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GAY MORAL DISCOURSE: TALKING ABOUT IDENTITY, SEX, AND COMMITMENT

David E. Woolwine and E. Doyle McCarthy

ABSTRACT

Gay men in the New York City metropolitan area were interviewed from 1990 to 1991, during the period of the AIDS epidemic. Using an interview schedule, they were asked questions about "coming out of the closet" and other identity issues: their experiences of "difference," beliefs about monogamous or "open" relationships, and their views about sex and commitment. The study's focus was on the men's "moral discourse" or their relationship to the "good," including ideas of the self, other(s), friendship, love, sex, and commitment. The study yielded a consistency in the men's responses: they did not wish to impose on other gay men their own convictions about being gay, sex, and intimate relationships. Their talk was tentative, localized, highly personal, and "nonjudgmental" on a range of identity and moral issues. These findings are discussed by relating the men's life experiences to the gay culture they shared: their unwillingness to judge others reflects their own formative experiences of "coming out" in a society that judged gay men harshly and who, in later years, lived at the time of the AIDS crisis.

In both classical and contemporary interactionist works, the social self is described as a dialogical and emergent entity. Its idioms of speech, its narratives, its forms

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of talk in everyday life provide the structures in which self-reflexive selfhood develops and proceeds. In social research this idea has led to firsthand studies of group members and their speech acts as the locus of selfhood and identity-making. For identity-talk is not only expressive of emerging selfhood, *identity-talk is constitutive of the self*. Put differently, identities are surely not manufactured by groups and then passed down like old clothes or family recipes. Rather, the identity business is more about what people themselves think and feel and say to each other (and to themselves), what particular clothes they wear, and what food they prepare and serve. Identity is about making choices, especially their own (spoken) claims to an identity. Identity is in the *doing* and *saying*.

These are some of the principal claims of symbolic interactionism, claims that we have used in our own study of gay men. From the start of our study we also assumed that these claims would operate as part of the "subjective reality" or as part of the body of self-understandings that our "subjects" themselves would use in their own conversations about their struggles to achieve "gay identity." For example, these men would interpret their own identities as something asserted, spoken, chosen, and achieved.¹

In conversations with these men, two principal ideas served as our "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969): the *first* comes from gay men themselves and their own accounts of "difference" from others. As we expected, the men used the discourse of "difference" when speaking of their experiences and identities. Difference is an idea that dominates both the very private feelings of gay men but also shapes public and political gay discourse. Difference is surely an identity bestowed by others; but it is also an identity embraced, asserted, and achieved, as when gay men proclaim and flaunt their own "queer-ness."

The *second* sensitizing concept of our study is the idea that the gay men we interviewed were, in many important respects, much like their heterosexual counterparts, since they obviously shared important features of late modern and postmodern selfhood (Gergen, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 1994; McCarthy, 1996, Chap. 4, 2002; Shalin, 1993; Young, 1991). For example, they share with them a decidedly reflexive quality to their conversations and to their humor, and a sense of their own identities as choices or "constructions." Following Georg Simmel's distinction, we also anticipated similarities of *content*, as opposed to *form*: gay men, we expected, would address issues of "relationships" and the various meanings people give to these relationships (lovers, friends, sex partners, etc.). Furthermore, gay men would undoubtedly look for "romance" and "love," but they would also, we expected, insist on their own gay meanings of these pursuits.

These two sensitizing concepts, the important ways that gays and straights are the *same* – they are co-habitants of late modernity – vs. their experience of "difference" or "otherness" were ideas that not only made sense to us as researchers; again, we

also thought they served as part of the self-understandings of our "subjects." Even if these appeared, at face value, to present contradictions to these men, they were contradictions that the men were able to live out as *cultural truths* about themselves as gay men. In other words, "difference" was a word that resonated with their social marginality vis-à-vis others. Furthermore, gay men's talk about "difference" expressed many (and, sometimes, different) things – for example, their youthful alienation from family and friends, their "coming out of the closet," their seeking out of communities of "difference" to articulate the various meanings of being and being seen as "different." At the same time, we reasoned, gay men would recognize that problems of identity were issues that were much broader than themselves and their own social and cultural milieu; others – women, people of color, immigrants – shared with gay men "identities of difference." More importantly, we anticipated that the everyday understanding of "identity" as something chosen or embraced, would be an important part of gay discourse as it would be of their heterosexual or "straight" friends and associates in the world of late modernity.

1. STUDY SAMPLE AND METHOD

This project began in 1990–1991 and the fieldwork was completed in 1991. One of us, David Woolwine, and a student researcher collected taped interviews based on a semi-structured format from gay men in New York City and New Jersey. The questions asked focused on issues discussed above, such as "coming out of the closet," whether and how gay men perceived themselves as different from others, beliefs concerning monogamy and "open relationships," their views about sex in the years of the AIDS epidemic, how community among gay men was discussed and how, if at all, they experienced an overarching meaning of life.

This process of sampling and interviewing yielded a total of thirty-one interviews. This sample of thirty-one men was not randomly chosen but attempts were made to make it as representative as possible. Flyers announcing a need for interviewees were posted or handed out in places where gay men hung out or assembled in New York City and in New Jersey (e.g. gay/lesbian political and cultural bookstores, the GMHC or Gay Men's Health Crisis, the New York City Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, the New York Gay Pride Parade, at ACT-UP meetings, at gay/lesbian religious services). Announcements were made at a wide variety of gay groups and the diversity of groups contacted represented our attempts to ensure some racial, ethnic, religious and political diversity. Finally, some people were selected to participate in the study in order to include more people of color and individuals who frequented gay bars almost exclusively (and might

not see announcements elsewhere). An earlier article on this study reported on the relationship of these gay men to a community of others and how that community was conceptualized (Woolwine, 2000). Here our focus is on the question of gay identity, in particular how these men – in their interviews – position themselves in relationship to the “good”; this includes notions of the self, the other(s), friendship, sexual relationships, and commitment to others. We refer to these articulations of identity as “moral discourse.”

It is important to note – and we will return to this in our concluding section – that the period from 1990 to 1991, when these interviews were conducted, was one of continued expansion of the AIDS epidemic, the disease having first attracted the attention of U.S. public health officials in 1981 (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001a). Data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that there were 41,595 new reported cases of AIDS in 1990, compared with 8,249 in 1985 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). From the outset, the most common means of exposure among those reported to have AIDS has been male-to-male sexual contact (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001b).² In the interviews, we did not use AIDS as our principal focus, but it came up often and was clearly the “environment” in which the study and the interviews were undertaken.

2. INTERVIEW DATA AND NARRATIVES

2.1. *Coming Out and Gay Identity*

Being gay surely means more than an attraction to people of the same (male) sex. For gayness – like blackness, manhood, nationhood – belongs to the realm of one’s identity, something resonant with meaning and emotion, something “thick” rather than thin (Ryle, 1971). In our particular world of late modernity, identity has come to mean something born of struggle and striving, assertion and defense; the self today is an opposing self – oppositional to the general culture, a theme addressed in works of sociology (Bell, 1996, Chap. 2; Hewitt, 1989, pp. 158 ff.) as well as literary criticism (Trilling, [1955] 1978). Identity, as we use it here, is also what we want to think of ourselves and be thought of by others, an ideal self (Berger, 1970; Erikson, 1968; Foote, [1951] 1970; Giddens, 1991). Identity is also who we are most deeply, most truly; it is the self of our truest and most authentic emotions. Yet today, our truest and deepest sense of ourselves is also a self that is, more than ever, a mobile and a changing self, best captured in the domain of the “ineluctably local” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1994, p. 699) and in narrative practice, where self-construction happens and . . . happens again.

