

In Plain Sight: Gay and Lesbian Communication and Culture

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Some of you will be eager to read this chapter, and others of you will want to avoid it. That's how strong are people's feelings about lesbian and gay culture in the U.S. today. To many college students, their lesbian and gay classmates are seen as people who are different, who rock the boat too much, or whose strange ways are simply threatening. Students committed to their religious beliefs may see their lesbian and gay classmates as people who need to be saved, to be rescued from their sinful ways. Perhaps some students may see classmates they consider to be lesbian or gay to be easy targets for bullying or even abuse. Some students and their parents may worry that lesbian and gay faculty members will attempt to "recruit" students who are in their classes. Students who know that they are lesbian or gay may find that this chapter does not express their experiences and views in strong enough terms. Lesbian women may be uncomfortable with a male author's attempt to summarize what is common about the lesbian and gay male experience. Students who are questioning their sexuality may find that reading this chapter helps them, or they may find that it confuses them all the more.

In short, there are so many different potential mindsets that readers will have when beginning this chapter that it will be impossible to address all of them. That said, I'm going to present some viewpoints on how communication, in its various forms, works to create lesbian and gay culture in the U.S. I use the term "viewpoints" because there is no precise way to define, measure, and track developments in lesbian and gay

culture, so we have to rely on observers to analyze and present what they see. And, as I selected and organized the information that appears in this chapter, my own viewpoint will predominate. It is thus only fair that you know something about the personal history and perspective I bring to writing the chapter.

I am a gay man in my 50s. My youth was “pre-Stonewall;” that is, I was entering into adulthood as a group of drag queens, who were being hassled by undercover police officers, began a demonstration in front of the Stonewall Bar in the Greenwich Village section of New York City on June 28, 1969. The demonstration attracted scores of gays and lesbians to the scene, and what came to be known as the Stonewall Riots began the Gay Liberation Movement. I was raised in a comfortable but conservative environment, and in elementary school I was branded a “sissy.” As I was not terribly coordinated, I was among the last picked for teams on the playground, and I was more interested in the performing arts than I was in sports. My parents insisted, however, that I should be engaged in doing “boy” things, so I tried every imaginable sport, and I became a very active participant in Scouting (Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts, Explorers). Some gay men report feeling more affinity and comfort with women, but I was not one of those. I was happiest being with one best male friend, and I’ve always had a male best friend, and sometimes more than one close male friend, throughout my life.

In college, my best male friend was openly gay. Going to college had been a liberating experience for me, but I was still very emotionally tied to my parents, who on more than one occasion had said negative things about gays. Secretly, I was pleased to be able to rebel against my parents’ authority by having a gay friend, though I never told them he was gay. For his part, my friend became convinced over the several years we

were in school together, that I, too, was gay. He started taking me to gay bars, hoping I would take the hint, and when I didn't he decided to seduce me. I enjoyed the experience, but the thought of rebelling *that* much against my parents' hopes and dreams for me frightened me. I promptly declared that I wasn't gay and proceeded to stay in the closet for twenty more years.

After I finally did come out to myself and others, I looked back on those years. I realized that I knew all along that I was gay but wasn't willing to admit it to myself for fear that being open about my sexuality would ruin my life and my prospects for success. In retrospect, being honest probably would have made my life even better than I imagined at the time. I wasn't ready to come out before my father died. I came out to my mother, and she was not at all happy about it. Over time, though, she decided that I was still the son she knew and loved, only now she knew a little more about me.

Today, I am mostly comfortable with my sexuality. I don't mind if people know that I'm gay, but I don't make a big deal of it, either. If you met me, you probably wouldn't be surprised to learn that I was gay, but neither would you want to pin a huge "GAY" button on my shirt. I still love the performing arts, and I sing with two choruses, one of them a gay men's chorus. I'm still not very proficient at competitive sports, but I enjoy noncompetitive activities such as bicycling and recreational skiing. I'm not nearly as uncomfortable being around women as I was when I was younger. And, it pains me that Scouting, an organization from which I benefited a great deal, has chosen to discriminate openly against boys who are or who might be gay.

My experience has helped me to see that the major issue facing lesbians and gays in U.S. society is that it is easy to hide. Defying societal pressures and choosing to live

openly as a lesbian or gay man is thus a political act, one that has ramifications, both positive and negative, for many of our everyday interactions. And, it is from those everyday interactions that cultural differences are created.

