Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity, and the Closet

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In this project, I illustrate how eight premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet contribute to the existence of paradox, an interactional situation constituted by contradiction. I first outline the following premises: gay identity is (1) inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet; coming out is necessary when gay identity (2) is invisible; the closet draws meaning (3) only in relation to heteronormative contexts; gay identity, as a (4) stigmatized identity, makes coming out a (5) potentially dangerous act; coming out is conceived of as a (6) necessary and important, (7) discrete and linear, (8) inescapable and ever-present process. I then use autoethnography to describe and analyze the lived experience of paradox in terms of these premises. I conclude by formulating ways a gay person can negotiate paradox in, and by way of, interaction.
Keywords: sexuality, gay identity, paradox, autoethnography, accountability

January 2005. I am an instructor of a public speaking course. The first assignment is a "Success Speech" designed for students to speak about a personal achievement. As I do with many assignments, I participate; I want to further introduce myself to the students as well as provide an example of how an outlined speech might sound. I decide to tell of my success with coming out to my father; my success of telling him that I am gay. Initially, I receive a positive response, but a few days later I receive a call from the chairperson of my department.

"Tony, the president of the university called me today," he reports in a serious tone. "She told me that a student's parents complained about you 'being out' in the classroom."

"Who would complain about that?" I ask.

"The parents don't think that 'being gay' is a part of the 'university curriculum,'" he says. "The president seems to agree."

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Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 33, Issue 2, pp. 234–256, ISSN 0195-6086, electronic ISSN 1533-8665. © 2010 by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp. DOI: 10.1525/si.2010.33.2.234.

Frustrated, sad, and frightened, I respond: "I don't want to hide from students, especially in a speech on self-disclosure. What should I do?"

"You should be out in the classroom," he says, "but should rethink how you do it."

The conversation ends, and I reflect on the complaint against my claiming to be a particular kind of person as well as for coming out too soon. An identity I claimed and the timing of my disclosure threatened a student, a student who will probably dislike my gay body and dislike me for the remaining thirteen weeks of the course. I decide that I came out too early in the semester, and now worry about losing my job.

In the classroom, I do not avoid discussions of gay identity. I often use examples of lesbians and gay men, and talk about issues facing nonheterosexual communities. However, instead of coming out in the first few weeks I come out either midsemester or not at all. I have not received another formal complaint about my sexuality in the classroom, but continue to receive a variety of informal criticisms about when and whether I disclose my sexuality.

In courses where I come out midsemester, I often receive charges, from students and colleagues, of being manipulative for waiting too long, dishonest for keeping my sexuality secret, and politically motivated for trying to advance the "gay agenda" (i.e., by forcing others to contend with gayness).

In courses where I say nothing, I often receive, minimally, a frown or comment of passive support (e.g., "Maybe you can come out next semester"), to aggressive chastising for being dishonest and self-hating and for not being a good gay role model. I cannot recall an instance where someone has supported me for not disclosing my sexuality, for deciding to "stay in" the closet. Furthermore, many of these criticisms have not only been about a (contextually stigmatized) identity but also been about the amount of time I kept that identity hidden (Brown-Smith 1998).

As a gay man, these are situations I commonly experience. As such, three questions motivate this project: How might premises of sexuality, gay identity, and coming out make such contradiction possible? How does a gay person experience contradiction in interaction? How can a person better navigate contradiction stemming from gay identity?

I begin by discerning eight discursive premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet, and illustrate how these premises contribute to the existence of a paradox, an interactional situation constituted by contradiction (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967). I then use autoethnography to describe and analyze the lived experience of paradox in terms of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. I conclude by developing ways a gay person can negotiate paradox in, and by way of, interaction. By using autoethnography, I take a "hands-on 'down-to-earth empirical approach" to this project (Plummer 2003:524, 522) and, in so doing, foreground the "complexity of being sexual."

PREMISES OF SEXUALITY, GAY IDENTITY, AND THE CLOSET

Symbolic interactionists discern the "defining activities" (Blumer 1969:5), "taken-for-granted meanings" (Denzin 1989a:19; Garfinkel 1967; Scott and Lyman 1968),

and "common language" (Mead 1962:198) manifest in embodied social interaction (Fine 1993; Goffman 1959, 1963, 1967). In this section, I discern eight interrelated premises—defining activities, taken-for-granted meanings, and common language—of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. I then define paradox and conclude by demonstrating how premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet—as manifest in interaction—make paradox possible.

