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Queer Theory

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Discursive Construction and Enforcement of Gay Identity

What is a man who is attracted to other men? A likely response to that inquiry may be *homosexual* or *gay*, if you are informed by Western culture. A simplistic implementation of discourse related to the nature of attraction in American culture may allow that conclusion to be made if no further context is provided. If further clarification is provided to the effect that the man in question enjoys sexual intercourse with women, then the meaning of the original statement changes and the man becomes *homosocial* rather than *homosexual*. This is only a matter of linguistic interpretation, but still relies on a background of the categories. If the recipient of the inquiry is not aware of the category of homosocial attraction or of a non-sexual use of the word attraction, then the circumstance becomes significantly more complicated. Without adequate context for the use of language interpreting meaning becomes impossible. Assume that the attribute of enjoying sexual intercourse only with women is removed and the subject has no desire for sexual intercourse with either men or women. Instead the subject is given the attribute of being aroused by being the object of acts of dominance carried out by other men. In this instance, placing the subject into a category may be a challenge when utilizing traditional categorical definitions. Is the man a homosexual because he is attracted to other men, or is he asexual because he is not aroused by sexual intercourse with anyone?

Sexual-identity is a component of social identity that is constructed based on an external perception of sexual activity, its subsequent assignment to a category and the internal acceptance of that assigned category as a component of self-concept (Brekhus 498). Self-concept is a basic internal identity that is accepted by a person which governs behavior and interpersonal interactions. The congruence between the internalized identity and behaviors is often thought to be a key component of psychological well-being (Whitley 208). Sexual-identity is a concept beyond the internalized identity though; it is informed by other members of the category, is defined by cultural constructs and is performed for the benefit of intelligibility.

There is more to sexual-identity than a simple label under which a certain set of genital behaviors are classified. The modern conception of sexual-identity comes with a community which shares the same abstracted identity. The concept of community designates a group as sharing similar qualities and places itself in opposition to external groups which are not part of the community. This approach provides the collective that shares similar characteristics with a group to fit into that is safe from the dangers of external groups. The difficulty with the construct of community is that it does expect a level of sameness which makes difference and disagreement negative traits that cannot be tolerated (Sullivan 136-138). The community that comes with sexual-identity is not necessarily a close community and certainly not homogeneous, but it does have at least loose constraints for what behaviors and ideas are *normal* for members of the community. Gay identity is the product of the homosexual community. Through socialization same-sex behaviors have been transformed into an identity with its own meanings and constraints separate from those associated with having same-sex desire and behavior. Gay identity has perhaps the most visible community due to the forces of activism and the efforts at social change that have occurred from within the collective gay identity group. Normative

identities such as heterosexual or straight have less-defined communities and are less affected by deviations from their community identity as long as the common trait is being met.

Observing sexual identities and their communities in society is often simple. Since the beginning of gay liberation the communities have made themselves visible in media and people holding the identities often identify themselves when engaged in political activism. The challenge to analyzing the meaning of sexuality is determining the source of the identities and the language that is used to discuss them. Sexual identities are defined through dominant discourse and given meaning through embodied experience. The meaning generated through embodied experience of the identity is not an exact replication of the identity as defined by discourse, but is instead an interpretation of that definition based on the internalized meaning of the identity. Judith Butler describes the performance of an identity in this form as "an imitation, a copy of a copy, for which there is no original" (Butler 644). Butler's statement is accurate not only for sexual-identity and gender identity, but also for nearly all other identities that are socially defined. In performing a sexual-identity a person cites an exemplar identity, either consciously or unconsciously, which has been witnessed before. In the process of forming an identity traits are not gathered from a single performance, but a multitude of performances from multiple people who each may perform the identity differently. Identities are not stable either in their definition of themselves or in the individuals who hold the identities. With each new performance there are changes to the identity.

