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## ABSTRACT

Social identities have emerged as a major mode of social participation today, particularly with regard to politics but in other spheres (sexuality, religion, race, disability, etc.) as well. A conflict persists among anthropologists about whether identities can be productive for cultural study or whether identities are too subjectively produced, too circularly defined to be useful. This paper takes the position, articulated by a variety of writers, that while it is true that identities are social constructed through various subjective lenses and obviously nothing like the essential categories which they are sometimes used as, identities nonetheless are claimed and disclaimed by social actors for a variety of purposes. I attempt a synthesis of theory in language and sexuality studies as well as narrative and identity theory to produce a method and theory for looking at how the telling of personal narratives of a particular "genre" (in this case, 'coming-out stories') comprise a definite locus wherein actors create, deconstruct, define, and dissociate their own positions.

[http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections\\_Winter\\_2009/Alex\\_Kim\\_Ideologies\\_identities\\_and\\_individuals\\_in\\_coming\\_out\\_stories.pdf](http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Winter_2009/Alex_Kim_Ideologies_identities_and_individuals_in_coming_out_stories.pdf)

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# Speaking “out”

## Ideologies, identities, and individuals in coming out stories

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### Introduction

“Most people come out because, sooner or later, they can’t stand hiding who they are anymore. They want their relationships to be stronger, richer, more fulfilling and authentic. Once we do come out, most of us find that it feels far better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of ourselves.” – “Deciding to Tell Others” (Human Rights Campaign)

“I thought it'd be fun to be in a group of uh, of people that are um, you know- my skin color and um, supportive of uh, you know- our identity as gay folks, gay people queer people. But um, after going through that I started realizing, No. It is not a dream come true. It's not a happy ending. It's not a happy spot. You know? Yeah, maybe we're all Asian, maybe we're all queer but, a lot of us hold different views and a lot of us, you know- express ourselves differently.” *Steve*

Social identities have emerged as a major mode of participation in politics, religion, education, and even sex: sexual identities have recently gained a high level of prominence due to their politicization in much of the world. In light of this, however, it is worth wondering how exactly individuals come to be a part of a social identity – are identities something that individuals choose for themselves, or are they institutionalized categories imposed on large swaths of disempowered people? How are identities useful as ways to delineate, observe, and interact with groupings of people? How useful are identities as a way to mobilize political action? Religious, vocational, educational, political, ethnic, racial, sexual, illness, disability, and et cetera – a great proliferation of identities has been accompanied by a proliferation in anthropological studies of identity groups. Identities have attractive to social science because often they are claimed and upheld by individuals themselves.

This paper aims to understand more fully the process of identification by individuals. Its particular focus will be on the process by which individuals with same-sex desires come to claim sexual identities, and the methodology I use for this investigation is that of linguistic anthropology. Because all social practice is

mediated by language, I find linguistic anthropology to provide an excellent foothold from which to grasp the detailed workings of social participation.

I will therefore begin this paper with an overview of theories relating language use to social participation, and from there discuss recent frameworks for relating language use to sexual identities and also for relating the telling of personal narratives to the formation of identities in general. I will then attempt a synthesis of these literatures and use the result as my theoretical and methodological approach to the coming out stories of ten individuals I have recorded and transcribed for this paper. I will conclude by discussing the results of this analysis and their implications for the understanding of the way sexual identities are used and maintained, as well as for the study of identity formation.

#### Linguistic Practice and Social Difference

The search for linguistic manifestations of perceived differences between groups of people has been a preoccupation of sociolinguistics since its academic beginnings. William Labov’s (1966) studies of linguistic variation among New Yorkers uncovered patterns in how speakers pronounced the postvocalic /-r/ sound (e.g. “farr” versus “fah” when pronouncing “far”) that correlated with their socioeconomic class. In highly structured interviews with a stated focus on linguistic propriety, Labov found that speakers of lower and middle class tended to pronounce /-r/ sounds they had not pronounced during less formal interactions, in some cases pronouncing more /-r/ sounds than upper-class speakers did. This “hypercorrection” showed that New York speakers of English also possessed an idea that the pronunciation of the /-r/ sound at the ends of words was correct or desirable. This idea that a certain linguistic form is more desirable than another is an example of a linguistic ideology in action – that is, a “cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests” (Irvine 1989:255). In other terms, Labov’s work uncovered a linguistic ideology shared by New Yorkers of all socioeconomic classes that not pronouncing /-r/ sounds at the ends of words was “low-class” and undesirable.

Labov’s work led to similar studies of how social difference might manifest itself and also be reinforced through linguistic practice. Lakoff (1975) examined gender differences in language use, showing that forms such as tag questions (e.g. “John is here, isn’t he?”) and gender-appropriate adjectives (e.g. lovely, adorable, etc.) marked their speaker as a woman – Lakoff’s study was motivated by a feminist perspective which is interested in criticizing various manifestations of

power in social practice, of which language is of course one. Note here also the importance of linguistic ideology as a way of understanding how speakers speak and how they think about how they speak. As evidenced today by the publication of Blackwell's "Handbook of Language and Gender", the question of how gender differences are related to language differences has emerged as a full-fledged field in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, with many scholars looking at a wide swath of linguistic practices and varieties with an eye on how genders are differentiated and situated in terms of power and agency.

As a response to the mushrooming of work on language and gender, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) proposed a new theoretical framework for organizing these studies that has come to be called the "communities of practice approach". By a community of practice they mean "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" wherein "ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations—in short, practices—emerge..." (464). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's approach was an attempt to unify the study of gender differences and gender relations. Instead of presupposing the essentiality and import of the social groupings (e.g. men vs. women, black vs. white, gay vs. straight, etc.) to whom we attribute linguistic differences, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet call attention to practices (that is, deeds and words carried out in situated interactions) as the starting place. They write, "[In] practice, social meaning, social identity, community membership, and the symbolic value of linguistic form are constantly and mutually constructed" (473).

Additionally, they point out the place of power in this scheme, writing that power in language is "Janus-like", with individual agency in local face-to-face encounters on one side and social-historical dominance, normalization, and conventionalization on the other (474). This duality of power is crucial, for it means that practices that constitute membership in a marginal community (in relation to central, more powerful communities, of course) may constitute solidarity and resistance to power within other communities. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet write to avoid reinforcing the pervasiveness of gender as a categorical system, themselves preferring to open up a consideration of how communities "gender" their members in shared practices and how individuals negotiate multiple memberships to assert compliance or resistance. The approach of starting with instantiated practices to gain a window into the constitution of identities and social difference, and at the same time examining questions of differential power and individual agency, is the fruit of the

communities of practice framework, and theoretically it will undergird my work here.

#### Language and Sexuality

Academic interest in language and sexuality (that is, the relationship between linguistic practice and sexual orientation as a social category and as a realm of desire) had a similar beginning and trajectory as the field of language and gender. Jacobs (1996) provides a cogent overview of the field in its earlier forms. Like Lakoff and descendant scholars, those working in language and sexuality began by looking for correlations between social groupings (in this case, gays and lesbians) and the ways in which they spoke. Jacobs’ review of the literature up to that point found that scholars had considered phonological variation, grammatical variation, speech standardization, lexical particularities, discursive forms, and paralinguistic in their examination of “gay and lesbian language” up to that point (50). For instance, William Leap (1993) takes on what he considered unique attributes of gay men’s discourse. In what he calls a “language of risk”, gay men routinely use “discourse strategies which will enable them to maximize gains (confirmation of gay identity, successful gay oriented discourse) and minimize losses (unwarranted disclosure of gender interests, heterosexist backlash and homophobia)” (57). These early works focused themselves on establishing language and sexuality as a legitimate field by demonstrating that gay and lesbian people spoke in uniquely peculiar ways.

Kulick (2000) made an important critique that researchers of language and sexuality have grounded their work in the essentialist idea that lesbians and gays have a different way of speaking that is rooted in their identities as lesbian or gay – in other words, “gay and lesbian language” has become an essential trait constituting gay and lesbian identities (c.f. Gal and Irvine 1995). He writes, “[It] is important not to confuse symbolic resources that anyone can appropriate to invoke stereotypical images of homosexuality with the actual language practices, much less the identities, of individual gays and lesbians” (Kulick 257). Kulick points to attempts to define the object of study (that is, queer language) and argues that they are logically circular. He takes special objection to the methods and assumptions of William Leap: “What makes [the English] gay? The fact that gay men speak it. Why do gay men speak it? Because they are gay men. And so on, round and round” (264).

Kulick describes an advance in the theory of the field when Barrett (1995) and Queen (1997) develop Butler’s (1993) theory of the performance of gender for

language and sexuality – they argue, Kulick states, that “the focus of research on queer language should be displaced from identity categories to signifying practices”(267). Still, he finds that the notion of performance brings with it questions of intentionality – does the speaker intend for her speech to constitute or signify a certain identity (or at least, the stereotype of one)? In light of the possibility that anyone, regardless of whether they are gay or lesbian, can use “gay or lesbian speech”, he considers performance theory to be little more than a proxy for the sexual identity categories it had hoped to supplant. Kulick justifies his weariness of sexual identity by a fear that identities introduce a structuralist limitation on understanding how people conceive of their sexualities. He writes that “because gender has a strong tendency to be analyzed in terms of mutually exclusive identity categories (namely ‘man’ and ‘woman’), the risk looms large that an analysis of sexuality will also be framed in terms of mutually exclusive identity categories” (70).