1. *Gay identity is inextricably tied to the metaphor of the closet* (Betsky 1997; Brown 2000; Sedgwick 1990; Urbach 1996). This tie is best exemplified by the phrase "coming out of the closet," the act whereby a person discloses a gay identity to another (Butler 1997; Fuss 1991; Gross 1991). Coming out is the "most canonical expression of being gay" (Perez 2005:177), a "central narrative of a positive gay experience" (Plummer 1995:84), a metaphor by which a gay person often comes to live (see Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

While the closet is sometimes described as Eurocentric (Jolly 2001; Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer 2002; Labi 2007; Phellas 2005), descriptive of white experience (Fung 1996; Johnson 2001; Lee 2003; McCune 2008), and male biased (Creet 1991; Halberstam 2005; Tillmann 2009), I believe that many same-sex desiring persons will negotiate the closet at some time. Like stigma (Goffman 1963; Marvasti 2006), the closet is a relational construct: *others* may hold a person accountable for it at various times, in various places. Even though a same-sex desiring person may not feel as though the metaphor describes her or his experience, others may make meaning of and, consequently, evaluate the person's experiences in terms of the closet.

2. *Coming out is necessary when gay identity is invisible* (Burgess 2005; Nicholas 2004). Gay identity—an identity constituted by same-sex desire—lacks definitive, permanent visible traits. Consequently, it is a "discreditable" identity that must be confirmed, repeatedly, in discourse and action (Foucault 1978; Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2006). If gay identity was visible, coming out—the revealing of gay identity—would be unnecessary, as others would know of a person's desire based on how she or he looks; a person would never have to say anything, never have to come out. Inferences about gay identity may stem from (visible) appearance—for example, a man dressing as a woman may be assumed to be gay—but often needs validation by way of discourse (e.g., saying "I am gay") or action (e.g., kissing someone of the same sex; see Bloom 2002; Butler 1991; Chirrey 2003; Fuss 1991; Minson 1981).

3. *The closet draws meaning only in relation to heteronormative contexts.* These contexts frame heterosexuality and opposite-sex desire as better than homosexuality and same-sex desire (Butler 1993, 1999; Foster 2008; Yep 2003). These contexts also frame a person as straight until proven gay, thus making the act of identifying as heterosexual unnecessary and simultaneously motivate, even require, a gay person to come out—that is, explicitly validate her or his nonheterosexuality by way of discourse or action (e.g., saying "I am gay," kissing someone of the same sex; see Butler 1991; Garrick 2001; Shallenberger 1991; Solis 2007). "The closet is not a function of homosexuality in our culture," Crimp (1993:305) writes,

> but of compulsory and presumptive heterosexuality. I may be publicly identified as gay, but in order for that identity to be acknowledged, I have to declare it on each new occasion. By "occasion," I mean something as simple as asking a cab driver to take me to a [gay] bar like the Spike, or kissing my friend Jeff good-bye on a crowded subway when he gets off two stops before me on our way home from the gym. Fearing for my safety, I might choose not to kiss Jeff, thereby hiding behind our fellow riders' presumption that we're straight.

Conversely, homonormative contexts like gay pride parades or gay bars make coming out irrelevant; a person's gay identity is often assumed until she or he is proven straight.

4. *Gay identity is a contentious, stigmatized identity* (Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2006). Persons who identify as gay are often targets of harassment and even physical violence solely for claiming to be or being perceived as gay (Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Pascoe 2007). In the United States, same-sex partnerships are not recognized as a legitimate kind of coupling in a variety of contexts (e.g., national and some state governments, hospitals, families), and institutions like the military (Brouwer 2004; Butler 1997) and the educational system (Gust and Warren 2008; Kirk 2008; MacIntosh 2007; Meyer 2005) require a gay person to vigilantly regulate or remain silent about same-sex desire. Same-sex relations are often absent from or disregarded in mundane conversation (Feigenbaum 2007; Foster 2008; Glave 2005), and various religions position gays and the "homosexual lifestyle" as immoral, disgusting, and in need of change (Bennett 2003; Brouwer and Hess 2007; Chávez 2004; Cobb 2006; Moon 2002; Stewart 2005).[1]

5. Because gay identity is contentious and stigmatized, *coming out can be dangerous.* Disclosing a gay identity can still motivate humiliation, rejection, and violence from family, friends, and strangers (Burgess 2005; Frank 1993; Glave 2005; Gross 1991; Kimmel and Mahler 2003; Mosher 2001; Pascoe 2007). The dangerous characteristics of coming out are often correlated with the potential for suicide, which is still prevalent among gay populations (Bornstein 2006; Goltz 2007; Russell and Bohan 2006).