Sexual orientations are derived from categorical knowledge. Categories are involved in "an efficient cognitive strategy for managing interpersonal interactions" according to some psychological theorists (Johnson, Freeman and Pauker 116). The difficulty with the knowledge structures that are used in this particular strategy of efficient cognition is that they are

generalized impressions and do not accurately represent all of the constituents of the category or community. There are a finite number of categories that can exist in the space of what is knowable and as such the recognition of the positive value in difference is limited. People who exist outside of socially recognized categories or that cross categories can find themselves unsupported by their community in aspects of their identity that does not conform to the goals of the community (Johnson, Freeman and Pauker 118). Categories exist to simplify and provide understanding. The flaw with identity categories is that they take on the characterization of knowledge and "present themselves as real, natural and universal" (Wilchins 162). The appearance of categories as being real and natural implies that what exists outside the categories must be unnatural and not real. To form identity categories in this manner limits the access that a person has to identities for themselves. If identities are finite then an individual is restricted to fitting into an existing identity category and cannot form an identity that is distinct. To form an identity outside of categorical knowledge is to form an identity that is not intelligible. Intelligibility is a privilege restricted to identity categories that are component of the cognitive catalog of the person interpreting the identity. The concept of the cognitive catalog of categories is grounded in use of stereotypes as a basis for comparison between identity and behavior. Stereotypes are a component of social cognition which is learned from an early age and accumulated as a reference for social recognition (Ashmore and Del Boca 221). Categories are a natural function of the human cognitive system, but the rigid implementation of categories is a function of social learning (Ashmore and Del Boca 236).

Communities are formed through the identification of similar individuals. The aspect of categories being natural is one of the attributes which allows categories to mutate into communities (Sullivan 136). Communities are socially constructed institutions of commonality

that carry psychological and emotional weight in the decision making process of the individual (Bandura 214). Membership in a community comes with several rewards, including a "good feeling", "a safe place to share with others like you" and "a source of strength" (Sullivan 137). The community also comes with dangers such as having differences ignored and loosing personal identity in favor of an identity imparted by a unified group identity (Sullivan 138-139). In the concept of a gay community the "safe place with others like you" may be a powerful draw due to the attitudes in dominant culture that are less receptive of same-sex desire than the attitudes of the community. The loss of a personal identity could be seen as a minor sacrifice for the benefit of all of the good attributes that are promised by being part of a community. This may even apply to people who do not necessarily share a lot of traits with the community outside of the gender of the object that their sexual desires are directed toward. If such an individual were to accept the identity of gay in its normative application they would sacrifice their personal identity and become part of a group that does not always speak fully in their interest. However, if the individual were to identify with a smaller community that is more specialized the social visibility and political effectiveness of the group to which the individual belongs would be less.

The basis for the construction of a gay identity and a gay community is the recognition of a difference from *normal* society based on cultural discourse and the sexual precedents. For the duration of recorded human history the act of heterosexual procreative sex has occurred, with each successive generation mimicking the performance of sexual roles of their predecessors. An often-cited example of a deviation from the heterosexual standard is that of the standard practices of sexuality in ancient Greece which included not only procreative sexuality, but also sexual interaction between men and boys (Siedman 166-167). This practice is broader than the traditional assumptions about the purpose of sex being solely for procreation. The practice is still

based on a sexuality model that was passed down through generations and was performed based on societal expectations. The difference between these performances and the modern idea of sexual orientation is that they now have a name. Sexualities did not have names in ancient Greece and the same held true in America until the mid-nineteenth century (Siedman 167; Wilchins 57). After sexualities were given names they were still not components of identity and not yet identities within themselves. Naming sexuality became a method for categorizing a set of behaviors. When sexualities were initially named anything not referencing standard heterosexuality was applied as a deviation. Homosexuality was seen as a mental illness, a crime and a sin. It was assumed that homosexuality existed as a behavior that was a symptom of a deviation and that the presence of such behaviors indicated a flaw in the person's normal and natural heterosexual desires (D'Emilio 13-14). Michel Foucault proposed a change in view from homosexuality existing as a set of behaviors to the homosexual existing as a species or in the view of the individual, an identity (Wilchins 70-71). Since that time sexuality has gradually moved from a natural fact of heterosexuality to an identity. This perception was aided by early gay liberationist groups who openly declared their sexual orientation and celebrated themselves as being unique and different (D'Emilio 232-234). It was through gay liberation that homosexuals renounced their clinical label and accepted a new name, a name that the previously homosexual community had selected for themselves: gay. This new identity did not resolve the hatred and disgust that was aimed at people with same-sex desire by mainstream culture, but in uniting for their rights the gay community entered a process of achieving legitimacy for itself as a viable subculture. In attempting to be different and distinct from normative culture the gay subculture developed cultural artifacts of its own and formed an image of what it is to be gay. At the point where the subculture became visible, a definition of gay identity was written into the

cultural discourse (D'Emilio 221). For people with same-sex desire this discursively produced identity became a standard to perform, resulting in the behaviors of an individual being directed by their acceptance of the identity.