Instead of considering language’s role in constructing sexual identities, Kulick urges a scholarly examination of “phenomena like fantasy, desire, repression, pleasure, fear, and the unconscious, however one ultimately wishes to explain them, that in many senses make up sexuality” (271). This approach is now described as a “language and desire” approach, and has resulted in a rift among scholars studying language and sexuality – on one side, those who continue to have an interest in the constitution of sexual identities; and on the other, those who favor a definition of sexuality that focuses on the articulation and actualization of sexual desire.

Bucholtz and Hall (2004) favor the retention of identity in sexuality studies. They recognize the lack of theoretical coherence in previous work, particularly in its view of identity and how identities become instantiated in language and speech, but see potential in the ability of language and sexuality to “[allow] us to talk about sexual ideologies, practices, and identities as interconnected issues without losing sight of power relations” (471). Bucholtz and Hall assert that the major foundation of the opposition to studying identity with language is “the fallacy that linguistic forms must be uniquely assigned to particular identities in order to be socially meaningful” (475, c.f. Gal and Irvine 1995). They coin the term “queer linguistics” to describe an area of interest in how linguistic structures and practices constitute and point to sexual identities either directly or indirectly, whether intentional or not, and for a variety of purposes. Most importantly, Bucholtz and Hall write that the notion of essential identities cannot be written off because “social actors themselves use [them] to organize and understand identities” (477). In other terms, essential identities are available to speakers as

ideologies by which they can conceive of and organize their sexual selves. Furthermore, the ways in which speakers do this can be discovered through the analysis of linguistic forms, or more broadly also in social practice as developed by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet. In sum, Bucholtz and Hall write: “[Language] users both draw on and create conventionalized associations between linguistic form and social meaning to construct their own and others’ identities” (478).

Bucholtz and Hall also warn against the adoption of Kulick’s language and desire approach for its incompatibility with the established methods of linguistic ethnography and its movement towards psychoanalysis. They are also weary of the break from feminist theory’s concern with sexuality and power structures to a more confined view of sexual desire and practice. They argue that “desire cannot be separated from power and agency” and stress the importance of “the ideologies, practices, and identities that produce [social meanings of sexuality]” (486). Since linguistic anthropology emphasizes that language is “the mediating level between structures of power and human agency” (492), examining the constitution of sexual practices and identities in situated speech becomes a potentially valuable tool for understanding how individuals both reproduce existing systems as well as creatively alter them. Bucholtz and Hall stress that sexual identity is “an outcome of intersubjectively negotiated practices and ideologies” rather than an inherent trait of intentioned individuals – this, they argue, makes identity precisely useful for social scientists looking to understand the ways structural duality affects social meaning (493).

The negotiated nature of identity makes it especially amenable to linguistic anthropological analysis. For this purpose, Bucholtz and Hall elaborate a theoretical scheme for organizing linguistic practices around the negotiation of sexuality – this they call the “tactics of intersubjectivity” framework. These tactics consist along three axes: sameness-difference, genuineness-artifice, and recognition-marginalization, and Bucholtz and Hall term them “adequation/distinction”, “authentication/denaturalization”, and “authorization/illegitimation” (494). They hold that these tactics encompass the range of linguistic acts (both in formation and in interpretation) undertaken by individuals in the performance and negotiation of their identities, and as agents employ these tactics multiple interactive ways, a complex array of identity formations can emerge.

Table 1. Tactics of Intersubjectivity (adapted from Bucholtz and Hall 2004)

	Positive tactic	Negative tactic
Sameness-Difference	Adequation – practices that establish sufficient similarity between an individual and others with a particular identity	Distinction – practices that assert differences between an individual and others with a particular identity
Genuineness-Artifice	Authentication – practices that construct an identity as something genuine, essential and/or true	Denaturalization – practices that construct an identity as something pretentious, non-essential, or untruthful
Recognition-Marginalization	Authorization – practices of power that legitimate certain identities as “culturally intelligible”, acceptable	Illegitimation – practices of power that withhold validation and social acceptability from certain identities

In the midst of the ongoing debate over the place of identity in language and sexuality research, I hold with those who see identity as playing a crucial role in how individuals think and speak about their sexual selves and sexual others. Kulick, along with Deborah Cameron, continue to push for researchers to make sexual desire the primary focus of study in language and sexuality, but the methods of linguistic anthropology (namely, ethnography of speaking and interactional discourse analysis), as well as those of anthropology in general do not lend themselves towards the examination of inner desire. I agree with Bucholtz and Hall that such an approach teeters close to psychoanalysis which anthropologists are neither qualified to perform on their subjects nor ethically should presume to be doing with the methods available to them. Furthermore, we have seen that sexual identities, while perhaps originally conceived as academic inventions to facilitate the categorization of subjects, can be productively considered as ideological resources available to individuals to



discursively construct their sexual selves according to the tactics of intersubjectivity described by Bucholtz and Hall. Thus, understanding the role of identities in the experiences of subjects and looking closer at linguistic practices that constitute identities, we can expect to find the live, instantiated dual workings of social power and individual agency in the construction of sexual identities (c.f. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992).

#### Narrative and Identity

The specific form of linguistic practice that I analyze in this paper is personal narrative, told in conversational interaction. A significant body of theory already exists that connects personal narrative to social identity. Much of this theory, however, has been more thoroughly applied in literary criticism and discourse analysis – nevertheless, because I am looking at narratives as instances of conversational speech rather than as printed text or other media artifact forms, I believe that the a synthesis of frameworks from language and sexuality studies and the older field of narrative and identity studies is possible, and that this synthesis will be highly productive. But first, two major concepts from the study of personal narrative that I wish to import into language and sexuality studies are narrative coherence (Linde 1993) and dialogic voicing (Menard-Warwick 2005; Bakhtin 1981).

Charlotte Linde’s “Life Stories” (1993) is cited widely in many works that analyze personal narratives as a window into social life and identity. Linde defines a life story as the collection of all stories told by an individual throughout her lifetime that are primarily about the teller, and that are tellable and retellable over a long period of time (21). Particular narratives, then, are parts of an individual’s overall life story, ready to be told at a reasonable request. And while some details of one’s life are expected to be tellable, others are not. Linde gives the contrasting examples of “Why are you a physicist?” and “Why are you blue-eyed?” – of course, only the former question would reasonably elicit a personal narrative about how one came to be in a certain profession. Linde also points out that “the particular conventions governing what can and cannot form part of a life story are obviously not universal” (10). She gives an example of the question “Why are you male?” as reasonable and intelligible within a Hindu ideological system that views being born a woman as a sign of sin in one’s past life.

For Linde, the main function of a personal narrative is to create and present a coherent self to others. She borrows the idea of coherence as it describes texts – that is, a coherent text is one whose various parts and components are seen as

being in proper relation to each other, and which is also a “recognizeable and well-formed text of its type” (12). Similarly, tellers of personal narrative work to form their life experiences, values, relationships, and statuses into an orderly relationship to one another, and they must do so according to recognizable patterns and forms.

What does coherence actually look like in a told narrative? Linde provides many examples of which I will highlight several here. Coherence must be understood on two levels – first, the local level of the told narrative itself making sense between the teller and listener as it is being told; and second, the global level of systems of ideology that govern what makes sense and what does not. Linde describes the local level of coherence as “adequate causality” – “a chain of causality that is acceptable by addressees as a good reason for some particular event or sequence of events” (127). The global level she describes as “coherence systems” – “[discursive practices] that represent a system of beliefs and relations between beliefs; [they provide] the environment in which one statement may or may not be taken as a cause of another statement” (163).

In the following example, a woman is asked why she chose to become a full-time editor:

“Um, I always knew I could correct grammar fairly easily and mark things up and then from the first job I got it seemed interesting enough to stay in. . . . But it’s just, it was a natural evolution. I always was nitpicky, I was always good at grammar, um I like to correct things rather than create them. And I’m interested enough in reading and I like to spend time reading, that at least now that I’m on journals that are even vaguely interesting, it c- it can be a lot of fun. . . . Yeah, It’s almost unbroken flow. Also, I mean, being with Bob [her former husband] and correcting, you know, working on Write-On magazine with the writers [a magazine that her former husband edited] I really enjoyed that” (131).

Linde adds that, “Her account is structured around the claim that her present profession is the result of a natural evolution, based on her character traits. . . . [but] although she mentions [that her husband was a writer and editor], she does not use [this] as the basis for her explanation. . . .” (131). This narrative highlights the idea that grammatical precision and a tendency to “correct things rather than create them” should “naturally” lead to a profession in letters. Linde considers this “common sense,” but I find it more useful to avoid familiarity in analysis and instead say that this narrative displays a coherence system wherein one’s vocation should follow from one’s inherent traits.