The humiliation, rejection, and violence a gay person may experience on coming out can occur because another is disgusted by the person's gay identity, but may also develop because the person reveals a history of hiding practices—practices she or he found necessary to protect herself or himself from humiliation, rejection, and violence but now, upon coming out, can frame the person as a manipulative liar and/or traitor (Crimp 1993:308; Downs 2005; Phellas 2005). As Bochner (1984:610) observes, self-disclosure is "embedded in the history of past disclosures" (Rawlins 1983; Simmel 1964).

The humiliation, rejection, and violence a gay person may experience on coming out can also occur because the other believes the person has kept gay identity hidden too long or not long enough. I mentioned that I received a complaint for coming out too soon in a college class. I also received complaints for not coming out soon enough or at all; others held me accountable for being manipulative with either action. Such charges were not criticisms of my contentious, stigmatized gay identity but of

the amount of time I kept my identity hidden—the "duration" of my secret (Brown-Smith 1998:26).

6. *Coming out is conceived of as necessary and important.* Disclosing a gay identity is framed as healthy (Cole et al. 1996; Downs 2005; McLean 2007; Phellas 2005; Seidman 2002), mature (Rust 1993), and politically responsible (Burgess 2005; Corrigan and Matthews 2003; Delany 1996; Gross 1991; Kirk 2008; Signorile 1990, 2007). Not disclosing is thus unhealthy, immature, and politically irresponsible, an act of silence indicative of shame and self-hatred (see Hopcke 1993; Meyer and Dean 1998).

7. Coming out is conceived of as *a discrete, linear process with a definitive end.* When coming out is treated as a process (Gagné, Tewksbury, McGaughey 1997; Kus 1985; McDonald 1982; Rust 1993), a gay person who remains in the closet may be viewed as immature, unhealthy, and self-hating (Phellas 2005; Plummer 1995; Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen 1999). "The idealization of coming out," McLean (2007:154) writes, "constructs a binary of disclosure that positions coming out as 'good,' as it enables the healthy development of sexual identity, and positions non-disclosure as 'bad.'" Rasmussen (2004:145–46) agrees, noting that gay people who "fail in their duty to come out may be marked as lacking" or as "somehow ashamed of their inherent gayness." There is an "attitude of contempt for people who are closeted," Chee (2006:114) says, as staying in is considered an act of "betrayal" (Delany 1996:1).[2]

8. Coming out is also conceived of as *an inescapable, ever-present process.* "Where heterosexuality is presumed," Urbach (1996:69) writes, "coming out can never be accomplished once and for all"; the "sustenance of gay identity (where straight identity is presumed) depends on continuous acts of declaration." Halley (1989:947) makes a similar observation:

> Because the assumption of heterosexuality applies in virtually every social interaction—from the encounter of teacher with student, salesperson with shopper, mother with daughter, Supreme Court Justice with clerk—even the most forthright and fearless gay man or lesbian cannot "come out" once and for all in a single public disclosure.

Obstacles to coming out always exist, and outness is a matter of degree changing with context (Chirrey 2003; Crimp 1993; Liang 1997; Plummer 1995; Sedgwick 1990).

PARADOX

A paradox is a situation in which "contradiction" deduced from "consistent premises" exists (Watzlawick et al. 1967:188); a situation in which a person has the possibility of being held accountable—by herself or himself and others—for taking the wrong course of action, making the wrong move; an "untenable" situation in which a person's "feelings are denuded of validity" and "acts are stripped of their motives, intentions, and consequences" (Laing 1969:124); a situation in which "compliance itself is not good enough," and "noncompliance is completely out of the question" (Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch 1974:71). Paradox does not develop in a person, but rather from her or his interactions with others; people make paradox together.