The creation of the gay identity instantly created the heterosexual-identity as an identity category, therefore establishing a binary of sexual-identity. While there was no direct creation of anything that was not already present the existence of a gay identity forced the existing heteronormative template to be seen as an identity as well. In having a binary of identity there came to be more than one classification of social identity to which a person could belong. The binary of identity is still a limited framework for expressing identity as it only acknowledges the existence of straight and gay identity. The people who experienced desire for both sexes were stuck between worlds and were encouraged by social forces to select one identity or the other. In 1948 Alfred Kinsey published the results of a study that he conducted on sexual behavior to determine the prevalence of homosexual behavior. Kinsey discovered that in terms of behavior most individuals had experienced both same-sex and opposite-sex interactions. As a result of this discovery Kinsey developed a scale for categorizing individuals based on their degree of sexual fluidity. Kinsey was successful in determining the range of sexual fluidity in humans, but this does not reveal a lot about sexual-identity (Drucker 1106). In some assisted dating services and some personals profiles there is reference made to an individual by their Kinsey number, but the usage is a novelty. For some bisexuals the use of the number may be seen as practical or as a minor component of how they identify themselves. The significance of Kinsey's work in relation to sexual orientation identity is in the fact that there are not discreet sexual-identity categories for each level of the scale or even for people who are mostly-heterosexual or mostly-gay (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 85). The number is left as a scale and not intended as a method

to classify individuals. To use Kinsey's scale to place individuals into categories would require complex testing similar to that which Kinsey himself conducted. The process is too time consuming and complicated for it to be used as a practical means of producing a system of categories (Drucker 1108-1109). The sexual orientation binary, Kinsey's scale and most modern conceptions of sexual-identity categories are linear models based on a quantifiable preference, attraction or consistency of behavior for a specific physical sex in relation to one's own physical sex. Preferred sex of a sexual partner is only one dimension of sexuality and as such, only one dimension of sexual-identity (Sedgwick 8). Linear models can never categorize such a complex component of human experience with any accuracy due to the level of variability between individuals. Sexual beings may have strong preferences for a level of adherence to gender stereotypes, preference for specific sexual activities or perhaps a paraphilia. All of these concepts and many others can influence a person's interpretation of their own identity and what they consider to be the identity of their ideal sexual partners. For example, there exists a community of people that could perhaps be described as their own subculture, who define their sexual-identity by their enjoyment of sadomasochistic role-playing (Moser 19; Newmahr 317). The members of that community hold a common identity of sadomasochist, but many of them also hold an identity as gay or straight. In that community it may be more common for a person to identify their sexuality as sadomasochist before identifying themselves based on a sexuality constructed based on their gender of preference. Sexual-identity is a trait that is difficult to communicate because the categories are simple concepts that attempt to convey complex meaning. Sexual activity can mean a variety of things to each person. For example, anal sex can be seen as an act of passion and intimacy or it can be seen as an act of dominance and aggression

(Hardy 3418-3443). In accepting a social sexual-identity category this meaning is lost to an abstraction within the identity categories provided by dominant discourse.

Despite the intrinsic problem of lost richness of meaning in utilizing an identity category they are used as a source of meaning in discourse. The rules governing that discourse are a part of language, or what Jacques Derrida refers to as "privileged language." The purpose of language is to convey meaning through symbolic representations. The function of language is to specify what is allowed to exist, typically through a process of exclusion. To determine what is homosexual, what is actually defined is what is not homosexual (Wilchins 41-46). In the context of the meaning of gay and gay identity language is important because of the metalinguistic elements used to establish meaning. There are numerous possible meanings that may be accepted for the gay identity including, but not limited to, a range from same-sex attraction to same-sex intercourse. Early gay liberationist movements perhaps served as a source for the identity category of gay separate from the clinical category of homosexual (D'Emilio 5). As with any discursive construction gay identity has changed since its original inception and there is no single standard that can be looked upon to inform the meaning of gay. The area of concern with the meaning of gay is in assumptions based on the category of identification. Riki Wilchins provides the example of the chair for consideration of the power of creating meaning in language. Wilchins states that we form what is chair by what is not chair, stools and love seats are excluded because they "aren't quite chairs" (42). In this example the labeling of the chair is handled through the representation of a physical object which has expected characteristics and can be distinguished from other furniture that has a similar function. For gay identity the situation is more complicated as there is not a physical comparison being made. Gay identity relies on self-identification for many of its purposes which would be similar to the chair having a written label

stating that it is a chair. A companion example for this idea may be found in staple jars found in a kitchen cupboard. A jar that is labeled flour can be exactly the same in form as a jar labeled sugar. The content of each jar is expected to be different, but there is nothing to inhibit the flour jar from containing sugar or a different type of flour than what is defined as a staple by culinary tradition. When applied to sexual-identity this metaphor translates to an individual identifying as gay is expected to have an interest in sexual intercourse with members of their own sex based on cultural assumptions. If an individual identifying as gay does not have such an interest they are viewed as deviating from their identity or are assigned an alternative identity. Gay is defined by what is not gay.