Below, I'll elaborate how this personal information becomes political. I'll include material on the "outsider" status that lesbians and gay men feel in society, the media's role in creating and perpetuating stereotypes, and the processes by which those stereotypes have been changing. I'll discuss the coming-out process, the role of communication in that process, and how gay men and lesbians eventually are able to achieve intimacy and find themselves a community. I'll discuss how people manage the tensions of displaying their sexuality to others, how public spaces are made safe for communication, how sexual attraction is negotiated by same-sex partners, and the problems entailed in achieving intimacy in same-sex relationships.

When the Personal Is Political

The Not-so Hidden Outsiders

More than other non-majority groups, lesbians and gay men have a better chance of living undetected by individuals within mainstream society. While ethnicity and national origin are relatively easy to discern by merely looking at an individual, sexual orientation is not readily apparent.

Of course, there are plenty of people who think that they can tell otherwise. When I was in high school students called Thursday "Queersday" and passed around the story that those who wore green on Thursday would be saying to all that they were gay. A group of lesbian and gay college students later turned that kind of thinking on its head when they declared that all students who wore jeans to school on Thursday would be telling their classmates that they were gay.

Pranks aside, why would students focus on clothing as an indicator that a classmate was gay? Perhaps it is because children from an early age are made very aware of differences and by adolescence there is tremendous pressure to conform. A person who dresses differently enough to be beyond the boundaries of conformity communicates “outsider” status. So, a male who wears colors that are a bit too bright or gaudy or a female who dresses down all the time but who otherwise do not seem to be making another identity statement (such as being a “stoner” or a “skater”) may be judged by others to be gay.

And, gay youth feel their outsider status intensely. One of the most eloquently written descriptions of these feelings comes from Paul Monette’s award-winning memoir, *Becoming a Man*:

Everyone else had a childhood, for one thing—where they were coaxed and coached and taught all the shorthand...And every year they leaped further ahead, leaving me in the dust with all my doors closed...Until I was twenty-five, I was the only man I knew who had no story at all...That’s how the closet feels, once you’ve made your nest in it and learned to call it home. Self-pity becomes your oxygen. (Monette, 1992, p. 1)

Of course, what is in fashion changes rapidly and probably isn’t a good indicator of sexuality over time. In urban areas, one can easily find male “metrosexuals” and gay men who dress alike. And, *The New York Times* discovered that a lesbian style not only exists but influences the clothing choices of heterosexual women in a piece provocatively headlined, “The Secret Power of Lesbian Style.” (Trebay, 2004)

If clothing is becoming less and less of a give-away, then what clues do people use to judge sexuality? In all likelihood, the first thing people will judge is any behavior that doesn't correspond with the individual's apparent gender. So, if men act "feminine" or women act "masculine" they are likely to be assumed to be gay. Indeed, gay men and lesbians may incorporate some aspects of opposite-gender behavior in order to be noticed by other gay men and lesbians. But, the adoption of these behaviors doesn't necessarily mean that the individual would rather *be* the opposite gender. Most lesbians and gays are happy being women or men; they are simply emotionally and sexually attracted to members of the same gender.

Media and Stereotypes

Media portrayals of lesbians and gays have helped both to perpetuate stereotypes and, more recently, to promote tolerance and acceptance. According to Fejes and Petrich (1993), who reviewed a large number of studies on how lesbians and gays had been portrayed in films, on television, and in the news, gay characters in entertainment were often cast as farcical, weak, or menacing.

Smyth (2004), in a more recent study of gay male portrayals in news magazine stories, identified four classic stereotypes of gay men: (1) gay males are effeminate, (2) gay males are "sick" or mentally ill, (3) gay males are sexual predators, and (4) gay males are "violent, libido-driven monsters." Smyth studied stories that appeared in *Time* and *Newsweek* between 1946 and 2002, and he found that there were three distinct periods reflecting differences in how these periodicals covered gays. From 1946 to 1969, the newsmagazines portrayed gay men almost exclusively from a dark point of view, as sexually deviant, predatory, and sick. From 1969, following the Stonewall Riots, to 1980, coverage focused mostly on the emerging Gay Liberation movement, and reactions

to that movement, mostly from religious or quasi-religious groups. While the articles themselves often focused on an emerging gay male identity and political agenda, there were still mentions of the old stereotypes in many of the articles. It was also during this period that the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses. From 1980 to 2002, the number of articles about gays surged dramatically. Portrayals of gay men as effeminate dropped sharply, though the news magazines still were interested in gay serial killers and unusual sexual practices. The prevalence of HIV and AIDS among gay men helped to perpetuate the “sick” stereotype, and coverage of the spread of AIDS perpetuated the stereotype of the sexual predator.