The previously identified premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet can trap a gay person in interactional paradox. As an invisible identity (premise two), gay identity is tied to the closet (premise one). The closet construct makes sense only in relation to heteronormative contexts (premise three) and is a construct that requires a person to leave the metaphoric space by saying or doing something indicative of same-sex desire. A gay person can decide to stay safely in the closet, as coming out—the revealing of a potentially stigmatized identity (premise four)—can be dangerous (premise five). However, the closeted person may be held accountable for being unhealthy, immature, and politically irresponsible (premise six) should her or his (invisible) gay identity (premise two) leak at a later time. A healthy, mature, and politically responsible gay person is one who not only comes out (premise six) but also stays out—that is, arrives to the end of the coming-out process (premise seven). But if coming out never ends (premise eight) and if every new interaction makes for a new disclosure of (invisible) identity (premise two), then a gay person can be fully out (premise seven) only if she or he comes out immediately upon meeting unfamiliar others. However, in so doing, the person puts herself or himself at risk in every new encounter (premise five).

A gay person always has the potential, in interaction, to be held accountable—by herself or himself and others—for taking a wrong course of action, making the wrong move: there are punishments for a gay person who comes out or does not, for coming out too soon or not soon enough, for trying to complete the coming-out process or finding completion impossible, for coming out most of the time, some of the time, or never at all.[3] But how, specifically, does a gay person experience paradox in interaction? And how might a gay person navigate paradox when it is perceived to exist?

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: METHOD AND DATA

To research how paradoxical premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet are manifest in, and created by, social interaction, I turn to autoethnography. As a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of *auto*biography and *ethnography*. When a person does *auto*biography, she or he retrospectively and selectively writes about experiences from her or his life. The autobiographer usually does not live through these experiences to make them a part of an autobiography—rather, they are constructed via hindsight; as Freeman (2004:64) notes, "One often does not know 'what is happening' until the moment is past, until it can be located within some broader constellation of events, read for its significance in some larger whole" (see Bruner 1993; Denzin 1989b). In doing autobiography, a person relies on memory, interviews with others, and texts such as photographs, journals, and recordings (Delany 2004; Didion 2005; Goodall 2006).

When a person does *ethnography*, she or he goes to, participates in, and observes a culture in order to write "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973:10) of everyday happenings (Goodall 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz 2005; Van Maanen 1988). Ethnographic

descriptions facilitate understandings of a group's interactional practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences, thus making strange aspects of the group familiar for "insiders" (cultural members) and "outsiders" (cultural strangers; Maso 2001). These descriptions are created by interviewing cultural members (Berry 2005; Nicholas 2004), participating in and observing cultural events and rituals (Geertz 1973; Makagon 2004), examining members' ways of speaking and relating (Ellis 1986, 1995; Lindquist 2002; Philipsen 1975), and analyzing artifacts like clothing and architecture as well as texts like books, movies, and photographs (Borchard 1998; Goodall 2006; Neumann 1999). An ethnographer does not apply predetermined, sense-making criteria to members' experiences but allows findings—patterns of experience—to emerge, inductively, through analysis (Deegan 2001; Jorgenson 2002).

When a person does *autoethnography*, she or he not only retrospectively and selectively writes experiences from her or his life but also situates these experiences within cultural contexts; the person works to connect personal experience with cultural experience (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis 2004; Holman Jones 2005). But this does not mean an autoethnographer can just tell her or his story; she or he must also be able to distance herself or himself from personal experience. As a publisher of autoethnographies Mitch Allen (personal interview, Urbana, IL, May 4, 2006) says,

> You have to look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story—and that's nice—but people do that on *Oprah* every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as "my story," then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV?

An autoethnographer uses personal experience to make unique and unfamiliar aspects of a group familiar for insiders and outsiders, and, in so doing, say something about or motivate change in a particular culture(s) (e.g., Bochner 2002; Boylorn 2006; Ellis 2002, 2009; Pelias 2004, 2007). An autoethnographer may also interview cultural members (e.g., Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy 1997; Foster 2006; Marvasti 2006) and analyze cultural artifacts (e.g., Boylorn 2008; Denzin 2006), but does not apply predetermined, sense-making criteria to her, his, or others' experience and the artifacts; rather, the person allows patterns to emerge, inductively, through analysis of the experience and artifacts.

As an autoethnographer, I retrospectively and selectively write about personal experiences that stem from, or are made possible by, being a part of a culture and from possessing a particular cultural identity. I distance myself from these personal and cultural experiences in an attempt to discern and analyze, inductively, patterns of these experiences as evidenced by repeated characteristics, responses, feelings, and topics of discussion. In so doing, I work to make patterns of a group familiar for cultural insiders and outsiders, and thus make personal experience meaningful, cultural experience.