A complicating factor in sexual-identity is its intersection with other identity categories that change its meaning (Collins 42). Categories such as race and gender factor into the formation of the sexual-identity and change either the meaning of the sexual-identity or the sexual-identity changes the meaning of the other components (Sullivan 72; Collins 42-43). When race, gender and other categories are used as filters of sexual-identity some underlying traits of the identity may be revealed such as in the case of gay masculinity. White masculinity utilizes homosexuality or perhaps more accurately heterosexism to control a standard of masculine presentation. In qualitative research conducted by gender sociologists it was discovered that the male homosexual is a viable masculine identity as it does not come with a connotation of any effeminacy, whereas the identity of gay male is not viable for masculinity as it is associated with effeminate displays of homosexuality (Pascoe 59). This difference in viability is partially an illusion of identity. To accept an identity as a male homosexual is to accept masculinity, but also accept a modifier of being homosexual almost as if it were a clinical diagnosis. There is no intersection of identity for that category; male and homosexual are performed separately as

additive identities. The gay male on the other hand accepts an identity that combines the categories and performs them both although in terms of institutional masculinity the masculine identity is vacated because the gay identity is accepted. This notion of vacating one identity to preserve another identity is both compatible and contradictory to the idea of intersectionality of identity. In the case of masculinity and gay each contains gender data and each contains sexuality data. These attributes cannot be gracefully shared between the identities and therefore the identities do not intersect and only one can be performed at any one point in time. If the identity is reviewed without respect to temporality then neither the gay nor the masculine identity can exist because they contain contradictory identity information. This notion in its literal interpretation would posit the existence of a void identity, but instead what emerges is an intersectional identity. The intersectional identity combines traits from both identities that allow an individual to pass between the identities. A male homosexual is distinguished from a gay male by gender expression and a male homosexual is distinguished from the category of man by his heterosexual behavior (Pascoe 72). These intersections occur between many identities and add to the instability of the notion of the identity category.

As Eve Sedgwick points out, there are "very many dimensions along which genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that other another," but only "the gender of the object choice" is registered as the dimension by which sexuality is gauged and forms sexual orientation (Sedgwick 8). Sexual orientation derived from the gender of the target of sexuality, but excluding other dimensions is one of the key problems encountered by modern gay identity. Gay identity is culturally interpreted to be associated with an object choice of same-gender, but is culturally constructed to be paired with specific sexual acts, primarily anal intercourse (Hardy 3328). In this model an individual who has attraction to members of the same gender, but on the

dimension of physical acts does not have an erotic attachment to anal intercourse may be misinterpreted. The sexual-identity can be misinterpreted either through assuming of a desire for an act that may not be present or by ignorance of the presence of additional desire beyond that which is contained in the discursively constructed meaning of the identity. As mentioned earlier alternative identities can exist inside the scope of same-sex desire such as those of sadist or masochist. Some identities also exist with much less clarity as to their same-sex desire such as a sexual-identity that is founded on a fetish. Fetish identities are less clear in their gender specificity, and any preference may only be toward masculine or feminine symbolism (Kularski 6). The idea of pure sexual-identity categories based on gender of object choice is further distorted by individuals who may have attraction that does not fall into the existing categories at all, such as a person that has an attraction for a specific type of body, but does not consider genitalia as a component of the desired object choice (Hall 110). Cases such as sadomasochism, fetishism and non-genital attraction may seem like exceptions to the rules of sexual-identity, but instead they are only vibrant examples of different types of sexual-identity. These different identities have the potential to encourage a questioning of the existing discourse on sexual-identity categories. Categorical knowledge used to create sexual-identity categories assumes a level of sameness or similarity between people who are included in each identity category (Johnson, Freeman and Pauker 116), but it is more likely that people who share a common sexual-identity category only have the one characteristic, gender of object choice, as a common sexual trait.