In another example, a musician tells Linde when and why he began to consider himself a musician by trade:

“...I kept changing you know ideas about what I was majoring in. but music was something that I had always done and it was great, a thread, you know, cause it, I had always played in bands since I was about 13 years old and had always made music and I just, and I was in a band at the time and just stopped and said ‘Wait a minute. I’m not going to be an anthropologist, I’m not going to teach uh you know, philosophy, and I’m not going to do any of these other things, you know, because this is what I’m already doing’”(135).

Linde remarks that, “For him, doing music goes very far back... Temporal depth is a very strong form of causality. One tenet of our common-sense view of the self is that an activity, an aptitude, or an ambition that goes back to early childhood must be seen as intrinsic to the self” (135). In other words, the musician’s narrative displays a coherence system that justifies profession through duration of personal experience.

Linde provides a constructed example to show how different coherence systems make different narratives make sense:

- 1a. How did you come to be an accountant?
- 2a. Well, I guess I have a precise mind, and I enjoy getting all the little details right.
- 2b. Well, my mother started toilet-training me when I was six months old. (164)

2a and 2b are both possible responses to the same question 1a. Linde’s point is that while 2a’s coherence relies on what she calls “common-sense beliefs”, 2b’s coherence requires that the listener be conversant in what she calls the “popular Freudian coherence system, which attributes the real causes of events to experiences in early childhood” (164).

As we have seen, coherence is the central organizing scheme that determines the ways in which people tell and understand their personal narratives. Linde takes care to add that just as the teller is forming a coherent narrative in conversation, “at the same time the addressee works to reach some understanding of it as a coherent text and to communicate that understanding” (12). Thus, the creation of coherence can be seen as a social process – coherence is not an inherent trait of disembodied stories. This implies as well that an analysis of personal narratives should take the teller’s attempts to create a coherent story as a key methodological filter through which to grasp the formative assumptions and ideologies that entered into the teller’s construction of her narrative. The

coherence of a teller's narrative carries with it what the teller assumed to be shared interpretive values and ideologies between himself and the listener. In the case of this paper, it is the potential of personal narrative to provide a view to these assumed shared ideologies that I find compelling as a method towards understanding the notions tellers carry about the identities they claim through their narratives.

Another useful concept for analyzing the place of ideologies in told narrative is that of dialogic voicing. Its precedent term, dialogism, was first developed by Bakhtin (1981) in his analysis of the construction of European novels. He noted that writers (and indeed, anyone who creates text, written or otherwise) represented entire ideologies in the quoted dialogue of individual characters within their stories. As writers placed characters in conversation with one another and sometimes with the writer herself (as the narrator), Bakhtin observed in novels the negotiation and competition of multiple "social languages" – that is, "specific points of view on the world, for conceptualizing the world in words" (292, in Menard-Warwick, 535). Menard-Warwick (2005) develops this idea for her analysis of personal narrative told to her by a Nicaraguan immigrant woman living in California. The woman's narrative contains herself, her grandmother, and her uncle, and tells of her uncle's decision to join the rebel Sandinistas:

"I remember that time we saw him come in with a backpack and he started to put everything in the backpack. And so then my grandma, his mom, says, Uh son, what are you doing? So then, Oh, mom don't you see that the trucks are leaving. I have to take advantage of the chance to catch a truck, because I have to go fight. And she says to him, And you, who are you going to fight if you don't even know those people. And they haven't even called you. So then he says It doesn't matter. It's necessary to defend the people so that those ones don't get in here"(543).

We can clearly see two different ideologies presented in tandem in this narrative: her uncle voices an ideology described by Menard-Warwick as "revolutionary commitment", while she and her grandmother voice an ideology of "family unity" (548-49). Through these characters, she voices several perspectives on the social change that engulfed her family. Note that whether or not the individuals represented in the woman's narrative actually espoused the ideologies they were voiced to have is not at issue here. The important point is that told narratives contain opportunities to give voice to what the teller perceives as competing ideologies in her experience. Menard-Warwick theorizes that by employing dialogic voicing, tellers of narrative ultimately convey their own perspective in relation to these multiple discourses and their itinerant ideologies, and thus that

the telling of narratives are valuable as social locations where tellers cope with perceived social transgression. In the narratives I analyze in this paper, dialogic voicing is used heavily to present various opposed perspectives and belief systems, and the teller usually also provides an evaluation of these perspectives.

In summary, narrative coherence and dialogic voicing provide two powerful analytical lenses with which to see how individuals form their own stories and perspectives out of existing expectations, conventions, and ideologies. Individuals constantly create coherence as they tell their narratives, thereby invoking what they assume to be values and interpretive frameworks they share with those listening. Furthermore, individuals voice characters in their narratives as representatives of conflicting ideologies, thereby providing a basis for evaluation and negotiation between them.

#### Personal Narrative and Sexual Identity – A synthesis

All the trouble of locating and developing tools for analyzing narrative is necessary because narrative is a rich resource for tellers and listeners to establish and maintain social identities. Schiffrin (1996) makes the explicit connection between the telling of narrative and the formation of identity. Because identities, rather than being fixed, inherent traits of individuals who claim them, instead emerge out of social interaction, the telling of narratives within a conversation provides a resource where identities can be asserted by a teller. She writes that the self, “arises within conversation – dialogical action that, by its very nature, marks a place for the new locator who is being inducted into it.” Schiffrin adds that our “identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations” (169-70). In other words, narratives reconfigure the teller’s relationships with other characters and events in the story in terms of the identity he is implicating in his telling, as well as situating his experiences and beliefs in the context of the experiences and beliefs of others. Schiffrin writes that “roles are not viewed as properties of individuals alone: our roles and statuses are bound together by sets of reciprocal expectations and obligations about what to do, and about how and when to do it” (196).

I do not think that the reciprocity of identity construction should necessarily be surprising – though it is often ignored or understated in anthropological work on sexual identities. If we agree that social identities are constituted in social relations, it should follow that there exists a set of social practices where identities are typically articulated and negotiated. I have established here that the

telling of personal narratives is one such set of social practices where tellers frequently form and implicate claims to particular social identities. In describing the telling of identity narratives as a social practice, I make an explicit connection to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's original framework of communities of practice. Thus, I take the use of narrative to claim and maintain social identities as a practice that defines individuals as members of a so-identified social grouping. This view is especially helpful for understanding the telling of coming out narratives as acts that make and keep one a "member" of the gay and lesbian "community". I also find this view helpful for keeping in mind in equal importance of differences in sexuality as well as relations between and within sexualities. In other words, differences in sexuality among individuals are not the only determinants of their claims to gay or lesbian identity – the application and manifestation of power both outside and within the gay and lesbian "community" mediates what it means for individuals to lay claim to membership.

The importance of considering power and structure as part of the process of an individual's claim to an identity is made more pointedly by Davies (2005), who writes: "A superficial reading of communities of practice might suggest that individuals have the choice of which communities of practice they belong to... However, gaining legitimacy is prior to gaining access to practice" (567). Of course, what is considered "legitimate" varies from group to group, but Davies' thrust is only that researchers keep an eye to factors that constrain the ways in which individuals gain access to membership. She makes a distinction between central and marginal modes of participation in any self-constituted social grouping, and encourages a linguistic examination both of constitutive practices as well as legitimating structures.

Fortunately, there already exists a framework for examining both sexuality differences (identities) and sexuality relations (power) in linguistic practices: the tactics of intersubjectivity framework put forth by Bucholtz and Hall [see table, page 107]. The tactics were proposed as a theory for organizing the wide variety of linguistic practices that implicate an individual's sexuality. I find no reason why these same tactics cannot also be applied to an analysis of personal narratives for the ways in which they constitute and legitimate a teller's claim to a gay or lesbian identity. It seems likely that adequation/distinction, authentication/denaturalization, and authorization/illegitimation would all be at play in personal sexuality narratives since, as I have discussed earlier, the telling of these narratives is constitutive of one's sexual identity. Various tellings, voicings, and evaluations within a teller's story can be understood as tactically responding to existing ideologies of sexuality and sexual identity.

### Coming Out and Coming Out Stories

Coming out is the widely recognized term, used both by mainstream community members as well as researchers, for the acts of communication that make an individual’s claim to a sexual identity known to others – Weston (1991) coined an early academic definition of coming out that is still quite useful: “claiming a lesbian or gay identity for oneself and communicating that identity to others” (44). Liang (1997) provides a more linguistic definition of coming out as “a speech act that not only describes a state of affairs, namely the speaker’s gayness, but also brings those affairs, a new gay self, into being” (293). Chirrey (2003) expands from this definition into a sociolinguistic examination of coming out as a performative speech act (c.f. Austin 1962) and describes two facets of coming out: “coming out to oneself” and “coming out to others”. The former is “a recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance of same-sex desire within the self”, while the latter is, of course, the publication of the same (Chirrey 26).

Coming out is also defined as a continuing process by which an individual publishes and maintains a gay or lesbian identity. Chirrey writes, “[It] would appear that the gay or lesbian sexual identity is a fragile construction that needs to be continually reiterated” (28). Additionally, Liang points out that because “[not] everyone can know, and therefore not everyone does, and the default assumption of heterosexuality remains in place”, lesbians and gays are “faced with the burden of having to decide with every interaction whether or not to self-disclose” (Liang 292-93). This means that coming out, as Wood (1997) puts it, “cannot be represented as a single event, like the day someone accepted religion into her life, but must be represented as a series of life-long experiences” (258).

