group ("Gay men are the highest risk group in this country for AIDS..."), makes an

assertion (“We’re a unique minority...” ) and supports it with objective facts (“...our skin color, anatomical features, or religious beliefs don’t give us away” “we represent a conservatively estimated 10 percent of the population...” ) and lesbian and gays as a minority (“...it is the gay and lesbian minorities who suffer discrimination”).

However, even as he adopts a donnish attitude, he also resorts to devices that create solidarity between himself and the reader. For instance, the first paragraph, consisting of a list of reasons for his frustration caused by the difficulty in securing AIDS treatment at reasonable costs creates a scenario that is inclusive of the gay reader with AIDS, and those who have lost friends and relatives to the disease, and those who have suffered discrimination on the basis of their sexuality. The use of the first plural personal pronoun in the second paragraph (e.g., “We’re a unique minority in two ways” “it’s easy for us to hide out” “we represent a conservatively estimated 10 percent”) excludes Abby but includes the “overhearing” lesbian/gay reader and creates a relationship of solidarity with the reader. Additionally, it is likely that the letter writer says things that the reader already knows (for instance, that physical traits or religious beliefs do not divulge the individual’s sexual orientation) and consequently raises a safe topic on which both reader and letter writer can agree.

Thus, the letter writer obliquely establishes a relationship of closeness with the reader via communication with Abby by, for instance, describing situations that may include the reader, by stating facts that they probably know, and by aligning himself with her/him through direct reference and raising of topics in a way that the reader might strike the reader’s interest. These create a context for establishing the persuasiveness of his suggestions and exhortations.

#### 4.4.3 Persuasive discourse

As with the other examples of advice literature, there are instances in the letter of suggestions and exhortations to the reader, utterances that try to get the reader to do

something, specifically to persuade her/him to a certain viewpoint. Given that these are accomplished in the context of statements that are allegedly informative and that create involvement with the reader, the letter also exhibits the characteristics of persuasive discourse. In the statement, "If every one of us 'came out' to our families and co-workers—the people in our lives who are important to us and whom we love—a new age of understanding and love would be inevitable," he indicates through the use of the first person plural pronoun that the scope of his statement includes himself. The reference to "the people in our lives who are important to us and whom we love," creates solidarity between the writer and the lesbian/gay reader given that (1) everyone has people who are important to them, (2) showing concern for the important people in the reader's lives shows concern for the reader. The reward of "a new age of understanding and love" can be gained without even trying because, once the suggestion is adopted, its consequences are "inevitable" and to be enjoyed by all. The assumption is that the "new age of understanding in love" is something that is desirable to the reader; thus, the force of the statement, "If everyone of us came out, etc." is that of a suggestion to the lesbian or gay reader.

By way of illustration and adding to the persuasiveness of his suggestion, he describes his own past behavior and shows that his own behavior is not much different from that of his fellow lesbians and gays. The values upon which the letter writer attempts to claim common ground with the reader are made more salient because the reader can identify with the letter writer. The letter writer describes how he rationalized not coming out, failing to heed the suggestion that he now presents to the reader ("I had dozens of good sound reasons for not telling my family and friends I was gay."). The inner speech, represented as direct quoted speech ("They won't like me. I'll lose my job. I'll lose my inheritance. etc.") involve the reader, and therefore is a way of claiming common ground, particularly since they could be uttered by the lesbian/gay reader her/himself when deciding whether or not to come out. By listing them one after the other, he emphasizes

their quantity, which has the effect of detracting from their individual validity. Because the reader is like the letter writer, the reader's thoughts are implicitly evaluated in the same way.

One of the protagonist's past fears is that the news of his gayness would "kill my dad." The rhetorical question "What did it matter if my dad 'died' if he found out?" is uttered from the writer's (not the protagonist's) point of view. Since "died" is in quotes, it conveys the writer's skepticism at the protagonist's fears. So the writer distances himself from the protagonist and enables the reader to align with the writer's current perspective. Moreover, the writer presumes that the reader will respond to the rhetorical question in the way that the writer intends. However, in case s/he doesn't, the writer directs the reader to the "correct" response, that "lying and withholding the truth" was creating a dying relationship, anyway, and therefore not telling was leading to the same consequences that telling, in the protagonist's misconceived view, would engender. The sequence of posing a known-answer question and then providing the response is employed in teaching situations. Consistent with the didactic tone observed above, the response by the letter writer to the rhetorical question likewise functions didactically. Further, the response itself refers to remaining in the closet as "lying and withholding the truth" and the letter writer's sexual orientation as "who I am." Thus, his suggestion for everyone to come out is now assigned a moral value, whereby failure to adopt it becomes an instance of dishonesty, and pretending to be someone other than who one actually is.

He frames the solution to his problems in terms of a definition of love as "unconditionally accepting people the way they are" that he attributes to "all great spiritual masters," and that therefore applies to the reader as much as to the letter writer. The

culturally shared value that he invokes is that love conquers all, including (e.g., his parents') ignorance. He describes the positive consequences that "inevitably" came about when he "learned to love and accept" himself. Because many of the concerns that he discusses are pertinent to the reader's life, they allow the reader to imagine that the consequences he describes apply to her/him as well. So while his parents are conservative, "their love ... superseded their own biases" and enabled them to support him when his lover died. Whereas he once feared the loss of his job, he now knows that he "can always get a job where it's okay to be who I am." Whereas he once feared that he would "lose love," now he asserts that he is "capable of nurturing open and honest relationships where I love and am loved."

The penultimate paragraph which follows is full of exaggerations and hyperbole. He turns away from Abby and directly addresses the lesbian and gay reader, as well as issues exhortations that are in both the interest of the letter writer and his fellow lesbian and gay readers, that are typically used in verbal interactions characterized by intimacy. For instance, as he invokes the shared cultural values through which the letter writer can claim common ground with the reader, he exaggerates the relationship between "telling the truth" and its therapeutic effects, claiming that the healing effects of telling the truth are so powerful that they not only have ramifications for the individual but also for the planet. The exaggerated characterization of this relationship is signalled by "literally," and reinforced by the urgency with which he states "Time is running out!"

The relationship between "telling the truth" and "coming out" (versus a more global moral code of telling the truth applicable not only to lesbians and gays but to

everyone) is evidenced in his use of the second person in “I encourage everyone to make it safe for people in your life to tell the truth,” and his use of the first person in “I appeal to all gays and lesbians to love ourselves enough,” suggesting that he places himself in the group of lesbians and gays but not in that group that can “make it safe for people in your life to tell the truth.” The associations between telling the truth, loving oneself, and coming out do not lead logically to the statement “Coming out is an act of love,” which seems to appear out of nowhere. Yet, as mentioned (cf. §1.13.3), it is a characteristic of self-help literature that bold, categorical statements are often made without any evidence.

#### 4.5 “Introduction” to *Outing yourself*

The other book from which an excerpt is taken, *Outing<sup>2</sup> Yourself: How to come out as lesbian or gay to your family, friends, and coworkers*, was first published in 1995. It is the most recent publication of all of the ones examined, and probably the most recent of all of the coming out advice guides currently on the market. The book is a fourteen-step program to coming out, the aim of which is to enable the lesbian or gay reader to live freely, without having to hide her/his sexual orientation. The program specifies a process of outing that begins with the self, and then proceeds to others, starting with other gay people, to straight friends, to family, and to coworkers. The final stages involve helping others to come out, and to “speak up” about one’s sexuality when appropriate (e.g., when someone casually makes a homophobic remark).

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<sup>2</sup> The verb “to out” refers to the practice of exposing someone’s homosexuality without their consent. Whereas the verb “to come out” from which it derives is intransitive, and suggests that only the individual her/himself may disclose her/his sexuality, the transitivity of the verb “out” allows both self-disclosure and other-exposure to be expressed. The verb was originally coined in the late 1980s to refer to the exposure of gay politicians who voted in favor of legislation that was not supportive or was harmful to the interests of lesbians and gays.

Before going into the analysis, one might ask what the author's motivation was for producing yet another coming out self-help book. Like many, if not all, of the self-help guides on coming out, this book assumes that the failure to come out, that is, hiding one's sexuality, is hazardous to the individual's mental health, that being open about one's sexuality can lead to a life of honesty and rewarding relationships, that coming out is a lifelong process, and that lesbian and gay visibility is the most effective means by which to educate the general public about homosexuality. However, in the section headed WHY STEPS?, the author describes his data collection methods, which range from letters, email, and telephone interviews, to questionnaires, from hundreds of lesbian, gay, and bisexual; states the reasons for choosing a stepwise approach (because gay psychotherapists recommended such an approach, because "a surprising number" of the people who had written him asking for help in coming out expressed a desire for a step-by-step program); and provides a description of how he devised the techniques for coming out within each step (based on consultations with psychotherapists and on descriptions given by his lesbian and gay subjects of techniques for coming out that they found to be successful. The impression conveyed by this section that the book is well-researched and authoritative is enhanced in the dedication to gay-supportive psychotherapists, and in the acknowledgements, where he thanks the "many lesbian and gay psychotherapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors whom I consulted personally on this project or whose bodies of published work guided me in creating this step-by-step program" (Signorile 1995:171). Thus, the author seems to be distinguishing his book from other coming out self-help guides, which are either outdated, that is, not relevant to "being gay in the 1990s" (Signorile 1995:xxiv) or which contain statements and recommendations that are not supported by psychological research.

The excerpt to be examined is the chapter titled "Introduction: Why out yourself?" The reason for choosing this excerpt is that it provides an overview of the book, as well as the motivation for it. As with the other excerpts, an analysis of the

politeness strategies reveals the same cultural norms about language, interpersonal relationships, and truth that appear in the other coming out self-help material examined.

#### 4.5.1 Shared cultural values

The title, *Why out yourself?*, evokes the informal tone of the chapter through ellipsis (“Why [should you] out yourself?”), and simulates face-to-face conversation (as though echoing the reader’s own question “Why [should I] out myself?”) through direct address of the lesbian and gay reader. Also striking about the title is his use of the term “out,” with its connotation of confrontation along with the relatively recent coining of the term, versus the more familiar “come out,” which, because of its intransitivity, does not have the same agentive sense. As with other self-help guides, when a question makes up the title of a chapter, the chapter typically supplies the response to the question. In this sense, the chapter serves to inform the reader about why s/he should conduct her/his life in the way recommended by the author.

As with the other self-help guides, authors typically resort to shared cultural values about proper behavior, about well-being, and about social relations. The present guide is no exception. There is very little that is different from other coming out advice guides as far as the kinds of cultural values that are present in these kinds of texts are concerned. The links between telling the truth and coming out, between the truth and sexual orientation or feelings, and between expression of emotions and mental health, through which common ground is claimed are present in this work. The first paragraph alone evinces all of these values. Thus, “the closet” is the same as “actively hiding the truth” of one’s sexual orientation, and therefore, coming out of the closet is equivalent to telling the truth. Coming out is a matter of mental health because “hiding the truth about ourselves diminishes our personal dignity and our self-esteem” which can lead to “many complex emotional problems.”

These shared values recur throughout the rest of the text. The understanding of the expression of sexuality as a moral issue, that is, a matter of being truthful, is instantiated in statements such as “Gay people ... struggle with the issues of honesty and openness.” The closet, or being secretive about one’s sexuality, is “a destructive force.”

#### 4.5.1.1 Individualism

Because much of the book is tacitly informed by psychological work on lesbians and gays, many of the ideas underlying the text can be presumed to derive from psychotherapy. “Coming out of the closet,” or verbalizing one’s desires, enables the individual to get beyond surface meanings (“the mask of heterosexuality”) and access “the real you,” or, in other words, “truth,” just as talking about one’s feelings in psychotherapy allows the client to realize insights about her/himself.

When describing the benefits of coming out, the author does so purely from the reader’s perspective, revealing an outlook that emphasizes the individual’s internal state and individual life course. Hence, the benefits of “outing yourself” is transformative on a personal level insofar as it makes the reader “less afraid of the world around you,” “better poised to take on real challenges,” and to “lead a more productive, successful, and happy life.”

Statements such as “Being gay in the 1990s means being part of a large, diverse community of people” fixes the lesbian or gay reader as “one of us.” Yet, duty and responsibility, terms that suggest morally based consciousness of others, are also framed in terms of the individual. When he describes lesbians and gays who have come out and are ready “...to stand up and be counted, to be identified as part of a community” he does so by invoking a conceptualization of community that is based on the individual, whereby a community is the sum of its members rather than a collective entity that is more or other than the sum of its parts. Again, when he discusses “duty” in the following excerpt, “Coming out instills a sense of duty ... by giving it visibility. Visibility builds self-esteem,”

the definition leads ultimately to the self (i.e., self-esteem). Likewise, in the context of the previous statements relating the individual to community, the otherwise spiritual sounding “to help others is really to help yourself, and to help yourself is really to help others” becomes a way of rationalizing self-centered acts such as outing. Another assumption that is consistent with the belief that individual acts not only have broad ramifications but are the source of them. Bringing the feminist aphorism that the “personal is political” also assumes that the individual is the basic unit.

#### **4.5.1.2 Personal testimony**

Another manifestation of individualism is, as mentioned, the correspondence between personal experience and “truth.” In this chapter alone, there are references to the experiences and utterances of five individuals to support the points made by the author. The use of personal testimony is a device that enables the reader to understand the writer’s point, as well as to be persuaded by it through identification with the individual giving the testimonial. In all but one of the texts examined here, personal testimony of the author her or himself, or of others were given to illustrate statements made in the text.

#### **4.5.2 In-group membership**

To show that he is like the reader, the author uses the first person plural pronoun, phrases like “our lives as lesbian and gay men” which place him within the category of lesbians and gay men with the reader; and he shares with his fellow lesbians and gays the position of being distinct from mental health professionals and of being the recipients of information from them. And he assumes that the “closet”, “coming out,” and “outing” are all interpretable to the reader.

#### **4.5.3 Reader and author as cooperators**

Finally, in the spirit of cooperating with the reader by showing her/him that he is concerned with the latter's wants, needs, desires, the author presents personal stories to point out that there are others like the reader who have gone through very similar experiences. They reduce the isolation that the reader might feel. What is interesting here is the role of personal testimony as evidence. He states that the "stories of Jonathan and Shelley ... attest to the ways in which the closet has been a destructive force."

The author also shows empathy toward the reader. The definition of coming out, and the enumeration of the benefits of coming out of the closet invoke shared cultural values. The description by the author of the reader's experience using the second person pronoun, as in "you no longer feel like a freak who must hide a terrible secret" indicates the author's empathy with the reader and her/his struggle. The operative terms here are "freedom, honesty, and pride."

#### 4.6 "Introduction to Coming Out"

The text from which the excerpts to be analyzed, "An Educational Rationale for Coming Out," and "The Politics of Coming Out," are drawn comprises a set of recorded messages that can be heard on the University of Florida Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Student Union switchboard. It appears on the web as well.

The eight messages are all divided up according to topic. They can be categorized according to: what coming out is in general (Introduction, The process), and in specific (Self-acceptance, Coming out to other people, Coming out to non-gay people), the reasons for coming out (An educational rationale, politics), suggestions on how to come out (Some suggestions). These topics appear typically in every instance of coming out advice literature. Compared to some of the previous texts analyzed, this is a more balanced account on the topic of coming out. Statements are not made categorically. Evidence is supplied in support of them, or modal expression are used to indicate the

degree of commitment the author has to the proposition being stated. The tone is slightly more formal.

#### 4.6.1 “An Educational Rationale for Coming Out”

Of the guides analyzed thus far on coming out, the present texts exhibit the most distance from the reader. For instance, the conception of coming out as an “educational tool” is quite different from a description of coming out as a personal act of “telling the truth.” Conceived as a tool, coming out can be viewed as a resource that can be employed purposefully. This is different from the usual psychological conceptualization of coming out.

#### 4.6.2 Linguistic reflexes of formal interaction

Other strategies used by the writer to communicate her/his desire not to impose on the reader include: The use of the impersonal pronoun (“one,” one’s”), the avoidance of direct reference to the reader or writer (“the [i.e., our/your] educational task which lies ahead [i.e., of us/you] is. . .” “no one [i.e., neither you nor anyone else] has the right ... to tell another person [i.e., you/us]”), nominalizations (“unemployment, disinheritance, or personal rejection”; cf. Eichberg: “I’ll lose my job. I’ll be disinherited. I’ll lose love.”) all create distance between the writer and the reader. Another strategy is to minimize the imposition of the writer’s values on the reader. For instance, the force of the statement, “Coming out is undoubtedly the most effective tool available...” is hedged with the adverb, “undoubtedly.” Avoiding judgment of the individual’s behavior also minimizes infringement on the individual’s autonomy. The citation of concrete, external sources of evidence such as: “excellent books, improved media coverage, visible lesbian and gay individuals — including celebrities”, reference to “more supportive attitudes from mental health professionals and many religious leaders” to support the claim that there is an increasing acceptance of gay people also evidences the operation of a negative politeness

strategy insofar as it does not hold the individual solely responsible for societal acceptance (or rejection) of lesbians or gays. The non-judgmental, i.e., non-impositional tone is also evident in the statement, "...the relative invisibility of lesbians and gays continues to allow countless Americans to overlook gay people; to tell cruel gay jokes; to assume that noone is gay; and to believe that they do not know or love any lesbians or gay men." Whereas other texts tend to place judgment on the individual for contributing to the "relative invisibility" and hence, societal oppression of gays and lesbians, here, it is an attribute of the lesbian or gay individual, not the lesbian or gay individual her/himself that engenders the misconceptions enumerated by the writer. Once again, the preserve of the reader is maintained. Neither the lesbian or gay reader, nor in fact the unwitting heterosexual, is censured. Similarly, although the statement, "Each time even one gay person comes out to such non-gay presons, their world view is challenged, their fears about homosexuality are confronted, and their level of understanding is raised," describes the consequences of coming out, the placement of the clause "one gay person comes out" in the subordinate clause, along with the use of the passive voice in the series of main clauses that follow minimize the role of the agent, "gay person" and instead, emphasizes the effects of her/his action.

Even the overall tone of the passage, which is empathic toward lesbians and gays, and therefore, the reader, is expressed with slight distance. For example, in the statement, "Absolutely noone has the right or adequate knowledge to tell another person when, how, or to whom to come out," the writer indirectly shows her/his concern for the lesbian/gay reader by recognizing that the decision to come out is hers/his alone. Even as the writer exhibits her/his protectiveness of the lesbian or gay reader, s/he also issues a strong moral pronouncement against anyone engaging in the behavior described, the scope of which includes the reader. In order to avoid direct reference to the reader and writer, s/he uses a negative politeness strategy of reducing the imposition on the reader by stating it as a general rule. The concern expressed of the reader's well-being in the sentence, "These

messages are aimed at helping you make realistic and responsible decisions about coming out to parents, relatives, friends and other non-gay persons in your life,” exhibits positive politeness strategies such as deixis (“these messages” point to a shared referent), direct reference to the reader (“you”), but they are mixed with linguistic output from negative politeness strategies such as the passive voice (“are aimed”) and omission of the possessive pronoun (“coming out to [your] parents, [your] relatives, [your] friends”). Empathy toward the reader is indirectly shown by assuming the center of reference is someone like the reader, though not the reader her/himself. In the sentence, “For some people coming out is probably not a realistic goal at this time,” “this time” refers to the time relative to the circumstances of “some people.”