Even though these stereotypes have been dissipating in media coverage, they persist in many people’s thinking. And, like all stereotypes, they have some basis in fact. There are certainly gay men who are effeminate, sick, predatory, or prone to sex-related criminal acts, but to characterize all or even most gay men as having one or more of these qualities would miss the mark completely. Some scholars would characterize these stereotypes as being products of *heterosexism*. That is, they arise from an assumption that behavior of heterosexual individuals is “normal” and behavior of homosexual individuals is “deviant,” as opposed to merely “different.” In terms of sheer numbers, there are probably more heterosexual men who are effeminate, sick, predatory, or prone to sex-related criminal acts than there are gay men, because same-sex orientation is statistically still very much the exception (independent estimates range anywhere from 2-5% of the population, though lesbian and gay activists claim that these estimates are low because people are motivated to hide their sexual orientation—these activists like to use a 10% figure).

Overcoming Stereotypes

One way that many people seem to have of letting go of their stereotypes is to meet someone who doesn't fit them. A survey of San Diegans conducted during the time when Massachusetts started to marry lesbian and gay couples legally found that respondents who claimed to know at least one lesbian or gay person held more favorable attitudes toward lesbians and gays generally than did those who claimed to know no lesbians or gays. Income seemed to be a factor in associating with known lesbians and gays, as the largest number of people who said they knew no gay individuals were those who made under \$20,000 annually. And, the more you know the better. People with the most favorable attitudes knew the largest number of gay people, and *vice versa*. Other factors also influenced people's attitudes. Those with liberal political ideologies held the most favorable attitudes, though even those describing themselves as very conservative split about evenly in feeling positively and negatively about gay people generally. Those who were not regular church-goers also held more favorable attitudes, though church-goers, like conservatives, split about evenly in their attitudes. Women were more likely to hold favorable attitudes than men, and younger people's attitudes were far more favorable than were those of older people. Overall, in this poll 60% of respondents said that they viewed lesbians and gays favorably, while 26% viewed these groups unfavorably and 14% were unsure of how they felt. ("Poll analysis," 2004) A study of viewers of the television show, *Will and Grace*, which features gay characters in leading roles, found that they held more positive attitudes toward lesbians and gays than did people who did not watch the show. (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2003) While one might expect that people seek out television programming that fits with their attitudes,

positive attitudes toward lesbians and gays persisted even among those viewers who did not claim to have lesbian or gay friends.

Even though these numbers indicate that attitudes are changing, there is still danger associated with being openly lesbian or gay. In particular, this danger seems to affect people under 21 to the greatest degree. In a study published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, researchers reported on a survey of 1248 gay and bisexual men aged 18-27 who lived in Austin, Texas, Albuquerque, New Mexico, or Phoenix, Arizona. Overall five percent of those surveyed reported that they had been the victims of anti-gay violence, while eleven percent indicated that they had been discriminated against because they were gay. But, of those under 21, the numbers jumped to ten percent as having experienced anti-gay violence, while half reported that they had been discriminated against because they were gay. (Huebner, Rebchook & Kegeles, 2004)

These data bring us back to the main point of this section, that being openly lesbian or gay is a political statement. When the odds are only 60-40 that others will have a favorable attitude toward you as a lesbian or gay man and when the odds are even greater that your openness at a young age may result in negative, even violent, consequences, no wonder many non-heterosexual individuals keep that information to themselves. They may date members of the opposite sex and may also marry and have families. Men especially, however, will often seek anonymous same-sex encounters outside of marriage, because the means for having such encounters are readily (though, not always legally) available. These men may deny that they have any same-sex attraction and claim that these encounters are necessary for a variety of reasons (e.g., “I don’t get enough sex at home,” “My wife won’t do things sexually for me that other men

will do,” “I get a thrill out of anonymous encounters.”). Public health workers call these individuals MSMs, or “Men who have Sex with Men.” People in the African-American community call this practice “dl,” or being “on the down low.” These groups of people, along with intravenous drug users, have the highest risk for contracting HIV/AIDS.

The Process of Coming Out

So, despite the potential for negative consequences, it is healthier for people to be open about their same-sex attraction. But, getting to that point is not always easy.