Reflecting a new cultural and “discursive” emphasis in identity studies, ethnographies of selfhood today employ narrative methods (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Gotham & Staples, 1996; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Maines, 1993, 2001; Plummer, 1995) to locate in a person’s life narrative a “life story” as a vehicle for understanding a person’s own account of “identity”: how it was achieved, its strivings, its struggles to discover what a life means and to assert and impose through that story an identity. Identity – in its contemporary usage – is about discovery and about “coming home,” or arriving at a place that I recognize as “me” and “mine,” even if I have not been there before. In the dominant discourse of gay men, an identity story is a story of “coming out,” of “coming out of the closet,” a coming home to one’s true self and to a community of others.³

Three ways of perceiving or talking about “coming out” emerged in the course of the interviews. There were three groups of responses: (1) those men who spoke of coming out as a *difficult, even painful, process*; (2) those who saw it as a *process* but who did not give indication that it had been especially difficult for them; and (3) those who said that they did not experience coming out as a process, nor did they see it as having presented difficulties for them. Most of the men fell into the first category (coming out is a process which presents certain difficulties). A smaller number fell into the second category (coming out is a process but not a particularly difficult one), and the descriptions of only three individuals fit the third pattern (coming out is experienced neither as a process nor difficult.) Finally, one individual was seen as clearly “in the process”; that is, he was dealing with the central issues of coming out at the time of the interview and was deciding whom to tell and if he wanted to assume a gay identity. He did not have any way of describing explicitly what he was going through, indicating that one’s language, even about one’s personal and inner experiences, is derived, at least in part, from those with whom one is in dialogue, one’s community. It was clear from his statements that coming out was highly problematic, since it required that he deal with strong negative images of gay men and a view of gay life as one of loneliness.⁴

In talking about coming out, the men spoke of this in different terms: sometimes it involved coming out to one’s self; for others, it meant coming out to others. One individual who saw coming out as a process of personal growth said:

To me it’s a process . . . beginning with . . . what’s the word, I can’t remember. It begins with, like, seeing, or . . . recognizing, that’s the word, recognizing it and dealing with it and then accepting it. And for me that took a long time, years and years . . . Then I guess there is the more accepted idea of when one comes out . . . enters the gay community . . . and that involves, I guess, acceptance and putting yourself forth in some . . . capacity.

[Another man placed more emphasis on the social nature of coming out.] There’s the level of being out to yourself, there’s the level of being out to the extent that you socialize with other gay people who consider themselves gay, there’s the level of telling your close friends . . . some

of whom might be gay, there's the level of, it just keeps going, you know, of being out to your family and being out at your workplace. I consider myself pretty along there.

Despite these differences the men interviewed neither noted nor discussed any contradiction or tension between the various ways of coming out. Rather they emphasized what they thought was relevant to them. And while most clearly placed a value on the internal stages of the recognition of the "truth" of one's gayness and acceptance of it as a positive identity and a personal valuation of identification in some manner with a larger gay community, they did not develop an absolute moral stance on "coming out." That is, they neither demanded that other gay men go through certain stages, although they clearly noted that specific stages were personally fulfilling and helpful, nor did they demand that a particular "end state" or final stage be reached in the process. Specifically no one stated that all gay men must come out at work, to friends, to family, or to the media. The type of language used in discussing coming out was one of persuasion from personal experience (i.e. advocacy), but not one that attempted to formulate universal prescriptions to which every gay man should be held.

There also existed a range of ages at which coming out was said to occur; but in most cases some initial recognition of emotional and sexual feelings for other men and/or some initial contact with a gay community seemed to have occurred by the late twenties. One man who self-identified as a "black gay male" said, "I was definitely born there. I remember. It had to be from birth." Another man emphasized not knowing or, rather, the slow process of coming to know.

I mean there were points where I kind of knew what was going on. I'd say by middle school, which would be sixth or seventh grade I knew, I knew that I was attracted to men. At first it was a funny feeling, then I sort of, I think it was a sexual thing . . . I had a girlfriend in high school, yes. And I didn't have sex with men, and even decided to cure myself of being gay in high school by refusing fantasies at all about men at any time. Which I did for about a year until I said, "Ah! I can't take it anymore!" So then I decided to be, I still decided to be heterosexual but allowed gay fantasies, until college where I finally decided to at least have sex, to accept that I wanted to and was going to. It was even later that I decided to live the lifestyle . . . That was, probably, when I was 22 years old.

A third man emphasized not coming out until his thirties and in a way that seemed almost like a conscious choice.

I came out initially when I was about 30 . . . 31, part of the trauma of turning 30. I . . . came out for a year. I was married, father of two, came out for a year in terms of separated, finding what it was like to be gay in [a particular city]. I was very discouraged with the value system there. Found out if that was the value set that it didn't fit with my life style as well, and went back to being married until I really had to deal with it at a later point in time. It's been about five years now, six years, since we dealt with it and we chose to be divorced, and separated permanently, and have evolved that way.

There were also those who emphasized desire, that is, those who, along with a narrative of coming out, chose to highlight or analyze particular desires or episodes of sexual behavior in their lives as important aspects of their gay identity. In these narratives the issue of bisexuality, and other forms of nonhomosexual behavior or desires, was a dominant theme; these narratives also included accounts of how one thought of oneself as a gay man. Here "being gay" was often spoken of as an aspect of one's bisexuality or being gay was principally a behavior; it was "just sexual." For example, a man might speak about how, after years of understanding himself as bisexual, he now thought of himself as "gay." In another case, a man thought that his gay behavior was really about sexual desire while the label "gay" meant a political stance. For example, one man who said he had "always been out" and had both heterosexual and homosexual experiences since he was twelve years old told us: "I was bi for a long time. Today I'm exclusively homosexual, for the last fifteen years." Another man self-identified as "bisexual," reported having no sexual experience with women. "I'm bisexual. I'm attracted to both sexes, more so to men than to women. I would say probably 85% toward men and 15% toward women. In actual practice I'm homosexual. I've never had a sexual experience with a woman, only with men." Homosexual identity did not preclude having sex with women or wanting to have sex with women, as one man put it.

Well, I'm homosexual, however you qualify that because I do have fantasies involving women and so I'm not sure I'm completely on that side. I probably wouldn't mind getting laid with more women, it just doesn't happen . . . Let me put it this way, it was easier for me to say, like, "Let's fuck," with a man than it is with a woman.

Finally, one man might take the label "gay" for political reasons or, as one person described himself as "gay with an asterisk":

I guess I'm just gay for political reasons and identity myself "gay" for political reasons. I think that I, ordinarily, in the perfect world, I would just describe myself as a sexual being, not as a heterosexual, bisexual, or gay, or anything else, or limit myself, but being that [pause] the way things are, I think it's important to identify myself as gay. And I found out, you know there are a number of levels of finding out, but as I think back on it, I think I've always been attracted to males as well as females. [pause] It surfaced a few times but then it sort of dropped again. Really it wasn't until, it was my mid-teens, around sixteen or so, that just, while masturbating, you know [with] male friends who at some point it was, "Well, we really don't need females here you know." I just sort of pushed them out and was left with, "Isn't that interesting, I guess I'm gay." So that's when I sort of realized I was gay, but I didn't do anything about it sexually for another five years. I was 22.

In the narrative accounts of "coming out," what were the particular meanings ascribed to being gay? Was there an emerging definition of "gayness?" On the whole, the men interviewed told about their discoveries of the meanings of gayness, meanings that went beyond sexual and emotional attraction. Significant variations

occurred among the various accounts. For example, there were various ways that "difference" was discussed. A feeling of "difference" or of "being different" was claimed by some of the men to have been experienced at a very early age. As one man said:

Well, I probably always knew, I guess. I remember always feeling a little different, feeling attracted toward members of the same sex. I don't know whether or not that's because of the lack of affection I felt from the same sex growing up, but I mean, I remember having crushes on friends when I was ten years old.

However, while some emphasized that this feeling of difference was accompanied by feelings of self-condemnation, others thought of gayness and "difference" as giving them an all-pervasive advantage in life. One way of expressing this was to use religious or quasi-religious language. Such views would hold that there is a supernatural, transcendent quality to "gayness," as in the following statement.