Although participants in this particular act of communication (reader, writer) are mentioned, thereby creating the impression of face-to-face interaction, they surface infrequently in the text. While the first person plural pronoun to refer directly to the writer and reader as well as other lesbians and gays is used five times, and the second person singular pronoun twice, there are seven references to “gay people,” two to pronominal referents of “gay people,” and one each to “lesbians and gays” “one gay person” “lesbians or gay men,” all of which referents include the reader. There are therefore about half as many uses of the personal pronouns as there are of the third person noun phrases or pronouns.

When the writer discusses the benefits of coming out, s/he uses the existential “there are very real benefits” and uses nominalized forms (“improved communications,” “deepened mutual understanding,” “honest personal relationships,” “relief from painful fears of eventual rejection,” “contribution to educational dialogue”), all of which obviate the use of personal pronouns.

The one major difference between this guide and others is the fact that there are no other voices evident. This is possibly due to the unusual channel by which the text is

disseminated. But the absence of personal testimonies is remarkable and attests to the distance between the participants in the communicative act.

Based on the slight distance along with the empathic tone, the relationship established between the writer and the reader seems to be analogous to that of expert to layperson.

#### 4.7 Conclusion

Although each writer had slightly different motivations for offering their advice, they all shared abundant use of positive politeness strategies to claim common ground with the reader and to show that the writer's wants were the same as the reader's. Furthermore, the same set of words and themes surfaced repeatedly: "honesty and openness," "truth" being equated with "who you are," the psychological benefits of telling the truth, and the harmful effects of withholding or distorting it. Thus, not only is an extreme morality associated with coming out, but so too is physical well-being. This association of proper conduct and physical well-being seems to render the expression of feelings almost inevitable. So long as everyone gets to fulfill their expressive potential without infringing on the rights of others to do the same, then any form of expression concerning the self is theoretically possible. Those who would thwart that right either by failing to accept the self that is presented through verbalization are labelled with terms such as "self-centered," "in denial," and so on. This is consistent with a culture that gives primacy to the individual.

As a speech act, coming out rests upon an ideology of individualism, where the individual matters more than the community.<sup>3</sup> The coming out story, a narrative account of how an individual came out, can be viewed as a way of re-establishing community, or of compensating for community "lost" via coming out by presenting a self to others with

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, I would argue that the current gender bending trend, from androgyny to crossdressing to remaking one's gender physiologically (transsexualism) is a manifestation of self-expression taken to the extreme.

similar experiences (and who would therefore accept the underlying assumption of the teller's homosexuality). Because coming out violates many of the norms of communicative behavior, the coming out story is one vehicle to help justify the teller's act(s) of coming out. The following chapter explores the form of telling out stories told by members of two ethnic groups (European American and Asian American, broadly defined), and how the stories reflect their sense of selves as members of the larger cultural group to which each belongs, their more limited and immediate role as participants in a specific speech event, and their identity as gay, in view of the problems of coming out.

## Chapter 5

### Coming Out Stories

...I've realized now that I can tell all my friends about the kind of guys I like to date. ... I can write to some 30,000 Cal students a week on the importance of (and secrets to) drag makeup. And, honey, I don't care if the whole world knows that I can't take it as a botT.

But I can't show these clippings of my newspaper columns to my dad. I can't tell my grandma that the "ugliest" baby she has ever seen took first runner-up in a beauty pageant and has serious hopes of becoming a future Miss Gay Universe. I can't tell my mom about my love life (or lack of it). I haven't come out. At least not where it counts: to my family.

—Eddie Jen, "It's snowing in Berkeley", *The Daily Californian*, October 9, 1996.

#### 5.0 Introduction

The strategies that are used in the justification and encouragement of the presentation of lesbian and gay identities reflect a specific set of beliefs about what a "proper" person is. But these beliefs do not exist in isolation, apart from or displacing competing systems of beliefs about what constitutes a good person. This chapter investigates the linguistic manifestations of the interaction between ethnicity and sexuality by examining the communicative strategies that are used by Asian American and non-Asian tellers of coming out stories.

Any decision to define one's self as lesbian or gay, in direct opposition to cultural norms, is necessarily one that requires explanation. By means of the explanation, or to use Linde's (1987, 1993) term, the *coherence principle*, an individual's narrative can be understood by and shared with others. The choice of explanations or coherence principles that are used in the telling of any given story depends on several factors, among them the reasons for telling the story (for instance, to justify as opposed to merely inform of the speaker's coming out), on what the teller's culture deems to be acceptable (for instance, in an individualistic culture, explanations that emphasize the speaker's autonomy are relatively more acceptable than those that indicate an attitude of excessive fatalism), the social context (for instance, if the teller's interlocutor is known to be atheistic, the teller might be less likely to invoke a religious explanation), as well as the teller's own personal perspective (for instance, a tendency toward pessimism). In other words, the ways in

which speakers account for their own and others' behavior are mediated through cultural constraints, social circumstances, and personal differences.

Although all of the aforementioned factors are relevant in any given instance of a telling of a coming out story, the ones of concern in this chapter are those coherence principles that arise from the teller's group identification(s). In order to highlight how the selection of events and their organization into a coming out story correlates with the teller's group membership, the present chapter compares coming out stories told by Asian Americans with those told by white Anglo-Americans.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, the differences observed in narrative strategies preferred by one group as opposed to the other are summarized. Next, one of those differences, the external versus the internal orientation of narrators is discussed. The ways in which narrators conceptualize conflicts is also explored. The topic of parents is also considered in the analysis of the narratives. A comparison is made on the ways in which ethnicity and/or religion figure in (or not) in the narratives of members of the respective groups. The issue of compartmentalized selves also sheds light on the cultural differences between Asians and non-Asians.

### 5.1 Differences in narrative strategies

There were two striking differences between the ways Asian Americans told their coming out stories and white speakers told theirs. First, the overall emphasis in stories told by whites was on the internal process of making sense of their same-sex feelings, while those told by Asians tended to stress the external acts of telling others. For instance, a large proportion of the narratives told by whites include descriptions of how they came to realize or accept their sexual identity, while self-disclosures to others were accorded relatively less emphasis. Contrastively, Asians tended to discuss their disclosures to others often to the exclusion of any mention of the psychological processes involved in self-definition as lesbian women or gay men. Members of both groups mentioned ethnicity and

religion as factors influencing their willingness and ability come out to themselves and to others. However, there was a sense in which religious affiliation, when verbalized by white narrators in terms of praying to God and the sin of homosexuality, appeared to be interpreted as an identity that is focussed inwardly and hence relatively more individualistic, while ethnicity, when discussed by Asians in terms such as whether or not to disclose to parents, was construed as an identity that is oriented toward social relations. In the stories told by whites, ethnicity (i.e., Irish Catholic) is mentioned only once by one speaker, and only in conjunction with religion, which is subsequently mentioned or alluded to independently of the ethnic reference several times thereafter; in contrast, in the stories told by Asian speakers (ten out of eleven), ethnicity is mentioned or alluded to, either in descriptions of the speaker him or herself, or of an addressee. Religion is cited by Asians as possible factors hindering their addressees' acceptance of their self-disclosures, while references to Christianity and God are made by several white speakers primarily as factors hindering their own self-acceptance.

The second difference is related to the first one: In the coming out stories of Asian narrators, the non-lesbian and non-gay selves that they report presenting to audiences such as their families, especially parents, and the openly lesbian or gay selves that they report presenting to everyone else were kept clearly separate. No such compartmentalized self-presentations are evident in the coming out stories told by white narrators. For example, whereas none of the whites reported that they would not come out to their parents (in fact, parents were often described as among the first recipients of speakers' self-disclosures), Asian Americans tended to discuss the issue of coming out to parents as extremely problematic. Like the columnist who is quoted in the epigram at the beginning of this chapter, one Asian speaker talked about being a "raging queen" on campus. When he described being active in lesbian and gay campus groups and being accosted by strangers who were grateful for his work and gay visibility, he displayed linguistic and paralinguistic behaviors that gave an exaggerated impression of effeminateness. Yet when

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this same speaker reported that he could not disclose his sexuality to his parents, his self-presentation also changed accordingly. Another speaker stated numerous times that he was openly gay on campus, that he was running for office in student government on a platform opposing homophobia, thereby implicating his homosexuality, and that he routinely comes out; yet when he describes his parents, he questions the assumption that one should always come out, states that coming out is not obligatory, and that coming out to parents is difficult, all in direct contradiction to the position he maintains with respect to his school life.

These differences, (1) the emphasis on internal acceptance versus disclosure to others; (2) the degree of consistency in the self-presentations reported or implied by speakers across social situations seem to reflect culture-specific understandings about emotions, and culture-specific definitions of a proper human being. They suggest that whites were presenting themselves as people whose sense of morality originated from within and who could be true to themselves regardless of external circumstances, while Asian Americans were portraying themselves as being attuned to the need for social harmony and adjusted their self-presentations according to the social context, particularly in their family relations, reflecting their membership within Asian culture; and being aware of the importance of being forthright about their homosexuality, reflecting their membership within white Anglo-American culture.

## 5.2 Internal versus external orientation

The most salient difference in the coming out stories told by white and Asian narrators is the relative emphasis placed by members of each group on coming out to self versus to other. Most narrators address both aspects of coming out. But whites tended to emphasize the internal processes of self-realization and self-acceptance. For instance, over a third of the white narrators (nine out of twenty-six) described problems with inner conflicts, such as feelings of not wanting to be gay, and strong though suppressed

attractions to members of the same sex. Contrastively, Asians tended not to dwell on the issue of self-realization or self-acceptance, and none of them reported inner conflicts to the same degree of intensity as the white narrators did. On the occasions when Asian narrators did discuss their internal realization of their sexual orientation, they did not recount a drawn out process. Instead, they usually stated the point at which they realized their homosexuality, omitting any reference to their own feelings about their discovery of their gayness.

The following exemplifies how whites may assume an internal orientation toward coming out. In a spontaneously conducted interview in upstate New York, L1, a man in his late thirties, is asked by A to tell his coming out story. After giving his name, age, and place of origin, he recounts his story.

(A)

1. L1: And ah,
2. I think I've known
3. since I was --
4. that I was gay
5. since I was probably five years old
6. .. for a long long long long time.
7. It wasn't until I was a teenager
8. that I really began to understand more about what that meant.
9. It wasn't until I was about eighteen
10. that I started to recognize
11. and identify as a gay man.
12. But for me,
13. coming out is an ongoing process.
14. A: ==Yeah.
15. L1: ==It's not a-
16. it's not something that happens
17. and then you're out.
18. Right.
19. L1: Everything is --
20. A: Right.
21. L1: there.
22. =It's=
23. A: ='cause= there's always the assumption that you're straight.
24. L1: Right.
25. It's an ongoing process
26. of getting to know oneself
27. and getting to understand what it means to gay
28. to be a gay person sexually,
29. as well as spiritually,

30. and culturally also.

L1's use of verbs of cognition such as (2) "known", (8) "understand," and (10) "recognize," (26) "getting to know oneself," and (27) "getting to understand" suggest that his immediate understanding of coming out is in terms of a psychological process of self-awareness and self-definition. When he begins to define coming out as a process that is (16-17) "not something that happens and then you're out," A proffers an explanation in support of his definition, (23) "'cause there's always the assumption that you're straight," alluding to the social dimension of coming out as self-disclosure to others. While A's explanation is acknowledged by L1, he continues with his construal of "process" as an internally motivated one, that is, coming out as a progression toward self-understanding within a range of contexts rather than the external process of countering the assumption held by most heterosexuals within American culture that all "normal" individuals are heterosexual. So for L1, the internal psychological process appears to be more salient than the social one.

In contrast, the following description (B), elicited in an interview scheduled with A, is typical of the Asian orientation to the external. A queries T, a 26-year old Chinese American, about his coming out story.

(B)

1. A: So what's your coming out story?
2. T: My coming out story? Well uh
3. A: —or however you define it.
4. T: Okay, uh, I came out
5. when I I moved to Berkeley
6. four years ago
7. nah- not to my family
8. but in terms of uh being open with those around me
9. on a daily basis,
10. openly gay to those around me.
11. So um, it was actually,
12. it was almost a strategic method of coming out,
13. y'know, deciding to go to graduate school um,
14. on the other coast,
15. y'know on the west coast,
16. and all my-
17. and the rest of my family's on the East coast,
18. and um, it sorta just gave me you know the the, the room
19. both psychological and geographic room

20. to to feel real,  
21. more free to do so.

Since the interviewer, A, allowed T the option of defining “coming out story” for himself, his response suggests that the most salient definition of coming out is (4-10) disclosure of his sexual orientation to other people rather than that of self-acceptance or self-realization. He goes on to explain his motivation for revealing his homosexuality to new classmates at the outset.

22. T: So basically um,  
23. from the day I landed in Berkeley,  
24. I I consciously decided not to keep my uh homosexuality secret  
25. from anyone I met from that point on.  
26. So um whenever I uh  
27. when I'd meet new classmates,  
28. um I would,  
29. first couple of times being with them  
30. I would find a way to =reveal= the  
31. A: =Wow.=  
32. T: fact that I was gay to them  
33. A: ==Uhhuh.  
34. T: because I know that um,  
35. well, the reason for that was was  
36. because um,  
37. I knew that if they,  
38. if we knew each other a-  
39. with myself being ostensibly straight for a long time  
40. it might be harder to come =out so,  
41. A: =Right.=  
42. T: = that's why= I had to get it uh out in the open  
43. A: =Uhhuh.=  
44. T: =as soon= as possible  
45. A: =Uhhuh.=  
46. T: And uh, yeah,  
47. because I I wasn't out in college and and,  
48. the reason why was just that, that um,  
49. all my classmates had known me as a straight person  
50. fer, fer a couple of years  
51. and I felt very very self-conscious about saying,  
52. well no, it's all a sham,  
53. I'm actually gay.  
54. A: ==Uhhuh.  
55. T: It's not that they would have rejected =me or= anything,  
56. A: =Right.=  
57. T: it's just, there was, the sense of  
58. shame was not a-  
59. for being gay,  
60. but for hiding the fact =that= I was gay  
61. A: =Oh.=

Not only has he defined coming out in terms of the social act of self-disclosure, but his focus on relationships is reflected in how he reports that (34-44) he would almost rather change the people he has relationships with (cf. 11-15 where he says “it [i.e., going to graduate school] was almost a strategic method of coming out”) and establish his sexuality upon first acquaintance than (46-56) change the relationships with people he has known for a long time by coming out to them. For T, the problem of coming out is not with the intrinsic quality of “being gay” but with self-disclosure after a history of presumed heterosexuality. Interestingly, this stretch of text contains one of the few times in his narrative that T makes an explicit reference to his emotions (69-70), suggesting again, his orientation to the social rather than the psychological. By stating that he (63-65) “felt very self-conscious about saying, Well no, it’s all a sham, I’m actually gay,” he explicitly defines “the sense of shame” from being exposed as someone who has engaged in the improper conduct of hiding his sexuality. The topics he chooses to verbalize (for instance, coming out to others), the ones he tends to omit (for instance, emotions), the order in which he addresses topics (for example, coming out to others is described first), all implicate his external orientation, and his construal of the problem of coming out as social rather than psychological.

### 5.3 Conflicts

Another manifestation of the orientation to the internal is in narrators’ descriptions of conflict. Common to the stories of white narrators who reported experiencing trouble with accepting their lesbian and gay identities is how each narrator verbalizes her or his conflict surrounding her or his homosexuality in terms of the transgression of certain cultural norms or expectations. C1, a participant in the rap session enumerates these expectations in general terms against which his own feelings can be seen to contrast.

(C)

1. C1: Basically I’ve been told a lot of-
2. for most of my life,
3. I have to be a certain way,
4. and feel a certain way,

5. and do certain \*things,
6. and then some things
7. you just weren't supposed to do
8. or weren't supposed to feel.
9. Well I felt those things and,

Of interest is the fact that he uses the agentless passive, (1) "I've been told, etc.", and the use of (7) generic "you" along with the deontic verbs (3) "have to" and (7-8) "weren't supposed to." These devices implicate the existence of a cultural authority or agent who tells the speaker the proper way to behave. The absence of a specific person or entity from which the directives are issued enhances the authority and generality of the norms that the speaker portrays himself as violating.

M3, a 30-year old woman interviewed at a gay pride parade, also articulates these norms.

- (D)
1. M3: I've always was fascinated
  2. with anything about lesbians,
  3. um, but women don't do that, you know.

She takes on an authoritative "voice" that says, (3) ". . . but women don't do that, you know," in response to her personal perspective of being (1) "fascinated" with lesbians. She does not attribute the voice to a specific speaker, which, like the use of the agentless passive, and that of the unattributed directive signalled by the clause "you're not supposed to," creates the effect of imparting authority to the directive. The conflict is presented almost as though it were a dialogue between her inner desires and a disapproving cultural authority.

In some cases, parents were the ones to whom these expectations were attributed. K1 states that he became aware that something was amiss when his "first sexual thoughts" did not coincide with his mother's "warning" regarding the male experience of puberty.

- (E)
1. K1: Um,
  2. when I was ah,
  3. well I first-
  4. I had my first . homosexual thoughts
  5. which were also my first sexual thoughts,
  6. when I was eleven

7. I was sitting in Mr. R's fifth grade class
8. Au: =[laughter]=
9. K1: =second row from the left second seat=
10. from the back.
11. I remember very clearly
12. the boy who was I was thinking about
13. I will not mention \*his name,
14. and um,
15. and I thought
16. \*wow
17. this is really strange!
18. And I'm like,
19. oh this must be puberty.
20. My mother's warned me about \*this.
21. But she \*didn't say it would be about other guys,
22. this is really bizarre.
23. Um I said . to myself
24. Well it's {[laughs] \*probably} just a phase.
25. I'll grow out of this."

The way he portrays his initial awareness of his homosexual feelings, and his evaluation of them as unexpected (i.e., (17) "strange" and (22) "bizarre", in view of his mother's (20) "warning" about heterosexual puberty) and hence (24) "probably just a phase" sets the stage for rest of the story, in which he recounts the difficulty he has with grappling with his homosexual feelings.

In others, religion, society, and parents were all specifically named as sources of opposition to homosexuality. Whereas in the previous examples, the cultural imperatives appear to originate from outside of the speaker, G2, a 23 year old participant in the rap group, designates not only outside factors, that is, society and his parents, but himself, in addition, as a bearer of cultural norms. In the following excerpt, G2 has been discussing his awareness of his homosexuality as a pre-adolescent.

- (F)
1. G: Even though even though I I knew that I had attractions to to guys,
  2. um I still, I still, you know,
  3. I still thought, you know, I'd get married
  4. with a woman.
  5. I mean, all these things, you know, that that society,
  6. that my parents sus- expected of me,
  7. that I expected of myself.

Describing his expectations that he would be able to conform with heterosexual norms, G2, as do the other white speakers who recount their experiences of inner conflict, draws a distinction between his same-sex feelings (i.e., (1) “even though I knew I had attractions to guys. . .”) and engaging in culturally normative behavior (i.e., (3–4) “I still thought, you know, I’d get married with a woman”). By using the adversative (1) “even though,” he contrasts his desires with his intentions and thereby formulates his same-sex feelings as a breach of the heterosexual norm, though one that can be emended so long as his behavior conforms with cultural norms, even if his feelings do not.

The striking feature of these descriptions is the prominence of cultural directives or norms in the difficulties speakers report having faced in accepting their homosexuality. These cultural directives or norms may be expressed as sometimes vague prohibitions (e.g., “some things you just weren’t supposed to do or weren’t supposed to feel”), as statements of the way the world is (e.g., “women don’t do that”), or as expectations or anticipations by cultural authorities (e.g., “my mother’s warned me about this [i.e., puberty]”). Same-sex attractions are described in juxtaposition to these descriptions, and emphasize that they are infractions against these norms.