I find autoethnography useful for this project for two reasons. First, autoethnography allows me to study the everyday, "actual empirical life" (Blumer 1969:31; Plummer 2003) of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet—constitutive characteristics of gay culture (Bronski 2003; Herdt 1992; Nicholas 2004; Sedgwick 1990). The method allows me to tap into and analyze my "firsthand familiarity" (Blumer 1969:38) of these phenomena and, as such, observe "what goes on in social life under one's nose" (p. 50).

The second reason I find autoethnography useful is because as a self-identified gay man, I have participated in gay culture for nearly a decade. I make my gay identity known most everywhere. Most of my family members know I desire men, and I openly discuss my intimate same-sex relationships with acquaintances, students, and strangers. As such, I am regularly held accountable, by others, and myself, for premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet; these premises inform, emerge in, and are reinforced by many of my social interactions.

EXPERIENCES OF PARADOX: THREE ENCOUNTERS

In this section, I use my "firsthand familiarity" (Blumer 1969:38) of gay identity to describe three "accounting encounters" (Marvasti 2006; see also Scott and Lyman 1968) in which I felt I was held accountable, by myself and others, for paradoxical premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. Similar to Marvasti's (2006:527) description of encounters that made his "skin tone relevant," I write of encounters that made my sexuality—particularly my gay identity—relevant, "recurrent patterns of joint action" (Blumer 1969:17) where structures and agency, premises and lived experience collide. I then engage in a "meticulous examination" (p. 44) of these situations to show how these premises are manifest in, and created by, social interaction.

(Mis)Reading Sexuality

I arrive at an all-male-clientele salon. Dan introduces himself and says he will cut my hair. I find Dan quite masculine: he has a firm gait, deep voice, and a somewhat-disheveled, relaxed appearance. He guides me to his hair-cutting station. Throughout the cut, we talk about sports, politics, and where we're from.

"Illinois," I say.

"Concord, North Carolina," he responds. "I miss it."

While I didn't initially think about his sexuality, his masculine appearance and his missing of small-town North Carolina motivates me to think that he is heterosexual. Stereotypes emerge: gay men often do not miss rural hometowns and are rarely hypermasculine. Though I study and teach about sex, gender, and sexuality, I still cannot disband deeply held assumptions. It doesn't help that the next part of our conversation is about attractive women.

"You know what it's like working around hot women all day?" he asks as a female employee walks by.

I hesitate. Is he making an observation about the difficulties, or the benefits, of men and women working together in one space? Does he want me to comment on his "hot" statement and say that I would love to work around hot women? Because I just met Dan, I find it awkward to say "I am gay" and am not sexually attracted to (hot) women.

"Um, sure," I respond uncomfortably and ambiguously, assuming that he's asking if I know about men and women working together.

The conversation stops, and I sense that he is nearly finished with my hair.

"Want something to drink?" he asks.

"No thanks."

"Okay," he says. "I'll be right back. I have to get some water."

When he returns, I notice he has something in his lip. I look into the mirror, see him spit into a cup, and realize that he has been chewing tobacco for most of the haircut. I cringe. He's hypermasculine, misses the rural place of his youth, asks about hot women, and is chewing tobacco, another stereotypical, masculine, heterosexual act; I have never met a woman or a gay man who chews. These characteristics combined make me nervous: as a gay person, hypermasculine men scare me. They were the bullies in high school. They are the people I see bash gays. They are the people that I find most uncomfortable with same-sex desire.

He coats my neck with shaving cream and pulls out a straight-edged razor.

"So do you have a girlfriend?" he asks while caressing my neck with the sharp blade.

"Damn question!" I say to myself. He's not asking if I am bisexual or gay, but is assuming that I like people of the opposite sex. How do I respond? He has a razor on my neck.

"Nope," I reply.

I feel guilty for typifying Dan and clinging to unquestioned heterosexual assumptions. I also feel guilty for not speaking of my same-sex desire. Should I have come out? Should I have arrived to the salon and said, "Hi, I'm Tony, and I'm gay?" Should I have come out when he asked if I knew what working around "hot women" was like? Do I tell him that I am not attracted to women? Even though I am single, should I have pretended to have a boyfriend when he asked if I had a girlfriend? I could have lied, but would that have eliminated self-condemnation?