So I guess my ideal, what I would like to see the gay community, or gay spirit, move into is focusing on ourselves and healing ourselves with our own powers, you know, and developing our minds and our, elevating our consciousness. I mean if you studied, you know, almost if you really look into history and study the greatest minds of our time, they're homosexual. The ones that brought us the most beauty, the most brilliant thinking to the world, expressed their sexuality with the same sex. And what I would like us to quit focusing on is where we put our penis. Elevate our consciousness to a level where we transcend that and really tap into, you know, the incredible powers we've been given . . . We love each other not because someone else defines love in a certain way, we love them because we can't help but love them, because we're tapped into love, you know. That's the reason I first expressed love with a man. I mean if that's not a love type of desire that transcends everything I was told, I mean all of the programming, all of that love transcended that.

Such accounts, whether locating gayness in early childhood, or presocial experience, or in some spiritual (essential) difference, can be looked upon as a form of essentialism.⁵ By this we mean that there is an "essence," a natural or inborn characteristic that explains one's gayness. Essentialism also refers to the belief that people are normally either homosexual or heterosexual, just as they normally belong to one nation, race, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth.

However, another interpretation of what gayness and "difference" mean emerged in some of the interviews. These accounts are remarkably nonessentialist and, in fact, reveal a remarkable sensibility about the social and cultural and, even, circumstantial nature of "identity," including one's own. Such "constructionist" ways of speaking, furthermore, attempted to reconcile the "difference" of being gay with what are taken to be universal human experiences and feelings. Such universalizing accounts can be seen in the statements of the following two individuals. Both of these men reject any essential difference between gay men and

others and then reintroduce a "difference" as a condition brought about by social experiences. In the first case, while emphasizing the "difference" produced in the gay person as "stranger" or "outsider" (Becker, [1963] 1973; Simmel, [1908] 1971), the speaker acknowledges that straights may also have experiences of "difference." He then states that one cannot generalize about what makes anyone gay. What gayness means here is also "difference," but a difference produced by social conditions, shared by straights, and a varied difference as well, one that may not be the same for all; nor is the experience of difference based on the same types of experiences.

The second individual also sees social "oppression" as something that many others confront, not just himself as a gay man; he goes on to point out that there are even differences in the particular forms of social oppression that groups experience and that shape their own sense of alienation or "difference."

[First individual] One of the things I don't understand is people who separate, who, I mean, for me being gay is . . . loving men and having sex with men. I know that there are people who think that . . . there are some aspects of gayness that transcend sex, but I don't quite understand that way of thinking. Sex is at the root of it for me. I suppose there are aspects that have to do with the accumulation of experience as a gay person that are interesting and of value that have to do with being an observer, growing up and having to conceal yourself in certain ways for self-protection and what that does to you, and how you learn to be in the world that way . . . that, that's certainly true of me, I mean, I think that there's probably some way that process of studying other people and seeing what is acceptable and what has to be hidden from other people, from myself, from my parents, probably contributed to the qualities that make me a writer, make me a reporter, make me a journalist, make me a good writer, all of these things, in that I paid attention to those things. Although, Lord knows, there are plenty of good writers, reporters, journalists, who are not gay. Perhaps you have some other experiences being an outsider, but something about it, I always felt like an outsider, you know, an outsider, in my own family and being gay was, I think, a big part of that. What makes us gay was your question? See, also I guess I feel like being gay is not one thing, and certainly not one thing to everybody, so I think there are a lot of different answers to that question and what makes me gay is not the same thing that makes someone else gay.

[Second individual] I think people are not special. Circumstances unique, the oppression unique . . . I don't think innately we're [gays are] more creative, or more intelligent, or we're duller, have greater sex drives, or more loving gentle people. I don't buy that shit. I think that we're human and whatever goes with humanity, that's what we are in perspective. Straight people, just like bisexual people, people of all races. The cultural phenomena of homophobia has, could, define our lives. The trick of being gay is to redefine your own life. Not based on oppression, but based on your own philosophy of life. And that's the coming out process. That, to me, it's controlling your sexuality, your own identity. Unfortunately the culture, the institutions, really want to maintain power for white male heterosexuals. To varying degrees, depending on the institution . . . Women experience that, and African Americans experience that, and Hispanics experience that, and Native Americans certainly experience that. Lesbians, gays, bisexual people, all experience that. And I think that I often see the most striking analogy

between . . . sexism and homophobia. It's really trying to control one's sexuality and body and that gay people can identify their own sexuality, their own needs, their own affections, what they want to do with their bodies, it's really threatening to lots of people, and it's a scary prospect for gay people, you know . . . And it plays out racially too. I mean, white people like to control Black people historically in a lot of ways, and sexually is one way. Economically is probably the most profound way. I don't think, I mean it affects women profoundly too, economics. I'm not sure it affects gay men as profoundly. I think it does have an effect on them, have an impact on them certainly, but I don't think as profoundly. Certainly not as profoundly as ethnic minorities and women. So I think gay people are a product, like all oppressed people, are a product of their oppression . . . And I think . . . in spite of the oppressors, and in that discovery itself, the self-definition defining all your humanity is what being gay is all about, and when you find your humanity, you find that you can be that gentle and loving person. Like the myth, you can find you can be a strong person physically.

2.1.1. Interpreting "Coming Out"

"Coming out," whether reported as difficult or not, is clearly one of the dominant experiences of gay men and a core theme in their identity narratives. Perhaps because of its dominant role in gay discourse and culture, gay men struggle with its meaning for them, its truth-value for them and for others. This said, "coming out" is rarely, if ever, denied as part of being and becoming gay. "Coming out," we observed from these interviews, requires a considerable degree of self-reflection and an investigation of emotional states, notions of personal courage, discovery, and confrontation – each of these recounted in "coming out" stories. It also requires, at least in most cases, that these characteristics be exhibited at the relatively early ages of the teens and twenties. As an experience, common among gay men and shared in discourse among those who laid claim to this experience, coming out stands as a prime candidate for one of the formative experiences for shared attitudes and shared characteristics of gay selves. Put differently, coming out is part of the cultural core of gay culture and gay narratives – at least for the period in which this study took place. For, as Plummer (1995, p. 49) has argued, while "coming out" has, for several decades now, become a "story of our time," at century's end, these widespread sexual stories of discovery and survival may have started to appear somewhat "tired" or "clichéd," a point we will return to in our conclusion.

Culturally speaking, "coming out" narratives contain a contradiction which is played out in various ways by the men we interviewed. On the one hand, *it is a shared or collective experience*; on the other, *it is spoken about in highly individual terms* – there is no one way of coming out. According to many of the men we interviewed, there is no universal coming out story, nor is there even an agreed upon interpretation of "gayness," the meanings about what constitutes a gay identity. Nor did we observe among these men an attempt to enforce a universal definition on other members of the group, beyond the suggestion of self-acceptance and an identification with some larger gay community.

Partly a result of the expressed difficulties inherent in a gay identity, the men we interviewed also manifested a *self-reflexiveness* about themselves and their identities. Self-consciousness about who they are is clearly an effect of their sense of "difference" and alienation from others. On the other hand, the type of reflexivity we observed in these men is also a distinct trait of modern selves, as described in classic works on the *shaping of modern identity* by Norbert Elias ([1939] 2000), Stephen Greenblatt (1980), and Charles Taylor (1989). The theme of a heightened "reflexiveness" is also a major theme in studies of the postmodern self (e.g. Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Lash & Friedman, 1992). In the case of our men, we observed a sense that "truths" about themselves and their gayness were understood as "inwardly developed" truths as opposed to universal truths. Identity, they told us, was a matter of something undertaken, suffered, asserted, lived up to, and so forth; it required work and courage. *Their identities were self-projects*, a remarkable denial of the sociological concept of identities as "social constructions," an issue we will return to later.

2.2. Gay Men's Moral Discourse

Gay men have often been characterized as sexual revolutionaries. To call them such depends, of course, on what is meant by "revolutionary" and how one conceptualizes a "revolution." Describing the position of those who maintain the revolutionary nature of gay male sexuality and identity, Michel Foucault (1990) argued that such views indicate an acceptance of the notion that there exists some essential sexuality which is capable of being repressed and, therefore, can be in need of "liberation." Regardless where one stands on this issue, we would argue that gay men's discourse on sexuality (and on sexual and romantic relations) reveals a set of values and norms that are relatively distinct from the dominant heterosexual discourse on sex and sexuality. And while it would be a difficult case to make the *sociological* argument that gays are sexual revolutionaries, the narratives we heard revealed relatively distinct modes of reasoning from those of their heterosexual counterparts on matters of sex and sexual relationships. Specifically, the interviews show that gay men's ways of talking about sex, sexuality, love, erotic and romantic relationships, and sexual and romantic intimacy are so many attempts to rework and redefine the dominant heterosexual moral outlook, including an expressed valuation of monogamy in various modified forms.