Asian narrators do indicate awareness in their stories of violations of cultural norms, but in sharp contrast with the accounts given by white narrators, in none of the eleven stories told by Asians is any analogous conflict reported. Indeed, Asian narrators often explained the avoidance of conflict, or failed to address the issue of conflict at all.

G, an Asian female whose story is written, exemplifies an instance of a narrator who gives no indication of internal conflict. She begins her coming out story thusly:

(G)

1. G: I chose to remain anonymous simply due to the fact that I have parents,
2. attend SFSU. I think as soon as I got out high school, I finally came
3. out to myself. I kinda knew that I was attracted to women since I was a kid. I
4. used to have very vivid dreams about women, even in kindergarten. But
5. anyway, I always just knew that I liked women. I used to be scared I would
6. grow up to be gay, but I don’t think anymore that it’s something you grow up to
7. be. [sic]

After describing her attraction toward women from an early age, she writes, (5-6) “I used to be scared I would grow up to be gay,” implicating awareness of a cultural norm against homosexuality. Unlike the white narrators who verbalize cultural norms and follow them with a description of the ways in which they transgress them, G’s statement is followed by a remark, (6-7) “but I don’t think anymore that it’s something you grow up to be,” that negates the subordinate proposition (i.e., (6) “grow up to be gay”) in her statement. That is, her statement, “I used to be scared I would grow up to be gay,” is not a preface, as might be expected, to a story about how the narrator overcame her fear of being gay, or how she reconciled her own violation of the implied norm. Instead, it is made to show how her views about the development of one’s sexuality have changed.

D, a 20-year old Asian male in his late teens who tells his coming out story in the rap group session, emphasizes disclosure to others. He begins with an explanation of why he had no problems with self-acceptance.

(H)

1. D: Uh .. I’ll go next.
2. ( )
3. um [clears throat] I’s pretty lucky
4. =cause um I: didn’t have to deal with what a lot of people said
5. .. that coming out to yourself is very hard.
6. um I \*knew I was attracted to men
7. .. before I knew that was \*wrong,
8. and I think that was very strange,
9. cause I I .. was attracted to um .. s- uh other guys
10. you know when I was pretty {[hi] young} still.

Although he implicates, as do the white speakers, a cultural authority that his same-sex feelings are (7) “wrong”, he claims to have escaped inner conflict because of (9) the early age at which he realized his attraction. T invokes a similar explanation, asserting that the early realization of one’s homosexuality is less likely to result in an inconsistent self-image, which might lead to internal conflict. His position is spelled out in the following excerpt, where he begins by stating that he has known about his own homosexuality (4) “since a very early age.”

(I)

1. T: Yeah.

2. But it's uh, yeah's uh,
3. basically,
4. since a very early age so,
5. which is nice,
6. =I think.=
7. A: =Uhhuh.=
8. T: I think,
9. better in a sense that um,
10. it's sort of you don-
11. when you're that young,
12. you don't understand really anything about yourself,
13. right?
14. A: Right.
15. T: So if you realize you're different,
16. in the sense that in th- in th-
17. because you're attracted to the same sex,
18. then that is just
19. A: ==Yeah.
20. T: another part of of all the other things
21. =about= yourself
22. A: =Right.=
23. T: that you're learning
24. =at the= time.
25. A: =Yeah.=
26. Yeah.
27. T: If y-
28. if you're sorta of uh ,
29. uh realize uh learn about your sexuality more
30. T: when you're older
31. =then= you'll have this very different image of yourself
32. A: =Yeah.=
33. Mhm.
34. T: and then y- your gayness can very well conflict with that image
35. and that can create all sorts of problems
36. and make it much harder to deal with.

He does refer obliquely to the heterosexual norm not in terms of a transgression, but by discussing the realization of being “different” from others—a term that is much less value-laden, with little or no authoritative force, than the ones used by whites when referring to cultural norms—who are attracted to the opposite sex.

It is notable that later on in the interview, A points out that socialization into norms could lead to a “retroactive” form of regret or guilt for having transgressed a norm. As shown in the excerpt below, T acknowledges A's observations.

- (J)
1. T: ==Yeah.
  2. I guess so,
  3. it's it's um,

4. y- yah,  
 5. um, I think that uh, y'could,  
 6. but in my case  
 7. there's never a factor of um wanting to change myself?  
 8. A: ==Uhhuh.  
 9. T: An' I an' I an' I sort of uh attribute that  
 10. to the fact that I was sort of aw- self-aware  
 11. as being gay from a very young age,  
 12. I'd never really want y'know to cure myself  
 13. =or to change= myself.  
 14. A: =Uhhuh. =  
 15. T: Uh my primary concerns were  
 16. how do I be a gay person  
 17. and not let anyone  
 18. A: ==Uhhuh.  
 19. T: else know about it,  
 20. right?  
 21. So it's not like um,  
 22. I just wanted to fool everyone  
 23. A: ==Oh.  
 24. Uhhuh.  
 25. T: around me.  
 26. I didn't want to change  
 27. A: ==Yeah.  
 28. T: myself,  
 29. A: == I see.  
 30. T: right?  
 31. So um, like,  
 32. yeah, I do-  
 33. you do learn,  
 34. well I I did know  
 35. that everyone else would think think  
 36. it was wrong,  
 37. even at that age  
 38. A: ==Uhhuh.  
 39. T: but, it's not something I n-  
 40. I really kinda took for granted myself,  
 41. it's just something um,  
 42. I knew would make other people ostracize me  
 43. and therefore, they couldn't know.

Remarkable about this passage is his emphasis on how his realization of the heterosexual norm had little influence on his self-image as homosexual. He admits his realization since an early age that same sex feelings were indeed “wrong” in (4-5), (31-37), and (42). But he seems to be unequivocal about never having had any wish to change his inner desires, making the point several times in (7) “there’s never a factor of wanting to change myself,” (12-13) “I’d never really wanted to cure myself or to change myself,” (26) “I didn’t want to change”, unlike many of the white narrators. Instead, he gives the impression that he

was mainly preoccupied with upholding a façade of normality, and states this concern several times as well in (15-19) “Uh, my primary concerns were how do I person and not let anyone else know about it,” (22) “I just wanted to fool everyone,” and (43) “they couldn’t know.” White speakers reporting conflicts did describe wanting to change themselves (for instance, in the rap session, C1 had stated that he did not want to be gay), or at least, not wanting to engage in social interactions where they could not maintain a self-presentation consistent with their internal experience of self (for instance, D1, another participant in the rap session, reported avoiding friends and family because he could obviate the problem of presenting an outer self inconsistent with how he felt inside). Thus, once again, T exemplifies the Asian focus on the maintenance of smooth social relations rather than on the internal.

The following, excerpted from an interview between A, the interviewer, and C, a Chinese American woman in her early twenties, exemplifies a description of an internal self-realization in which the speaker acknowledges the presence of conflictedness, but does not evidence it to the same degree as the whites who report such experiences.

(K)

1. A: Um, did you have any conflicts about the discovery?
2. C: Um, yes,
3.     um, what do you mean by conflicts?
4. A: Well,
5. C: ==try to convince myself not?
6. A: Yes.
7.     Or or or deny it or whatever.
8. C: I think I did, you know,
9.     suppress it for a while,
10.    and, but I was,
11.    I guess I was really analytic about my life at the time?
12.    So I was doing a lot of just sort of probing
13.    and thinking
14.    and you know, researching sort of different ways of life um.
15.    I was still going out with a man from high school at that point
16.    so it was a little weird, you know,
17.    thinking about sexual orientation
18.    meanwhile in a heterosexual relationship.

C responds affirmatively in (2) to A’s query regarding conflictedness about the former’s discovery of sexual orientation, and then requests clarification of the term in (3).

Ultimately, she reinterprets the problem of conflictedness as (9) “suppression” of her sexuality, in agreement with A’s recasting of “conflict” as “denial” in (7), in contrast to the whites who construed the experience of conflict in terms of a violation of cultural norms rather than mere suppression of knowledge. Indeed, she seems to suggest that her sexuality was something that was a matter of discovery. She talks about having been (11) “analytic” about her life, and having engaged in (12) “probing,” (13) “thinking,” and (14) “researching” alternative lifestyles. These terms underscore that, for her, the issue of her own sexual orientation was an object of detached investigation or exploration, and not a source of emotional stress due to internalized heterosexual cultural norms or directives. Her narrative conforms with the pattern of the other Asians where individuals do not report experiences of inner conflict or problems with self-acceptance with respect to their sexuality.

But even in the one instance where an Asian narrator did describe problems with self-acceptance, he did so in a way that was not only different from but also failed to evince the same degree of conflictedness as whites reported. M, the only Asian in the data who does describe a problem with self-acceptance, does not articulate the cause of his depression in terms of a culture-specific norm. Introducing himself to the other participants in the rap session, he begins by describing his emotional distress in his coming out story, similar to the way that some of the white narrators do.

(L)

1. M: Okay my name’s M?
2. =={[p] Let’s see,}
3. I’ve been out for one year
4. .. exactly one year last April,
5. and the rea- one reason why I came out was um
6. .. um .. I’ve \*always known since I’s like seven or eight years old I guess
7. ==I don’t know the first time you think about these .. things
8. but the reason why I came out
9. cause I was .. I I \*know a lot of people
10. ==I have a \*lot of friends
11. but I was \*so lonely like
12. .. during the \*month of February \*March
13. I basically \*isolated myself from everybody
14. you know .. {[ac] would never return calls}
15. didn’t \*call anybody (noone),

16. people call me back and,  
 17. .. was doing really \*poorly in school,  
 18. and um, and suddenly:: you know I was  
 19. .. {[ac] it was really bad.}  
 20. you know I was really feeling really depressed,  
 21. so then I deci-  
 22. ==and then one time there was this \*movie showing on TV  
 23. ==channel two,  
 24. .. and I forgot the name of it  
 25. ==but it's from about a family  
 26. ==a dysfunctional family?  
 27. one was .. \*gay,  
 29. Au: [laughter]  
 30. M: =one was alcoholic,=  
 31. Au: =[laughter]=  
 32. M: =and the and the \*girl= uh the w- and the woman,  
 33. Au: =[laughter]=  
 34. M: was had a .. bad marriage.  
 35. And the one- when during the \*movie um the \*best line that I heard  
 36. ==I still remember you know was when  
 37. ==well when the son came out to his \*father.  
 38. and uh, and cause he had tried to commit suicide.  
 39. and uh, he tried to smash himself into a pole  
 40. and then what happened was  
 41. the father or the mother said  
 42. {[lo]look} \*you \*think .. we would rather visit you in a \*graveyard  
 43. ==than you know, accept you who you are.  
 44. And then just \*thinking about ( ) I said myself,  
 45. ( ) my parents  
 46. would I wanna see my parents  
 47. .. visit me in the graveyard?  
 48. it was .. it was unfair for \*me and it was unfair for them.  
 49. So then,  
 50. I decided to go out there  
 51. and just look for things.  
 52. ==and so I went to Pacific Center,  
 53. um Monday night groups,  
 54. they've M- Monday night groups there,  
 55. and then they: said there was an \*Asian group .. on \*Tuesdays.  
 56. ==so I went to that,  
 57. and since then I've .. {[p] sort of become ( ) friends ( ).}

Distinguishable within this narrative is the overall narrative of how the speaker came to accept his homosexuality, and the narrative embedded within it describing the television program that prompted his acceptance. M's narrative is both similar and dissimilar to those told by whites. While he describes his internal emotional state in (19) "it was really bad," and in (20) "I was really feeling really depressed," presumably regarding acceptance of his gay identity, his concern is with the external consequences of

his depression, such as the isolation he describes in (11), neglect of social obligations in (14-16), and poor academic performance in (17). Additionally, the apparent abruptness of the onset of his depression described in (18-20), “suddenly you know I was, it was really bad, you know, I was really feeling depressed,” and its equally sudden departure described in (21), “so then I deci-”, is quite different from the stories of whites reporting internal conflict. All of the white individuals (six out of nine) who reported that they knew of their same-sex attractions pre-pubescently and that they had experienced inner conflicts gave accounts that began during high school or earlier, and spanned the period of adolescence. M also stated that he had always known of his homosexuality in (6), but makes no reference to puberty or high school. He does not name any specific source of conflict, and does not explain the source of his depression in terms of any violations of internalized cultural beliefs. Furthermore, rather than going into detail on the internal process of self-acceptance, he describes the plot of a television show in (22-43). Hence, to the extent that the disturbance of M’s homosexuality to his self-image does not appear to be as extreme or as persistent as it is for whites, his story resembles that of the other Asian narrators. Second, M summarizes his emotions, stating only in gross terms that (19) “it was really bad” and he was (20) “really depressed.” The vagueness of his references to (50) “there” and (51) “things” is consistent with the overall lack of detail specifying his feelings. In contrast to the white narrators like D1, who evidenced an inwardly oriented perspective by talking about what did not but should have happened, M’s perspective is oriented externally upon the palpable effects of his depression, namely, his self-imposed isolation from social intercourse and the suffering of his schoolwork. Third, that his original intention regarding his account was that it serve only as a subnarrative or introduction to the longer more detailed accounts of self-disclosure to others is evidenced by “So then I deci-,” which presumably would have ended his account of self-acceptance if he had not self-interrupted at this point and proceeded with the description of the television program. The fact that he ends the narration of the film with (49-50) “So then I

decided to go out there and just look for things” supports this argument. Had he continued with his sentence in (21), that is, had not self-interrupted, then the passage up to that point would have terminated his account of self-acceptance, and served as an orientation for the narrative of self-disclosure rather than one in its own right. From one perspective, M’s account of the difficulty of self-acceptance appears to constitute an exception to the other stories told by Asian Americans; nonetheless, his tendency not to go into detail with regard to emotions and to focus, instead, on external events, the absence of a description of a transgression, and the comparatively easier time in terms of duration and internal conflict in self-acceptance is consistent with the kinds of narratives told by Asians.

#### 5.4 Descriptions of relationships with parents

The difference between the internal point of view of stories told by whites and the external orientation of those told by Asians is also seen in how the narrators deal with the issue of self-disclosure to parents. Of the fifteen (of nineteen<sup>1</sup>) white speakers who address the issue of parents, nearly all (fourteen out of fifteen) state that they have revealed their sexual orientation to their parents. In contrast, of the ten (of eleven<sup>2</sup>) Asian speakers who discuss parents, almost half (four) of the Asian speakers indicate that they have not disclosed their homosexuality to their parents; of the six remaining speakers whose parents are aware of their child’s sexuality, two speakers state that they had not intended to self-disclose. In three of the six instances, the parent to whom the initial disclosure was made requested that the speaker withhold the information from the other parent. Thus, in the case of Asian narrators, only one speaker reported intentionally and successfully coming out to both parents. In general, it seems that coming out to parents for Asians is extremely problematic.

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<sup>1</sup> Four others did not address the issue of parents.

<sup>2</sup> One Asian participant of the rap session, in his late teens, did not address the issue of parents.

M3, a white interviewee at the Rochester Gay Parade, has just recounted to A, the interviewer, how she came to discover her lesbianism and has enumerated several instances of coming out to others. In the following excerpt, she begins by summing up the experience of self-disclosure as positive, including the reaction of her mother. Like many of the Asian and white narrators, she verbalizes her awareness of the risks of disclosing to parents (11-12).

(M)

1. M3: Um it's been --
2.     for me it's been a very positive experience,
3.     my mother's been very supportive,
4.     I mean that --
5. A: When did you come out to her?
6.     And how =was it=?
7. M:             =About six months ago.=
8. A: ==Oh really.
9. M: ==Um I mean,
10.    I was --
11.    yeah I was very concerned about it.
12.    My mother's seventy-eight years old,
13. A: Wow.
14. M: Very Catholic,
15. A: Uhhuh.
16. M: um, very much ( )

However, she goes on to explain why she came out anyway, basing her explanation on the nature of her relationship with her mother. In fact, she uses the word "close" several times to describe the relationship she has with her mother.

(N)

M: My mother and I are very close.  
We've been close for a long time  
...  
and we've been close so.

M mentions the women's chorus and coming out several times, reinforcing the impression that these were important events in her life.

(O)

M: and to join the chorus and coming out were,  
...  
It would be hard for me not to be able to tell her about my chorus  
not to be able to tell her about my girlfriend.  
...  
well I talk to her

because my girlfriend  
and my chorus are a big part of my life,

A requirement of intimate relationships in American culture is the mutual disclosure of personal information, including experiences and events that have significance in individuals' lives. Given the closeness of the relationship between M and her mother, and the pertinence of the chorus to her social life and momentousness of her realization of her homosexuality, it follows that M would make her homosexuality known to her mother, despite the fact that she was "very concerned" about her mother's reaction.

Asians, in contrast, appear to recognize that coming out as a general practice may help to advance the cause of lesbian and gay acceptance, or may, in theory, lead to a more fulfilling and sincere relationship, but may also be problematic within specifically Asian cultural contexts. M, an Asian male in his early twenties and a participant in the rap session, reveals ambivalence about being openly gay when he addresses the issue of disclosing his sexuality to his parents. Unlike Marta and many of the white narrators, the issue for M of disclosing his sexual orientation to his parents is not one that is self-evident.

(P)

1. M: ( ) my parents I don't know yet.
2. It's like .. everybody \*tells you
3. {[ac] oh you gotta come out to your} \*parents
4. {[ac] you gotta come out to your} \*parents
5. {[ac] you gotta come out to your} \*parents.
6. but .. you know, it jus' it jus'
7. because .. uh uh y'know
8. ==we're A- I'm Asian and I'm Chinese
9. ==and my parents are \*very very traditional
10. ==and \*very conservative
11. but pretty mih- pretty modern (at the same time)
12. .. it's \*different.
13. ==you know it's just different from others
14. .. uh from the whites and African Americans whatever
15. it's just uh, it's {[dc] really really hard. }

While he expresses his hesitation regarding revealing his homosexuality to his parents in (1), "My parents I don't know yet", he also demonstrates his awareness of the received view among lesbians and gays that (3-5) "You gotta come out to your parents."<sup>3</sup> He then

<sup>3</sup> Note here the presence of the authoritative "voice" of lesbian and gay culture and the absence of it when he describes his difficulty with his acceptance of his homosexuality.

adduces, as a kind of response, (8) his Asian ethnicity and the related idea of (9-10) his parents' conservatism and traditional views as reasons for why the issue of coming out to his parents is (15) "really really hard," and why, therefore, he cannot comply with the general opinion held by many lesbians and gays that one should self-disclose to one's parents. However, he does not rule out coming out to his parents.

16. M: so I haven't had a chance to think about coming out to my parents,
17. so I kind of uh .. I don't know ..
18. but sooner or later I will have- not will \*have to but .. I will w-
19. I'll \*want to come out to them.
20. ==I just don't know when the right time is.

Interestingly, his ambivalence is further manifested in how he begins by saying that (18) "sooner or later I will have-" as though circumstances will force him to self-disclose, and enables him to maintain his commitment to social harmony with his parents, but then corrects himself by saying, (18-19) "not will have to but I'll want to come out to them," thereby adopting a more volitional, and hence, autonomous, stance characteristic of western culture.

Two other Asians also describe problems and evince ambivalence surrounding the issue of coming out to their parents, even as they demonstrate, as M does, their awareness of the cultural directive to come out to everyone, including, and especially, parents. V, a Vietnamese participant in the rap session, asserts definitively in (1) that he cannot self-disclose to his parents.