A few weeks later a friend says he's been dating Dan for a few months. I am amazed.

Assuming that Dan identifies as gay, I approach him the next time I am at the salon.

"Why didn't you tell me that you were gay?" I ask. "Why didn't you tell me that *you* were gay?" he responds.

"I didn't think it was appropriate," I reply. "You scared me. I thought you were straight."

"Sorry," he says, "but I didn't think telling you was appropriate, either. I assumed you were straight, too."

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I believe Dan initially marked me as heterosexual, evidenced by him asking if I knew what it was like "working around hot women" and if I had "a girlfriend." Even though attractive men worked at the salon, Dan did not ask if I knew what it was like working around hot men or if I had a boyfriend. For Dan, my heterosexuality was assumed, thus suggesting that my gay identity, for him, was invisible. Consequently, I had to say something to indicate my same-sex desire or to get him to ask about my identity (e.g., by asking, "Why didn't you tell me that you were gay?" and hoping that he would infer or ask about mine).

Likewise, I marked Dan as heterosexual as evidenced by my fear of coming out to him, surprise with finding out he was dating a man, and asking him about not coming out to me. Had I believed Dan to be gay, I would not have worried about my safety, as we both were members of the same contextually stigmatized group. Not only do my assumptions illustrate heteronormativity and the invisibility of gay identity (and, consequently, the need to come out of the closet, to say or do something indicative of same-sex desire), but also how Dan and I stigmatized gay identity in our encounters by assuming and perpetuating heterosexual identities; if either of us didn't consider gay identity contentious, then why didn't either of us ask about the other's desire or be direct about ours?

Even after I came out to Dan, I still left our encounters feeling guilty, shameful, and dishonest— guilty for (intentionally) omitting information, for "not correcting a falsehood" (Brown-Smith 1998:28–29), and for reinforcing the "interpersonal strain" of heteronormativity, a strain that suggests "it's fine" to be gay as long as it is not discussed (Feigenbaum 2007:7; Glave 2005); shameful for not seeming proud and comfortable with an identity I claim; and dishonest for reifying an inaccurate assumption. But I am also torn between what I could have done differently: I could have walked into the salon and said, "I am gay," but know that, in so doing, would have feared for my safety. However, by not coming out immediately, I also knew I could be held accountable—by Dan, others, and myself—for feelings of guilt and shame for having told a "lie of omission" (Brown-Smith 1998:29) should my gay identity leak at a later time.

Dining Out, Staying In (the Closet)

I arrive at Damen's, one of my favorite fast-food restaurants. I place my order and take a seat. Since she's not busy, the cashier comes and sits at my table. I tell her that I'm moving to Chicago. She asks if I'm moving with my girlfriend.

"No," I say.

Should I tell this cashier, an acquaintance, that I'm gay? Do I say, "No, I'm not moving with my girlfriend or my boyfriend because I am single?" I assumed that she assumed I identified as heterosexual by possibly being in a relationship with a woman. Why couldn't, or didn't, I say that I date men? Even though I believe that I am comfortable with my gay identity, mundane encounters like these make me question myself; they make coming out difficult.

The cashier asked if I was moving with my girlfriend. I was not moving to Chicago with a girlfriend and, as such, decided to say no. However, her question also implies that I would be in a relationship with a woman, evidenced by her not asking if I would move with a boyfriend, partner, or significant other. Her statement illustrates how heteronormativity manifests itself in discourse: not only was my gay identity invisible to her—an invisibility thereby marking me as straight—but it also would have required me to make my gay identity known by either saying or doing something indicative of same-sex desire.

However, she did not ask if I identified as gay or straight, only if I was moving with my girlfriend. Thus, by saying, "No, I am not moving with a girlfriend" while adding "I wouldn't have a girlfriend because I identify as gay," I worried that she might respond not only with disdain for gayness but also with "I didn't ask about your sexuality." I therefore decided to say only no. But similar to the previous encounter, I left the interaction feeling guilty, shameful, and dishonest.

Moving (and Staying) In

A male tenant moves into my apartment building. When we first meet, he asks what I do for a living.

"I'm in graduate school," I say. "I read and write and teach."

"What do you write about?" he asks.

Hesitantly, I respond with "I write about ways people talk about nature."