Despite these disclaimers, the interviews also reveal that there is, in fact, *a dominant form of moral discourse or a dominant ethos, one that structures much of gay men's speech on sex, sexuality, relationships, and intimacy*. As in Section 2.1 above, this discourse is a localized, highly personalized, experientially based

discourse with an expressed preference for an open, evolving universe, an emphasis on "growth" and gaining of new, fulfilling, and creative experiences. We also found these themes to characterize their discourse on sex and romantic/intimate/erotic relationships. The analysis also revealed a substantive consensus among the gay men as to what is to be valued in erotic/romantic relationships. This consensus – a set of core issues on which most gay men interviewed agreed – is itself loose. Durkheim ([1893] 1933) referred to this as a "vagueness" in both the conceptualization and the meaning of modern social categories. The men expected some disagreement with others about the exact meanings of words, about the way they valued relationships of friendship and intimacy; they often described this *positively* – as a "nonjudgmental" stance. That is, the value preferences expressed by them are, in their own thinking, rarely totalizing, hardly ever generalizable, and certainly not clearly defined (more "gray" than "black and white"). As the men described what they thought, they often quickly asserted an openness about these ideas; there was a tentativeness in the ways they said things, even about their own particular beliefs and convictions. Accordingly, the men expressed a degree of willingness to allow new experiences to change their own expressed values and beliefs and an acknowledgment that such change may likely occur in the future. Built into their moral discourse is an idea that their own moral discourse (i.e. their own ideas and values about relationships) might very well change into the future.

In sociological terms, gay experience is quintessentially that of a "subculture" (cf. Plummer, 1975, 1996, p. 80; Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967, p. 97), a group culture that develops in opposition to dominant group culture and whose core features are inversions of that culture. We certainly see this in the mocking and humorous way that some gay men parade themselves as "queens," faggots," and "queers," in the "in your face" displays in body and costume that poke fun at straight, bourgeois culture. But gay culture – speech, narratives, categories – is also made up of the many attempts of gay men in everyday life to rework or to redefine for themselves what their sex is and what their relationships mean. In these cases, there is more negotiation than opposition, more of a need to show to themselves and others that "gays are gays"; and whatever that means, it means that "we are who we are" and we are not who *they* are, nor are we who they *think* we are.

In the case of sexuality and erotic/romantic relationships the men themselves often examined and reexamined words and phrases ("lover," "commitment," "friendship"), and in such a way that this testing process seemed to be integral to their own struggle to define themselves in relationship to significant others. In this regard, some of the men indicated a distinct uneasiness with the term "lover," principally because of its connotation in the "straight" world. Some of the men felt that the term "lover" for straights had either a purely sexual connotation and/or

described an intimate relationship that is thought to be less stable and less important than that of the legal spouse. Another reason for the failure of "lover" to win full acceptance among some gay men might be that the standard gay redefinition of "lover" has not, in the minds of some gays, produced what the gay community needs, a word that corresponds to a community and the needs of the men who belong to that community. "Lover" doesn't provide a person with a positive social status. As one man put it,

"Lover" [is] one [term] that we used until fairly recently. I still use it actually. I guess mostly when I introduce other people to [N . . .] I say "This is my lover." I've started to say "husband." I feel kind of weird about it, it doesn't sound quite natural yet, but I like it better . . . "Lover," I think . . . that's a good word, but it's not good enough, it doesn't quite say enough as far as (pause) I think it says enough as far as your personal relationship and that you're in love and love is expressed through sex, in part, and you know, you are together. I think that's fine. I think it's a good word for that. But it doesn't say something about your status in society, which I think is real important because we don't have a lot of societal support. Even within the community there's no, but there's not a lot of almost legal status or acknowledgment that we're together, and I think it's so important. Like if a married couple is going to break up it's like they get support. Before you consider divorce, "Don't you want to think about it, don't you want to do this?" or whatever, it's like taken seriously that before divorce you step back and think about it. In fact, I think gay couples say, "Well, we're going to break up, Oh too bad." And there's no social . . . mechanism that goes into place and says, "Hold on, I'll think about it." I think "lover" does not convey that.

However, there were many of the men interviewed who did not directly express an uneasiness with the term "lover." This can be interpreted in two ways. These men may be entirely satisfied with the term or they may use it, even when not entirely satisfied with it, because it is a term commonly in use within gay culture; it refers to the individual with whom one is in a significant erotic and/or romantic relationship. Even some individuals who complained about the term indicated that they still used it most of the time. The individual quoted above falls into this category. At some level he does not really have a term with which to describe this significant relationship. He is caught between a dominant heterosexual discourse and a gay discourse, or perhaps seeking out some new discourse. Several other men indirectly indicated their unwillingness to accept the term "lover" by answering questions which had the word in it by avoiding its use in their own replies or by using other words along with the word "lover" (e.g. "I have a lover; I have a primary boyfriend who lives in another city. So, we have a standing relationship."). Other terms offered as replacements for lover were, as above, "friend," "companion," and "mate." "Partner" had not yet entered the vocabulary of gays and straights at the time of this study.

But, more importantly, what does the term "lover" and its suggested replacements mean within gay male discourse? Despite the personal power

expressed in defining a word or in choosing words that one wants, social communication requires at least a *loose consensus of meaning*. It was, in fact, clear from the interviews that there are various meanings that the men gave to words like "lover." In fact, a surprisingly consistent core of expressions emerged and constituted one of the areas of *loose substantive consensus* among gay men. First, in their process of stating what a "lover" meant to them, the men dealt with a set of self-selected issues and they often began by saying what a lover is not. Issues they raised here included: (a) distinguishing lovers from individuals with whom one had anonymous, or relatively nonemotionally engaged, sexual relations (this proved the easiest to establish); (b) distinguishing lovers from friends with whom one did not have sexual relations (this also proved easy to accomplish, and only one individual seemed seriously concerned with this issue); and (c) distinguishing lovers from "fuck buddies," those with whom one is not emotionally attached but with whom one is having ongoing sexual relations. (No one making this distinction actually stated what constituted the difference; it was simply assumed that it was clear. The positive definition of "lover," discussed below, should indicate why the above association was not made: namely, the difference rests upon the relative degree of emotional involvement which one has with a lover.) Other issues raised were establishing the length of time one needed to be in a relationship before one could use the term "lover" or its equivalent, establishing whether one must live with someone to call that individual a "lover" (Both issues were ones about which no consensus emerged, and both of which seemed to be taken as unimportant relative to other issues), and establishing whether one could have more than one lover simultaneously. This issue arose explicitly in only one instance.

Once this list of preliminary issues had been talked through, it became relatively easy to say what a lover was not. A "lover" is *not* someone with whom one has anonymous (unemotionally involved) sex; a lover is *not* a friend, if one is not having sex with that friend; a lover is *not* a "mere" friend with whom one is having sex on a regular basis. Finally, a loose consensus about the positive definition of a "lover" also emerged.

As an example of how one goes about identifying the positive meanings attached to the term "lover," we looked at how one man defined "lover." This man in his twenties told us that he had not been successful with long-term relationships. He began by emphasizing what seemed most salient from his own experience, namely, that lovers should present more than sexual experiences (i.e. a lover is *not* an anonymous sexual contact.). He went on to say that he felt that a relationship with a lover should contain an emotional component as well as certain responsibilities to the other person (e.g. to communicate who one is to that person). He also emphasized strict monogamy, an idea not shared by most of the men.