- (Q)
1. V: {[f] and um,}
  2. .. and because (of the xxx) situations,
  3. ==um I can't tell my parents
  4. and uh .. you know uh
  5. ==th- but there is that pressure .. internally,
  6. uh to answer your question,
  7. only because I feel like,
  8. I .. could never know {[hi] them?}
  9. and they could never know \*me.
  10. ==and um,
  11. my parents are are are older,
  12. they're like almost two generations older than me,
  13. ==they .. they were like forty when they had me ( )
  14. so .. there's that gap there
  15. ==and and a:nd .. and you know

16. ==their their health isn't \*great,
17. and so it's like,
18. .. I feel half the time it's like,
19. .. what if they pass a\*way,
20. and {[p] don't ever .. you know, learn the truth of who I am, you know.}
21. but at the same time, it's like
22. .. well .. who are we to say ( ) we think
23. ( )
24. but, but \*yeah but that's the only time we can be completely \*free,
25. is ( ), {[p] [hi] so}.

However, like M, he seems to recognize that verbalizing this decision violates an expectation among lesbians and gays—that intimate relationships, and parent-child relationships in particular, should be based on mutual self-expression since it leads to greater honesty and intimacy—because he immediately follows his assertion, which almost appears to be a concession, with a reference to (5-9) “that pressure, internally, [to come out to parents] only because I feel like I could never know them and they could never know me.”

But the way he justifies his decision is by implying that the news of his homosexuality might cause some unspecified damage to their well-being, given (11-13) the difference in age between him and his parents, and (16) their ailing health. Justifying his decision in terms of the survival of his parents alleviates the seriousness of the transgression of the lesbian and gay cultural directive to come out.

The third of the three Asians who have misgivings about telling their parents is T, an interviewee who explains why he cannot tell his parents that he is gay. Like the others, he assumes that he is “giving up on this very very close relationship” with his parents by not revealing his homosexuality to them. By adducing so many reasons to justify why he cannot come out to his parents, he seems to implicate his awareness and belief that intimate relationships are formed and maintained through mutual self-disclosure, and that parents are natural recipients of acts of coming out.

- (R)
1. T: So.
  2. I guess I feel that,
  3. there's so much lost {[laughs] ground},

4. in terms of,
5. our getting to know each other
6. simply coming out to them
7. wouldn't even begin to
8. A: ==Right.
9. T: to bridge the =gap= between us.
10. A: =Uhhuh.=
11. T: And so that's half the reason,
12. sort of like the giving up on on any
13. A: ==Uhhuh.
14. T: giving up on this very very close relationship with my parents
15. um which, um
16. A: ==Uhhuh.
17. T: perhaps is wrong of me to do but
18. A: Huh.
19. T: but which basically t- t-
20. the other reason I'm not coming out to them
21. is that they're also very, traditional Chinese
22. A: ==Uhhuh.
23. T: people
24. =and = it's simply
25. A: =Uhhuh.=
26. T: I don't-
27. it's ( ) I mean just,
28. ih w-
29. it could conceivably kill them
30. o(h)n th(h)e spot really.
31. They are like that.

He discusses the sort of relationship he has with them as one that consists of a gap (3-9) that cannot be bridged by the news of his sexuality, in contradistinction to the western belief that personal information enhances intimacy. His understanding of his relationship with his parents manifests his membership in Asian culture. Like the other Asian speakers, he makes reference to his parents' conservatism in (20-23), as a justification for why he does not intend to reveal himself to them as gay. He bolsters his justification by using hyperbole to support his point that the extent of their traditionalism puts them at risk of death if T were to self-disclose (29-30). Once again, he exhibits a perspective that is characteristic of an Asian perspective, namely, a view of self-disclosure, and, by extension, the expression of emotions, as dangerous to social relationships. The improbability that such a disclosure could lead to greater intimacy, the traditionalism of his parents, the likelihood of their overreaction, and the loss of the relationship altogether make it almost inevitable that social harmony is the best T can hope for with his parents

even if it is achieved at the expense of depth in the relationship. That he opts for social harmony over the truth of his homosexuality as far as his parents are concerned is another indication of external orientation.

In all three of these instances, speakers verbalize (1) a belief that exists among many lesbians and gays that coming out to one's parents will lead to a closer relationship; (2) a belief that the failure to self-disclose entails some sacrifice to a close relationship with parents; (3) norms of behavior within family relationships that differ from those of white Anglo culture (for instance, it may not be prudent to come out to one's parents if one is Asian). What appears to be manifest in these examples is the weighing of the consequences of observing white norms (displaying the "true," i.e., gay self) versus Asian norms of behavior (ensuring smooth social relations by, for example, suppressing display of the "true," i.e., gay self) when the issue of coming out is under consideration. This negotiation of norms is not evident in any of the accounts of the white narrators.

Finally, a typical situation occurs when parents do know but refuse to acknowledge their child's sexuality. For instance, M1, an Asian man in his mid-twenties who was interviewed during a gay pride march, had self-disclosed to his father, but, as of the interview, his father continued to refuse to recognize this aspect of his identity even though it had been ten years since the speaker first came out to him.

(S)

1. M1: Um, and then with my family
2. I jus' I just ( ) totally,
3. I told my father when I was, seventeen, I think.
4. I just told him,
5. A: ==Uhhuh.
6. M: and he hated it,
7. he still hates it.
8. It's been ten years or more
9. since he's known I've been gay.
10. Ten years.
11. Ten years.
12. A: Wow.
13. =So you=
14. M: =And he's=
15. we barely speak.
16. A: Oh really?
17. M: Yeah um,

18. when we do,
19. we we don't acknowledge that we don't speak
20. and he sort of tries to carry on ( ),
21. I speak to him three times a year maybe.
22. =I see= him maybe once a year
23. A: =Uhhuh=
24. M: or maybe once every other year.
25. You know.
26. And um, it's hard
27. but it's just harder tryin' tuh tryin' tuh hide things.

It is interesting to note that M1 himself states in (27) that he attempts to conceal any signs of his homosexuality even despite his father's awareness of his homosexuality. Even in this instance, M1 reveals himself to be attentive to the effect on his relationship with his father of reinforcing the information concerning his sexuality to his father. In other words, Mike verbalizes a perspective that gives precedence to the father-son relationship over gay self-presentation. This viewpoint is consistent with the orientation of the other Asian narrators to the external.<sup>4</sup>

C is one of the exceptions to the general Asian tendency to view coming out to parents as fraught with problems. She mentions twice that she and her parents are not close.

C: I uh, my m- my mom and I aren't very close?

...  
I'm not very close to my parents either.

Thus, she may have had few misgivings about violating any norms that were operative in the relationship. In the following excerpt, she outlines her motivation for coming out to her parents.

(T)

1. C: I uh, my m- my mom and I aren't very close?
2. My mom um you know was talking to me

---

<sup>4</sup> In the coming out story of a Chinese American male-to-female transsexual (<http://www.asiancompass.com>), the narrator explains

I have to wear big heavy jackets every time I go home. I don't want to burden my parents by just showing up with my breasts.

Even where the physical evidence of an alternative sexuality is unmistakable, the same relational orientation, manifested as concern that one's sexuality may be a source of social discomfort, that is apparent in the stories of the Asians is present in that of this female transsexual.

3. and she made me really mad
4. because uh she said something about those weird people with AIDS
5. and blah blah blah,
6. and at that point
7. I had been active in AIDS walks
8. and things like that
9. and so it really upset me.
10. And so I sent a letter to my mother
11. and then I fired off an email to my dad
12. [laughs]
13. Talk about engineer.
14. [laughs]
15. ...
16. Um I told him that it really upset me
17. when you know my mother was cutting down the people that I'm with-
18. you know,
19. the type of person that I am and um,
20. I don't remember.
21. It was it was more of an emotional like anger reaction than anything?
22. and I sort of regret that.

She reports making a partially successful attempt at disclosing her sexuality to her parents that appears to be motivated in part by the apparent lack of intimacy and in part by the impulse of her anger with her mother. (One might speculate that white individuals who were not close to their parents might do the converse, that is, they might not feel compelled to reveal their sexual orientation in the absence of a normative parent-child relationship.)

### 5.5 Ethnicity/religion

One striking difference among the stories was the fact that nearly all Asians (ten out of eleven) mentioned or alluded to their own and/or others' ethnicity. Those narrators who identified themselves explicitly as Asian (or Chinese or Vietnamese) often did so (1) to identify another aspect of themselves; (2) to explain why parents or others might be problematic recipients for self-disclosures; (3) to establish solidarity with the addressee.

First, for some speakers, ethnicity is referred to as a way of identification. For instance, A3 alludes to the Chinese belief of the existence of a close bond between mother and daughter when discussing whether her mother knew of A3's sexuality prior to disclosure. M describes how he went to a Gay Asian male support group after he came

out. In the written stories, speakers made reference to aspects of Chinese culture that figured into their lesbian and gay identity.

Second, it was used to justify some aspect of their story that deviated from the behavioral norms of lesbians and gays. As we've seen, ethnicity was cited as an explanatory factor in deciding whether or not to self-disclose to a particular recipient (usually the parents). For instance, M makes mention of the ethnicity of his family and himself to distinguish himself from those belonging to other ethnicities in order to support his contention that certain expectations concerning coming out to one's parents do not apply.

(U)

1. M: but .. you know, it jus' it jus'
2. because .. uh uh y'know
3. ==we're A- I'm Asian and I'm Chinese
4. ==and my parents are \*very very traditional
5. ==and \*very conservative
6. but pretty mih- pretty modern (at the same time)
7. .. it's \*different.
8. ==you know it's just different from others
9. .. uh from the whites and African Americans whatever

In addition to identifying themselves by ethnicity, speakers also describe others who are recipients of their disclosures also in terms of ethnicity. For example, T1 points out that one of the women, Gina, to whom he had been considering coming out as a reason for concern about her reaction, is Korean. In the following excerpt, he describes one of the interactions he has with her prior to his disclosure.

(V)

1. T1: so I went down there
2. .. and you know um I was staying with um
3. .. ([lo] oh her name's Gina,
4. and that's the one that sent me the card. }
5. So I was you know I stayed with her and um,
6. I was you know .. and I was you know .. called up the other girl
7. and who was you know also .. my good friend,
8. and um .. um well Gina and I were just like driving into Santa Monica one day
9. ==and I \*guess .. Santa Monica kind of has a um reputation for-
10. has a large gay population or whatever.
11. ==and .. she's kind of looked at me and she said,
12. {[hi] you know I think
13. there's .. there just too many gay people a{[laughs] round.}}

14. and i'm {[laugh] like .. well? .. what do \*\*you think about that?}
15. and um .. 'cause I mean she's Korean, and she's a Jehovah's {[dc] witness.}

He apparently mentions her ethnicity to suggest that she maintains views antithetical to homosexuality; hence, his reported cautiousness in (14), “well, what do you think about that?”, when she complains that there are (13) “too many gays” in Santa Monica. His additional remark that she is also a (15) Jehovah’s Witness reinforces the impression that he is attempting to convey his concern about her potential reaction to his self-disclosure.

Another possible motivation for alluding to ethnicity was to evoke the shared backgrounds between the speaker and hearer. For instance, C, a Chinese American whose story was elicited during a scheduled interview with A, also Chinese American and lesbian, made one allusion to her own ethnicity by mentioning (1) “dimsum,” an Asian concept. In her description of what happened when she revealed her sexuality to her father, she says:

- (W)
1. C: and my dad and I went out for dimsum
  2. and we talked about it
  3. and he was like,
  4. how how are you like this, you know

The reference to “dimsum” seems to be one of many devices used by C to indicate her orientation to her listener in the course of narrating her coming out story (cf. Clancy 1980:128). By being specific about the nature of the meal that she and her father had, referring to it as dimsum rather than the more generic brunch, C appears to be making an assumption about the addressee's ability to interpret the lexical item, and more generally, their relationship. Given that she does not explain the term, she assumes that A is also familiar with it, perhaps in view of their shared familiarity with the San Francisco Bay Area, which is populated with several large Asian enclaves and restaurants serving food in the style of dimsum, as well as their common ethnicity of Chinese American. She makes one additional reference to the email group, the Asian Pacific Lesbian Bisexual Network, using the acronym APLBN “applebun,” through which A established initial contact with her to set up the interview. These are not the only unexplained mentions that C makes. She also alludes to lesbian and gay culture. Taken together, these references suggest that,

for C, ethnicity and sexuality are significant identities insofar as they provide resources for constructing meanings in an act of narration with others who share those identities.

In contrast to the Asian speakers' consciousness of ethnicity as a social category relevant to their identities as lesbians and gays, only one of the seventeen whites mentioned ethnicity, and this was in conjunction with religion.

(X)

M3: I grew up in an Irish Catholic family.

All subsequent mentions were of her own or her mother's Catholicism. Indeed, if any social affiliation was mentioned by whites, it was usually religion. Seven whites mentioned or alluded to their own religious affiliation, either Catholicism or Christianity, and sometimes that of others. For instance, one speaker, V1, a white participant in the rap session, identifies himself specifically as a (7) "gay Christian."

(Y)

1. V1: But um .. being out at B is like really funny I mean just like
2. ..cause like at the beginning of the year
3. I was just like all, you know, Mr. Scaredy Cat
4. =I didn't you know wanna say anything and,
5. and now I'm all {[p] you know} doing all these functions
6. =I . you know I spoke at the rally yesterday,
7. and I told everyone what it was like to =be a= gay Christian and,
8. X: =[cough]=
9. V1: =and= you know it was just it was really \*good to just like you know
10. X: =[cough]=
11. V1: to speak my voice
12. and t's- t' jus' say what I \*feel you know
13. =something that I've kept hidden so \*long, you know?

Two individuals indicated that their religious beliefs were a hindrance to their ability to accept or label themselves as lesbian or gay. In an interview with A, B, a woman in her late twenties, discusses her (2) Evangelical and (3) Baptist grandparents who (4-5) raised her, and how their religious beliefs (6-8) affected her ability to come out.

(Z)

1. B: But they were very-
2. Part of their lives they were Evangelical
3. and part of their lives they were Baptist.
4. And I spent a lot of time with them
5. when I was really little.
6. And they had real strict beliefs about the world
7. and I found that those ended up controlling me

8. more than um I would have liked them to have controlled me.

One of the white participants in the rap group, K1 alludes to religion by describing his mother's concern about his homosexuality and how she felt compelled to consult with the family minister.

(AA)

1. K1: we'll take you to our minister.
2. And so I went,
3. and I talked to my minister.
4. And my minister's like
5. oh-ho you're gay,
6. and your mother doesn't like it,
7. well I'll straighten her out.

Both ethnicity and religion are social affiliations. However, the ways each is understood by Asian and white narrators respectively, correlate with the orientation toward the group and the individual, respectively. Nearly all Asian narrators mention or allude to ethnicity in their stories. In the Asians' stories, ethnicity appears to have been a consideration of whether speakers decide to reveal their sexual orientation to other people, particularly to their parents but also reflects their own awareness that their identities encompass not just their sexuality but also other dimensions. In the stories of whites, the only comparable social category is religion, which is nonetheless less frequently mentioned than ethnicity by the Asian narrators. Religion in the stories of white narrators was usually reported as a factor that hindered their lesbian and gay self-acceptance.

## 5.6 Compartmentalized presentations of self

A number of Asians hinted at compartmentalized presentations of self when describing how they contended with membership in a culture that, on the one hand, encourages self-expression among intimates, and, on the other hand, that views intimate emotional and psychological experiences as potentially dangerous if verbalized. Their descriptions of their self-presentations reflect this compartmentalization to the extent that,

for them, specific circumstances dictate which self-presentations they may display. A lesbian or gay Asian American individual may maintain that they find it difficult to express their lesbian or gay identity to other Asians,<sup>5</sup> even if she or he is otherwise openly homosexual in nearly all other circumstances. Insofar as any verbal behavior is a presentation of self, Asians seem to be concerned with presenting selves that, on the one hand, value harmonious relationships, particularly with their parents, but that, on the other hand, are also open and honest about their sexuality. These conflicting concerns are resolved through discrete, as opposed to synthesized self-presentations.

A striking example is V, the Vietnamese participant in the rap group.

(BB)

1. V: .. um .. I've been like this raging queen
2. since i've been on on campus so.
3. Au: [laughter]
4. V: =( ) it's like it's like=
5. Au: =[laughter]=
6. V: it's really funny,
7. it's like wherever I go
8. I see people like
9. {[hi] ~o:h} yes yes I remember you from whenever you know
10. and then
11. and I I would always
12. ( )
13. {[lo] [p] [ac] oh come on come on come on come on come on}
14. ( )
15. it happens
16. he was in my dorm my freshman year and,
17. like you know like two years later
18. he walks up to me, and he's all
19. {[hi] Oh, I'm so glad that you ( )}
20. {[lo] ( ) yeah yeah yeah}
21. I know I know
22. Au: [laughter]
23. V: =So uh,=
24. Au: =[laughter]=
25. V: ..
26. so but the thing is,
27. you know so .. recently I've been feeling like I've I've done enou::gh
28. I don't wanna do anymo:re
29. you know I I've .. finished MBLGA and all that stuff,

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<sup>5</sup> Chan (1989) surveyed 19 female and 16 male Asian American homosexuals. She found that 27 out of 35 respondents found it more difficult to come out to fellow Asians than to whites, and that 20 out of 35 identified more strongly as lesbian or gay than as Asian American.

On the one hand, he designates himself a (1) “raging queen,” that is, as a gay man who affects mannerisms that are conspicuously effeminate. As he describes being recognized by various, presumably gay, individuals on campus, his high pitch, elongated vowels, and overstressed intonation in (9), “O::h yes yes I remember you”, the use of intensifiers such as “so” (19), and the way he renders modesty (the excessiveness of repeating “come on” five times in line 13) are illustrative of the conduct of a “queen.” Indeed, this campy self-presentation elicits laughter from the audience.

On the other hand, in spite of his prominence as a gay man around campus, he describes his family situation.

(BB)

- 30. V: and .. but I wasn't take ca- I wasn't
- 31.     ==like the only people that really don't know that I care to know
- 32.     are my \*parents .. a:nd my \*aunt,
- 33.     who's like .. always lived with us
- 34.     ever since I was born,
- 35.     ==and you know, she's my second mother basically,
- 36.     {[f] and um,}
- 37.     .. and because (of the xxx) situations,
- 38.     ==um I can't tell my parents

He asserts in (38) that he cannot reveal his sexuality to his parents, which suggests that he presents to them a persona quite different from that of a “raging queen.” The intonation, the elevated pitch, and repetitions are not evident in this comparatively more sober description of how he is unable to disclose his sexuality to his parents. In other words, the paralinguistic and linguistic cues that are evident in his narrative present a self (i.e., gay or not gay) that seems to correlate with his attitude toward the topic (i.e., being a raging queen in college versus being closeted to his parents and their peers) that he talks about.

Another way in which individuals manifest the compartmentalization of their identities is in their descriptions of themselves in one situation versus another. For instance, M, who was running for senator in student government, characterizes himself as very open about his sexuality during his campaign.

(CC)

1. M: and basically .. since then  
 2. ==um I've been pretty much out  
 3. .. to the entire school,  
 ...  
 8. ==and I was open- I was running openly ga::y  
 9. and I came out to \*so many people that I-  
 10. from high school,  
 11. from my dorms,  
 ...  
 25. and um, and also um .. the reason why I am so out  
 ...  
 30. And that's the reason why I make sure .. that people \*know that I'm gay um,  
 ...  
 46. .. that's why I'm running openly gay just so-...  
 ...  
 56. so what I coming out, every time I come out to someone,  
 ...  
 60. ==and that's the onl- that's one of the reasons I still do come out

In excerpt (CC), he states numerous times that he is not only open about being gay, but that he ensures that people know that he is gay, that he comes out, and that he is out to the extent of even having crossdressed in public. However, he is of a different, almost diametrically opposed, opinion regarding coming out to his parents in particular.