If coming out is to be understood as both an act of publication of one’s claim to a sexual identity as well as a process by which this claim is maintained, it follows that coming out stories will describe specific instances of coming out as an act of speech, while also serving to further the process of coming out through their telling. Through it all, the focal point remains the maintenance of a gay or lesbian identity and the reconfiguration of the teller’s relationships and experiences through the lens of that identity – therefore, examining ideologies present in these narratives should reveal the teller’s perspective on what it means to have come out and to be coming out as well.

There seem to be relatively few studies of coming out stories themselves – most literature on coming out focuses on the communicative act of coming out rather than stories about coming out (though I find many authors carelessly confound the two). Liang (1997) uses a somewhat similar analytical approach as I do in her

study of Asian-American and European-American coming out stories. She takes coherence as a focal point from which to examine the coming out stories she collected, paying particular attention to the portions of participants' stories describing how the teller came out to himself – that is, how he was able to “understand his life as both a moral person... and a gay person” (298). She finds that European-American coming out stories “portray a protagonist who attempts to reject or deny his gayness and who does so until some facet of his survival is at risk” (303). Liang’s Asian-American coming out stories lack any description of an internal conflict, and Asian-American tellers justify this “by having become aware of their attraction to members of the same sex before acculturation of knowledge of negative valuations of same-sex attraction” (305). Liang concludes that the “downplay” of “the inward-looking, coming-out-to-self component of the coming-out story” demonstrates as “adherence to the values of Asian culture, whether as a cultural predisposition to withhold expression of emotions or as a bypassing of certain presuppositions of Western culture” (307).

While I draw much inspiration from Liang’s use of narrative coherence to analyze coming out stories, I find her conclusions entirely deserving of the sorts of harsh criticism published by Kulick (2000) and others who oppose the study of sexual identity in linguistic practice. Her attribution of the differences in “Asian-American coming out stories” to “adherence to the values of Asian culture” is flawed methodologically and theoretically. In her methods, she presupposed the delineation of Asian-Americans as opposed to European-Americans, which likely affected the correlation of differences she encountered. Her theory for explaining the differences treats “Asian values” as a monolith, and even more problematically treats Asian-American attitudes towards “Asian values” as unmediated by other ideological systems the speakers may have contact with or access to.

Moreover, Liang’s very definition of coming out as making public “the speaker’s gayness” obfuscates two very different aspects of the act of coming out – on one hand, it can be considered a publication of one’s sexual desire for members of the same sex; on the other, it can be considered a claim to a lesbian or gay sexual identity. It is very important to establish from an anthropological perspective that these aspects need not be equivalent.

#### Ideologies of Sexual Desire and Sexual Identity

**I**n the introduction to their edited volume on the proliferation and reinscription of American conceptions and language for sexual desire and



identity throughout the globe, Boellstorff and Leap (2004) write: “In some instances, [same-sex desires, subjectivities, and communities] are not named in local discourse. . . . There is no single term that completely embraces the wide range of sexual and gender diversities under discussion. For that reason. . . we [use] the word gay as a referential shorthand. . .” (4). In the same volume, Peña (2004) contrasts the U.S. basis for sexual identity organized by “sexual object” (e.g. a man desiring a man is identified as gay) with what she calls the Latin American sex system where “sexual aim” determines identity – here, the aim to penetrate a sexual partner is “masculine” while the desire or position of being penetrated is “feminine” (235). From these examples alone, we see that there is a problem with assuming that when a man discloses his desire for the same sex, he is necessarily claiming a “gay” identity. The force that equates the two is ideological, not essential.

The uncritical propagation in the literature of this equation of sexual desire with sexual identity seems to lie at the heart of Kulick and company’s objections to the current state of language and sexuality studies. More recent works seem to be more guarded against the unintended universalization of the American convention of making sexual desire the subject of social identity. I still do not accept Kulick’s wholesale rejection of identity in sexuality research, because as culturally limited and centralized as the notion of sexual identities may be, they are still pervasive modes of conceiving of sexual desire that are becoming increasingly accessible to more people around the world, as suggested by Boellstorff and Leap.

In this way, I argue for a shift from thinking about social identities as originating in differences between individuals towards the concept of identity as ideology. A similar argument is made by Bucholtz, Liang and Sutton (1999) who write that this view considers “not merely how speakers conform to an accepted or imposed ideology, but how they rebel against or subvert a powerful system of beliefs. Ideological systems, they write, “themselves exist as cultural constructs, subject to processes of change and revision by individuals and groups” (14). The notion of sexual identity should be foremost understood as an ideological system, complete with justifying logics and conventionalized norms that work to erase the distance between desire and identity. In the same way, coming out and the telling of coming out stories are actions and practices that draw upon ideologies of sexual identity to adequate, authenticate, and authorize the claims of tellers while simultaneously reinforcing the ideologies themselves. Thus, every telling of a coming out story that creates a coherent connection between one’s sexual desire and one’s claim to a sexual identity completes the process by which the

ideology of coming out both serves as a resource for questioning or oppressed individuals while also constraining the ways in which individuals think about and live out their sexual desires in public.

#### Summary of Methods and Analytical Perspective

I collected ten coming out narratives from ten individuals (eight men, two women) over the course of seven months in the 2006-07 academic year. My interviews were largely unstructured – I typically only asked something akin to “What was coming out like?” When necessary, I prompted a continuation or elaboration with a follow-up question based on what the informant had said so far. The interviews resulted in about nine hours of recorded dialogue, from which I transcribed over an hour and a half of sections I considered most relevant to my analysis – this is favorably comparable to amount of dialogue used in studies of similar length I have reviewed from the literature. Because my initial research goal was to examine the coming out experiences of multilingual gay and lesbian people, my inquiries yielded a proportion of ethnic minorities much greater than the actual proportion of minorities in the gay and lesbian population I know colloquially. Nevertheless, I do not take the race and ethnicity of my informants as a presupposed category during my analysis of their narratives, though I will analyze their own invocations of their race or ethnicity as dialogic oppositions in their stories. All personal names have been altered or redacted to protect confidentiality. In the footnote below is a guide to the conventions I use to transcribe my informants’ narratives, adapted from Linde (1993).<sup>1</sup>

Narrative coherence and dialogic voicing lie at the center of the analytical frameworks I have developed for this paper. In the told narratives, these will most often appear as:

1. Justification or evaluation, contemporaneously or retrospectively, of the teller’s actions; or,
2. Quoted dialogue where the teller is voicing other people in his story.

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<sup>1</sup>Transcription Conventions . In excerpted transcripts, all emphases have been added:

( )	blank parentheses mean an unintelligible recording
(yes)	filled parentheses are a “best guess” as to what the recording is saying
(1.5)	a timed pause in speech, in seconds
(.)	an untimed pause of roughly 0.5 to 1.0 seconds
,	a short, untimed pause (roughly less than 0.5 secs)
//... //	text between double-bars indicates brief interruptions or interjections that do not significantly disturb the speech of the person already speaking
[And]	text in square brackets shows overlapping speech; sometimes, square brackets show non-speech sounds (like laughter)
But-	dashes indicate an abrupt cut-off to the sound
Li:::ke	colons show a sound being drawn out

Such locations within the narrative should also be places where the teller employs tactics of intersubjectivity to position herself towards or against various ideologies of sexual identity that she voices in her narrative. How do coming out stories manifest socially-held ideologies of sexual identity and coming out? How do individuals negotiate the contact between their own conceptions and perspectives on their sexualities and those that are constituent to the ideologies that frame most discussion of sexuality in the United States? In what ways do individuals align themselves with mainstream ideologies of coming out and sexual identity, and in what ways do they differentiate themselves from the same? These are the questions I will now explore by analyzing the coming out stories of my informants.

#### Ideologies of Sexual Orientation and Identity in Coming Out Stories

I found there to be four major strands of ideology invoked or implicated throughout the coming out narratives of my informants. They are the ideologies of: 1) the immutability of sexual orientation; 2) the importance of sexual orientation to the self; 3) the deceit or shame of not coming out; and 4) the liberating quality of coming out. I should also note that by referring to the immutability of sexual orientation as “ideology”, I am not using the term “ideology” in the critical sense to call into question or doubt whether sexual orientation is truly immutable. In fact, my use of the term “ideology” throughout this paper never means to affect or evaluate the veracity of whatever it is I attach it to – rather, I am merely drawing attention to the use of certain ideas as organizing principles towards and against which individuals craft their narratives and construct their identities.