If sexual-identity were to be given meaning based upon the many dimensions that create a person's self-concept of sexuality then the structures that exist that rely on a small number of sexual orientations or identities would be overwhelmed and perhaps become useless for the

purpose of social categorization. If social categorization is broken on the category of sexual-identity then so are the communities and the institutions which discriminate based on sexual-identity. As described before there is no shortage of potential sexual identities, but the use of any identity other than a minimalist set that typically includes heterosexual and homosexual are discouraged in society. One way this discouragement is accomplished is through institutional restrictions such as allowing only one of the standard identities on forms or in data gathering instruments (Malacad and Hess 332). These restrictions make individuals who have other identities invisible and forces them to either not respond to the question, or to associate themselves with an identity that they do not necessarily hold. Sexual-identity categories in discourse function to provide a way to classify and label individuals, but are not reliable indicators of the sexual behaviors of the individual or even the way that the individual views themselves.

Sexual-identities have ambiguous meaning and are constructed through cultural discourse, but this does not prevent sexual-identity from becoming a tool of cultural intelligibility. A culturally intelligible identity performance that is observed can inform the placement of the performer into a sexual-identity category by the viewer of the performance. Sometimes this interpretation is not authentic when compared with the internal sexual-identity. An individual may accept an intelligible identity category which is interpreted differently from their own internal sexual-identity meaning for the purpose of being intelligible. Someone who is transsexual may accept the identity of gay because it takes less time to explain and places them into a category that is commonly accepted as valid. In this particular example the identity of gay, which is a sexual-identity, is accepted in place of a gender-identity. The performance of an identity does not make the individual intelligible, but rather reinforces the identity category that

is being performed, making any potential identity meaning that the individual may hold culturally invisible and further complicating the identity politics involved in existing outside of the few categories that are supported by cultural discourse.

In the present state of sexuality discourse there is no room for alternative sexual identities to exist that are not based on some form of interaction with genital organs or at a minimum a desire for those sexual acts. The idea of what sexuality must be questioned to accommodate such identities. Sexuality is often constructed as being founded in physical activities or some desire that is based on a physical quality (Scherrer 622). This can be problematic for asexuals who claim a gay identity, as this minimizes their status and their claim to the identity. The difficulty with affiliating with a particular community can become a strength in identity formation for asexuals because there are fewer pre-conceived categories and the various facets of the sexuality may be explored in the process of establishing an identity. While asexuals have no interest in physical acts of sexuality they have other interpersonal attributes which are involved in composing their identity such as their romantic attractions and reliance on emotional and intellectual relationships (Scherrer 632). The absence of a cohesive asexual community places more asexuals in a position of individual discovery and a self-labeling and self-identification process. There is an absence of external influence of sexuality discourse.

Donald E. Hall proposes a method of thinking about sexuality that does not address the issue of intelligibility, but works around the problem of performativity. Hall invokes masturbatory fantasies as a frame of reference for sexual-identity. In Hall's analysis it is not the outward acts that compose sexuality, but the internal thoughts that are the site of sexual-identity formation (110-111). The external sexual-identity used by the individual has no bearing on the masturbatory fantasies in which the person engages. By moving the identity into the mind of the

individual it is possible for the identity to be always fluid primarily because the concept of identity is in itself vacated. There are no categories to subscribe to if the only notion of sexual-identity is based upon what each person independent of interpersonal interactions desires. Each category is a category of one.

It is not possible to write a firm definition for what constitutes gay identity because it is constantly changing. From the time of the early gay liberation movements, gay has become a subculture with its own norms, values, art and fashion separate from that of majority culture. Identifying a strong relationship between gay identity and the gay subculture is not a simple task because of the various permutations that occur in both the sexual-identity and the subculture. During the early liberationist movements when the gay identity was first established behavior was a significant component of gay identity; same-sex intercourse was a defining characteristic of the community. Gay was defined equivalent to homosexual, except without the connotation of a clinical diagnosis (D'Emilio 16). Gay has since left the purview of its original proprietors. The spectrum of people holding a gay identity is no longer only homosexuals. Gay identity may be claimed by persons with no sexual desire, but who have romantic attraction to members of their own gender. Others adopt the identity for either social or political reasons (Scherrer 626). There are also homosexuals who do not identify as gay, such as the previously mentioned masculinity preserving male homosexual-identity. There is not a single definition that fits the entire spectrum of gay identity, other than the trait of accepting the gay identity as a personal identity.