- (DD)  
 1. M: ( ) my parents I don't know yet.  
 ...  
 87. ==so I really don't need to come out.  
 ...  
 89. ==you know .. will I really need come out to my parents  
 90. you know I don't-  
 ...  
 92. ah I just think that  
 93. ih- if .. I want to come out to my parents,  
 94. I will come out to my parents but  
 95. .. when you hear everybody you know  
 96. you \*have to come out,  
 97. .. it's not true.  
 ...  
 113. so my mom has asked me  
 114. you know um .. if I \*was or not  
 115. ==and I said,  
 116. come \*on, \*please mom, you know I- y'know  
 117. .. what kind of question is that?  
 118.Au: [laughter]  
 ...  
 137. .. {[hi] uh it's hard to .. come out to parents.}

Although M verbalizes the importance of being openly gay in public settings, with respect to more intimate family settings, his Asian identity takes precedence over his gay identity.

His short narrative (113-117) of having lied to his mother illustrates the difficulty, for him, of disclosing to parents. Indeed, when lies are reported by whites, they are framed as problems to be rectified (cf. analysis of (FF) below). M seems to conceptualize lying as a solution to the problem of whether and how to incorporate his sexual identity with his relationship with his mother.

Another way of compartmentalizing lesbian and gay self-presentations is not to talk about them, even if the recipient knows about the speaker's lesbian or gay sexuality. Several Asian lesbians and gays report that they do not discuss their homosexuality with their family, despite the fact that they are aware of their sexual orientation.

(EE)

C: we haven't really talked about it since,

...

We haven't really talked about  
and I haven't really been pushing it so.

For some Asian narrators, the compartmentalization of identities is a way to accommodate the conflicting values regarding proper selves of Asian and European American cultures, both of which Asian American narrators are members of. Nearly all of the coming out stories told by Asians indicate some difficulty in reconciling Asian identities with lesbian or gay identities. Several white narrators suggested that inconsistent self-presentations are problematic. In the following excerpt, C1 describes his concealment of his gay social life from his parents.

(FF)

1. C1: Um,
2. I saw that
3. they were missing a large portion of my life
4. and they were calling every Sunday
5. I was just like .. omitting
6. half the things I did during the week,
7. you know,
8. I can't say I went to the Mix [i.e., a gay dance club] Friday night,
9. and had fun you know and,
10. and everything else,
11. and I just felt they were really missing out
12. and they \*felt something was going on
13. which I wasn't saying,
14. you know,

He employs semantically negative verbs such as (3) “missing,” (11) “missing out,” to describe his parents’ state of knowledge concerning his gay life, and his own behavior of depriving them of information through his use of the semantically negative verb in (5) “omitting,” and the negated verbs in (8) “can’t say,” and (13) “wasn’t saying.” As an evaluative device (cf. Labov 1972a, and also Tannen 1979), the use of negated concepts reveals an expectation of the positive. Accordingly, C1’s use of semantically and overtly negated verbs reveals his expectation that his parents ought to have the information that he is able to supply. He goes on to describe how he felt as a result of his omissions.

15. C: and um the pressure just built up
16. and towards-
17. um when Christmas came around
18. I just felt I was going to explode.
19. I was just like
20. I can’t deal with them not knowing anymore,
21. I want them to know,
22. and I want to know
23. how they’re going to react,
24. so at least I know where I stand
25. vis-à-vis themselves,
26. so I know what their reaction would be
27. and not just wondering
28. will they accept me:
29. will they not accept me:,
30. will I be cut off financially,
31. will I not be:,
32. I just- I needed to know.
33. I needed to know where I stood
34. with them with \*them.

For C1, the discrepancy between his self-presentation at school and to his parents is described as sufficiently disturbing (15, 20, 32) that he states that he was willing to (28-29) risk rejection and (30-31) being cut off financially in order to present a self consistent across domains. It is also interesting to note that C1 reveals a belief, characteristic of western cultures, that emotions ought to be expressed and are dangerous if withheld (“the pressure just built up,” “I just felt I was going to explode”), even at the risk of losing an important relationship.

Another white speaker, D1, a participant in the rap group, recounts his coming out story, and also reflects the idea that inconsistent self-presentations are problematic.

(GG)

1. D1: Um my name's Dave,
2. um I'm one of those people
3. who had a \*great deal of of trouble coming out to my\*self.
4. Uh, I didn't come out to \*anyone in high school
5. ==and I didn't come out to anyone
6. .. during my four and a half years at \*Cal.
7. Uh, I- you know I would see the MBGLA table or something
8. ==and I'd, you know, =I would ne=ver even \*think of =approa=ching it.
9. F: =[coughing]= =[cough]=
10. D1: Um,
11. it wasn't really until um late last year
12. ==th- that I started coming out,
13. ==and this was after a period where
14. .. you know I could see that there were a lot of costs associated with .. being in the closet
15. ==for an extended period of \*time.
16. U:h basically,
17. I found myself just kind of retreating from the \*world
18. ==in a lot of different ways.
19. U:h I've always .. {[p] you know} have valued my friendship with my \*parents,
20. ==but it was just ver- much easier just not to have to deal with ( )
21. feel uncomfortable uh at family e\*vents
22. or even .. you know I would even avoid calling them on the telephone,
23. {[p] they they live in Orange county,}
24. uh, {[f] same thing with \*friends.}
25. ==I just didn't keep up with people,
26. ==cause e- the easiest way to uh live a \*lie is
27. to not .. uh have to deal with someone
28. ==or just not have the issue come up.

There are two striking features about this segment. First, is the way in which D1 illustrates his statement asserting the difficulty of coming out to himself by describing the avoidance of social situations. His behavior in social settings is construed in terms of how it reflects on the narrator as a moral person. Second is his extensive use of negation.

He starts out with a general statement, (2-3) "I'm one of those people who had a great deal of trouble coming out to myself"), and follows it with a series of specific events. He uses negated simple past tense verbs in (4, 5) "I didn't come out . . .," (11) "it wasn't until . . .," negated conditional verbs in (8) "I would never even think. . .," and semantically negative referents in (14) " . . . there were a lot of costs associated with being in the closet. . .," (17) "I found myself retreating. . .," and (22) "I would avoid. . .," to

describe a state of affairs by negation. Therefore, his statements neither assert nor describe events that transpired, but index the speaker's expectations of what ought to have happened. Further, the negations cover a range of social situations that he avoided ("I didn't come out to anyone in high school . . . [or] during my four and a half years at Cal. . . . I found myself retreating from the world . . . I would avoid calling [my parents] on the telephone. . . I just didn't keep up with people"), and reflect his own expectation that he should have been able to present his gay identity in all of those contexts. One implication is that if he could not present a gay identity, then he would have to avoid social situations altogether.

## 5.8 Conclusion

In the psychosomatic distribution of pain, researchers in cross-cultural psychiatry have recognized that pain tends to be instantiated somatically among members of Chinese culture<sup>6</sup> (Marsella, Kinzie, and Gordon, in Dragus 1990). Even third and fourth generation Chinese-Americans in Hawaii have been found to experience depression as physical symptoms, in spite of assimilation into American culture (p. 246-7). One possible explanation, employed in psychotherapy textbooks which address cross-cultural issues (cf. e.g., McGoldrick, Pearce, and Giordano 1982; Berman 1990), is that whereas the overt expression of emotions would interfere with personal relationships, thereby drawing attention to the individual at the expense of relationship, somatization of emotions into physical pain allows for the retention of some form of social structure (e.g., the role of caretaker and the one cared for).

According to Wai-ling Young (1982), this attention to harmonious relations is also manifested in Chinese discourse strategies. Whereas Westerners, particularly Americans, prefer a discourse strategy where a point of view is first presented and then

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of somatization is seen by Dragus (1990:246) as a possibly Western bias toward the psychological origin of emotional pain. He suggests that socially-oriented cultures like that of the Chinese may experience emotional correlates of depression but emphasize sensitivity to "actual bodily manifestations of depression."

followed by supporting arguments, the Chinese see the Western strategy as confrontational and disruptive of social harmony. In Chinese discourse, reasons are stated first, so that listeners can be led gradually to the position held. But to the Westerner, this strategy is oblique, hence the stereotype of the inscrutable Chinese.

We can speculate that Asian American gays evidence some aspect of this orientation toward external, i.e., social, reality in their coming out stories. As we have seen, in all of the stories told in the rap session in question (as well as in the stories collected by the researcher in interview and informal settings), the protagonist is portrayed as one whose attention is directed toward the external aspects of coming out. He may report the external consequences of his feelings (e.g., Mike's poor academic performance) or the social circumstances of his disclosure (e.g., the words uttered in coming out). But in all instances, Asians downplay the inward-looking, coming out to self component of the coming out story.

That Asian Americans tell coming out stories at all means that the coming out story comprises one discourse genre in their repertoires of linguistic behavior. That is, it marks them as communicatively competent members of an American gay community. They evidence understanding of the role of the coming out story in defining an American gay identity. But that their stories never reveal any of the inner conflicts to the extent of those told by European Americans can be attributed to adherence to the values of Asian culture, whether as the cultural predisposition to withhold expression of emotions or as having bypassed certain presuppositions of Western culture (such as the communication of emotions and the homophobia which are embedded therein). That their stories assume a distinct form, different from those of European Americans, reflects their tie to Asian culture, and thus indexes their identity as Asian. And in telling their coming out stories, they reaffirm not only their own existence as gay Asian Americans but also that of the gay Asian Americans in the audience.

Coming out stories are a product of their own subculture, having their own cohesion rules and structural constraints. They create community among individuals who have undergone similar experiences, and validate identities which are otherwise proscribed by the dominant culture. At the same time, they are formed (unconsciously) according to the structural principles of the narratives of the larger culture of which the teller is a member (e.g. Asian or White), and also in conformity with the expectations of that culture about how to be a good person. The analysis therefore illustrates an overarching principle that in order to effectively challenge cultural norms, those norms must at some level be reproduced. In other words, a person must first establish himself as a good person according to some other (sub)cultural norms—for Asian Americans this means both relational and individualistic orientations—before he or she can subvert or change them.

Both coming out and the coming out story present the self in terms of what is said. But there are other forms of self-presentation that present the self in terms of what is unsaid. These forms are suggestive on several levels. First, a sufficient level of cohesion (or shared assumptions) exists among members of the subculture for whom what is unsaid can constitute a form of self-presentation. For these members, there is no need to justify their individual existence because the group as a whole exists (as there is for those who tell coming stories to justify their acts of coming out, or, their gay identities). Second, such implied presentations of self indicates that outgroup members too are aware of the existence of the subculture as a unit (the shared assumptions thereby reducing the need for explicit self-presentations). Third, if both ingroup and outgroup members share recognition of the latter, then the identity in question has become part of the range of possible identities for the culture as a whole that is shared by the two groups in question. The next chapter is an exposition of one such self-presentational strategy, gay implicature, which forces the hearer to (eventually) activate the inference that the speaker is lesbian or gay. Once again, the issue of prioritizing relational versus individualistic ways of being emerges as considerations in choice of strategies of self-presentation.

## Chapter 6

### Con conversationally implicating American lesbian and gay identity

#### 6.0 Introduction

The analysis of the use of verbal devices in self-help texts and in the coming out stories of both Asian American and white narrators suggests that a common set of beliefs about what constitutes a good human being is operative in all. Examination of the discourse genre (or more precisely, strategies) known as gay implicature (Liang 1995) contributes further insights into the person, assessed via observance or violation of CP, that underlies the display of lesbian or gay identity. Like the other two discourse genres, coming out and the coming out story, gay implicature arises out of a model of the self that recognizes the value, indeed necessity, of individual expression.

Gay implicature comprises the conversational strategies that permit speakers to navigate potential social hazards while achieving their aim of lesbian and gay self-presentation. Termed after Grice's (1975) *conversational implicature* (the meanings speakers convey and hearers understand beyond the literal), gay implicature is a presentation of self that is ambiguous between lesbian or gay on the one hand, and straight on the other. The investigation of gay implicature sheds light on the relationship between the presentation of self and the assumptions about legitimate identities that speakers and addressees must share in order for a lesbian (or gay) self-presentation to be more or less successful. The questions of concern in this chapter are thus: What social phenomena can the speaker reasonably expect the listener to be aware of in view of the "training" provided by society that realities are varied? And what meanings can the speaker therefore expect the listener to infer when she uses vague expressions to discuss her sexual and gender identity? And what does the use of one type of strategy over another imply about the speaker?

This chapter begins with an anecdote that reveals how the co-construction of gender identity can occur by leaving unchallenged basic assumptions about gender. It discusses how gender can be considered as an implicature, and demonstrates how lesbians and gays present an ambiguous self by exploiting the possibility that culture-specific presuppositions regarding gender identity, and specifically what is known among lesbians and gays as the *heterosexual presumption* (cf. for example, Woods 1993:54-61), are being reconsidered on a culture-wide level. From a theoretical standpoint, Grice's (1975) formulation of literal and implicated meaning is useful for analyzing which implicatures, or self-presentations, interlocutors convey and understand, even when the speaker cannot be sure if the hearer shares the same presuppositions. It is further useful for assessing the cultural status of those self-presentations. In other words, if lesbian or gay identity can be implicated to mere acquaintances, or, as Goffman (1963:51) put it, to "customers, orientals, and motorists, that is, persons who fall into very broad categories and who may be passing strangers to us", with whom "normative expectations regarding conduct and character" are shared, then those self-presentations have attained the level of shared knowledge at the cultural level.

### 6.1 An anecdote

While S and her parents were sitting around the kitchen table, her mother reported that S's aunt had telephoned. In the telephone conversation, S's aunt had inquired after S, and asked when she was going to get married. S's mother said that she had explained that S just hadn't found the right person yet, to which her aunt had replied that not being married was easier anyway. In response to this story, S's father remarked that if S found the right person, she didn't have to rule out the possibility of getting married. This conversation went on despite the fact that S, who, unbeknownst to her parents, is lesbian, said nothing to indicate that she agreed or disagreed with what they were saying. In the absence of S's protestations to the contrary, S's parents could retain their assumptions

regarding how a woman is defined in American culture. Had S elected to express how she really felt—for instance, if she had announced that she was going to live with a woman, or that her definition of marriage was quite different from theirs—she might have, minimally, aroused her parents' embarrassment, or she might even have been thrown out of the house, and so on. But she chose not to, and they could define her sexual identity without feeling contradicted by her silence<sup>1</sup>.

The question of which selves are presented in interaction is contingent upon at least three overlapping elements: (1) what constitutes a culturally approved self; (2) the degree to which that self is acceptable to participants within a given interaction, including the speaker (the one engaging in the self-presentational act) and the addressee (the one to whom the speaker's self is being displayed)<sup>2</sup>; and (3) the relative power of each participant, within and outside the interaction.

Culturally approved selves are those that make up the range that can be found within a given culture's inventory of acceptable identities and roles. For S's parents and aunt in the above anecdote, as well as for most people in American culture, and probably the world, part of being a legitimate woman involves having a life course that includes marriage to a man; lesbian relationships do not enter the picture at all. In contrast, for S (and other lesbians), as well as a growing number of heterosexuals, a notion of 'woman' includes acting on emotional and erotic attractions to women, establishing committed relationships with them, and so on. Additionally, this expanded concept of woman that encompasses same-sex relationships opens up the possibility of other non-traditional relationships and identities.

In interaction, a subset of culturally approved identities is revealed and displayed in accordance with culturally and individually determined expectations of appropriate self-

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Christopher Liang for this anecdote.

<sup>2</sup> For ease of discussion, I am considering the presentation of the self from the perspective of the speaker, but it should be understood that the addressee also displays a self through her listening behaviors. Whether speaking or silent, one cannot not communicate in social interaction (Bateson 1972); consequently, one cannot not present a self.

presentations. Thus, not only are there global constraints on the identities which can be displayed, but at the local, interactional level, participants' expectations also exert limitations on what is or is not appropriate. Referring once again to the anecdote above, to the extent that S anticipated a skirmish with her parents, and consciously decided not to dispute the assumptions concerning her future marital status, she shared their comprehension of womanhood, as both an insider and an outsider. So strong are the expectations for what a normative woman is in American society (along with many others) that, unless an individual indicates otherwise, her identity will be a matter for others, whether in interaction or society as a whole, to settle<sup>3</sup>. Thus, S's decision not to engage her parents in discussion over what it is to be a woman illustrates the fact that self-presentation does not occur in a vacuum, but is subject to who the audience is, and what their expectations and assumptions are in relation to those of the speaker's herself.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, identities may be imposed by fiat, in a direction of greater to lesser power. In American culture, parents may "define" or label their children until they reach a level of autonomy that makes it inappropriate and unwholesome for such definition to continue.<sup>5</sup> But institutions may also impose identities on individuals. For instance, the legal system may define proper identities, granting and removing personhood to maintain order in

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<sup>3</sup> That identity hinges on power is illustrated by the question of how Jewishness is defined. Strictly speaking, according to Judaic law, only if the mother is Jewish do the offspring "count" as Jewish. Yet even those who do not themselves identify as Jewish recognize that Jewishness is contingent upon who has the power to characterize those who are and those who are not. Were a rightwing white supremacist anti-Semitic group to seize control of the country, it is probably likely that anyone with Jewish blood would be defined as Jewish, regardless of the individual's own self-identifications or of what Judaic law states.

<sup>4</sup> The federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) which defines marriage as an exclusively heterosexual union, along with recent debates about homosexual marriage, can be viewed as the negotiation of the status of gays vis-à-vis legal marriage, or, the question of who is entitled to certain roles and privileges associated therewith. Lakoff (personal communication) puts the problem of identity more directly, in terms of who has the right to create whose identity; whether, for example, a married woman can choose her name (Lakoff forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Some diseases with psychological components (cf. Bateson 1972, on schizophrenia) are viewed as a result of the ways families impose a role onto a family member in order to ensure survival of the larger family unit.

society; the medical profession too has the power to define individuals in terms of, for instance, conceptions of illness (as homosexuality was viewed prior to 1975).

As a member of a culture, the individual also works out a self-definition at least partly in terms of her understanding of culturally-approved identities.

## 6.2 Gender: A basic implicature

The presentation of self is one configuration of meanings among many others—including propositions, presuppositions, and entailments; illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects; frames; and alignments—that the speaker conveys in interaction. Yet among all of these meanings, it is unique: there are invariably some attributes of the self presented by the speaker and interpreted by the audience that are superimposed upon the meanings exchanged in a given interaction. In face-to-face interactions, information about gender in particular (as well as other social categories such as ethnicity), rather than being stated explicitly, is more or less continually constructed, through nonverbal (e.g., gestures, clothing), paralinguistic (e.g., vocal fundamental frequency, intonation), and linguistic (e.g., indirectness) signals. We might say then, that a basic implicature<sup>6</sup>, conveyed in a culture is “I am a woman” or “I am a man” and that such a meaning itself evokes a whole set of presuppositions. That there is no name for an act of stating that one is a woman or a man—as the term *coming out* exists for the assertion that one is lesbian or gay—implies that behavioral expectations associated with womanhood and manhood are

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<sup>6</sup> In Robin Tolmach Lakoff's (1995a:191) construal of Grice's conversational logic (the system of precepts or maxims adhered to by speakers and listeners in producing and interpreting utterances in conversation),

[m]axim-observant utterances do exactly and succinctly express pure semantic meaning; but they may not incorporate many of the pragmatic signals that orient participants to significant aspects of the message: discourse genre, deictic situation, seriousness, level of intimacy, mutuality of trust, delicacy of subject matter, and much more. Implicature provides that information, often as important in the full understanding of a communication as its explicit denotation.