A sexual experience is [pause] you can have it more than once with the same person but it's usually with someone you don't know very well. I don't know, it could be with someone you do know, but it's kind of, there's no understood attachment. In a relationship, I think there is devotion, monogamy. There is a certain responsibility that you have to know that person, let that person know where you are, what you're doing. Being in that person's life style. With sexual experience I don't think that's necessary.

The loose consensus of meaning referred to above and shared by most of the men, contained the notion that *a lover is that person with whom one is sexually involved and who is one of the most important persons in one's life*. One chooses to "share" one's life and one's self with that person. We will refer to this as "domestic romanticism," regardless of whether the men advocating it were in a monogamous or nonmonogamous relationship and regardless of whether they lived together or not. What seemed to be important here was an emotional closeness and commitment. "Closeness," "acceptance," and "communicating" in an open and honest way are some of the words used to describe this idealized version of a lover relationship. In some cases, the lover is said to be the "central person" and the relationship *the most important part of one's life*.

Such romantic definitions indicate that the gay men interviewed were far from the revolutionaries others have described them to be. A "lover relationship" for gay men is a modified form of what most Americans would describe today as a relationship with a "partner" and/or a marriage in ideal form—emotional closeness, personal commitment. The language used also reveals a strong belief in an "inner" or "essential" self, one that needs to be shared with an other. The relationship becomes precisely that place, within the gay community, where one is able to share the self and where one can develop oneself in certain important ways. As one individual put it:

We love each other, we're sort of the central (pause) we're the other person in each other's lives. I mean [N. . .] is my other self, someone I feel totally bonded to, like we're two halves of the this (pause) whole entity. We live together, we didn't always live together, but we live together. It's mostly that we, I've committed myself to this relationship and see him as the most important person in my life other than myself."

Finally, "growth" was a theme explicitly present in some of the men's responses. As one man in his sixties said:

Someone you can grow with. Grow, grow, grow and never have completion of the growth process. And so that's a generic statement that covers most possibilities, but looking back on my relationship, this last relationship, the 24-year one, and I had some long ones before that, that certainly is the one quality that I think is primary.

Beyond a working definition of the term "lover" (a definition which includes the notion of domestic romanticism), the issue of monogamy vs. "open" (i.e.

nonmonogamous) relations was addressed in the interviews. Monogamy as an ideal was the expressed preference of most of the men answering questions. A few of them regarded monogamy as a "demand" or necessity and some of the men also spoke about their preferences for "open relationships," a term taken from the widely read book, *Open Marriage* (1972), on the subject; an open marriage means one where couples can expect sexual "freedom" and "experimentation."

Two men indicated that they were in transition from the monogamy ideal to preferring open relationships; a small number of men simply stated that they had no strong preference on the issue. Although monogamy was the expressed preference of most of the men, there was no consensus on the issue given that nonmonogamous preferences or lack of preference were also expressed by many of the men. This is further supported by three other characteristics of the men's answers. First, almost all of the men, regardless of their expressed preference, refused to make a moral absolute out of that preference. In fact, on the whole, they refused to make a statement about what other gay men should prefer or do. The men refused to generalize from their own preference. One heard repeated references to "what works," "this is only my experience," and "I don't want to judge." The most frequent form of argumentation was from "personal experience" and there were frequent statements of the sort, "different things work for different people." The emphasis was on an individual's own perspective and experience, on finding out by one's own experience what is the best practice for oneself. Because of this emphasis, relationships were seen as "negotiated" and were seen as places for "self-discovery" in relationships with others. This is compatible with the expressed ideal of "personal growth" and being "nonjudgmental" about others.

The following statement was made by a respondent who rejects monogamy but who, nonetheless, bases his views, like those of the other men, on his own personal needs and psychology.

I am not opposed to monogamy but monogamy will not work for me. I simply cannot promise monogamy. And I know that from past experiences, a relationship, if I agree to a monogamous relationship, the relationship is really doomed for failure. It would be a matter of weeks, months, years, but eventually it will not work because I will basically get tired of the relationship and no matter how good it is. I was involved at one point with a man who, for all intents and purposes, was my perfect man. He was a professional body builder, had a body that was perfect really. Very good looking, very nice, very sweet, treated me wonderfully, never asked anything, you know, from me. I got along very well with his family. Basically, you know, there was no problem and it was perfect. I mean I couldn't envision myself in a better arrangement, but being with him, even though he was perfect, I started to get tired of the, not the relationship, but it got to be a bit monotonous and even sex, even though it was great every time, even though it was a ten every time, nonetheless, it was the same thing with the same person and I started to get a little bit bored with it, and I started to feel a little frustrated and then I met another man, who I also liked, and I began to have a relationship with him at the same time and we decided that we were not going to be monogamous and my relationship with [N], the one I was with previously, improved

100% when I started seeing [M], because, I don't know, I'm not really sure why this is, but my feelings for N became more intensified when I was also with somebody else. I didn't feel that I was stifled, I didn't feel I was constrained in any way. I felt he had given me, you know, the freedom and I appreciated that and I loved him all the more for giving me the freedom to do what I wanted and it strengthened our relationship from my, you know, being with someone else. We didn't, however, discuss our extramarital, if that's the word you want to use, relationships. And so, I know from that experience that I can't promise monogamy to anyone. It just is not realistic. It may be idealistic and it may work for a lot of people, but it won't work for me.

While there is very little consensus among these gay men on these issues, there was a remarkably strong consensus that important romantic/sexual relationships require the work of *communication* and/or *negotiation on the issue of monogamy* (and nonmonogamy). In some cases men stated that they believed that personal growth could occur because of negotiation and compromise on these issues. Even among those with a strong preference for either monogamy or openness in relationships there was an acknowledgment of a need to ascertain their partner's, or future partner's, views on the matter. Furthermore, most of the men indicated a willingness to work out a compromise on the issue if necessary. This willingness to discuss and/or negotiate these issues, in fact, more importantly, the *assumption* that some sort of important discussion must take place about such matters within a relationship, is also one distinct way in which gay male discourse seems to differ from that of the dominant heterosexual discourse. For although some heterosexuals might be willing to negotiate monogamy and openness in relationships, *it is not an assumption among heterosexuals that negotiation and discussion on monogamy vs. open relationships must take place as they enter into the married state or even into a serious romantic relationship.*

The first quotation below is from one of the strongest advocates of monogamy and an individual least willing to compromise among the men interviewed. Yet, even his statement indicates that a clear statement of one's expectations and desires on this one issue must take place at some point in a romantic relationship between two gay men. The second speaker below, on the other hand, welcomes the lack of firm guidelines in a relationship. He states that he enjoys what he learns in the process of interacting with his lover on this issue and making the relationship "work." Both men, as opposite in their substantive stances on the issue as they can be, acknowledge that *relationships between gay men cannot be presumed to adopt a monogamous or open form.*

[First individual] For me, monogamy is what I strive for and what I would want to expect. I don't think, and this is, I don't think it's something you can impose on someone else. I think it's something they have, it's kind of like asking somebody if you love them. "Do you love me?" I mean, if you have to ask, the question is redundant. It's something that should be, someone should say without being asked. The answer is already compromised. The same with monogamy. To say "OK, I want you to be monogamous in this relationship" is very different from

a person saying "I expect to be monogamous in this relationship". That should be something not imposed.

[Second individual] . . . I realize that my relationships are better and better where I've gotten closer to people and the relationship's been better where I've let go of my expectations of what relationships are supposed to be like. Then no, my relationships are not monogamous, they're not, you know, like "I Love Lucy," or anything you might expect. [N . . .] and I don't live together, for example. I'd get worried if we did. But I don't think that's bad. I mean, it's just, I think each relationship is its own animal and you have to learn how to take advantage of it, make it work. I think it would be silly if, you know, if I were to throw this relationship out, or any relationship out, if it wasn't meeting this sort of criteria or expectations . . . So no, I mean, it's not a monogamous relationship. That is a little bit of a problem or I think it might become more of a problem, but I think you have to learn, grow, and maybe it will change back again. I mean, I don't want to, a lot of these pressures, a lot of these standards and expectations and rules and stuff, don't in the end serve you or the other person or the relationship.