Guilt subsumes me: I am scared to say that I write about sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. I am not ready to come out to a person during our first meeting, and I assume that speaking of what I write about might mark me as gay.

But now, having said "I write about ways people talk about nature," I also worry about when to disclose. I'm sure I'll talk with him again. Do I tell him at a later time that I write about sexuality, gay identity, and the closet? "Why didn't you tell me initially?" he might ask. Even if he only thinks such a sentiment, he may perceive me as being shameful about my work and myself. The possibility exists. And what I think he thinks is just as important as what he thinks (Blumer 1969; Mead 1962; Laing 1969).

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Given that I write about sexuality, gay identity, and the closet, I recognize that talking about my writing can serve as an act of coming out. Even though numerous heterosexual-identified persons write about these topics, I recognize that a person who says she or he writes about these topics may be marked, initially, and evaluated, consequently, as a gay person—at least until the person proves her or his heterosexuality.

I recall advice I received from an interviewer for an academic job I did not get. "Say you write about 'sexuality,' not 'gay identity,'" he said. "I know you write about gay identity, and I am okay with it. But I also know that you made others participating in the job search uncomfortable—they found writing about gay identity inappropriate and immoral."

I remember feeling sad for making others uncomfortable, dishonest for thinking about masking my work as more general ("sexuality") than specific ("gay identity"), angry that others still consider gay identity inappropriate and immoral, and regret knowing that had I changed a few words I might have been offered the job.

While not vying for a job with the tenant, I worried about the consequences of coming out to him with my work, a stranger whose stance on same-sex desire I did not know. I did not want him to do anything to my apartment, to take my mail, or to damage my car. I did not want to hear gay slurs regularly or to receive "unwanted attention" from him and his friends (Gerber 1996:46). I also did not want to be physically harmed.

Furthermore, having said "I write about ways people talk about nature" (or "I write about sexuality"), I would tell a "lie of omission" (Brown-Smith 1998:29) should my writing topics emerge at a later time. The tenant may then hold me accountable not only for writing about topics that are potentially stigmatizing but also for telling a lie in our initial encounter. Regardless of whether my specific topics emerge, I hold myself accountable for our past interactional practices as well as those I might use in forthcoming encounters.[4]

ANALYZING EXPERIENCES OF PARADOX

I leave these accounting encounters torn between what to say and do. In all of these autoethnographic fragments I could have come out to these people but, as a result, may experience negative evaluation and rejection, hostility, and possibly violence. I did not know these people—particularly their views about gay identity—and by being open and honest I risked safety and protection (Rawlins 1983; Bochner 1984).

Coming out in such mundane interactions makes other relational dilemmas possible as well. I find it socially inappropriate to walk into a hair salon or fast-food restaurant and say "I am gay," or tell my new neighbor of my gayness immediately upon meeting. Being that some of these people assumed my opposite-sex desire, speaking about gay identity may "breach" (Garfinkel 1967) everyday (heteronormative) assumptions. Consequently, I may make others uncomfortable not only for making (gay) sexuality a topic of discussion but also for speaking about the (contextually stigmatized) identity. I may then be marked as awkward, selfish, and politically motivated, as wanting to advance the "gay agenda."

I could make sure to come out to these people in our next encounters—the next time I get a haircut, visit the restaurant, or see my neighbor—but then recognize that I may be considered manipulative for postponing disclosure or a liar for omitting information (Brown-Smith 1998). Even if I postpone disclosure or omit information to maintain safety, I may still be held accountable for these (intentional) acts should my gay identity emerge at a later time. Furthermore, the longer I wait to disclose, the longer I construct a history of postponement and omission, a history that for one-time relational encounters may not matter, but may for people to whom I will be exposed time and again.

I could avoid coming out by not saying or doing anything that might imply I am gay and, consequently, perpetuate the assumption of heterosexuality ascribed to me, but may then struggle with feelings of (in)authenticity and (in)sincerity (Waskul 2009). Authenticity is a subjective reference that "accounts for the degree to which a person" fulfills interactional "commitments" to self and others—commitments such as maintaining and preserving a relationship or avoiding relational tension and conflict (p. 58). Sincerity exists when a person communicates cognizant and contextually relevant information to another; insincerity exists when she or he intentionally conceals contextually relevant information or distorts information by saying something false and inaccurate. While sincerity and insincerity are often used to satisfy authenticity (i.e., fulfill self-other commitments), insincerity can mark a person as inauthentic (i.e., as not fulfilling self-other commitments) should acts of intentional concealment and distortion leak at a later time.