To Lakoff's specification of meanings covered by implicature, I would add culturally-approved, situation-appropriate identities.

normative and pervasive. In this sense, gender identity has the appearance of being self-evident. Further, this implicature has a series of culture-specific presuppositions associated with it. For example, in western (and many other) cultures, gender is dichotomous, and members of one gender are expected to be attracted to and form coupled relationships with the members of the other. These assumptions about gender together constitute a fundamental presupposition about gender in this culture, namely, the heterosexual presumption.

Gender identity is socially required information for interaction, in much the same way that relative status among interlocutors is among speakers of languages such as Japanese that grammatically encode such information. The discomfort that is aroused when the gender of one's interlocutor is indeterminable, the sometimes violent reactions that are provoked when gender roles are transgressed,<sup>78</sup> and even the existence of an illness category (such as gender identity dysphoria) for those who perceive themselves as gendered differently from that into which they were socialized, attests to the character of these categories as a sociocultural organizing principle. Because gender makes up a very basic category that is fundamental to people's beliefs about the world, anyone who questions the foundation of those beliefs is, in a sense, questioning their existence. My point here is not to embark on a discussion of the expression of gender *per se*—there are many excellent works which explore that theme<sup>9</sup>. Rather, my purpose in raising this issue

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<sup>7</sup> In 1993, Brandon Teena, a pre-operative transgendered man living in Humboldt Nebraska, was arrested on misdemeanor charges for check forgery. The information, including the fact that he was anatomically and legally female, was publicly released by police to the local newspaper, the *Falls City Journal*. A week later, Teena was raped by two men who threatened to kill him if he went to the police. Although he reported the rape to the police and identified the two assailants, no charges were filed against them. Teena was subsequently hunted down by them and murdered, along with his female lover and another friend.

<sup>8</sup> There is a case, currently in litigation, where a woman is suing her estranged husband, a male-to-female transsexual, for custody of their child. The woman reasoned that since her husband was a transsexual, he was "really" a woman; but since same-sex marriages were illegal, the marriage was non-existent. Furthermore, since the child was conceived via artificial insemination, her ex-husband had no right to custody. I would like to thank Robin Tolmach Lakoff for this example

<sup>9</sup> For recent works, cf. for example, Livia and Hall, *Queerly phrased*, Oxford: 1997; and Barrett, Capps, Coates, Orellana, Tannen, Walters, and Wood, all forthcoming.

is to note that because gender is often implied (that is, constructed, displayed, indexed) rather than stated explicitly, it can be viewed, in Gricean pragmatic terms, as being subsumed under the category of implicature. And since the interpretation of implicature hinges crucially upon shared culture-specific presuppositions (Matsumoto 1989; Ochs Keenan 1975), it is a useful construct for the investigation of gender identity and the dramatic transformation it is presently undergoing in US culture and elsewhere.

### 6.3 The problem of lesbian and gay self-presentation

Homosexuality has thus far not achieved the status of a culturally approved plotline, to use Donald Polkinghorne's (1987) term.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, lesbians and gays continually confront the issue of disclosing or concealing their lesbian or gay selves. For every interaction in which they participate, they must decide whether or not to reveal their identity as lesbian or gay, and then which strategies they will use to disclose or conceal it. Since lesbian or gay identity violates gender norms, various kinds of social situations can give rise to instances that highlight the discrepancy between the speaker's actual social identity and the one that is assumed. Typically, the situations in which lesbians and gays find themselves fall into three broad categories, with different responses associated with each. In one scenario, self-disclosure would clearly lead to termination of the relationship between the speaker and addressee, or, in the worst case, would endanger the speaker's well-being. The possibility of disclosure is overridden by considerations of survival (of the relationship or of the individual). Another scenario is one where the addressee is clearly supportive of or indifferent to the speaker's identity as lesbian or gay. In these kinds of contexts, the speaker may self-disclose without compunction.

The present concern, however, revolves around the third possibility, in which the speaker is unclear as to the addressee's opinions regarding homosexuality. In this

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. also Mandy Afel (1996); Charlotte Linde (1993); Theodore Sarbin (1986); and Kathy Wood (forthcoming) for other narrative-based conceptions of culture-specific identities.

scenario, the speaker is required to consider factors such as his or her relationship with the addressee, and his or her own socially and culturally shaped beliefs of what is or is not appropriate to disclose. From the perspective of a culture whose members value personal truth and sincerity, lesbians and gays are in a double bind. If they observe CP, then they would be communicating in good faith because they would be making their intentions known. But they would reveal that they violate gender norms, in which case they risk ostracism, violence or abuse, and discrimination. However, if they fail to observe CP, and, for instance, lie about their sexuality, then they engage in questionable communicative behavior. They may feel guilty for lying or dissembling. Additionally, there is the potential for social sanctions if their non-observance of CP is discovered later. Cultural norms force upon some lesbians and gays a decision that heterosexuals do not have to contend with.

#### **6.4 Managing lesbian and gay identity**

A number of strategies have presented themselves in view of the dilemma faced by lesbians and gays. Goffman offers three possible courses of action to the “normative predicament” faced by members of stigmatized groups:

One solution was for a category of persons to support a norm but be defined by themselves and others as not the relevant category to realize the norm and personally to put it into practice. A second solution was for the individual who cannot maintain an identity norm to alienate himself from the community which upholds the norm, or refrain from developing an attachment to the community in the first place.

The processes detailed here constitute together a third main solution to the problem of unsustained norms. Through these processes the common ground of norms can be sustained far beyond the circle of those who fully realize them ... Passing and covering are involved, providing the student with a special application of the arts of impression management, the arts, basic in social life, through which the individual exerts strategic control over the image of himself and his products that others glean from him. (Goffman 1963: 129-130)

The first solution he proposes to managing a stigmatized identity may apply, for instance, to lesbians and gays who do not want to be lesbian or gay, but who cannot manage to live a normal heterosexual lifestyle. CP is not in question because the individual attempts to conform to the norm, or at least, expresses commitment to it by

repudiating offending tendencies or behaviors in themselves as well as in others. The second solution is a form of opting out, and includes such strategies as minimizing contact with others to reduce the risk of exposure, abstaining from asking others about their personal lives so as not to invite queries about their own. The third solution that he describes, “passing or covering,” may involve lying, and therefore, flagrant violation of CP. It also covers avoidance strategies, which are also violations of CP insofar as the speaker intends to withhold information from the hearer. But because these strategies may also implicate the speaker’s sexuality, they can be viewed as cooperative. Because the status of CP is ambiguous, avoidance strategies may be less problematic than others such as outright lies, both in terms of the speaker’s own sense of integrity and his or her need for self-protection.

#### 6.5 When CP is ambiguous

Ann Weiser (1975) identifies a set of strategies whereby cooperativeness is defined less by the speaker’s informativeness than by the degree to which the speaker’s intentions can be inferred. She proposes a pair of communicative strategies which she designates as *conversational devices* and *conversational strategems*. Both are linguistic means of achieving one’s interactional purpose. The former involve direct speech acts, indirect speech acts, and implicature, all of which entail the listener’s recognition of the speaker’s intention. Use of these strategies signifies that the speaker is on record as having expressed her intention to achieve a given purpose; hence, adherence to CP is operative. The latter involve strategies by which the speaker masks her intention to achieve a given purpose. She is not on record as having expressed her intention, and consequently, the speaker covertly opts out of CP. For Weiser, then, CP involves not only an exchange of information, but also a displayed orientation toward the shared goals of participants in the interaction, while non-observance of CP would involve a covert non-orientation toward those goals in order to maintain the appearance of promoting shared interests.

Conversational devices are exemplified by the following dialogue between Jill, a straight woman, and Jack, a gay man:

- (A)  
Jill: Jack, do you like guys?  
Jack [who is gay]:  
    i. ø  
    ii. Nice weather we're having.  
    iii. None of your business.  
    iv. What kinda question is that?

In (A), although all of the listed responses differ in the degree of directness (responses i and ii being the most indirect since they do not explicitly acknowledge that the question is being asked, and hence are most evasive), all are oriented to the question and all conversationally implicate or express explicitly the speaker's hesitance or refusal to answer the question. Silence (i) would conversationally implicate reluctance to respond, as would a change of topic (ii). The response in iii is an explicit refusal. And the metacommunicative remark in iv brings the interaction to another level, but in doing so, communicates the speaker's refusal to answer the question. Here, being cooperative is manifested as acknowledgement or orientation to the addressee's remark (although in Lakoff's (1995b) terms, iii and iv are in clear violation of politeness principles as well as CP insofar as the speaker refuses to provide the information requested).

A conversational strategem, on the other hand, may arise as follows. A speaker may be asked a question that s/he does not want to answer but neither is s/he willing to acknowledge this fact, because any response s/he might undertake would be socially problematic (for example, communicating refusal to answer would implicate the speaker's lesbianism). In such a situation, the speaker may employ a range of devices, whereby s/he pretends that "a sudden thought may have struck, something demanding comment may have occurred in the environment, or the second speaker may not have heard that the first speaker said anything" (Weiser 1975:651). In these cases, if the questioner believes that the response had nothing to do with the question, s/he will not understand the response as a refusal to answer the question. Furthermore, if the questioner has posed a question that

has multiple possible interpretations, the speaker can avoid answering the question by responding to an interpretation that is different from what the questioner intended and not be heard as having refused to respond. The following exemplifies:

(B)

Jill: Jack, do you like guys?

- Jack [who is gay]:
- i. Oh no! I forgot to turn off the stove!
  - ii. Wow, did you taste how strong this cappuccino is?
  - iii. White rice only. I hate brown rice.
  - iv. Some of my best friends are guys.

As can be seen, the respondent employs respectively, the “sudden thought” device in i, the “something-presently-demanding-comment” device in ii, the “mishearing” device in iii, and in iv, the “selection by reply” device of responding to an interpretation that is different from what the respondent believes the questioner intended (Weiser 1975:651).

Another way that a conversational strategem may be achieved is via the construction of an image within which characteristics that might otherwise betray the individual’s homosexuality may be reinterpreted as idiosyncrasies. In example C, Jill, an unmarried woman in her late thirties, may construct an image that emphasizes experiences such as a childhood spent in many different countries, characteristics such as an unusual dialect, abilities such as ambidexterity. Deviations from the expected life course for a woman would then be seen as another peculiarity about her and not an indicator of her homosexuality.

(C)

Jack [a naive heterosexual]: Jill, why aren’t you married yet?

Jill [a lesbian]: I want to live alone.

Jill’s response is interpreted within the context of her overall personality rather than in terms of her homosexuality. Her response is categorized as a strategem because she is not being entirely forthcoming, and is encouraging Jack to make the default assumption.

The status of CP differs according to whether conversational devices or conversational strategems are used. In the former instance, one or more of the maxims may be violated but since CP in some form is upheld, the speaker’s meaning corresponds

to what is conversationally implicated. In Example (A), Jack is adhering to CP to the extent that Jill can calculate an informative meaning even though Jack is not providing a response in line with the maxims. In the latter instance, substantial cooperation is not overtly violated, but since the listener's ability to calculate the speaker's purpose is suppressed, as in Example (B), the interlocutors do not share a "set of common purposes or at least a mutually accepted direction," and hence, formal cooperation at least has been violated. It must be pointed out however that the distinction between strategems and devices is not clearcut. The two strategies can be functionally identical such that strategems too can be recognized by listeners as evasive. So the responses in Example (B) may also generate implicatures. Consider also the following:

Joel runs a weekly church discussion group that focuses on minority issues. The group is small, he says, and the conversation is often intimate. Yet Joel has never revealed his own sexuality to anyone in it. "If I were asked directly, I might just say, 'Well we're really not talking about our own orientations here.'" Another possible response might be, "I'm black, I'm a woman, I'm a Muslim, I'm gay, I'm very poor, I am *all* those things that are discriminated against." (Woods 1993:143-144)

The first response is both a conversational device and a conversational strategem. It is an overt refusal to answer the question, and is legitimate to the extent that the discussion is not focussed on him, personally. But it is also a way of deflecting attention from himself, and so is evasive. The engendering of similar effects from the use of different strategies, known as pragmatic synonymy (Lakoff and Tannen 1979), consequently also renders adherence to CP ambiguous. The following excerpt (D) shows how conversational strategems may fail, and end up being interpreted, correctly, as a desire not to respond.

(D)

Dave remembers a typical conversation with Audrey, a woman from personnel. "She had a friend who was gay, very blatantly and openly gay, and I know him. One day Audrey came over and says, 'Oh, I didn't know you knew Victor.'" Then she says, "*How* do you know Victor?" Luckily Victor and I lived in the same apartment building at the time, so I said, "We live in the same apartment building and there are social functions; that's how I met him."

The initial dodge seemed to satisfy Audrey's curiosity, but before long she raised the issue again, this time with a question about Dave's roommate (and lover) Kyle. "I guess Audrey put more and more together," Dave says, "I don't know *how* she found out, but last fall we were walking through the Reading Terminal Market and she asked if I was going to my parents' house or to Kyle's parents' house for Thanksgiving. And I said, 'Well, my parents invited Kyle, but we're going to his parents' house.'" As

the conversation continued, Dave grew uncomfortable. Finally, when Audrey asked how long he and Kyle had “been together,” Dave responded with an explicit dodge. “She started talking about how long she’d been with *her* boyfriend, so I finally said, “Audrey, I’m not going to discuss relationships with you.” I just changed the subject. (Woods 1993:142-143)

Whether or not the strategem is successfully carried out depends on the hearer’s willingness to recognize an implicature, or to follow up on the point that was redirected when the conversational strategem was interjected in the interaction. As can be seen in the passage above, Dave initially uses a conversational strategem, the “selection by reply” strategy, to respond to Audrey’s query. He knows she is asking if he knows Victor because both he and Victor are gay. But because they both live in the same apartment building, he can exploit this fact and form a response to her query that does not reveal his sexual orientation. However, in a subsequent interaction, she initiates a line of questioning about Dave’s relationship with his lover Kyle, which suggests that she was not persuaded by his original strategy. In response, Dave resorts to a conversational device in which he places himself on record as refusing to respond to her question, by which he may have implicated his sexuality. Thus, the effectiveness of a conversational strategem may be considered as much a construction of the hearer as it is of the speaker. (See Barrett (forthcoming) for how ethnicity, performed by outgroup members, can succeed as a co-construction of the audience based on the latter’s stereotypes of the ethnic group in question.)

The tension between having to tell the truth about oneself and having to protect oneself puts some lesbians and gays in a communicatively awkward position. On the one hand, if they employ the strategy of conversational devices, they implicate their sexuality, which involves some degree of risk to their relationships, or to their physical well-being (in the case of violence) or their mental well-being (in the case of verbal abuse). If, on the other hand, they successfully employ the strategy of conversational strategems, they achieve their interactional purposes, such as avoiding having to answer an incriminating question, without conversationally implicating those purposes and without appearing to

have opted out of CP. And yet, even in these instances, lesbians and gays often feel deceitful.

## 6.6 Gay implicature

Any interactional exchange can be said to be cooperative if assumptions are mutually shared which allow the speaker to conversationally implicate her meaning, and the listener to infer it. Cooperative strategies can range from close observation of the maxims, to the generation of implicature through clear violation of the maxims, to overt defiance of the maxims for reasons such as are enumerated in Lakoff (1995a)—to conform with politeness norms, for aesthetic purposes, to create group solidarity.

Uncooperativeness comprises behavior that adheres neither to politeness principles (whether in observance of the maxims or not) nor to clarity-based communication (insofar as the hearer's ability to calculate the speaker's meaning is impeded). A possible middle area is occupied by the conversational strategems delineated by Weiser, which entail formal uncooperativeness and possibly substantial cooperativeness, although, as mentioned previously (§6.5), conversational strategems can also be viewed as co-constructed by speaker and hearer. Here, social relations are preserved through the avoidance of a delicate subject, for perhaps both self- (that is, self-defense) and other-protection (that is, politeness), though at the expense of cooperation at the level of the maxims.

Given that talk always has, to use Labov and Fanshel's (1975) term, immanent reference—that is, that ultimately we are always talking about ourselves—and given that relating to and being related to by another depends upon mutual knowledge of the other's social status (Linde 1993; Matsumoto 1989), the lesbian (or gay) individual is compelled by these cultural conventions to reveal the homosexual aspect of herself, or at least she finds it difficult to circumvent these conventions so that she doesn't feel obliged to self-disclose. At the same time, she is constrained by cultural values, or more precisely, her

perception of them as a member of the culture in which she socializes, in what she can reveal about herself just in case her interlocutor is hostile to gays. Hence, she is faced with having to invent conversational strategies which neither implicate her lesbianism, in order to protect herself, nor negate it, in order to conform to the requirement of social interaction, that the information she provides about herself adheres more or less to the truth. Confronted with this dilemma of either having to risk the possibly dangerous consequences of coming out or of feeling hypocritical in having to lie, gays have devised ways of communicating to circumvent it.<sup>11</sup> Although these ways of communicating seem to involve deceptive behaviors, often the information from which to draw the correct inferences is there for those who can bring the correct assumptions to bear in an interaction.

These communicative strategies comprise what I have termed gay implicature and may be a solution to the dilemma of lesbian and gay identity. Their covert meanings—though misleadingly worded for “credulous”, that is, straight, listeners—can be properly inferred only if the listener disabuses himself of the default assumption of heterosexuality. These strategies are unlike Weiser’s conversational stratagems in that listeners can be and are expected to infer the speaker’s sexuality from what the speaker has conversationally implicated. This expectation is justified, for instance, by the fact that the speaker and hearer live in a place like the San Francisco Bay Area, where lesbians and gays are publicly visible<sup>12</sup>. Thus, to the extent that lesbian and gay speakers implicate their sexuality, they

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps another contributing factor compelling the use of gay implicature rather than baldfaced lies is the resentment among some lesbians and gays regarding the double standard that is applied toward their lives and behaviors, in contrast to that of heterosexuals: When lesbians and gays merely state their sexual orientation, they are often viewed by heterosexuals as “flaunting” their lifestyles. Susan Ervin-Tripp (personal communication) has, for instance, recounted the story of a heterosexual colleague who objected to a pink triangle sticker on the door of the office of a fellow academic who was lesbian. According to the colleague, the lesbian academic’s sexuality was irrelevant to her capabilities as a researcher and teacher. (Presumably, this same colleague did not consider that wearing a wedding band was equally irrelevant to the qualifications of an academic.) Gay implicature enables lesbians and gays to thwart the proscription against “flaunting” it by refusing to commit to the heterosexual presumption, even if they do so covertly.

<sup>12</sup> However, it is also the case that some naive heterosexuals will never get the implicature, no matter how many time it is repeated, whether due to willful blindness, lack of experience, or other factors.

adhere to CP. But because successful inference depends on being able to adduce the relevant assumptions, in particular, the relinquishment of the heterosexual presumption, gays also circumvent CP when listeners fail in this task. Consequently, just as speaker meanings are co-constructed over the course of interaction, so too is CP.

## 6.7 Examples

The following are examples of what a hearer needs to know in order to realize the presence of a gay implicature.

### 6.7.1 Genderless reference terms

The first and most common strategy is the use of genderless reference terms such as *they*, *spouse*, or *partner*, in discussing intimate relationships, exemplified as follows:

(E)

Scenario: A lesbian speaker is talking with a (presumably) naive heterosexual.