We think that the strongest indications of a lack of consensus on this issue were the various redefinitions of monogamy and openness that occurred in the men's responses. Although the men continued to speak as if monogamy and openness in relationships represented contradictions, a large number of the men, especially among those advocating monogamy, indicated personal exemptions, allowances, and what were, in fact, personalized redefinitions of the terms "monogamy" and "openness." This amount of personal redefinition would be unlikely to occur if there existed either a strongly held group consensus on the matter or a unified manner of speaking about monogamy and openness in relationships. Reasons for not being entirely "monogamous" in relationships defined as "monogamous" were many and included: (1) absence of a partner for a long period of time; (2) inability of one partner to fulfill the other sexually; (3) "spontaneously" (i.e. without planning to do so), becoming sexually involved with someone; (4) a willingness to return home every night; (5) agreed upon openness in a relationship once monogamy had allowed strong bonds of trust to develop; (6) anonymous or nonemotionally involved relationships allowed alongside a central and emotionally important one; (7) monogamy in "intense" relationships and openness in less "intense" ones; (8) the willingness to discuss one's outside relationships with one's lover; and (9) the willingness to keep outside relationships secret from one's lover.

Among those preferring open relationships, the most frequently mentioned modifying factors (i.e. the ones which made them most likely to be monogamous or attempt some version of monogamy despite their preference) were "jealousy" and/or "insecurity." Here the jealousy or insecurity could be either their own or their lover's. The following are two of many statements on this subject.

[First individual] That's a tough question. I have to say that I "want my cake and eat it too." Not that that's necessarily reality. Lots of things come into play as far as that goes. By having my

cake and eating it too I mean that I would love to be able to have a variety of sexual partners. I don't think that sex affects emotions. I think emotions affect sex. I think that I have come to believe that at least assuming monogamy is essential to a relationship until there is, assuming there is, a point reached where there is such a strong mutual trust that both parties can allow that trust to bind them emotionally and not feel threatened. I don't know if that's possible or not, you know, I don't know if monogamy is something that, you know, the heterosexual world devised and we adopted it because it's the model we're looking at, or if indeed, that's the way it works. You know, I see nonmonogamous relationships and I see monogamous relationships work. I think if you're going to be monogamous you have to be really committed to it. You have to really want to be monogamous with the other person . . . But I could have been monogamous rather with my ex-lover for the rest of my life, and although I was physically attracted to, or had desires to have had sex with other people, I would not have had . . . if we were still lovers and had such an agreement.

[Second individual] Monogamy is real . . . I was very monogamous and if I dated you and you were in Timbuktu I wouldn't date anyone else. I wouldn't date nobody else, and there was nobody for me. Well, I was one of the people it didn't work for and I felt betrayed . . . sex is sex . . . so it's a whole other concept and I let people know that. Right now my relationship is not monogamous. We can have sex with other people and I have had sex with other people, but I prefer, if we lived in the same city and were together all the time I don't need anyone else. He would satisfy the needs for me, hopefully. But people have to make the relationships work for them. Because monogamous may not work for you. Would I prefer monogamy? Yes. Can I live without monogamy? Yes.

We would argue that in the course of people's renegotiations about these issues the difference between monogamy and open relationships becomes blurred. What develops is a new understanding of monogamy and open relationships, one that takes the form of a continuum. The dichotomy (monogamy vs. openness) is done away with while another dichotomy emerges to take its place: the contrast between what is "ideally desired" and what is "really possible." It is significant that in most cases where this new dichotomy is used, the "really possible" becomes the privileged term; it is a kind of reality test. The individual learns (is supposed to learn) to accept what is "really possible." This is what we have referred to as a morally *pragmatic stand*. It is also a way in which gay male discourse probably differs from the dominant forms of heterosexual discourse on these issues, where a willingness to state a preference for the "ideal" still prevails.

3. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND ISSUES: NEGOTIATING "DIFFERENCE"

Identity is formed at the unstable point where the "unspeakable" stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture.

Stuart Hall

Reading Stuart Hall's words and applying them to the men we interviewed forced us to rethink the social and political climate of 1990–1991 when these interviews were conducted. It was a time when the AIDS epidemic provided the context for these stories and to the men's own distinctive discussions about "moral discourse," their views concerning sex, friendships, and commitments. Yet, the relationship of a group's "situation," in John Dewey's sense of the word as an "environing experienced world" (1938, pp. 66, 67), to the distinct shape of its members' narratives of identity is neither a direct one – the story, a clear reflection of the group – nor is the relationship of a group's culture to its members' identity stories a direct one, as if our stories about our identities are merely derivative of our group's situation. To claim something like this is to assume that group structure directly affects members' identities, surely contrary to the interactionist position that "agency" and "process" matter. Not only do these matter, what members say and do are the ways that group "structures" are produced and, in turn, become the presuppositions of members' actions (Maines, 2001, pp. 169, 170).

As sociological interpreters of these men's narratives, we can, however, try to "read" something about their situations at the time of the interviews (back) into what they said to us then about gay identity and lifestyles: for example, their spoken claims – repeated over and over – that *they did not wish to impose on other gay men their own convictions about sex and intimate relationships*. In some sense, this can be read as an odd disclaimer about one's identity; it seems to deny the *identity* of me and us, of gays as my "imagined community" and myself as a gay man. After all, don't we expect that others like us will feel and act like us? That they will do or want to do as we do? Isn't that a large part of what "us" is? But regardless of how (sociologically) unexpected it was, this disposition came up repeatedly and in different contexts in the interviews, about monogamy, intimate relations, and what it meant to be gay: "people got to do what they got to do"; "people have to make the relationships work for *them*." Even on matters of "coming out of the closet" – the most taken-for-granted feature of what it means to be "gay" – coming out is spoken about in terms so highly personal and individual as to virtually deny anything at all common about the experience. There was, they insisted, no single way to come out, one did not have to come out to the same people (family, friends, at work) or at the same age. We spoke about this earlier as a type of cultural contradiction: *coming out is a shared experience ingredient to being gay; coming out is spoken of in highly individual terms*.

[one man said] What makes us gay is your question? . . . See also I guess, I feel like being gay is not one thing, and certainly not one thing to everybody . . . [another said] For me, monogamy is what I strive for and what I would want to expect . . . I don't think it's something you can impose on someone else. [and another] But people have to make the relationships work for them . . . monogamous may not work for you.

In these statements and others, the highly individualized formulations of these men – ingredient to their own distinctive moral discourse – were principally statements about *other gay men*, about not imposing their own experiences and judgments on other gay men: their talk was tentative, localized, highly personal; they expected variations and disagreements with others which they described positively; "communication" and "negotiation," for example, in close relationships was important; it also presupposed differences and disagreements. As we described it earlier, the only strong consensus among these men was that they expected disagreement with others; it was important, they said, to be "nonjudgmental."

In Ken Plummer's (1995) book on "sexual stories," one of his central arguments is that the stories he wrote about are both "socially embedded" (produced and shaped by social contexts) and are told by people who experience and tell these stories as their *own stories*. Context, therefore, is important for interpreting stories as the stories of *particular people* who see themselves and their worlds from particular vantage points. But the connection between context and persons' experiences is neither obvious nor direct. Take this theme, repeated many times by the men we interviewed: *being open to others and nonjudgmental*. This might be understood as a highly individualized morality that these men shared with many of their contemporaries. But it is also a stance that makes special sense as something spoken by gay men in the years from 1990 to 1991, when AIDS had already killed so many gay men and when gays were the object of public scrutiny and moral judgment (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Scott, 1990, p. 503). Judging, they might have said, is what the world was doing to "us"; we cannot . . . should not . . . do it to *ourselves*. There is also something in this (nonjudgmental) disposition about "difference," especially in their "coming out" stories. For in their assertion, however tentatively expressed, that they would not, could not make judgments about other men, they were also aware that this was another way they were different from "straights": their early experiences of "difference" in the face of others was an important feature of their gay identity; they *knew* that whoever they were was something *they* suffered, chose, undertook, and so forth. In the face of "difference," being treated that way, they assert a better way, *their way*. Sometimes their language is heroic:

[as in this man's words] . . . homophobia has, could, define our lives. [but] the trick of being gay is to redefine your own life . . . based on your own philosophy of life. And that's the "coming out" process. [and another says] So I think gay people are a product like all oppressed people . . . a product of their oppression . . . And I think . . . defining . . . your humanity is what being gay is all about.