To some members of the gay community and other interested parties, such as academics studying lesbian and gay issues, the component of physical sexual behavior is considered a necessary component to hold a gay identity. To the field of sociology, the sexual behavior is a distinguishing component that is used to quantify gay persons (Brekhus 499). This requirement

of a quantifiable measure treats a group inside of a population as being different from others in the population based on a single factor. Foucault viewed the homosexual as a species (Wilchins 69). That view has been accomplished in the social sciences by defining the homosexual as something worth studying because it is distinct from its cultural background. Incidentally the view that Foucault wished to move away from, homosexuality as a set of behaviors, is used as a standard by which the species is defined quantitatively (Wilchins 69; Malacad and Hess 330). With empirical research it is important to consider what is being measured. Counting the number of people who respond to a survey stating that they have engaged in sexual activity with members of their own sex does not reveal the number of homosexuals or the number of gay identified respondents in the survey. The count may even miss respondents who identify as gay who have not had any sexual encounter with their own sex. The survey only determines the number of respondents who have engaged in sexual activity with members of their own sex. Often in research behavior is paired with identity. A recent occurrence where identity research has been complicated by this assumed pairing is in anthropological research on the topic of gay subjectivity. The research in question found that a category was emerging outside of gay identity in a group that identity themselves as "men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay" and utilize the acronym "MSM" as their categorical label (Boellstorff 287). The term is in itself more precise than gay because it identifies criteria that are used for the category, but there is no method of preventing the term from becoming overloaded by members that interpret sex differently or who wish to use the term for a meaning other than how it describes itself. Boellstorff claims that the politics in selecting different categorical labels is futile as new identity categories are merely "logic of enumeration" attempting to "transparently label reality" (Boellstorff 288). Boellstorff echoes Focault's warnings about attempting to "capture the exact

essence of things." A quest for such an essence assumes "the existence of immobile forms" which are not affected by external forces (Boellstorff 289). The futility of the quest for a linguistic construct that accurately and succinctly describes reality is a complicating factor in research attempting to quantify homosexuality or to capture a sample of data related to some aspect of the gay community. The qualitative measure of sexual contact with members of one's own sex is a method for approximating gay identity, but not defining it.

One way in which behavior and performance is maintained in identity communities is the threat of being excluded from a community. Belonging to a community is viewed by many to be a positive trait and as such, are threatened by the potential exclusion. The gay community came into existence through exclusion from normative society, but has taken on a normalizing force of its own with the ability to exclude members who do not conform to standards of what it is to be gay. A contemporary issue that is of concern to members of the gay community is marriage. In the United States there is great division among the various states as to whether members of the same gender can marry (Herek 608). Some factions of the gay community see marriage as an essential component of gaining liberation in society whereas other factions see marriage as a burden of heteronormative society infiltrating their culture (Fox 1). The discourse surrounding the gay community accepts the assumption that the community seeks the legalization of gay marriage. The majority of the community may take that position, but it is not a universal characteristic of all members of the gay community. Gays that do not agree with the community assumption on the issue could find themselves excluded from social interactions with other gays that support the assumption. An exclusion based on difference of ideology could lead to forming relationships with others that hold similar viewpoints. The new relationships could constitute

another variation of gay identity, existing further removed from stereotypes and social constructions of what it is to have a gay identity.

A method through which the gay identity is informed is through popular culture. Since the late 1970s gay media has surfaced in an accessible form in culture. The appearance of such media is a result of community demand for inclusion and changes in policy of major production studios and film distributors. Before the 1930s homosexual characters were portrayed, but often in a negative way that reinforced effeminate traits and displayed them as objects of ridicule for other characters. Between the 1930s and 1960s such portrayals were discouraged as they were thought to be representations of immorality (Media Awareness Network 2). The current direction of popular culture portrayals of gay characters are still based on stereotypes in the personal behaviors of characters, but gay characters are less likely to appear as criminal, mentally ill or as a threat to society (Media Awareness Network 3). The lack of deviance in modern portrayals of gay characters makes them more acceptable for being models of gay identity for gay identified people. According to Albert Bandura, a psychological theorist, a person is more likely to identify with someone that is either similar or perceived to be similar to themselves. That identification can lead to imitation of behavioral traits (Bandura 214). The less difference between a character and a particular person increases the attraction of the person to the character and to assimilating behaviors and traits of that character. An example of a protagonist with a positive gay identity can be seen in the film *The Birdcage*. The lead character is a successful owner of a gay nightclub that could be viewed as a positive role-model for a gay identified viewer. The character has a lifestyle that is somewhat stereotypical. His living environment is filled with art containing phallic imagery and is decorated in a flamboyant style. The character's partner is portrayed as effeminate and emotional, but overall as successful as well. In the plot the