(i)

Lesbian: Well the last person I was involved with, they<sup>13</sup> <blahblahblah>.

(ii)

Lesbian: Well the last person I was involved with was <blahblahblah>.

This strategy generates a gay implicature because it supplies less information than necessary. Rather than saying (i) *they*, why not say *he*? Since the speaker did not say *he*, the listener should draw the appropriate inference. In (ii), the speaker uses the relative clause to avoid the use of the gendered pronoun, and this too should trigger an implicature. The strength of the implicature in both 3.1 and 3.2 increases when the avoidance of the gendered pronoun persists over the course of several turns.

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<sup>13</sup> This use of the plural pronoun to avoid identifying the gender of the referent should, of course, be distinguished from its use for pronominal agreement with singular gender-neutral referents, as in "Someone's gonna get their ass kicked if they don't shut up."

A related strategy for avoiding gendered pronouns is exemplified in (E'), which illustrates the strategy of the repeated use of *the person*.

(E')

Scenario: Same as (E).

Lesbian: I went out on a date with this person, and the person and I got along really well. I'm seeing them again next weekend, etc.

The strength of the heterosexual presumption suffice to offset in the hearer's mind the strangeness of the repetition of the noun phrase *the person*, and the resultant lack of cohesiveness such behavior entails (Halliday and Hasan 1977). Once again, the audience's role in the co-construction of identity is evident.

Slightly trickier, however, is the avoidance of gendered terms, even while the listener employs the (wrong) gendered pronoun. The following dialogue, reported by a lesbian narrator, A, takes place after the narrator's co-worker, B, has described her plans to go dancing with a man she has been dating.

(F)

Scenario: A lesbian speaker is conversing with her naive heterosexual female co-worker, B, to whom she has not disclosed her sexuality.

Lesbian: I'm looking forward to the weekend.

B [ie, co-worker]: You doing anything special?

A: Well, I'm having a visitor.

B: Ooh...that kind of visitor? Does he come in often?

A: Actually, yes...

B: Is this someone special?

A: I think so...we'll see.

In order to draw the implicature, the listener needs to note that the speaker avoids referring to the visitor with gendered pronouns. Thus, the omission of expected information may also be a trigger of gay implicature. However, Grice did not discuss the issue of whether or not allowing the listener to draw the wrong implicature was an instance of uncooperative behavior. So although the lesbian speaker herself does not state anything to commit to the heterosexual presumption, and therefore may be said to be conveying a gay implicature, one can imagine B saying indignantly, upon discovery of her lesbian co-worker's homosexuality, "Why did you let me go on thinking that?" The

possibility that B may feel deceived suggests that observance of CP on the part of the lesbian speaker is not in effect.

#### 6.7.2 “Not my type”

Another strategy involves narrowly construing queries concerning romantic interests, as in the following.

(G)  
Scenario: B, a naive heterosexual, is inquiring of a lesbian speaker about her availability.  
Het[erosexual]: So, dating any men?  
L[esbian]: No.  
Het: Why not?  
L: I'm not interested in finding a man.  
Het: Just haven't found a good enough man, eh?  
L: No, I'm just not interested in finding a man.

In this example, the statement “I’m not interested in finding a man” should be understood as conversationally implicating interest either in finding a woman or no one at all. Stress can signal a difference in the meaning that is implicated. So putting the stress on *find*, as in “I’m not interested in finding a man,” leaves the heterosexual presumption intact by rejecting the proposition in its entirety. But if the emphasis is placed on *man*, as in “I’m not interested in finding a *mán*,” contrastive stress signals that the speaker is interested in finding something else, namely a woman. Gay implicature appears to be generated when the stress is placed on *interested*, as in “I’m not interested in finding a man,” because it leaves the crucial part of the proposition, “finding a man,” neutral.

#### 6.7.3 Other strategies

(H)  
Scenario: A possibly naive heterosexual male, B, who is potentially interested in the lesbian speaker, queries her about her availability. The lesbian speaker has been dating another lesbian.  
B: Have you been seeing anyone recently?

**Lesbian:**

**(i)**

**I haven't been seeing any men recently.**

**(ii)**

**I haven't been seeing anyone recently.**

Finally, in (H), the lesbian in question was asked by a prospective male suitor, B, "Have you been seeing anyone lately?" Although she uses a strategy which is subsumable under gay implicature, her presentation of self is ambiguous. She could have lied directly and stated simply that she had not been seeing anyone at all in the context of a romantic relationship. More subtly, she might have been able to respond with either an elided form, "No I haven't," or a repetition of the proposition, "No I haven't been seeing anyone lately" and been understood as having said that she hadn't seen anyone of the opposite sex, without implicating anything about the same sex. However, such a response presupposes the default assumption of heterosexuality. Since she could not honestly maintain that assumption, she could not give either negative response without opting out, unless she explicitly indicated that a maxim had just been violated. So in this sense, she did not lie. Yet neither did she tell the truth since she could have replied with a version of an affirmative response and even qualified it with the disclosure that she didn't want to be lesbian. However, she felt that she would have lost the opportunity to date this man. Hence, she replied in (i), "I haven't been seeing any men recently," without placing any contrastive stress on *any men*. By stating the obvious, that is, by violating the maxim of quantity, she answered the suitor's question without compromising her moral stance. That she stated she hadn't been seeing any men lately should have triggered the the less obvious unstated alternative, namely that she had been seeing a woman lately. Therefore, the listener should have concluded that she was lesbian. "So," she said, pursuing her reasoning to its conversationally logical conclusion, "I came out to him." He seemed satisfied with her reply as attested by ensuing dates, while the speaker had maintained her commitment to cooperativeness, making what she termed her self-disclosure apparent (to anyone who listened closely).

Note that if her response had been (ii), there would likely be no implicature. The reason for the difference is that the lesbian's response in (ii) acquires its function as gay implicature in relation to what was said previously. Contrasting with the suitor's use of "anyone," the lesbian's use of "any men" in a sense defeats the implicature of "any men" in the former's use of "anyone" and triggers another, i.e., gay, implicature. In (ii) however, there is no implicature generated by the suitor's "any men", and hence, none in the repetition of the corresponding noun phrase by the lesbian.

Example (G) attests to how complex identity is, and how ambiguity itself can be polysemous. In the previous examples, (E)-(G), individuals implicated their unwillingness to enact a heterosexual identity, but they did not preclude false conclusions about their sexuality. In other words, if the listener maintained the expectation of heteronormativity, the lesbian or gay speaker did nothing overt to disabuse them of their erroneous "conclusion." It is in this sense that their identities were ambiguous. However, in (H), the speaker employs gay implicature not only for her self-presentation to the potential suitor, but as a way of being different things to different people (e.g., arguably straight to her suitor, and lesbian to the lesbian interlocutor to whom she reported the dialogue). If she had truly believed that she were or could be heterosexual, and indeed if she wanted to date her male interlocutor, she could merely have stated that she hadn't been seeing *anyone* lately. On one level, her utterance could actually have been interpreted as fully cooperative and informative. That is, her intention to be heterosexual would render such a statement, which would implicate not having seen someone of the opposite sex, as completely relevant and providing just enough information required by her interlocutor, even if she were exploiting the fact that he was maintaining the heterosexual presumption. She would thereby have eliminated any possibility of gay implicature. Yet, the fact that she did not do so, and further, the fact that she believed that she "came out" to him suggests that she understood her self-concept to be lesbian. Thus, her presentation of an ambiguous self was not merely a conscious strategy adopted out of self-defense and/or the

need to perceive herself as a moral person. The speaker was, in addition, attempting to have it both ways by implicating both a heterosexual and a lesbian identity.

#### 6.8 Ambiguity: Lesbian/gay identity and the Cooperative Principle

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. ... She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.  
(Anzaldúa 1987: 79)

The ambiguity of the *mestiza*'s experience of herself can shed light on how ambiguity pertains to the presentation of lesbian and gay identities. The *mestiza* is neither defined nor accepted by any one of the multiple cultures from which she originates. She is not quite a full-fledged member of Mexican culture given her Anglo-American ties, nor a true American because of her Mexican heritage. So she creates a culture and an identity out of this blend (which is, after all, what *mestiza* means) of shared experiences of non-belonging. To the extent that experiences are shared that impel such a presentation of self, and to the extent that knowledge by virtue of those shared experiences permits lesbians and gays to correctly interpret such ambiguous self-presentations, a lesbian or gay identity is based, as it is for the *mestiza*, on ambiguity. The selves presented by lesbians and gays who engage in the use of gay implicature implies noncommitment to, and thus has the qualities of ambiguity in relation to accepted (heterosexual-based) gender categories.

However, while the *mestiza* in a sense is forced by circumstances connected in particular with her language and ethnicity to co-opt her liminal states and render them into a basis for identity, the ambiguous identity presented by lesbians and gays through the use of gay implicature involves a different set of motivations. Lesbians and gays are not compelled into an ambiguous identity since there are few overt markers of sexuality as salient as language or the physical characteristics that are associated with ethnic categories. It appears then that a possible motivation for gay implicature is a model of the self where the speaker tries, to the extent possible, to be honest and sincere in his or

her interactions rather than one that attempts to do what is necessary to conform, even if it means lying.

Indeed, gay implicature appears to be less socially problematic than other violations of rules of interaction are. While there are words for other discursive acts of lesbian and gay self-presentation (e.g., *coming out*, *coming out stories*), no such culturally recognized term exists for gay implicature even though it is a common form of discourse employed by lesbians and gays. Likewise, we have words for infractions against CP, the most numerous and value-laden reserved for the most problematic infringements in this culture, including *lie*, *falsehood*, *prevaricate* (cf. Verschueren 1979). But it is more difficult to think of words describing conversational behaviors which suppress the addressee's ability to calculate a speaker's intentions, or even furnish to the addressee the option of calculating them. The absence of any such terms for gay implicature suggests that the way that the culture evaluates such strategies is open and, indeed, ambiguous. Inasmuch as such strategies are less accessible to naming and therefore to value judgments in this culture, the moral implications are less problematic than they are for maxim violations.<sup>14</sup> Thus, it cannot be clearly be said that gay implicatures (and Weiser's conversational strategems, which are pragmatically synonymous with utterances that do give rise to implicatures) are overtly deceptive; moreover, because the relevant information is present in the message and the speaker is acting out of self-defense. To this extent, then, speakers employing these strategies are "passing" by means of their ambiguous adherence to CP.

Because the strategies present an ambiguous self, and because the speaker does not seek confirmation for whether or not the audience has detected the speaker's ploy, the possibility exists that the audience is able to infer the speaker's sexuality. Goffman

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<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, behavior which is less accessible to naming and therefore to a value judgement does not mean that the interactions in which gay implicature is used are not necessarily unproblematic for the hearer. It is in fact convenient for the speaker that there are no ready made names or value judgments to condemn the suppression of the hearer's ability to calculate the speaker's intention.

observes that those who are stigmatized and those who are normative may cooperate in the construction of “normativity” of the stigmatized.

Also involved is a form of tacit cooperation between normals and the stigmatized: the deviator can afford to remain attached to the norm because others are careful to respect his secret, pass lightly over its disclosure, or disattend evidence which prevents a secret from being made of it; these others, in turn, can afford to extend this tactfulness because the stigmatized will voluntarily refrain from pushing claims for acceptance much past the point normals find comfortable. (Goffman 1963: 129-130)

Consequently, what hearers are actually aware of and how much they actually cooperate when the speaker uses such strategies is not known. What is important is when the speaker’s ambiguous self-presentation goes unchallenged. In such instances, it is not unreasonable to speculate that CP may be observed by both parties, where norms remain superficially intact in spite of the deviator’s violation of them.

(Cf. also Barrett (forthcoming) for a different take on ambiguous identities, whereby African American drag queens occasionally alternate between exaggerated performances of femininity and stereotypical masculinity in order to demonstrate their skills at performance.)

## 6.9 Conclusion

Identity is not something that stays constant, but is constructed out of the interactional flow through which shared meanings are established from a negotiation process (itself a property of interaction) between the speaker, whose intentions to self-presentation are culturally and individually determined, and the addressee, whose expectations of possible and legitimate identities are likewise a combination of personal and cultural beliefs and understandings. Depending on which assumptions are shared, certain implicatures, and hence, identities, are more likely to be conveyed and inferred than others, unless the speaker takes some sort of corrective action, such as gay implicature.

This chapter has explored the concept of gay implicature, one site at which language, cultural beliefs, and identity intersect. By invoking this conversational strategy, lesbian and gay speakers can exploit addressees’ cultural expectations of legitimate

persons in order to present an ambiguous self. Not only are implicatures culturally determined, but adherence to CP and to the maxims which permit their calculation also depends upon other real-life considerations, relative social status, face, power relations, and politeness principles. Strategies such as conversational strategems and gay implicature suggest that adherence to CP cannot easily be defined in terms of the hearer's success in calculating the speaker's intended meanings; nor does it hinge solely on the speaker's intention that the hearer eventually calculate the speaker's intention. As noted, conversational strategems which are ostensibly CP violations (at least at the level of formal cooperation) can be ambiguous with utterances which do give rise to implicatures; in such instances, whether the speaker has violated CP is as ambiguous as the strategem itself.

It is questionable that the status of CP is simply one of speaker adherence or nonadherence, or indeed, hearer success or failure at calculating an implicature. In regard to gay implicature, the hearer's ability to calculate the speaker's intended meaning is a result of an ongoing process of negotiation, taking place perhaps implicitly, between the speaker and hearer. It emphasizes that identity is irrefutably an outcome of the interaction between the individual's perceived expectations as a member of her culture of what a "normal" human being is, and what her own subjective experiences are in relation to those expectations. Cultural imperatives in the form of shared expectations of what is "natural" place individuals who cannot conform with them (or who conform more easily with negatively evaluated social categories) in psychologically difficult situations, because the individual encounters a predicament through which her subjective experience of same-sex attraction prevents her from realizing the norm of heterosexuality. As Goffman (1963:128) suggests,

Failure or success at maintaining such norms has a very direct effect on the psychological integrity of the individual. At the same time, mere desire to abide by the norm—mere good will—is not enough, for in many cases the individual has no immediate control over his level of sustaining the norm. It is a question of the individual's condition, not his will; it is a question of conformance, not compliance.

As a result, cultural imperatives impose moral dilemmas that are not faced by “normative” individuals within the culture: Lesbians and gays must “decide” whether to present a self which conforms with or violates cultural expectations. (See Barrett’s discussion (forthcoming) of the view, reinforced by homophobia in the African American community and racism in the white gay male community, of African American gay men as having to “decide” between aligning themselves as African American or as (white-identified) gay men.) Thus, a naive hearer may fail to calculate a gay implicature at an earlier part of an interaction, and in some formulations of CP (such as Lakoff’s), the speaker may be said to be uncooperative. Yet, particularly in a context where there the community as a whole has had exposure to lesbians and gays, the speaker’s continued use of gay implicature over the course of an interaction may lead the hearer to realize that the speaker’s utterances are indeed giving rise to such an implicature. In this case, based on the hearer’s success in decoding the speaker’s intended meaning, the speaker would be observing CP without having changed her intentions regarding the calculability of her homosexuality. Used over the course of an interaction, gay implicature can implicate a noncommitment to the heterosexual presumption which can eventually lead the hearer to infer the speaker’s homosexuality.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the status of lesbian or gay identity as a culturally-acceptable identity can be assessed by the speaker’s degree of adherence to the maxims in communicating her sexuality. In the act of coming out, for instance, the maxims are observed and there is no room for the audience to do any inferencing. Coming out presupposes that the audience subscribes to the normative model of gender and sexuality, and that the most effective way

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<sup>15</sup> Sara Gesuato (personal communication) has given me the example of the use of *signora* versus *signorina* in Italy. In recent years, it has become a law that all women over eighteen years of age can adopt the title *signora* whether or not they are in fact married. *Signorina* meanwhile retains the meaning of ‘Miss’. According to Gesuato, since the law has been effective for at least a few years, her use of the title *Signora* over *Signorina* should convey to strangers that she is not willing to commit to a statement about her marital status (and that furthermore, addressees should not inquire). The fact that some of her fellow Italians continue to ask about her marital status indicates that the law and its social significance for women has only partly been incorporated into Italians’ collective consciousness.

to dislodge at least one component of this model, the heterosexual presumption, is through clarity-based communication. The distress that such directness causes to those maintaining the heterosexual presumption implies that the two underlying models of gender (that individuals are meant to be coupled with the opposite sex, versus the absence of such a constraint on choice of mate) are unshared by speaker and audience; this cognitive mismatch is also evidenced in the numerous books that have been published and organizations that have been established whose main purpose is to deal with the consequences of this communicative act.

The existence of less explicit forms of coming out such as gay implicature demonstrates that the status of lesbian and gay identities on a culture-wide level is changing. The mere fact of allowing hearers the possibility of decoding utterances that would implicate the speaker's sexuality suggests that the heterosexual presumption has been sufficiently disengaged from current cultural presuppositions regarding gender. If homosexuality were as taboo as say, membership in the North American Man-Boy Lovers Association were, the odds would be very slight that the speaker would allow identification of his pedophilic tendencies. That is, given the (illicit) status of pedophilia, he would commit a clear infraction against CP and lie. Gay implicature, in contrast, is perhaps an indication of hope on the part of lesbian and gays that the heterosexual presumption no longer has to be viewed as a distinguishing characteristic of outgroup (that is, straight) members.

Finally, as we saw in the last section (§5.6), lesbians and gays are in the peculiar position of being at the forefront of cultural change, depending on whether they decide to lie (thereby maintaining the status quo), to tell the truth (thereby forcing, at the risk of physical harm to the self, one person to confront his or her conception of normality), or to convey their identity through gay implicature (thereby avoiding commitment to the old, normative category and initiating a process of "training" in the new, nonnormative, lesbian or gay category). The flipside of the moral dilemma which lesbians and gays are forced

into confronting also makes available “choices” between possible self-presentations. If lesbians (and gays) can create the appearance of being heterosexual (by simply invoking, as the situation warrants, their ability to “pass,” or by going so far as to engage in all of the external trappings of heterosexuality, including living a wholly heterosexual lifestyle), or of being ambiguously heterosexual and homosexual, there is some sense (exploited by anti-homosexual political groups) that identity is conscious and therefore voluntary. Yet, this reasoning fails to differentiate between performed identities (social identity) and biographical identities (personal identity, or self), a disjunction that lesbians and gays, because of the absence of inherent identifying traits, make salient. The range of self-presentations “available” to lesbians and gays merely exemplifies the performed nature of all identities and social categories, whether or not they correspond to the individual’s biographical self. Lesbians and gays who “pass” as straight perform an identity that is dissonant with who they actually experience themselves to be. Identities, both stated and implicated, are a result of linguistic decisions made over the course of an interaction, where each individual’s contribution in general is the outcome of a choice reflecting both the individual’s intention and the local and global social constraints of the interaction. Such a process of negotiation between individuals, intentions, and social and cultural forces illustrates the intimate connection between language and identity.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion

#### 7.0 Introduction

I would now like to address the connections between the discourse genres—coming out and coming out self-help literature, the coming out story, and gay implicature—and how they, as an ensemble, relate to the definition of lesbian and gay identity. In Chapter 1, I mentioned the concept of a discourse system, introduced and specified by Scollon and Scollon (1995:95-98). The discourse system furnishes some useful concepts and relationships that can serve to provide a unified, if tentative, account of the various speech genres. To recap, a discourse system consists of the following characteristics:

- 1 Members will hold a common ideological position and recognize a set of extra-discourse features which define them as a group (*ideology*).
- 2 Socialization is accomplished primarily through these preferred forms of discourse (*socialization*).
- 3 A set of preferred forms of discourse serves as banners or symbols of membership and identity (*forms of discourse*).
- 4 Face relationships are prescribed for discourse among members or between members and outsiders (*face systems*). (Scollon and Scollon 1995:98)

I will consider the discourse genres making up the present study in terms of the four components enumerated in Scollon and Scollon's definition.