Contained in these two accounts is an expressed awareness that being gay is something *given* and something *chosen*; being gay is simultaneously something

beyond my control and something I choose. More specifically, the fact of my gayness is beyond my control because it was determined by factors beyond my control. However, my *identity* as a gay man and my acceptance of who I am is an important matter of choice. This distinction helps us to understand how these men can insist, as they did, that "coming out" was a process that contained such highly personal and individual experiences; this is because being gay belongs to the realm of our destiny, something recognized and accepted; whereas gay *identity* is how we as individuals make choices about who we are. In this assertion, the men we interviewed were in agreement with the study by Whisman (1996, p. 120):

The dominant account of lesbian and gay identity holds that the individual's homosexuality is determined by factors beyond her or his control while acting upon, accepting, and identifying with that orientation are matters of choice.

Another way to characterize these men's statements and dispositions is to point to another expressed *contradiction* in the matter of their "difference" relative to those who are straight. In many cases they expressed the view that "we are not like you," especially in the accounts of their "coming out." At other times the men, in their efforts to understand and express where they stand relative to other nongays, asserted an identity, a likeness really, with other groups. Here, it seems that "common humanity" supercedes "difference." As one man stated, "I think gay people are a product like all oppressed people or a product of their oppression." Another said, "I think that we're human and whatever goes on with humanity, that's what we are . . . Straight people, just like bisexual people, people of all races."

Finally, the men's expressions of tentativeness and their reluctance to impose their own ideas on others sometimes had the quality of a "pragmatic" approach to the matters we discussed with them. Especially on matters of "monogamy" vs. "open relationships," it was expressed by them as "what works" or "making the relationship work." In fact, each of the men that we cited here on monogamy, regardless of where they stood on monogamy, agreed that what mattered most in these relationships was "working it out" with the other, not imposing one's own ideas on the other, accepting what was "workable" or "really possible." This attitude was also expressed by the men as a contrast between the "ideal situation" and "what's really possible." This we characterized as a *morally pragmatic stand*. In this (pragmatic) disposition the men were voicing a stance that links them up with many other Americans past and present. Clearly, this pragmatist stance is not a distinctly gay-American trait. In fact, some have argued that it has been a consistent feature of American culture and the American self since the last century (Menand, 2001): American pragmatism includes a skepticism about imposed ideas coupled with an idea that "people are the agents of their own destinies . . . and [their]

universe is still in progress" (pp. 371, 372). According to this perspective, ideas are *instrumental* and thoughts *adaptations of ourselves to reality*. "Beliefs . . . are just bets on the future," Menand writes, describing the thinking of the pragmatists Holmes, James, Peirce, and Dewey. "Though we may believe unreservedly in a certain set of truths, there is always the possibility that some other set of truths might be the case. In the end, we have to act on what we believe; we cannot wait for confirmation from the rest of the universe" (p. 440). These distinctly pragmatist claims, place in the forefront of a moral discourse the individual self struggling to discover for itself what it should do; alongside this claim stands another equally vital one about *the other*: each of us needs to respect the other's right to be and to choose. ". . . the moral justification for our actions comes from the tolerance we have shown to other ways of being in the world, other ways of considering the case (Menand, 2001, p. 440).

This perspective – nonjudgmental, pragmatic, tentative – was, in many ways, the dominant feature of the talk of these gay men who spoke to us in the years when the AIDS epidemic threatened their lives, their friendships and loves, and their safety: a stance that holds back any judgments about other gay men and how they live (and die); one that articulates a narrative about gay identity that is open to difference "even among ourselves"; one that is tentative rather than certain about oneself and one's beliefs and the beliefs of others (monogamy vs. open relationships, about who's a "lover" and who's not, about what "coming out" is all about). This particular moral discourse, as we have called it, brings to the fore a distinctly American (and interactionist) idea about what a self is, a subjectivity-in-process, a distinct presence whose contours move from deep inwardness to expressed outwardness, someone whose being is its expression; a self is "a constant undertaking" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 71).

Which is to say, the matter of these men's "identity" is neither to be found in their narratives of "difference" (coming out of the closet) nor in some "essential" likeness with their/our contemporaries. The various ways they "made themselves up" always involved *identification with* and *disidentification from* (Hewitt, 1989, Chap. 5; Perinbanayagam, 1991, pp. 12, 13). Again and again, it was as if they were saying to us in the interviews, "Here is how we're like you . . . the rest of you . . . Here is how we're *not* like you." It sometimes mattered a great deal whether the men thought of themselves as "different" from straights (in the courage it took to "come out," in the need to *negotiate* our monogamy); at other times, using the (straight) language of "lovers" didn't really amount to much and, in the end, it was really about "being human": "we're human and whatever goes with humanity, that's what we are . . ." The conversation always, in one way or another, was about "difference" and/or "likeness" with gays, with gays and straights, with "humanity" (all of us, the denial of difference). Their stories were so many constructions of

identities, of difference and sameness, as all of our identities are (Hall, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, Chap. 6).

Plummer's (1995) study concludes with a proposal that the sexual stories he reported on would undoubtedly change to reflect changes in late modern society and subjectivity. We would expect to see changes as well, particularly in this study's focus, gay "moral discourse." New issues about "gay Americans" are already changing the moral and political climate of "gay culture," even changing public discourse on both sides (if we can speak that way) about gays and straights ("Are they enough like us to let them marry . . . or not? And what about gays raising their children and our children?") Some issues have a strong pull on a society or a group within a society, changing identities and relationships, occasioning new images of "marriage," "family," "parents," and so forth. It is too early to tell about gay marriage and whether or not a new and dominant gay discourse emerges, asserting sameness and identity vis-à-vis straights. Or, will American gay men become more publicly diverse on these matters, as one early poll suggests (Belluck, 2003). Is it possible that the "nonjudgmental" and "pragmatic" stances of these men in the early 1990s has prepared the way for gay Americans to become like their straight counterparts, disagreeing on most national issues by class, age, ethnicity? In charting some of these changes in the decades ahead, this study might help to lay the groundwork for future studies of gay men's identity and, particularly, their moral discourse – what they have to say about sex, relationships, and commitments.

3.1. *Queer Theory: A Final Note*

We would be seriously negligent if we concluded without engaging our own study's categories and findings in a conversation with current work in "queer theory," an academic movement that emerged in the 1980s and an important body of work inside and outside of sociology.⁶ This is because queer theory raises questions about the very terms we have employed throughout this study, as well as its purported object: "gay men" and "gay identity." Our own approach is decidedly within the interactionist sociological tradition (which today reflects a number of sociological and theoretical positions and agendas), particularly its emphasis on self and identity as social and dialogical processes. We are also clearly aligned with the "constructionist" argument and, in particular, with Berger and Luckmann's (1967) depiction of the construction of "objective" and "subjective" realities, including what they construe as "identity." That said, while there are some points of agreement in our perspective and that of queer theory (e.g. the constructionist view of identity and sexuality), there are important differences as well. As outsiders to

this body of work, we would assess its special importance as both theoretical and political.