D’Augelli (1994) theorized that there are what he called “six interactive stages that non-heterosexual” individuals pass through as they develop an identity. The stages are:

1. Recognizing that one’s attractions and feelings are not heterosexual, as well as telling others that one is not heterosexual.
2. Summarizing self-concepts, emotions, and desires into a personal identity as gay/lesbian/bisexual.
3. Developing a non-heterosexual social identity.
4. Disclosing one’s identity to parents and redefining familial relationships afterward.
5. Developing capabilities to have intimate gay/lesbian/bisexual relationships.
6. Becoming a member of a gay/lesbian/bisexual community.

It is possible that these stages can be passed through quickly, but it is equally as likely that these stages will progress slowly if at all. Each stage requires some degree of change to how one talks and each stage requires the ability to share with others what heretofore one considered to be private information. As people search for new ways of talking and for what they might consider to be the “right words” to say, they look to the

examples of others. This process of learning to communicate differently helps lesbian and gay individuals to assimilate into the lesbian/gay/bisexual community.

The fact that disclosure of information about one's sexuality may evoke responses ranging from "That's wonderful," to spews of hateful words makes such disclosure a political one. "Political" communication, in this case, is constituted by messages that have the potential for promoting controversy. "Political" also means that such a disclosure tends to carry with it an assumption that the speaker holds a set of attitudes and beliefs that may be at odds with those of the listener. Such assumptions may not be correct. For example, lesbians and gays may be seen as being antagonistic to organized religion, while many consider themselves to be quite devout. Lesbians and gays may also be seen as holding liberal political views, while their views on most matters may be quite conservative.

Communication and Identity Formation

D'Augelli's stages of identity formation are called "interactive" because they rely on communication with others to occur. As same-sex attraction is controversial information, lesbians and gays beginning on D'Augelli's stages need to find strategies for disclosing this information. These initial disclosures will usually be tentative and told to a confidant, often a trusted friend or adult who is not a parent (e.g., a teacher, counselor, adult neighbor, clergyperson, or an aunt or uncle). The initial messages may not be in the form of "I am lesbian," but may be more general statements such as, "I'm having trouble with starting to date. My friends are dating, but I'm not," or even a statement such as, "I'm not sure that people like me." The realization that one is attracted to members of the same sex may be present, but the individual may be choosing to hide that information behind what is often legitimate confusion. Depending on the response, the individual

may finally say that they think they are more attracted to members of the same sex than to members of the opposite sex, or they may label themselves lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In many cases, the first formulation of sexual identity might be “I’m bisexual,” because the speaker may believe that this statement is more socially-acceptable than “I’m gay.”

Once some form of admission that “I am different” is made the gay or lesbian person will begin to look for information that will help her to figure out what is going on. Sometimes this information search is confined to books, magazines, or informational web sites. Other times the information may come from pornography or erotica or from seeking out places where gays or lesbians gather. Often, these places will be ones where anonymous sex might be had. Males in particular will try to experiment with gay sex to see if they find it to be exciting. The fact that sex in public places is usually against the law may add to the thrill of the experience. In many cases, younger gay men will become involved with men older than they are in these environments. These older men (and, they may be as little as five or ten years older) will sometimes serve as role models as well as sex partners. Sometimes, however, the older men will only be interested in having sex with a younger partner.

As the lesbian or gay individual has contact with other lesbians and gays and compares themselves favorably to those other individuals, the idea that “I am different” should eventually become “I am gay.” At that point, the dilemma becomes whether and how to let others know of one’s sexual identity.

Coming Out as Event

The process of “coming out of the closet” is actually described by all of D’Augelli’s stages, taken collectively. The moments when the lesbian or gay individual actually tells the people closest to them of their sexual identity should ideally be (1) when

that individual is ready and prepared to make the disclosure, and (2) when the family members are ready to hear what their child or sibling has to say. In many cases, however, these scenes are not nearly so clean and well-planned. Parents may learn about their child's sexuality by catching them with same-sex pornography, by reading their diaries, or by discovering them with a same-sex partner. Or, initial sexual experimentation may lead to trouble with the law or delinquency. Or, the son or daughter may burst out with the information at an unplanned moment.

Reactions to this information will be varied. The ideal reaction, from the lesbian or gay person's point of view, is described on the website of the support organization Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG):

Some people are able to take the news in stride. But many of us went through something similar to a grieving process with all the accompanying shock, denial, anger, guilt and sense of loss. So if those are the feelings with which you're dealing, they're understandable given our society's attitudes towards gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

Don't condemn yourself for the emotions you feel. But, since you love your GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered] friend or relative, you owe it to him or her - and to yourself - to move toward acceptance, understanding and support.