#### 7.1 Coming out

Coming out is the principle form of discourse for the expression of the politeness norms, i.e., involvement, that are privileged by the discourse system supporting lesbian and gay self-presentation. As mentioned, there have been numerous books written on the subject of coming out, as well as web sites and pamphlets serving as guides for coming out under various circumstances. These publications offer solutions to the social problems engendered by acts of coming out. As I demonstrated via the text analysis of the self-help guides, their purpose is not merely to supply some recommendations on how to manage

the reactions of the reader's parents to an act of coming out by the reader, or how parents should behave when confronted with the self-disclosures of their lesbian or gay children. What all these forms of literature have in common is that they are formal ways of socializing the individual into the values of the lesbian and gay discourse system (which can be seen as a subsystem of the therapeutic discourse system)<sup>1</sup> by presuming the importance of expressing one's true feelings, and of listening to others do the same. They define any deviation from these values in negative terms. Lesbians and gays who do not self-disclose are dishonest and deceptive. Parents of lesbians and gays who do not accept their lesbian and gay children are immature, selfish, and lacking in personal growth. Coming out, hence, implicates the ideology of what has been termed, the therapeutic culture of the US (Bellah *et al.* 1996).

The act of coming out is a form of discourse whose immediate function is to convey a message about the lesbian or gay speaker's sexuality to the (probably) heterosexual addressee. Indeed, the fact that in its most basic form, it comprises the most direct and unambiguous form of all the lesbian and gay self-presentational discourse genres, "I lesbian (or gay)," indicates that it is an outgroup form of discourse that assumes very little about the addressee. It distinguishes ingroup members from outgroup members insofar as it presupposes a certain kind of relationship between the former and the latter. That relationship is based on differences in respective states of knowledge concerning the sexuality of the former, and on differences in acceptance of homosexuality as a social

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<sup>1</sup> There are other, less explicit, ways of socializing lesbians and gays into the values of its discourse system. For instance, lesbians and gays who describe themselves as "straight-looking" are often censured for the implicit valorizing of heterosexual norms, and for not pulling their weight for the cause of lesbian and gay visibility.

In recent months, there has been considerable debate among lesbians around the Bay Area as to whether JoAnn Loulan, a lesbian therapist, could legitimately designate herself a lesbian given that she had fallen in love with and was living with a man. Contributing to the controversy is Loulan's feminine demeanor: Because she can pass as heterosexual, her claim to lesbian identity had previously been her self-identification and the gender of her mates. For some lesbians, her new heterosexual relationship invalidated any claims to being lesbian (if she doesn't look like a lesbian or act like a lesbian, etc.), while for others, her history, her dedication to lesbian rights, and continued self-designation as a lesbian were sufficient.

category, and more broadly, on what is appropriate and acceptable to talk about. Since the speech act of coming out recognizes a boundary between the speaker as a member of the ingroup, and the addressee, as a member of the outgroup, it implies the presence of a discourse system which I have been referring to as the lesbian and gay discourse system.

Whether the speaker consciously intends it or not, coming out is also an attempt to socialize the addressee away from the heteronormative systems of discourse of which both speaker and addressee are members and into the non-heterosexual norms of the former. The speech act of coming out is not simply a presentation of a lesbian or gay self; it is also an attempt to change the addressee in relation to her/his own heteronormative discourse system.

Coming out is a discourse type devised specifically for communicating across discourse systems, from a non-heteronormative to heteronormative one, from one that values negative politeness (as far as topics such as sex are concerned) to one valuing positive politeness. As a form of outgroup communication, participants do not share assumptions or values. Therefore, since they have to fill in information gaps and to justify the norms and values of the disparate discourse systems of which they are members, participants are required to put in more effort to make themselves understood and to be able to interpret what others are saying. As with all such intersystem communications, coming out entails varying degrees of stress (Scollon and Scollon 1995:248). A couple of consequences have emerged as a result of the stress associated with coming out. One result is the emergence of coming out self-help literature. Another that has arisen as a result of managing this stress is the coming out story.

## **7.2 Coming out self-help literature**

Consistent with the recognition of the boundary between individuals, or between self and other is the emphasis on the individual. Although the act of coming out is socially problematic, a body of self-help literature has emerged that attempts to define it as a

problem that only the individual can solve. Thus, the individual is told of the benefits of coming out (e.g., one gains the ability to lead a fulfilling life, one's interpersonal relations improve), the costs of staying in the closet (e.g., one suffers mental health problems), what it means when one does come out (that it is "an act of love," that one is being honest and open) and what it means when one doesn't (that one is hiding, fearful, being dishonest).

Furthermore, the ways in which these ideas are presented as self-help texts implicate the individual as the agent of change in her/his life. Positive politeness strategies create the impression that the author of a given text cares about the reader and is offering suggestions for the reader's own good. One device in particular that appears almost ubiquitously in the coming out self-help guides is the personal testimony. Underlying this use is the idea that no two individuals are the same, that truth is what is true for the person; but that, paradoxically, it is through these personal stories that the individual can feel connected to others. Through this connectedness, the reader is motivated to at least believe what is being claimed in the texts, if not apply the recommended attitudes and behaviors to her/his life.

The ideas surrounding coming out are embedded within a discourse that appears to have the appearance of inevitability about it. But an examination of the Manifesto of the 1996 Chinese Tongzhi<sup>2</sup> Conference, a meeting of Chinese lesbians and gays that took place in Hong Kong, illustrates that alternative methods of expression are possible.

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6. Confrontational politics in the West should not be imposed upon Chinese societies. The les-bi-gay movement in many Western societies is largely built upon the notion of individualism, confrontational politics, and the discourse of individual rights. Certain characteristics of confrontational politics, such as through coming out and mass protests and parades may not be the best way of achieving tongzhi liberation in the family-centered, community oriented Chinese societies which stresses the importance of social harmony. In formulating the tongzhi movement strategy, we should take the specific socio-economic and cultural environment of each society into consideration.

7. We should respect each other regardless of sexual orientation.

We are a group of Chinese tongzhi unashamed and proud of who we are. While we do not deny our sexual orientation, we do not advertise the sexual aspect of our life. If the

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<sup>2</sup> The term "tongzhi" is the term used, usually as an address term, in Mainland China for "comrade," but has been adopted by Chinese lesbians and gays to refer to same-sex sexual relations.

[sic] society can deal with this issue without prejudice, everyone, tongzhi or otherwise, need not highlight her or his sexuality.  
etc.

As seen in the passage, vehicles of lesbian and gay self-expression such as coming out and gay parades are considered to be “confrontational.” There are references to social context, evidenced in the terms “family-centered,” “community oriented,” “social harmony,” and “socio-economic and cultural environment,” that are not apparent in the coming out advice texts examined in this study or elsewhere. Furthermore, the manifesto indicates a distaste for the expression of sexuality for its own sake. Rather it is acknowledged but not felt to be a justifiable reason for public display.

### 7.3 Coming out story

The coming out story serves a number of related functions, internal and external. It is therapeutic for the speaker, and possibly for the lesbian or gay audience. It explains and justifies why the speaker came out. And, because it is a form of discourse by which people who have similar experiences of coming out communicate with each other, it is an indicator of ingroup membership.

First, the narration of a coming out story is therapeutic. It affords lesbians and gays the opportunity to communicate with those who share coming out experiences or, more generally, with those who share and accept<sup>3</sup> knowledge of the speaker’s homosexuality, without having to invest a large amount of effort establishing background knowledge, assumptions, and shared values. The coming out story is therefore an example of intrasystem communication that defines a form of communication among members of the same group, what I am referring to as the lesbian and gay discourse system. This experience, as Tannen (1979a) puts it, of “communicat[ing] with those who speak the same language,” and, one might add, with those who share the same kinds of

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<sup>3</sup> Note that shared knowledge alone is not sufficient. A parent to whom a lesbian or gay speaker has given an account of how s/he came to be lesbian or gay may assume that the speaker’s sexuality is just a phase and therefore deny that the speaker is in fact lesbian or gay.

experiences, “is necessary for mental health” (p. 43). If such communicative experiences do not occur at least occasionally, people are likely to “doubt their ‘coherence’ in the world” (p. 43). Telling a coming out story to others who have gone through similar experiences of self-realization, self-acceptance, and self-disclosure is one way of relieving the feeling of incoherence from being a lesbian or gay person (e.g., because of the stresses of having to determine when it is necessary to conceal and when it is safe to self-disclose) in a heteronormative world. The story’s therapeutic function is reinforced by the kinds of speech events in which they are typically embedded. These speech events, such as the rap session, the written anthology, and even the interview<sup>4</sup> tend to absolve the teller of the requirements to justify inserting her narrative within the flow of a conversation. Overt negotiation is minimal, in comparison to stories told in conversation (cf. e.g., Polanyi 1985). The therapeutic effect comes from, among other things, the ability to tell one’s story unimpeded by others’ definitions. In this way, it differs from an act of coming out, where the audience may, for instance, question or deny, as well as accept, the basic proposition being conveyed by the speaker, namely the self-identified lesbian or gay person’s homosexuality.

Second, the coming out story gives the teller the opportunity to justify her/his acts of coming out (i.e., her/his acts of disruption of the social order). The justification is necessary because, as a member not only of the non-heteronormative discourse system into which s/he has been socialized as an adult, but also of the heteronormative discourse system into which s/he has been socialized as a child, s/he retains both sets of cultural values, conflicting as far as homosexuality is concerned. More specifically, whereas in the heteronormative discourse system, members operate under a set of assumptions based on a shared set of taboos, in the non-heteronormative discourse system, other sexualities are possible, and sex and intimate emotions are not considered taboo. By coming out, the

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<sup>4</sup> After expressing my thanks at the end of an interview with Tom, one of the Chinese-American subjects from whom I elicited coming out stories, he replied that he found the experience of telling his coming out story “therapeutic.”

speaker indicates that s/he has adopted one set of values—at least in some situations—over the other; and by telling her/his coming out story permits her/him to justify her/his preference and to establish that s/he remains a good human being in spite of her/his rejection of at least parts of the heteronormative discourse system into which s/he was originally socialized.

Finally, because any given telling of a coming out story presupposes shared knowledge and acceptance of the narrator's lesbian or gay identity by both narrator and audience, it is not merely an expression of identity, but an affirmation of shared group values. In conjunction with the coming out speech act, the coming out story contributes to and symbolizes the group's sense of cohesion. Both forms of discourse implicate an overarching set of extra-discourse features (e.g., same-sex attraction, having to conceal one's sexuality, knowing where the lesbian and gay bars are) that define the group, specific forms of socialization (e.g., reading self-help books to learn how, when, and to whom to come out, going to bars to learn how to "cruise," participating in rap sessions to learn to tell a coming out story), assumptions about interpersonal relationships (e.g., people should mutually express and empathize with each other's feelings, honesty and openness in relationships are good). The forms of discourse themselves are symbolic of group membership because they both define who is a member and who is not and they comprise identifiable resources that are available to ingroup members. Thus, the coming out story is another manifestation of a lesbian and gay discourse system.

#### 7.4 Gay implicature

Gay implicature may be considered another form of coming out (or coming out to "us," i.e., fellow gays, but remaining closeted or ambiguous to "them," i.e., straights) but it is treated separately from coming out because the audience may or may not calculate the speaker's intended message that s/he is lesbian/gay, whereas in a paradigmatic case of

coming out, the message is sent clearly and unequivocally such that the audience, assuming normal linguistic processing functions, is able to understand.

Gay implicature constitutes a set of strategies that preserves the definition of the ingroup by means of the indirect rejection of the heterosexual presumption, but it nonetheless allows the addressee to infer the speaker's homosexuality over time. The function of implicating rather than stating originates out of politeness (i.e., temporary respect for the addressee's sex taboo) and self-defense (i.e., in case the addressee is hostile to homosexuals); to this extent, the speaker preserves the norms of the heteronormative discourse system even as she, paradoxically, subverts them by her refusal to commit to those norms. Her non-commitment to heteronormativity is intended to produce the same result as a direct act of coming out does: conveyance of the speaker's sexuality, and more generally, socialization of the addressee into a non-heteronormative discourse system.

When lesbians and gays employ lesbian and gay self-presentational genres, straight addressees are neither brought entirely within the fold of the lesbian and gay discourse system, nor excluded entirely. They may be able to interpret the entire range of genres, and to support the beliefs and values inherent in the discourse system. And indeed, this seems to be the purpose of both coming out and gay implicature. But because they themselves cannot employ the self-presentational forms of discourse comprising the system (they are, after all not lesbian or gay), they may be seen as outgroup members. And thus, it would seem that a separate discourse system exists defining lesbian and gay identity. If however the discourse system is viewed as a goal-oriented one which seeks to legitimize the status of lesbians and gays within the culture as a whole, then to the extent that straights adopt the values inhering in that system, can the latter then form part of the system of lesbian and gay discourse. In this case, however, it may not be appropriate to talk about separate discourse systems but rather, a single one that is more inclusive of a range of different sexualities.

The question arises regarding the function of the strategies comprising gay implicature in view of the existence of alternative forms of lesbian and gay self-presentation and of self-protection. In other words, what does gay implicature accomplish for the speaker that neither lying nor overt self-presentation does, and what does the use of gay implicature say about the speaker?

The status of the Cooperative Principle is revealing in this regard insofar as it reflects the speaker's priorities in a given social situation, and more generally, (1) notions about the functions of language, (2) the nature of relationships it establishes, (3) how those relationships are established, and (4) whether the group or the individual is emphasized. When gay implicature is used, CP is ambiguously (and ambivalently) observed. Therefore, it is a compromise that involves being sincere in light of the problems associated with being lesbian or gay.

Every act of communication conveys information and reflects assumptions about the roles and relative statuses of participants. Since cultures value different kinds of relationships, and have different ways of establishing them, they differ to the degree that they emphasize the informational function or the relational function. In western cultures, the primary function of language is not to express relationships among participants but to transmit information. As Scollon and Scollon (1995:141) put it, "the ideal language use is to purge one's speech and one's writing of everything but the essential information" and that "what cannot be communicated in this way is hardly worth paying attention to." The conveying of information is tied in with the concept of the self via the notion of sincerity, meaning what you say, or saying what you believe to be true.

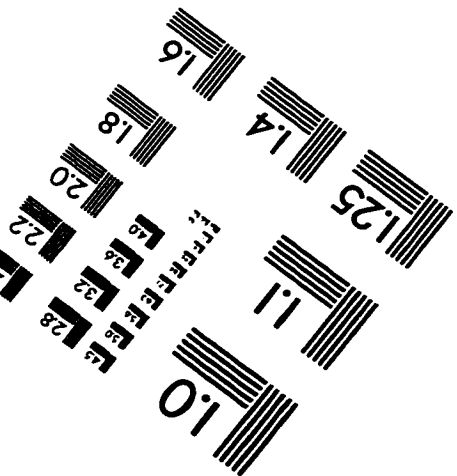
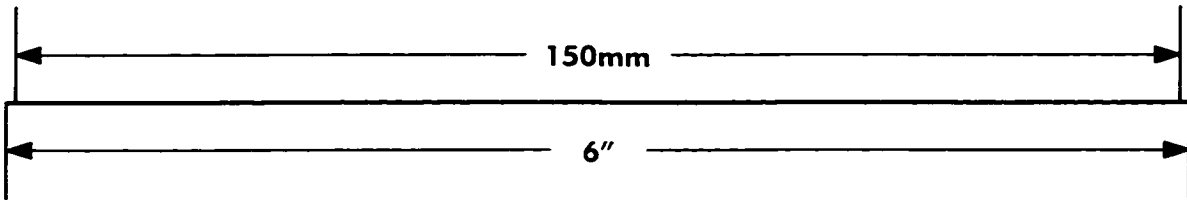
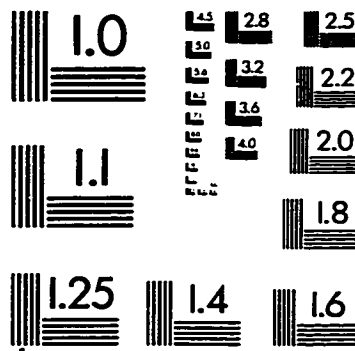
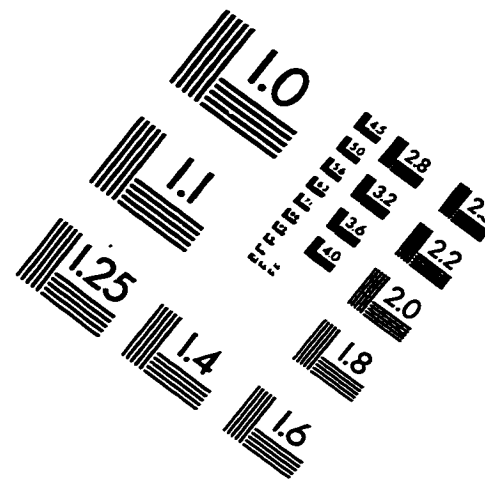
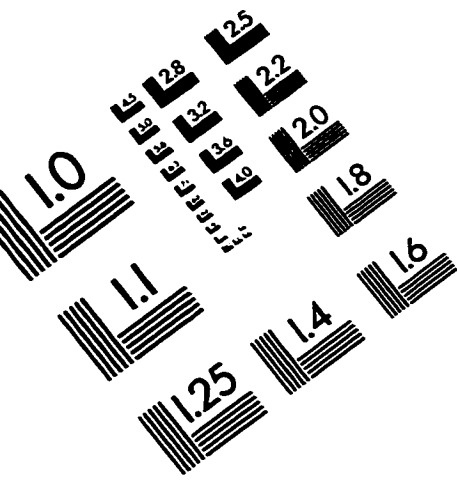
Gay implicature presumes an informational function of language since the strategies it comprises function to convey the message "I am lesbian (or gay)." The informational function of language also means that speakers are free to create new relationships. Therefore, gay implicature is consistent with and a manifestation of the ideology of the therapeutic culture: members speak sincerely and honestly, and thereby

change their relationships with others. Contrastively, in cultures where the default function of language is relational, language reinforces or ratifies relationships already set in place. Thus, it is unlikely that gay implicature would arise in a culture which placed strong emphasis on relationships, because such a culture would preclude the conveyance of such information as “I am lesbian (or gay).” That is, what is at issue in relational cultures with regard to the topic of sexuality is the appropriateness of raising such a topic. Concealment, deception, dishonesty would not be accurate descriptions of what members do when they choose not to talk about their sexuality. If the topic is not appropriate, it is not raised.

### 7.5 Conclusion

The lesbian and gay discourse system consists of paradoxical elements that reflect, on the one hand, the desire of lesbians and gays for the same “normal” status that heterosexuals have within American culture, and, on the other, their desire to retain an identity separate from the heteronormative mainstream. In other words, the shared desires and efforts of non-normative members of the culture to be recognized as normal give rise among lesbians and gays to a sense of group identity. For instance, in a conference where I presented a preliminary version of the chapter on gay implicature, one conference participant complained that the use of the term partner was being taken over by straights. Yet, if lesbians and gays want to be normal, then aspects of their discourse system will inevitably filter into the broader heteronormative mainstream such that the distinction between heterosexuals and homosexuals (or, that is, between heteronormative and non-heteronormative discourse systems) will eventually disappear.

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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