Early works by Judith Butler (1990) and Eve Sedgwick (1990) opened up new problematics for lesbian and gay studies, new ways of thinking about the subject. Butler's offered a view of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" as constructions and determinacies and proposed, in its place, a view of the "indeterminacy" of sex and gender. The idea of the *construction of the homosexual*, Butler argues, brought into focus that of the *heterosexual*, how the two notions – themselves sociohistorical constructions of relatively recent date – represent previously unseen sociopolitical positions about normal sexual practices and desires (see also McIntosh, 1968). These categories and their accompanying practices and desires are ingredient to "society" itself, as we know it and live within its structures of law, religion, morality, politics, and so forth. "Heterosexual" and "homosexual" operate as part of "disciplinary regimes" that punish and stigmatize "unnatural" and "immoral" actions and identities. Furthermore, sexual categories operate alongside of other social and political identities to support and reinforce "society." For example, the social boundaries of race, ethnicity, and nation are also sexual boundaries, an argument made by Joane Nagel (2000, p. 107): "The borderlines dividing racial, ethnic, and national identities and communities constitute ethnosexual frontiers, erotic intersections that are heavily patrolled, policed, and protected . . . Normative heterosexuality is a central component of racial, ethnic, and nationalist ideologies." The enterprise of queer theory – its capacity to *queer* or to trouble – is to render visible these disturbing assumptions – its imposed boundaries and "borderlines" – that are built into every facet of "society." Furthermore, it opens up to our rationalized selves, societies, and sciences the domain of "desire," previously repressed, displaced, silenced. In the realm of the political, queer theory takes the form of a "radical politics of difference" (Seidman, 1994) in its call to emancipate human being from its repressive and regulative structures.

Returning to our own study, queer theory offers a view that questions the very ideas of "gay men" and their univocal "identities" or "moral discourse." In its place, queer theory views identities as always multiple and changing, representing intersections of race, class, ethnicity, gender, age and so forth; to argue otherwise is to suppress or silence some over others. Affirmations of identity, in fact, effectively operate as "disciplinary and regulatory structures," because they exclude a range of peoples, practices, and desires from those that are recognized and permissible (Lemert, 1996, pp. 11, 12; Seidman, 1994, p. 173). However, these are highly contested issues inside and outside of queer theory (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). Particularly important are the criticisms of queer theory's emphasis on culture and discourse and its neglect of the structural and material features of

"regimes of power." Another criticism, closer to our own work, is queer theory's inattention to the gay and lesbian lived experience, the object of interactionist and ethnographic studies. While queer theory continues to point to the important place of discourse and text in the construction of engendered subjectivities, interactionist studies provide descriptive accounts of people's lives as told through stories, allowing embodied subjectivities to speak their struggles with community, power, illness, intimacy, and so forth. Nevertheless, we position ourselves with those sociologists who invite the work of queer theory into sociology and sociological theory (Denzin, 2000; Lemert, 1996), particularly as a resource for investigating the precise ways group boundaries are created, reproduced, negotiated, and changed.

From the standpoint of queer theory, we also recognize that our own telling of these men's stories is decidedly "modernist," particularly our finding that these men were resoundingly clear – speaking in a single voice – in their acceptance and openness to the lives of other gay men and whatever moral choices they made. As we have argued, this univocal voice clearly reflected their particular life (group) experience, especially the formative experiences of young men "coming out" in a society that judged gay men harshly and who, in later years, lived at the time of the AIDS crisis. As sociologists, we know that stories change as lives change. Understanding this process is not only a worthwhile endeavor, it is more. Story-telling is an important feature of a group's identity and power. Through the vehicle of the story we enter the (contested) domain of the "subject" who, for reasons not yet adequately understood, is a relentless story-teller.

NOTES

1. Peter L. Berger (1970) made an argument that is worthwhile incorporating into sociological studies of the self: namely, there is a necessary "dialectic" between (a) the *theories of selfhood* that arise in particular social worlds (whether those produced by practitioners of witchcraft or psychiatry); and (b) the *various ways that individuals experience and interpret themselves* in those particular worlds. Accordingly, we should expect that the subjective experiences of the men in our study would be compatible with our own interactionist notions of what a "self" is. Put differently, it is not only academics who understand selfhood as a "social construction." So do their fellow collaborators in everyday life.

2. The number of new AIDS cases reported annually continued to rise through the early 1990s, although the 1993 peak of 103,533 new cases reflected an expansion of the AIDS case definition to include a broader range of indicator diseases, as well as HIV diagnostic tests (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The remainder of the decade saw significant declines in both AIDS incidence and deaths (U.S. Census

Bureau, 2002, 2003), due to the introduction of new treatments that were more effective at delaying the progression from HIV to AIDS and at preventing death among AIDS patients (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003).

3. The interactionist and social psychological literature on gay identity formation views the "coming out" experience as pivotal and, sometimes, conceptualizes it as a rite of passage. See Ritch C. Savin-Williams (1990). See also J. D'Emilio (1982); Ken Plummer (1975). Finally, see Edmund White (1982). Other studies have provided some of the social historical roots of "coming out of the closet" as a collective idea of gay culture (Bérubé, 1990; Chauncey, 1994; Marotta, 1981). In Plummer's (1995, Chap. 4) discussion of "coming out stories," he compares this type of story to other groups who tell sexual stories of survival and victimhood.

4. Twenty-one men were judged as being in the first category (coming out is a difficult process), six in the second (coming out is a process without particular difficulties), and only three thought of it as neither a process nor difficult. One, as noted, was in the process itself and experiencing some difficulty dealing with strong negative images of gay men. He might reasonably be included with the first group, bringing its membership to 22. Since it is part of our argument that the near universality of experiencing "coming out" as a process, and the fact that for a majority of gay men, it is experienced as one presenting some difficulties, makes it one of the few shared experiences of gay men; therefore, that it is likely to play a major role in forming shared values and attitudes. The classification "coming out as a process," identified above, was arrived at if any one, or a collection of, the following were present in their accounts: A. The individual used the notion of personal stages, or levels, in his account. Usually this consisted of the stages of recognition, coming out to others, involvement in a gay community, acceptance and/or affirmation, although not always in the order given here. B. The individual used notions of public stages of coming out, i.e. he spoke of coming out in stages to self, friends, family, co-workers, the media. Not all speaking of public stages went through all stages of coming out, and they did not all go through the stages in the order given here. C. The individual actually used the words "process," "stages," "levels" when speaking of coming out.

The "coming out process" was said to be "difficult" if one, or a combination of, the following were mentioned in the account: the individual mentioned having to overcome a negative self image as a gay man, or a negative image of gay people in general, in order to come out. A. This can be indicated by actually saying this or by the use of phrases which indicate that the individual had initially perceived his homosexual desires, or gay identity, as a problem or as less than desirable. B. The individual emphasized that he encountered resistance and negative treatment from his family or other significant individuals in his life when he was coming out or states that he anticipates, or anticipated, such resistance and negative treatment from significant others. C. The individual indicated that he made a change in geographical location in order to come out. D. The individual lost his job or suffered economic discrimination, or believed that he lost his job or believed that he suffered economic discrimination, as a result of coming out.

5. We are using Craig Calhoun's (1995, 1997) discussions of essentialism and its relationship to modern identities of nation, race, gender, and sexuality.

6. For sociologists, we found the following to be useful overviews of this body of work: Michael Warner's (1991) essay and his 1993 edited collection by the same title; Steven Seidman's (1994) essay and his 1996 edited collection, *Queer Theory/Sociology*; William B. Turner (2000).

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AN ACCOUNT OF A LIFE LIVED: HERBERT BLUMER REVISITED[☆]

Karen Manges Douglas

It's official – my sister is black. It says so in the second paragraph of the autopsy report – “The body is that of a normally developed obese black female whose appearance is compatible with the recorded age of 41 years.” OK, the obese part we knew – but black? This finding was confirmed on her death certificate as well: there in black and white the word “Black” in the Race category. It's ironic that my sister achieved in death what had eluded her in life: an official, unambiguous racial identity.

Biologically my sister was no doubt of mixed racial ancestry. Officially her birth certificate was silent on race, as it is for many adopted children. Socially she was reared as the adopted daughter of a European American father and a Japanese immigrant mother. My parents adopted both my brother and sister as infants. I am the youngest of the three and my parent's only “natural” child. When my parents adopted my brother and sister all they knew was that they were getting “non-white” children. At that time (the late 1950s, and early 1960s), like today, the waiting period for adopting a white child was quite long. But, that didn't matter to my parents. And in our household growing up, race wasn't an issue that was much thought about. I was often puzzled when people would ask me how I felt about my siblings being adopted. I never knew how to respond. They were, after all, my siblings and I loved them as anyone loves a brother or sister. We were what we were: a normal, middle class family with an engineer father, a housewife mother and three children. A Cleaver family, right? (Photo 1).

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