While it may feel as if you have lost someone, you haven't. Your loved one is the same person he or she was yesterday. The only thing you have lost is your own image of that person and the understanding you thought you had. That loss can be very difficult, but that image can, happily, be replaced with a new and

clearer understanding of your loved one. (online at <http://www.pflag.org/support/family.html>)

Still, there are many families where parents and siblings do not process this news in nearly as supportive a manner. Some family members will immediately cut off contact with the lesbian or gay member. Some families will try to persuade the lesbian or gay person that “this is a phase” or that “you can change.” In the larger community, coming out as lesbian or gay is grounds for ex-communication in some religious denominations, and lesbian or gay individuals who work for religious organizations may well find themselves out of a job after their same-sex attraction becomes known. Disclosure of same-sex attraction is grounds for dismissal from the U.S. Armed Forces.

No wonder that individuals who are questioning their sexuality are reluctant to talk to others about it until they are sure of a lesbian or gay identity. And no wonder that some people stay in the closet for years, as I did. Many lesbian and gay individuals feel tensions in their relationships with family, work, and social and religious institutions. Lesbians and gays may resolve these tensions in a variety of ways. They may decide to create alternative support institutions, such as “families of choice,” as opposed to “families of origin.” They may strive to achieve at work or in an arena where they can gain recognition. They have formed alternative social and religious structures. They have also become politically active, seeking to root out and eliminate discrimination wherever they find it. In doing so, these groups may employ tactics ranging from traditional lobbying to attention-grabbing demonstrations such as same-sex “kiss-ins,” where same-sex couples deliberately engage in public displays of affection.

Achieving Intimacy

It is usually difficult for a lesbian or gay person to progress to D'Augelli's fifth stage, learning how to develop intimate same-sex relationships, without having completed at least some of the fourth stage, allowing the people who matter to them to know them as sexual beings. Intimacy, by its very nature, demands a degree of honesty that is usually suppressed by the need to hide a major portion of oneself. In addition, fear of being discovered, or fear of what others will think, or the very real fear of losing one's job can keep people in hiding and afraid of their own sexuality. But, sometimes finding another person to trust and love can help an individual to be more open about same-sex attraction. Of course, intimate relationships can and do happen between people who can't be open with others. Sometimes, these relationships are described to others as "roommates" or "friends," which is how a neighbor of mine described his living arrangement with his partner of seventeen years when I first met him. As soon as he realized that I was sympathetic to his situation, however, he began talking to me in much more open terms. The ability to be openly a part of an intimate relationship in the community at large is a test of not only how accepting the person has become of her own sexuality but how interactions with the community can create a climate where the couple are accepted and included by those around them.

Building Community

D'Augelli's final stage entails becoming a part of a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. This stage, too, does not necessarily wait for the other stages to finish, but can occur even while completing the earliest stages of the process. High school gay-straight alliance clubs can provide a supportive place to be different in an environment that puts a high premium on conformity. Universities often provide both a means for

“out” lesbians and gays to gather but also often private groups, typically run by a Counseling Center, where questioning students can explore their sexuality. Lesbian and Gay community centers also provide “coming out” workshops and other social services designed to assist people in finding a community and feeling as though they belong there.

Being in community typically involves having a concentration of like-minded people with whom to interact on a daily basis. The 2000 U.S. Census was the first to allow individuals to identify themselves as same-sex couples, and Gates and Ost (2004) have compiled the Census data to learn about lesbian and gay living patterns. They found that gay male and lesbian women couples tend to live on the East or West Coasts of the U.S., though not necessarily in the same locales. The ten most popular spots for gay male couples to live were San Francisco, CA, Fort Lauderdale, FL, Santa Rosa, CA, Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, WA, New York, NY, Jersey City, NJ, Los Angeles-Long Beach, CA, Santa Fe, NM, Oakland, CA, and Miami, FL. Gay male couples tended to live in places that had higher concentrations of other gay couples, and they tended to live in more urban areas. For lesbian women couples, the most popular places were often more rural in character: Santa Rosa, CA, Santa Cruz-Watsonville, CA, Santa Fe, NM, San Francisco, CA, Oakland, CA, Burlington, VT, Portland, ME, Springfield, MA, Corvallis, OR, and Madison, WI. Gates and Ost also reported that 99% of U.S. counties had at least one same-sex couple living there, giving credence to activists’ cries that “We are everywhere!”