characters succeed over a heterosexist antagonist further portraying a favorable display of gay identity (Williams, Lane and Hackman 1996). Less ideal images of gay identity are provided through independent studios. Such films include *Latter Days* (Ramsey, Sandvoss and Place 2003) and *Shank* (Virgo, Laurent and Bott 2009). *Latter Days* utilizes a plot that involves multiple gay identities. The primary identities used are a flamboyant "party boy" identity, Christian, and a repressed gay Mormon missionary, Aaron. Neither identity is rendered as completely successful, but the repressed Mormon identity is treated negatively. During one scene of the film the intersection of gay and Mormon identity is shown to be potentially fatal. The Mormon identity ultimately must break from his church and encounter a major life change to become happy. The flamboyant gay identity goes through no major revision other than seeking monogamy. The scene that goes farthest in reinforcing gay identity is a scene in which both of the primary characters are unclothed and are engaged in intercourse. During that scene the characters are portrayed as achieving a level of happiness that neither of them have experience before that point. The scene establishes that penetrative intercourse is an essential part of their collective gay identity through their dialog during which the gay experience is placed as being exactly opposite the experience of death (Ramsey, Sandvoss and Place 2003). The plot of *Shank* is notably more negative to gay identity than the previously mentioned films. The film portrays a flamboyant French gay male, Olivier, and a British thug, Cal, who does not accept a gay identity. Cal engages in sex with men in conjunction with a drug-induced high. His sexual encounters are hidden from his friends and fellow gang members. Olivier is a successful student who is somewhat more effeminate than Cal. Olivier prides himself on his sense of fashion and his knowledge of arts and culture. Similar to *Latter Days* this film portrays the less open and less flamboyant character as being in a position of distress. Ultimately Cal's sexuality is exposed by

his friends to his gang and he must hide from them to protect himself. Cal finds protection and happiness with Olivier (Virgo, Laurent and Bott 2009). Through positive characters and situations represented with which a gay-identified audience can find similarity there is an event of social learning in which the audience may assimilate characteristics of gay identity. For viewers who do not identify as gay the characters become a part of their reference for gay identity, becoming a component of a mental representation of gay identity.

An area where the influence of gay identity on related but separate identities can be seen is in the contributions to erotic imagery. Gay fetish identity is one of the identities that interact with normative gay identity in erotic imagery. Fetish imagery can be disguised inside of normative imagery. The inclusion of such imagery can be benign to most viewers, but is viewed as erotic by individuals who identify with the fetish portrayed (Shroeder and Borgerson 65). Images that exhibit purely fetish identities exist, but often they are intersected by more traditional gay identities. It is possible to interpret the inclusion of fetish elements in gay imagery through a variety of perspectives. The elements may be present to be inclusive of people with specific fetish interests in the general gay community. The elements could also be seen as normative gay imagery being given a transgressive twist to push their imagery to be more risky or provocative (Shroeder and Borgerson 69). Figure 1 [see Appendix] depicts an individual with a sport bike fetish. The image shows an individual dressed in a racing suit and helmet kneeling in front of a sport bike, making oral and tactile contact with the bike. The image is a representation of a somewhat typical image of this type of fetish, an individual person engaged in an act with the fetish object. It is not possible to determine from the image if the individual's desire is directed toward the object itself or toward a person for which the object is a representation. The fantasy is private to the individual (Fisher 1). Figure 2 [see Appendix] depicts an individual who

does not necessarily have a fetish, but is presented as an object for the viewer's visual

consumption. The styling of the image is such that it could appeal to individuals with an athletic

shoe fetish, an underwear fetish or pygophilia. The image can also be read as a normative gay

image with unrelated stylistic elements intended to appeal to a broad gay audience. This image

does not capture a specific identity or intended audience, as the artist could have intended it the

image for a heterosexual audience (Dark Light Photography 1). Figure 3 [see Appendix] captures

a pair of men engaged in penetrative intercourse. The men are not without clothing, but are

instead very prominently wearing athletic shoes. The image is composed in such a way that both