#### The Ideology of the Immutability of Sexual Orientation

Ellis: Well I guess I sat her down when no one else was home and I was just like Oh mom, I'm gay. Heh, like I really didn't set it up or anything. And she's like Oh. And then she started crying, and then she started asking me if it was a phase or something and of course it isn't // AK: Mm-hmm. // so, (1.4) and that was that. But then we don't really talk about it anymore. (Ellis 1)

In this example, Ellis is telling me about the exact situation where he first came out to his mother. Ellis describes his mother's response as questioning whether his orientation might be a “phase”, and Ellis immediately evaluates this challenge by saying, “Of course it isn't.” In this narrative, Ellis presents (through his mother's voice) an ideology that views sexual orientation as malleable or shifting, but then declares (through his own voice) such an ideology false. Through this

narrative, we see that Ellis assumed the immutability of sexual orientation to be a shared ideological value between Ellis and myself:

Ben: And one thing that my sister said that also kind of (1.1) also pissed me off, like- it's just very weird- I expected my mom and my sister to be the easiest. And they ended up being the hardest. (.) My sister said, you know, she thought it was me coming to Seattle that did it. She thought Seattle changed me // AK: Yeah. // because they promote it here // AK: Yes yeah totally. // and, whatever (Ben 5)

Ben is describing the reaction of his sister to a letter he wrote her telling her he is gay – from the start, he says that her reaction “pissed [him] off.” Then he gives a summary of what his sister’s reaction was – that is, her thinking that Ben’s new environment in Seattle “changed” him. That Ben would tell of such a reaction and his being upset about it shows that the ideology of the immutability of sexual orientation is taken to as a shared resource between him and me, his listener. Without this ideological frame, his narrative lacks coherence:

Ben: And so I was talking to my mom about this and how frustrating it was for me (.) everything that was going on, and she said “Well why is this frustrating for you? Are you afraid that it's changing your feelings about things?” // AK: Right. // And I knew exactly what she was talking about, // AK: Yeah. // you know? (Ben 5)

Similarly, Ben later tells of himself talking to his mother on the telephone about a female classmate who had just expressed to Ben that she had had romantic feelings towards him, despite the fact she knew of his sexual orientation. Here he voices his mother’s response to his frustration – she asks him two questions that ostensibly seem to contain no threatening language, and which could perhaps even be described as vague and unspecific as to their subject. And yet Ben tells me that he “knew exactly what she was talking about” as his evaluation of his mother’s questions. What’s obvious between Ben and myself here is the constant presence of the ideology of the immutability of sexual orientation, where any statement of suggestions contrary to this ideology (here in the form of his mother’s dialogically voiced question that suggests the possibility of change) is immediately “known” as a challenge to the teller:

Richard: I'm definitely as frank as I possibly can be, // AK: Right. // with like my sexuality with them. // AK: Yeah. // That it is non-negotiable. Because- because to me- it's because I think if there's any room for negotiation like, it's gonna be the end of me. You know? (Richard 4)

In another coming out story, Richard is going into detail about how he usually talks about his sexuality with his parents. He stresses that unless he leaves no

room for “negotiation” on his sexuality, “it’s gonna be the end” of him. This statement’s coherence depends on the teller and listener being aware of the ideology that the assertion of a gay self has failed if the people one has come out to still hold to the possibility that one’s orientation could change. These are four examples of many where the ideology of the immutability of sexual orientation was present in the coming out stories of my informants. All the narratives I collected authorized and authenticated tellers’ claims to a gay or lesbian identity by a common appeal to the ideology of immutability – there were no instances of negative tactics around this ideology.

#### The Ideology of the Importance of Sexual Orientation to the Self

The next major ideological strand I found in my informants’ narratives was the ideology of the importance of sexual orientation to the self – that is, the conception that sexual orientation takes up an essential, even central place in one’s total self. Unlike the ideology of immutability, I found that my informants employed both positive and negative tactics with respect to this ideology – some adequated their personal perspectives in alignment with the ideology of importance, while others distinkted their perspectives by repudiating this ideology:

Ben: Cause coming out to my family, trust was sort of a given, but it wasn't about- it wasn't ever about trust with my family, it was about my family knowing who I was. And (. ) // AK: Wow. // you know, if my immediate family doesn't know all of me, (1.0) that's- that's what I had a problem with // AK: Yeah. // you know, and that was- that's what it was always about. (Ben 4)

Ben’s statement that coming out would enable his family to know “who [he] was” implies that before they are aware of his sexual orientation, they in fact do not know who he is. The reorganization of “knowing” versus “unknowing” in this narrative is coherent only by drawing upon the ideology of importance – thus, we see that Ben holds this ideology to be shared between himself and his listener:

Tim: And, it's kinda like immanent feeling where I feel like if I miss this chance I'm never going to be able to face myself or face my parents and you won't be able to be completely whole yet. So it was really dire. I was like "eerrr". You know, I need to do this like as soon as possible. (Tim 1)

Like Ben, Tim adequates his own perspective on the importance of his sexual orientation in this narrative. His narrative implies that sexual orientation makes

him “completely whole” – it reflects an ideology that views the individual as composed of essential components of which sexual orientation is one:

Richard: I'm just their son that happens to be // AK: Uh-huh. // like, that happens to have this very very small part of yourself be different. (.) I- I think w- [coughs] in a very serious discussion, when you spell out the word 'gay' it's almost like (1.1) you're forcing yourself into a- into a little box, into all these (1.4) // AK: Hm. // into all these things that like (2.3) that doesn't have anything to do with you, you know? (Richard 2)

In clear contrast to Ben and Tim above, Richard distincts his views on the centrality of his sexual orientation from the ideology of importance. Here, he is telling me why he does not like to use the word “gay” whenever he talks about his sexuality with his family – he is explaining his strategy of reducing his sexuality to a near-triviality. He describes his attraction to the same sex as “simple”, simultaneously casting his parents’ various objections as overly complicated, unnecessary, and confusing:

Steve: Like everybody's just like, “Oh, there's a cool gay guy!” // AK: (laughs) // “[Steve]- [Steve]'s so cool, cool, he's the coolest gay guy I know.” Be-be-be-beh. And it's just like, (.) it felt weird because it's like, “You know, fuck you, you know? I'm not just only some gay dude.” (Steve 1)

In Steve’s narrative, he is telling me about the initial reaction of many of his peers in high school after he came out – while he voices them as being ostensibly accepting of his gay identity, Steve voices his evaluative response: “fuck you I’m not just some gay dude.” It might seem his response is incoherent and undeserved – after all, Steve does identify himself as a gay man, and his peers have seemed to accept him as one. But Steve’s response is understood coherently within an ideology that views one’s sexual orientation as a relatively minor or insignificant part of one’s larger self – therefore, by telling his narrative this way, he clearly makes a distinction between his opinion of the essentiality of his sexual orientation to his self and the ideology of importance.

#### The Ideology of the Deceitful or Shameful State of Not Coming Out

The third ideological framework I found running through the narratives I collected is a logical consequence of the first two I have already discussed and given examples for – if sexual orientation is both an immutable trait of an individual and also a very important component of one’s larger self, it reasonably follows that not making one’s sexual orientation known to others would be

indicative of deceit or shame on the part of the “closeted” same-sex attracted person. Here too, I found that my informants expressed a spectrum of perspectives about this ideology, some authenticating and adequating the importance of their coming out experiences by citing the feelings of deceit and shame they felt before coming out, while others illegitimated or distinkted the disclosures of their sexual orientations to others in opposition to the ideology of deceit and shame.

In the following excerpt, Ben is concluding a story about an instance where he needed to counteract suspicions that he might be attracted to other men – in the story, his sister had earlier that day discovered him browsing gay pornography on the internet, and she had told his parents. Here, he has been confronted by his mother after he convinced his father for the time that he was not attracted to men:

Ben: And um, she's like, you know, if- (1.3) if you're gay, you can tell me, it's okay.  
An::d (1.0) I was so close, to telling her then. (1.0) So very close. But (1.0) what (.) what my dad said scared me so much that I just couldn't. // AK:Yeah. // And so, I made up another, like, a different bullshit story [laughs] that she bought. Because she, deep down, wanted to buy something that was not the truth. (Ben 2)

I find this narrative to clearly embody the ideology that not coming out is deceitful or shameful – Ben’s own evaluation of his attempt to dissuade his mother that he is attracted to other men as “bullshit” reveals the ideology of deceit at work and also shows an authentication of his gay identity by a narrative appeal to this ideology:

Paul: And then the other thing I decided too was that, if I was gonna date someone, I actually just don't wanna lie to my parents about it. (.) Cause I knew, like (.) like every time I went out, you know- I could just this- Hey like oh I- I'm, hanging out with AJ or whatever. And, they probably would never guess // AK:Yeah. // anything and like, it would be fine, // AK:Yeah. // but, you know I- I wanted them to know. Because then- then like if I told them later, then there would never, my parents are very much about trust and like, they would feel that that's a really big affront to their trust. // AK: Totally. // And, and so they would basically kinda never trust me again like, is he really telling us the truth // AK: No. // now, or all these things. (Paul 1)

Paul’s first statement in this narrative draws on the ideology of deceit to draw a coherent link between dating another man and lying to his parents. He narrates a scenario where he finds he could potentially carry on a romantic relationship with another man, but counters this possibility with his view that it would irreparably damage the trust between he and his parents. It is important not to view sexual practice and public knowledge as a “natural” issue of trust and

honesty – it is an ideology of sexual behavior that makes one’s sexual practice a legitimate subject of disclosure and knowledge to intimate others. In this case, the ideology of deceit and shame justifies Paul’s choice to tell his parents about his attraction and activity rather than carrying on in private:

Tim: It's that () guilt inside you that says hey you know if they have given you everything they can, (1.3) why are you trying to hide such an important thing from them? (Tim 1)

As a final example of authentication and adequation around the ideology of deceit, Tim cites a guilt he felt before he had come out to his mother, and in the telling of his narrative here, he construes not coming out as a negation of “[everything] they have given you” – by doing so, he implies that not coming out is not only a deceit, but also a betrayal. Notice also his use of the universal “you” – in linguistics such universalized particles are called “deictics” and are often associated with statements meant to be generalizable beyond the individual who speaks them:

Richard: With my parents it was definitely like I am protecting you from something. Good. Like, I would've sooner had them die. // AK: Huh. // But, my- my mom found out about it. So, it was out of my control. I was pretty enraged actually. I was like I put- I took all this effort, y- y- you know? To try // AK: Uh-huh. // to like hide myself from you because I wanted to protect you. (.) // AK: Uh-huh. // So you wouldn't y- so you wouldn't be disappointed in me. I'm your only son. I'm the only person carrying your name. (1.6) // AK: Uh-huh. Yeah. // And uh, yeah. No. It was definitely not deceitful. // AK: Yeah. // Much more like it's for your own good. (Richard 5)

Richard is one of several informants whose sexual orientations became known to their families unintentionally – here, he justifies his intention to hide his sexual practice from his parents perpetually. Far from seeing this as deceitful (an ideology he even explicitly repudiates at the end of the excerpt), he considers himself to be “protecting” his parents from knowledge that, in his perspective, would be worse to them than dying. Richard’s narrative makes a sharp distinction between his perspective and more common ideas that what he tried to do was deceitful – instead, I find that the narrative coherence of his choices draws on an ideology of self-reliance and containment of personal issues that may cause burden on others.



### The Ideology of the Liberating Quality of Coming Out

Analogous to the ideology of deceit is the ideology of the liberating quality of coming out – certainly, if not coming out is a state of deceit or shame, it seems reasonable that coming out would be imbued with values of liberation and self-expression against odds. Because the ideology of liberation is so closely related to the ideology of deceit, I will present three examples from the narratives at once – it is easy to see how they manifest this ideology in interaction:

Steve: And so:: coming out to my family at first was, it was just like you know, my nephews and nieces I got like ten of them and uh, the older ones that are like 19 or 20 and 21, they understand it, like, the, man we see you know? We know, we were just waiting for you to come out blah-blah-blah-blah, you know? // AK: Yeah. // I was like, oh fine, you know, whatever. And so once I came out to them, it was so much easier to just be myself around my family. (Steve 1)

Ben: So like, midnight (.) on like a Friday night, I went downstairs [laughs] to Lander, walked over to Terry to the blue mailbox [laughs] dropped them in-

AK: And once you do it, you can't take it [back.]

Ben: [Yeah.] It was the weirdest feeling because it was like a weight was dropped // AK: Yea::h. // with those letters being dropped in the mailbox but it was also, like, I knew I couldn't go back. Like it was, it was done and I had to deal with it whatever happens. (Ben 4)

Andrew: I feel good. I mean- // AK: Yeah. // noth- there's nothing to hide now. I mean- nothing to hide from my parents. Because everything I talked to my- every time I tell my parents like I'll just feel like there's something- something I'm hiding from them, you know. I haven't ta- I haven't been honest with them. // AK: Mm-hmm. // And ( ) I'm just kinda tired of that. (.) Like Dad asking me like When I'm gonna get marrie::d, when am I- when am I having grandkids. All the time. (Andrew 2)

Andrew, Steve, and Ben each implicate the ideology of the liberating power of coming out in order to make their narratives coherent. Within this ideology, Steve's feelings of new ease around his family are adequately caused by his coming out to them. The ideology of liberation provides coherence to Ben's narrated feeling that a weight was dropped, and Andrew's statement that “there's nothing to hide now” incorporates at once the ideology of the importance of his sexual orientation, the deceit of hiding it, and the liberation of revealing it. Steve, Ben, and Andrew all adequately, authentically, and authorize their claims to a gay identity by positively aligning their experiences towards the ideology of liberation.

Some informants did not say anything in their narratives that involved the ideology of liberation. A few actually repudiated this ideology, justifying their decisions not to come out. Here, Kate is telling me why she would not have come out to her family if she had not been coerced to by a schoolmate:

Kate: Well (1.2) no it was just kind of like you know, I didn't wanna mess anything up. Like you know // AK: Yeah. // I knew my high school friends, after two or three years I could choose never to see them again but,

AK: Not your sister.

Kate: Not my little sister. (1.9) And so that was it. I was never gonna come out to my parents. I decided I was never ever gonna come out to my parents. (Kate 2)

She reports a much different perspective on the ideology of liberation – in her narrative, she says she decides not to come out to her parents because she doesn't “wanna mess anything up.” She explains that while she has the freedom to dissociate from high school friends to whom she is already out, she cannot dissociate from her family. Thus, she constructs a narrative coherence wherein she is actually more liberated before coming out than afterwards.

#### Other Ideological Systems at Work

There were several other coherence ideologies I noticed in multiple narrative accounts – I will briefly highlight some examples of each.

*Non-acceptance as Ignorance:* In this narrative, Kate is telling me how she continues today to attempt to gauge how her parents are feeling about her and her sexual identity. She rarely asks her parents directly – instead, she described how she brought up current events or friends' stories to force her parents to give their perspective on them:

Kate: So I mentioned that, () Oh, yeah, one of my friends, um, (1.5) said that, like, he really wanted to give blood but he can't because if you're a man and you've had sex with another man since seventy-seven, um, you can't. And my dad's like, "Well, that seems reasonable." And I'm like, "If you've had unprotected sex if a prostitute you can give blood within a year." () "Well, yeah, but you're more likely to catch it from a man." I'm like, "But, you're... not..." [laughter] It's weird cause he's really smart, and he's... (1.2) I don't know, I just totally don't understand any of this. (1.1) And how they can be so hypocritical about me. (1.0) And it's- they're like, "Oh Kate, it doesn't matter who you love, we love you." (1.0) And then they just stop talking about it, at all, and... (1.6) It's really weird. (Kate 6)

Kate finds her father’s opinion about the blood-giving ban against men who have sex with men incompatible with his professed support of her. What is interesting is that she constructs her father’s perspective as “weird” by placing her characterization of him as “really smart” in opposition to his opinions and “hypocritical” stance towards her. The ideological frame that makes this construction coherent equates one’s non-acceptance of another’s coming out to ignorance or low education level. This frame is present also in Paul’s narrative, where he is explaining to me why his mother’s reaction to his coming out was relatively less receptive than the reaction of his father:

Paul: And um, (1.2) and, I mean- she... (1.0) she went to a school that was entirely run by nuns all her life until she came to college, here at the U-dub. And, she's a devout Catholic but- you know, the other- the- I guess actually my mom is pretty conflicted because she's also a scientist, and she's just- she's very smart. And like, so, there must be weird things about that for her life. But, () so she was kind of upset. (2.7) She cried a little bit. But not like overwhelmingly. (Paul 2)

*The Inherent Conservatism of Asian Culture:* The majority of my informants were of Asian-American ethnicity. My original research plan was to examine the unique meanings and tactics of Asian-American gays and lesbian had for coming out to others – most of my appeals for informants therefore requested that those interested be “multilingual.” This became less important when, after reviewing the stories, the presence of ideologies in coming out stories became more salient as an analytical approach. Still, I think an identity-as-ideology approach is still productive as a way to see how ethnicity is voiced in the coming out stories of some Asian-American informants.

In this example, Winnie is explaining her parents’ reaction to finding out that she is attracted to women:

Winnie: And cause um, my dad's a doctor so he has a- he has these clinic- you know like doctors in Asian countries are kind of um, is conservative, and hard working (.) kind of figure? Right? My dad's one of them, and, so, but like doctors have, like, I think, have high, like, social status // AK: Yeah. // there. Right? // AK: Yeah. // And, like, you have like all these people around like look up to you respect you.

AK: Everyone, [yeah.]

Winnie: [Yeah] and,

AK: You're a community leader in // Winnie: Yeah. // many ways. // Winnie: Right? // Uh-huh.

Winnie: And my mom's a professor in Taiwan // AK: Uh-huh. // so they- they are kinda like okay so we have all these people who respect us, and how are they gonna see us if my daughter is gay? // AK: Uh-huh. // Yeah. (Winnie 2)

What is significant here is that Winnie's narrative employs an explanation for her parents' reaction to her coming out that is not available to my informants who are not Asian – she invokes what I call the ideology of the inherent conservatism of Asian culture as a coherence system that adequately justifies her parents' rejection of her claim to a lesbian identity. In another instance, Steve is telling me about the difficulties some of his family members have had in understanding his claim to a gay identity:

Steve: And I'm just like Look, I don't want to be a girl, I- I don't want to go change my sex, I don't want this and that, I don't want boobs, you know? // AK: [chuckles] // It's just who I am. // AK: Uh-huh. // I like (.) being with men. // AK: Uh-huh. // You know what I'm saying? (.) And so (.) it's hard for them to understand that because coming from um, our culture, uh, the Khmer culture you know? They don't even (.) have (.) they don't, they don't even have that, branch of (1.2) what is it. They don't understand what homosexuality is. (Steve 2)

As with Winnie, Steve draws from the ideology of Asian conservatism to explain the non-acceptance of some of his family. This ideology makes it coherent for him to state that “they don't understand what homosexuality is” after giving no description of them besides that they are “coming from [the Khmer culture]”.