Once in a community, gays and lesbians will often become involved in social organizations, such as square-dancing or choral singing, business and networking groups such as a lesbian and gay Chamber of Commerce, and causes that benefit the community

as a whole. Since lesbian and gay communities are controversial, however, these organizations will almost assuredly have political ramifications, if not be overtly political. Over time, gay men have been involved in prevention of HIV/AIDS transmission and in raising funds for research on this disease, which began in the gay community but now affects far more heterosexual people world-wide. Lesbians have actively been involved in raising awareness about breast cancer and in funding breast cancer research. Both groups have campaigned against laws that allow discrimination in hiring and housing or which criminalize private and consensual sexual practices commonly engaged in by lesbian and gay couples. These campaigns culminated in the U.S. Supreme Court's 2003 decision in *Lawrence v. Texas*, where Justice Anthony Kennedy, writing for the Court majority, declared that two gay men could engage in consensual sexual activity in the privacy of one's home and "still retain their dignity as free persons." Most recently, the lesbian and gay community has been galvanized by a drive to legalize marriage for same-sex couples. This drive created a fair amount of national debate, as well as spawning legal attempts to restrict the term, "marriage," to recognizing relationships among opposite-sex couples. But, the *New York Times'* decision to print announcements of the unions of same-sex couples in its wedding announcements pages did much for increasing the social acceptability of those relationships.

Communication and the Tensions of Being Open

In U.S. culture, gays and lesbians needed to remain hidden yet visible for so long that they developed ways of signaling their sexual orientation to like-minded people that would remain oblique to society as a whole. Or, they choose to be so flamboyant that their sexuality could not be ignored.

The author and playwright Oscar Wilde proved to be a masterful practitioner of hiding a gay subtext in his stories and plays, work that was acclaimed by mainstream critics and audiences alike. For example, in his novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde concocted a tale about a man who finds the secret to staying eternally beautiful and youthful. The secret is a portrait of himself that he has hidden in his attic. The portrait, not the man, is the one that ages. Ultimately, the story ends in horror, and the man receives his comeuppance, but its central fantasy appealed to the soul of every gay man who read it. Wilde himself was married to a woman but had many dalliances with young men, including with at least one long-term lover. Tried in court for being a homosexual, a crime in Victorian England, Wilde defended himself by claiming that he merely enjoyed the company and energy of younger men. Wilde was convicted and jailed, however, and the experience left him sick and defeated, unable to produce the kind of tales that had once made him the toast of London.

Camp as Gay Sensibility

Wilde has been credited as being the first practitioner of “camp.” Camp has evolved into a central concept in understanding gay culture. In her famous 1964 essay, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” critic Susan Sontag defined camp as a “sensibility,” as opposed to an idea or a thing. Sensibilities, according to Sontag, are difficult to describe, but she argued that camp is a sensibility that requires aesthetic appreciation, because it is a style or taste. Since styles and tastes change frequently, however, one must be nimble and not given to set ways of seeing the world. Indeed, camp often turns the world on its ear, relying on exaggeration and a tendency to see double meaning in words and acts. Camp is theatrical, an attempt to be and do extraordinary things. Camp is “fabulous.” (Sontag, 1964)

In a more recent essay, Meyer (1994) extended Sontag's analysis to argue that camp encompasses how lesbians and gays perform their lives in front of others. Camp is the embodiment of how gay individuals manage the tensions of being open about their sexuality in a society that brands them as deviant. Rather than hide one's difference, camp helps the gay or lesbian person to find an alternative way of being in the world, a "queer" reality that doesn't have to rely on the norms of mainstream society, a reality that, in fact, often mocks those norms.

A good example of this alternate reality is the concept of drag. Drag not only bends the idea of gender by allowing men to dress up as women and women as men, but it requires that the "drag queen" or "drag king" play with the character in some way. Puns are a commonly-used form of verbal play. For example, "Anita Mann" has undoubtedly been used more than once as a drag name.

Perhaps a good way of explaining drag would be to compare it to female impersonation. Let's say that both a drag queen and a female impersonator are portraying actress Carol Channing. The female impersonator will attempt to look and sound as much like Carol Channing as possible, to create the illusion of Carol Channing as a tribute to her talent. The drag queen, on the other hand, will portray an exaggerated version of Carol Channing, playing with her persona to distort it in humorous or ironic ways.