men's feet are clearly in view and even have clearer focus than the rest of their bodies. This

image can be interpreted as being intended for a fetish audience, but it also depicts an act that is

traditionally associated with gay sexuality. The obscuring of the faces and their placement in the

bokeh of the focal plane deemphasizes them, which indicates that traditional areas of erotic focus

may potentially be disregarded in this composition. The identity portrayed could be

intersectional between a fetish identity and a gay identity, a fetish identity that has appropriated

gay identity elements or a gay identity which has appropriated fetish elements. Regardless of

intersection or appropriation of identity the image represents a combining of identity elements

which do not conform exclusively to traditional gay identity (Men.com 1). Each of the three

example images contains an element of fetish identity and the second two can be interpreted as

containing elements of gay identity. The meaning of each image is ultimately left to the viewer

as there are no clear definitions given. Erotic imagery may contribute to portions of a person's

private fantasies or may be a reflection of the private fantasies of the artist. These three images

represent a category of erotic imagery that is no longer constructed as representing a monolithic

gay identity.

Social scientists utilize categorical labels in a formal way. They use categories in their research to group various people together under an assumed common identity. Often the categories are formed based on labels which research or survey participants use to describe themselves. This process often involves a small set of labels from which the participants are to choose. The limited selection enforces identity categories by assuring participants that those options are the only selections that are valid. Participants will either select a label to place upon themselves that matches closely to their identity or will leave the response blank. Leaving a response blank or filling in a value that is not otherwise provided can be seen as an act of deviance (Malacad and Hess 330). The act of placing oneself into a category without necessarily fully identifying with that category is likely not a new behavior for those who elect to complete questions with a limited set of responses. From an early age social conditioning encourages people to identify similarities between the self and others and to associate with a group or identity (Bandura 214).

A problem that arises from the influence of the identity category and its community on the person holding the identity is that the person with the identity experiences a decreased sense of agency and is not able to act entirely as an individual on matters that are informed by the community. The individual can be compelled to alter their own actions and opinions based on the ideas of the community. Sullivan discusses this effect through the work of Sigmund Freud, the premise that the subject is split between the interest of the self and the interest of the group. Sullivan also paraphrases Bauman to state "if you want security you have to give up your freedom, or at least a good chunk of it" (144). Membership in the community requires a certain amount of adherence to goals of the community or the idea of the power of community collapses.

Social pressures involved with membership in a community may find the member compelled to take action in a certain manner even if it is not in compliance with personal views.

One method to ensure a maximum of self-determination and autonomy in the exploration of sexuality and the establishment of a sexual-identity is to queer existing sexual-identity categories and to queer the system of sexual-identity categories in general. If categories of sexual-identity are questioned, critiqued and are re-evaluated, then their assumed meaning is lost and their use becomes deprecated. Queer theory provides the tools of discourse to question the sexual-identity categories in a productive way. Queer theory allows for the deconstruction, decentering and problematizing of identities (Sullivan vi). It also provides for a means of subversion of the identity categories and the structures that created them (Wilchins 200). The tools provided by queer theory are tools of questioning. If the construct of identity categories itself is questioned, then the amount of control that it imparts can be diminished. Questioning does not make identity categories disappear; instead it brings them into discourse to be engaged with and breaks the silence on their constitution (Siedman 167). The discourse utilized in the formation of categories is part of what Focault calls "discipline". The disciplinary society strives to quash difference and enforce uniformity (Wilchins 87). It is the idea of discipline in discourse which acts as a restricting force against variation and difference. Through the enforcement of norms and categories society controls the types of people that exist. Queer theory invites members of disciplinary society to question where the categories were formed, what purpose they serve and "what erasures have made them possible" (Wilchins 162). To queer gay identity is to deconstruct its origins and to ask questions of its existence including of what has been erased by its existence.

The performance of gay identity is informed by the language that has been established to discuss what it is to be gay and the discursively constructed meaning of gay identity. This discourse comes from the clinical and cultural representations of homosexuality as well as from collective movements to establish a unique and liberated gay identity. Gay identity exists as a social construct from the vision of no one person in particular and not from any original model of what it means to be gay that can be identified. Gay identity is performed as a copy of a copy, for which there is no original. Through discourse, social learning and other traits still unknown the category of gay is translated into behavior that is the embodiment of that category.

Is the man in the opening narrative gay? The answer to that question is dependent upon how the man interprets the meaning of the concept of gay in relation to himself.

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