The use of this ideology may be indicative of an interactional environment that routinely accepts such monolithic and stereotypical drawings of an entire nationality's political and social ideology. Alternatively, the use of this ideology by some of my Asian-American informants may reflect their position as continually engaging the intersection of their Asian and gay identities. This point will require more investigation than I am able to give here.

#### The Normal Coming Out Story

Most of my informants, at some point in the course of their narratives, directly or indirectly made reference to a “typical” or “normal” course of events surrounding one's coming out to one's family. The notion that there is a normal course for coming out is, obviously, an ideological tenet. I relate it more generally to what Rasmussen (2004) calls the “narrativization of gay and lesbian life where people are constructed as having no agency in the adoption of their sexual identity” – she writes that notions of what coming out should look like and

feel like have pigeonholed same-sex attracted people into having relatively similar stories and experiences about coming out (146). Thus, coming out stories can be thought of as a veritable “genre” of life narrative of which there are “good” and “bad” examples. Many of my informants showed an awareness of the “coming out story genre” in the course of their own stories.

In the next excerpt, Sean is concluding the narrative of how his entire family came to find out that he was bisexual after he accidentally mistook his brother for a female cousin (who he had already come out to privately) in an online chat and made a reference to his boyfriend at the time. His brother immediately began to tell various members of his immediate and extended family:

Sean: And he also called one of my cousins who he's really close to in Spokane where my dad's whole side of the family lives and so everyone knew. And by the next morning my mom found out. You know? So I didn't really have to come out to anyone. I guess my brother and um, word of mouth did that job for me. So the coming out process was really easy. Like I didn't have to like face anyone, sit them down and do whatnot. // AK: Yeah. // Um. (Sean 1)

Sean concludes his story by describing it as “easy”, and summarizes it with “I didn’t have to face anyone, sit them down and do whatnot”. This summary would only follow his narrative coherently under an ideology of the normal coming out story, which, as Sean alludes to, involves a personal confrontation, often sitting down. In fact, that Sean says that because he himself did not initiate the interactions by which his family learned he was bisexual, he actually “didn’t really have to come out to anyone”:

Ellis: I mean I guess- everyone- there's- (1.2) everyone has sorta like a similar story. Everyone just sorta prays that they aren't (1.3) // AK: Mm-hmm. // like that they'll change and hope- but (1.0) you find out after a while that it doesn't and then (.) you watch TV and you- you watch some Oprah special and you're like Oh it's normal after all. One tear. // AK: [laughs] // And then you- // AK: Right. // you watch like Will and Grace and you're like Oh:. (.) You know. // AK: [laughs] // ( ) You know, I mean, I'm not like that but-

AK: Yeah right. [laughs]

Ellis: I guess it's sort of okay. [laughs] // AK: Yeah, right. // So. (1.5) It becomes more and more normal and I guess- (1.2) // AK: Hm. // or it feels more normal, but. // AK: Hm. // (Ellis 6)

Here, Ellis is actually narrating his own process of at one point being “in denial” about his sexual orientation and then eventually accepting it. But rather directly summarizing the process he himself went through, he appeals to a pattern that he supposes “everyone” goes through. Where Sean’s narrative shows a genre awareness of how the act of coming out should look, Ellis’ narrative shows a genre awareness of how coming out should be internalized and felt within an individual.

Genre awareness and the ideology of the normal coming out story that presupposes it show that my informants are all cognizant and conscious of socially-held values and norms for what it means to be attracted to the same sex, what an individual with such an attraction should do, and how to think of oneself as a same-sex attracted person. My informants’ coming out stories were constructed with these values and norms as the stage – as I have shown, some stories positioned themselves positively towards these ideologies, while others were negative.

#### The Mainstream Coming Out Ideology

To summarize the results so far, the four major ideological strands (immutability, importance, deceit, and liberation) I found in my informants coming out narratives served as resources for creating coherence within their stories. Additionally, the coherence they created did not always affirm and uphold the ideologies positively – sometimes my informants constructed narratives that tactically positioned their claims to a gay or lesbian identity in opposition or negation of these ideologies (with the exception of the ideology of immutability, which no one repudiated).

Even a cursory search for “coming out” on an internet search engine results in a slew of existing ideologies about what coming out should be. The Human Rights Campaign, a major lesbian and gay advocacy group, devotes an entire section of its website to coming out. For instance, here is an excerpt from a section of their website entitled “Deciding to Tell Others”:

Being brave doesn’t mean that you’re not scared. It means that if you are scared, you do the thing you’re afraid of anyway. Coming out and living openly as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or as a straight-supportive person is an act of bravery and authenticity. Whether it’s for the first time ever, or for the first time today — coming out may be most important thing you will do all day.

Opening up to the possibility that you may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or even just questioning means opening up to the idea that you’re on a path that’s your

own. It’s also why coming out and living ever more openly is a profoundly liberating experience.

Most people come out because, sooner or later, they can’t stand hiding who they are anymore. They want their relationships to be stronger, richer, more fulfilling and authentic.

Once we do come out, most of us find that it feels far better to be open and honest than to conceal such an integral part of ourselves.

We also come to recognize that our personal decision to live openly helps break down barriers and stereotypes that have kept others in the closet. And in doing so, we make it easier for others to follow our example (*A Resource Guide to Coming Out*)

Reading some of the Human Rights Campaign’s statements on coming out, I find a striking similarity to their ideological positions and the ideologies of sexual orientation and coming out I found in the narrative data I analyzed. The four ideological strands I found lead to the logical conclusion that one should, in all circumstances and as soon as possible, come out. They also provide a set of principles by which to justify a claim to a gay or lesbian sexual identity. Furthermore, the genre awareness I demonstrated earlier then indicates the strong possibility that my informants (and perhaps many other same-sex attracted people) are acquiring ideologies of coming out from mainstream organizations such as the HRC.

Therefore, I will refer to the set of ideologies of coming out that I have been discussing at length as “the mainstream coming out ideology.” I will return to a critique of the mainstream ideology later – first, I would like to show some examples of conflicting ideologies and how they are managed in narrative.

## Ideologies in Conflict – dialogic negotiation of meanings in coming out stories

Steve: But I myself I'm just being myself you know. // AK: Right. // I- I'm gay, and that's it. And it took the girls at the bars a couple of times to understand that, because you know, we went out for late night drinks // AK: Uh-huh. // with my, you know- my friends they're all straight, so we go out for late night drinks and all that. And the girls're flirtin, flirt with them. And it's just like um, "Don't flirt with me I'm gay." I told them, you know what I'm saying that you know I already, I'm gay I have somebody (at home). And they're just- they cannot understand that. Because I'm not (1.0) flamboyant or girly or whatever you know? // AK: Uh-huh. // They just can't understand that. // AK: Huh. // And I'm- they're like, "Oh, you're lying." They just don't believe you at all. And I'm just like, "I'm telling you the truth." (Steve 2)

Steve told me the story of his nightlife experience on a trip to Cambodia while he was working with a safe-sex education organization. During this narrative, he voices two very different ideologies for understanding sexual desire – his own, through which he identifies as “gay”, and the ideology of the “girls” at the bars and nightclubs he visits with his male colleagues which sees him as deceptive and deliberately avoiding their interest by making what to them is an obviously false claim to a gay identity. Steve says this is because he is not “flamboyant or girly”. He says that eventually, women at nightclubs came to understand that he was not sexually interested in them. In this dialogically voiced narrative, Steve articulates a conflict between his coming out ideology (which views coming out as an act of forthrightness and honesty) and the ideology of the people in Cambodia he tried to come out to, for whom the notion of claiming a same-sex desiring identity had to be linked to an ostensible desire to be female. Steve places himself as a mediator between the mainstream coming out ideology and the ideology he encounters in Cambodia – he claims a gay identity, but also rejects being “flamboyant or girly”.

In this next excerpt, Tim is narrating the moments after he told his mother that he didn't “want to date girls” – he had just made a point to me about avoiding the use of the word “gay” due to its negative connotations in Mandarin:

Tim: And so, and my mom was like, (1.5) "Oh, so: are you telling me that you're, like, you're sexual orientation is gay?" So she actually used the word instead of me. // AK: Really? // Yeah. And I was like, "Um, yeah, and I don't really know how to say it." And she's like, "Well, but, but you have to change it." She's like, "But you have to change it. It's, you know, it's not normal. And, you know, and you know how much expectations your- you know, the family has of you and stuff." I'm like, "I know that and that's why I- why I say I just couldn't tell you guys because I don't want to disappoint you." And, my mom's like, "Well, you know, it's okay. Like, don't worry about it, we'll go see a counselor or something." And I'm like, "Mom, I don't think counseling is going to help.