Drag also allows an individual to be "someone else," at least for a while. One acquaintance of mine confided to me, "When I go to a bar in drag, all of the cute boys want to talk to me. I have a quick mouth, and they love my comebacks. But, out of drag I'm a large, older man, and if I went into the same bar as that person those boys wouldn't

have anything to do with me. In drag, I'm fun and safe, but out of drag I'm someone to be avoided."

It's About Sex, But Not Only About Sex

Of course, the point of same-sex attraction is that gays and lesbians want to find someone of the same gender with whom to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually intimate. Recall, however, that while D'Augelli's (1994) stages of developing a non-heterosexual identity includes the capacity to form and maintain intimate same-sex relationships, D'Augelli places this capacity down his list, after coming out to family and friends. Clearly, a lot of developing a lesbian and gay identity involves exploring one's same-sex attraction and learning to flirt with and meet people who might be candidates for intimate relationships. And, many, if not most, lesbians and gays do not wait until they have found their "soul mate" before having sex. Gay men often talk about finding Mr. Right, as opposed to finding Mr. Right-Away. As you might imagine, the latter is much easier to locate.

Making Public Communication Safe

Meeting other lesbian and gay people is not an easy task, however. If one is in a "safe" space, where everyone there is gay or accepting of same-sex attraction, then conversing openly is not a problem. Bars have traditionally filled this role, though to a greater extent for men, as opposed to women; San Diego, for example, supported more than twenty gay bars but only two lesbian bars at the time this chapter was written. Coffee houses and some community-based restaurants have also emerged as bar alternatives, especially for gay and lesbian youth who are not of legal drinking age, and for those who may want a less pressured atmosphere. Social and volunteer organizations also serve as safe spaces for lesbians and gays to meet.

Meeting someone outside of these spaces can be tricky, especially if one isn't sure that the other person shares one's same-sex attraction. Most lesbians and gay males develop some degree of sense of who around them might also be lesbian or gay (and this intuitive ability is referred to as "gay-dar"). In public places, contact is usually established by exchanging gazes, typically more than once. Holding another's gaze is generally interpreted as a sign that the other person might be interested. A conversation will often ensue, and an early task in that conversation will be to say something socially acceptable but that the other person can identify as a gay reference. Leap (1996), who has studied how gay men use English, provides an example of a conversation between a clothing sales clerk and a customer:

C: What are you asking for these? [*Points to one set of gray sweatshirts*]

S: Oh, I'm afraid they're not on sale today. But that colored shirt would look nice on you. [*Points to a pile of lavender sweatshirts, which are on sale*]

C: Yeah, I know. I own a few of them already. [*Grins*]

S: [*Grins back, no verbal comment*] (1996, p. 13)

Undoubtedly, both men walked away from this conversation with the knowledge that they were both gay. They understood that fact by (a) the reference to "lavender" a color generally associated with being gay, (b) the exaggerated response to the suggestion that the lavender shirt would look good on the customer, and (c) the fact that both men had exchanged mutual glances prior to beginning the conversation and the both grinned at the end of it. The conversational space was thus "safe," though still public, and if the two had been interested in pursuing each other's company further they would have exchanged contact information.

Negotiating Sexual Attraction

The above example involved two men who might have been interested in each other as potential friends or potential dates (“Mr. Right”). When gay men are looking for sex partners (“Mr. Right-Away”), however, they will tend to use mostly nonverbal signals to do so. What gay men call “cruising,” typically starts with making eye contact with someone as the two pass each other. If one is interested, that person will typically slow down and look back. If the other person also looks back, one person may begin to follow the other person. The two might stop and begin a conversation, or they might silently look for a place to have sex. Generally, when men engage in an anonymous sexual encounter the less they know about the other person the better. Of course, sex in public places is, for the most part, against the law, so some men cruise for sex and then take their “trick” to a private space. There is always some level of danger associated with anonymous sex, and for some men that level of danger may be a part of the reason that cruising is exciting. Part of the reason that HIV/AIDS was transmitted so quickly between gay men in the 1980s was that cruising did not have to be so carefully hidden and peer pressure to have a lot of anonymous sex was strong. One of the principal obstacles that had to be overcome in safer-sex campaigns within the gay community were to encourage gay men to avoid risky behaviors in an environment where talking was discouraged. Early HIV prevention campaigns focused on talking to your partner about your HIV status, which was, and still is, a good idea for couples who were dating or in a relationship. The solution seemed to be to teach gay men to regard every sex partner as being HIV-positive until proven otherwise.

Negotiating Intimacy

Most lesbians and gay men put a high premium on dating and forming intimate relationships, however. In this way, they are quite a bit like the rest of the populace, and their courtship communication patterns in many ways resemble those of their heterosexual counterparts in similar age groups. Lesbian and gay couples do have unique issues to negotiate on their way to achieving intimacy at all of the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels, however. For one thing, the issue of “who does what” in the relationship has to be worked out bit by bit. In heterosexual relationships, societal expectations for the roles that men and women play can either be followed or they can be reversed by the couple’s decision. In lesbian and gay relationships, couples generally reject the notion that one of them plays the “man” and the other plays the “woman.” So, each physical or emotional task has to be worked out, either consciously, or by one person taking on that task and having it become part of who that person is in the relationship. Many lesbians and gay men also reject that their relationships should have to conform to the normative expectations of the heterosexual community. These issues often revolve around setting rules for how much physical, emotional, or spiritual attraction is allowed to each member of the couple outside of the relationship. This work is hard, and if it becomes too hard or leads to major conflict before the couple has committed to each other there will be a tendency to break off the relationship, rather than to work through the conflicts.

The fact that same-sex couples have no legal standing in most geographical locations also means that couples either have to keep their finances and other matters separate, or they have to draft legal documents spelling out their agreements, knowing that the validity of those documents may be challenged successfully, perhaps by members

of one individual's family, at some future date. While some lesbians and gay men may reject the idea of "marriage" as a religious institution, the legal institution of "marriage" provides a shortcut for allocating benefits and privileges to one's partner that a legal contract finds hard-pressed to provide. And, the emotional and ceremonial institution of "marriage" as a public commitment of two people to each other would surely help couples to cement their partnerships. No wonder so many lesbians and gays have been energized to work for ways of providing legal marriage for same-sex couples.

Some Closing Thoughts

In writing this chapter, the readers I was keeping in mind were traditionally-aged university sophomores and juniors. So, I tried to select and emphasize material that I thought might be most relevant to both the intellectual and emotional journeys of 19 or 20-year-olds. Clearly, not every second or third year college student is 19 or 20 years old, and if you fall into that category my examples may not fit where you are in your life so well.

I also tried to emphasize material that might be common to both lesbians and gay men. Because I am a gay man, doing so probably means that I shorted lesbians in important ways. So, if you'd like to read more about lesbians in particular, I'd refer you to several works that I've listed in the references (Allen, 1990; Coyle & Kitzinger, 2002; Dunne, 1997; Jay, 1995; Stein, 1997).

I have also ignored almost completely the "BT" part of the "LGBT" formulation, bisexuals and transgendered. Both of these groups are more hidden, even within the gay community. I have heard gay men say that bisexual men are actually gay men in denial and that men who call themselves bisexual are really interested in sex and nothing more.

I have heard lesbians become angry when a woman who was with another woman starts dating a man instead. But, I've also heard that bisexuals are different from lesbians and gay men, as well as claims most people are probably at least somewhat bisexual (Woody Allen once famously remarked that "bisexuality immediately doubles your chances of having a date on Saturday night"). I also wrote earlier that exhibiting the behavior of the other gender doesn't necessarily identify one as a lesbian woman or gay man, and I commented that many, if not most, of us were quite happy being men or women.

Transgendered individuals, on the other hand, do sense that they ought to be the opposite gender from what they are, physically. Much of the research on transgendered individuals is new, so checking an advocacy website, such as that of the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition (<http://www.ntac.org/research/>) should provide up-to-date information on this topic.

Finally, I have avoided writing about many of the political issues about which many lesbians and gay men care deeply, as well as about several of the tensions that exist within the gay community. These tensions include poverty and homelessness among lesbians and gays, racism and sexism among gay men and lesbian women, concerns about how to foster healthy communication among lesbians and gay men of different ages (see, for example, Hajek & Giles, 2002), and worries that lesbian and gay culture is becoming too mainstream, resulting in the possible loss of the community's identity (Hattersley, 2004; McNamara, 2004).

Despite these shortcomings, I hope that I have provided you with some insight about communication among gay men and lesbians and how that communication manifests itself in the U.S. as a "culture." It used to be said that the members of the

lesbian and gay community were “hiding in plain sight.” Now that so many of us are no longer hiding, I hope that this information will help you to understand the ways in which members of this community may be different and the ways we are the same.

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