I know myself well enough to know that's not the problem.” (1.1) My mom's like, “Well, maybe there's like (1.3) some master in Taiwan or China that they can do something to fix you.” (1.5) I'm like, “Um, yeah, Mom I don't think going into- to any religion will be able- or any practices will be able to- you know, solve it because it's not a problem. It's not a disease, it's not, you know, it's not a curse. It's nothing of that sort.” (Tim 1)

Tim voices two very strong ideological systems in conflict with one another in his narrative. We see the clear influence and presence of the mainstream coming out ideology, particularly the ideology of the immutability of sexual orientation and the ideology of the deceit of not coming out (by the fact that Tim told his mother he was attracted to men even though he told her that he didn't “really know how to say it”). But equally present is the ideology represented by the words of his mother, which sees Tim's newly claimed sexual identity as a psychological or medical condition that must be remedied. Tim voices his mother as telling him not to “worry” because they could “go see a counselor or something” – in this voicing, Tim shows the pervasiveness of the ideology he sees himself coming out in opposition. What follows is a dialogic exchange which concludes with his definitive statement that his sexual orientation is “not a problem” – a direct challenge to the ideology voiced in his mother.

In the final dialogic negotiation I analyze here, Winnie is telling me about the conversation she had with her father (a medical doctor in Taiwan) after he discovered she was attracted to women when he walked into a room where she was watching a movie with a girlfriend:

Winnie: [So he'll be like], yeah, he's like, “I know those lesbian patients. I know those homosexual patients. You are not like them.”

AK: Oh really?

Winnie: Yeah my dad is- m- m- my- dad said, he's like (1.1) “If you were, like, homosexual, like, you would like, like you would be attracted to, you- you'll want to have sex with an- any girls you want to. But you are not like that.” The- like cause I- I- I said, said that, “Well, I have a lot of, like girlfriends too. And like, they stay over but it's not like I want to have sex with them all the time.” And he said, “Yeah. That's why I said you are not homosexual.”

AK: Oh great, so you're not a [maniac.]

Winnie: [Yeah.] // AK: Uh-huh. // And he's like, like “I'm a guy, right? Like, if I'm, like with a girl, like with a woman // AK: Uh-huh. // like in one room, and the light is dim::ed, and like the- if the environment is right, like I might do something wrong. I don't know. Cause it's biological. It's- it's you know, desire, it's your sexual drive. But you don't have that. (.) It's not like that for you.” So I'm like, So you want to tell you

that, like, I want to have sex with girls all the time? So that you'll believe that // AK:  
Huh. // I'm lesbian? So weird. (Winnie 3)

Even though Winnie did not intend to come out to her parents, she voices herself as representing the importance and validity of her sexual orientation – her objective in this exchange is to defend her claim to a lesbian identity. In this way, we can see that she voices herself as a representative of the mainstream coming out ideology. Winnie also voices a very strong opposition to her ideology in the dialogue of her father, who insists that “lesbian patients” are defined by women with hyperactive sexual drives. Like Steve, Winnie’s narrative places herself as a mediator between the mainstream ideology she voices herself and the medicalized ideology she voices through her father. She concludes that her father will only believe she is lesbian if she asserts that she has the “symptoms” of his lesbian “patients.”

#### Conclusion

I have now demonstrated the presence of multiple ideologies in the coming out narratives of my informants – they are present as resources and interpretive frameworks by which tellers create coherence in their life stories, and they are present in dialogic voicings that negotiate conflicts between multiple systems of meaning the teller finds himself in. The creation of coherence and the dialogic negotiation that occurs in my informants’ narratives are exactly the sites where their individual claims to lesbian or gay identities are constructed and maintained through the both positive and negative tactics of intersubjectivity.

It is important to consider critically the social categories that are often taken for granted in other spheres such as popular media and politics, and I find that the analysis of the narratives by which people claim membership in these categories is a fruitful way to make such considerations. My informants’ narratives show a wide variation in how they position themselves in relation to the mainstream coming out ideology – as we have seen, some deviate little or not at all, while other distance themselves greatly. What matters, though, is that these ideologies do not simply exist in a canonized state – they emerge through conversation and interaction, where consequently, they are sometimes changed and reinterpreted. If the ideologies that drive coming out and the coming out process can be seen as social constructions, then so should we regard critically the entire institution of coming out as a practice. There is a significant diversity of perspectives on what coming out means, despite there being no acknowledgement of this diversity in

the articulations of the mainstream coming out ideology by organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign.

Others have made similar observations. Snider (1996) writes that the coming out discourse constructs “not coming out” as “a crime [that] calls into question everything from one’s sexual identity to one’s responsibility to the lesbian and gay community” (297). She supposes that such forces coerce some queer people (especially people of color) into “the articulation and unnegotiable acceptance of the ‘outing’ discourse” (299). Similarly, Rasmussen (2004) writes that “[w]hen coming out discourses are privileged, the act of not coming out may be read as an abdication of responsibility” (146). She argues that the dominance and self-justifying power of coming out ideologies often ignore that they are “inevitably mediated by the particular bodies that are engaging in these discourses” and that “people’s ability to continuously negotiate their identity is necessarily mediated by varying circulations of power relating to age, family background, economic positions, and race” (144, 147). For these and other critics, coming out is a constraining gateway through which prospective gays and lesbians must pass through before gaining legitimate claim to a gay or lesbian identity.

The narratives of my informants demonstrate that individuals hold a profuse number of meanings on why, how, and if they should make their sexual orientations a social fact. Some of these meanings are derived from personal experience, while others are acquired through media and social sources. As with any practice that draws on a social ideology, coming out exists as a manifestation of institutionalized power that regulates who belongs and who does not. For this reason, politics and studies of sexual identity must take care to acknowledge and account for the multiplicity of understandings that occurs at the intersection of social ideologies and individual agency. The mainstream coming out ideology facilitates an individual’s entry into a highly structured notion of what it means to claim a sexual identity, so academics and activists should keep an eye to deconstructing the hegemonic power of this ideology.

At the same time, however, the mainstream coming out ideology provides a powerful resource by which individuals can invent and uphold novel social positions for themselves in situations where existing discourse would otherwise silence them. The utility of the mainstream coming out ideology as a resource for self-identification and resistance to dominant moral values is seen clearly in the examples of dialogic negotiation I discussed earlier. The tellers of the narratives voiced themselves as representatives of the mainstream coming out ideology in opposition to whatever counter-ideology they found themselves

reacting against. For these (and I expect many) individuals, gay or lesbian identity serves as a tool and resource by which they craft previously impossible sexualities. Criticisms of sexual identity and the coming out imperative often overlook the creative potential that ideologies of identity provide for individual agents who face an otherwise monolithic system of sexual meaning. Therefore, just as I advocate for academics and activists to keep an eye towards deconstructing the hegemony of the coming out ideology, I also implore them to respect and acknowledge how coming out ideologies are, for many individuals, paths to new forms of social participation that would otherwise not have existed at all.

#### Implications and Future Directions

Giddens (1984) proposed the duality of structure as a framework for relating social praxis (speech and action) to social theory (belief and ideology) – in Giddens' view, neither praxis nor theory serves as the foundation for the other. Instead, they simultaneously constitute each other in the midst of lived and meaningful human experience. Much has been made of the concept of structural duality in sociology and anthropology, but I have not encountered many examinations of the mechanics of structural duality.

This paper ultimately should be regarded as a study of structural duality as it affects sexual identities. Other authors have established all social identities as constructs that emerge in social interaction – from here, it follows easily that identities are mediated on one hand by ideological systems and on the other hand by the individuals who claim them. The mainstream coming out ideology is a complete ideological system that governs the access to and meaning of sexual identities, but as I have demonstrated, it is individual agents who draw upon this system to understand and participate in sex. Ideologies are not canonical manuals from which individuals follow precise instructions as to the formation of their identities, nor are identities wholly subject to whatever claims and assertions an individual chooses to make about them. Ideology, identity, and individuals exist in a co-constituting relationship where each affects the others at all times. This is what I have endeavored to demonstrate by analyzing coming out narratives as unique sites of cultural production where ideologies, identities, and individual agencies are woven together by the demands of coherence and negotiated through dialogic voicings.

As noted by others (Linde 1993; Schiffrin 1996; Menard-Warwick 2005), coherence and dialogism are the properties of narrative that make them so useful

as a window into more fully understanding the mechanism of structural duality in the lived experience of people. This implies that the study of identity narratives and life stories can be extended to other types of self-claimed identities. Even the tactics of intersubjectivity, although developed for the analysis of sexual identity in language use, can be applied to analyze individual claims to a wide array of identities, be they related to religion, nation, ethnicity, race, vocation, disability, or illness.

The sophisticated understanding of social life afforded by the structural duality perspective is especially salient today, as identities become increasing important modes of social participation in the United States. An eye to duality resists the tendency of populist politics to over-romanticize the authority of the individual to craft an identity of her desire and choosing, and also rejects the tendency of social critics to overstate the oppressive and monolithic power of ideologies of identity as wholly determinant of one’s sphere of agency. Recognizing both the restrictive and resourceful qualities of ideologies of identity seems to provide a path away from the highly divisive and essentializing identity politics of today that is not also a path backwards into histories of identity-based oppressions already overcome.

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