I leave these encounters feeling authentic for fulfilling coming-out commitments to myself by steering clear of danger, and commitments to others by not calling out their heteronormative assumptions or making them uncomfortable with my contextually taboo sexuality. But I feel inauthentic for not fulfilling coming-out commitments to myself: my concealing and distorting of information—my insincerity—makes me feel shameful and self-hating. I also feel inauthentic for not fulfilling my commitments to others: they might find me manipulative and politically irresponsible should they learn of my insincerity at a later time (which, as a result, might make for relational tension and conflict).

I also am not aware of research that advocates for *not* coming out; not disclosing is often framed as bad, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible, an act of silence that is an "assault" on my "civil rights" (Yoshino 2006). I hurt myself by not coming out and open myself to ridicule not only from myself but also from others for not being myself, with myself and with others.

In analyzing these encounters, I illustrate how I trap myself by Mead's (1962:69) "generalized other," particularly how I try to incorporate the "attitudes" of "other persons" into my conduct and how I try to "justify" my and others' actions (Scott and Lyman 1968). I trap myself by trying to discern the threshold of coming out—the threshold of needing and wanting to be open and honest with another while still being open and honest with myself. I risk safety and protection in coming out if the other fears, hates, or is disgusted by gay people. I risk being awkward, selfish, and politically motivated for coming out too soon, and feel guilty, shameful, and dishonest for coming out too late or not at all. I also risk being manipulative, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible for postponing disclosure and omitting information should my (invisible) identity emerge at a later time. I reside in what Laing (1969:124) calls an "untenable position," a position where my acts may be "stripped of their motives, intentions, and consequences," a position in which "compliance itself is not good enough" and "noncompliance is completely out of the question" (Watzlawick et al. 1974:71); I reside in paradox.

CONCLUSIONS: MANEUVERING PARADOX

Even though I consider myself comfortable with my gay identity, I leave many of my encounters feeling trapped in paradox, trapped in contradiction made possible by premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. For instance, I feel that many of my mundane interactions happen in heteronormative contexts, thus marking me, for others, as heterosexual. Consequently, in these interactions my gay identity is invisible; there is, therefore, a need to come out of the closet, to say or do something in order to indicate my same-sex desire. I feel that there is no end to coming out; I can never be out always and forever, as new interactions make for new times to come out, new evaluations about whether a time is right, new worries about how others will respond. I feel that coming out is necessary and important while recognizing that coming out—the revealing of a (contextually stigmatized) identity—can be dangerous. And I feel that in most every new interaction, I may be held accountable, by myself and others, for being manipulative, dishonest, self-hating, and politically irresponsible with whatever action I choose to take—for coming out too soon or not soon enough, for coming out most of the time, some of the time, or never at all.

In an attempt to better navigate paradox, I use tenets of symbolic interactionism to formulate strategies that I and others might use to negotiate contradictory premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet in, or by way of, mundane interaction—the space where paradox is manifest and reified. In particular, I focus on (1) developing an "interactional competence," (2) manipulating the metaphoric "front stage" and "backstage," and (3) reframing gay accountability.

Developing an Interactional Competence

One way a gay person can navigate paradox is by developing an interactional competence of gay identity. Such competence happens when (not) coming out is not (personally) considered a problem, when the reason for (not) doing so involves "choice and not terror, not intimidation, not victimization, nor any of the range of attitudes that can fall under the umbrella effect of oppression" (Delany 1996:25). A gay person can achieve interactional competence in two ways.

First, Mead (1962:69) argues that an intelligent social actor is able to incorporate the "attitudes" of "other persons" into her or his own conduct. For a person who identifies as gay, this means incorporating the attitudes of other persons into her or his own conduct, particularly the paradoxical premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. For instance, when a person knows of the exhaustive need to not *and* always come out, embraces the idea that she or he may be considered as having an agenda the shorter or longer that omission happens and disclosure is postponed, then the person can better prepare for an ascription of being awkward, politically motivated, and selfish; guilty, shameful, and dishonest; manipulative, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible. She or he adjusts to possible conduct of the other *before*

encountering the other, adopts a "different act" before the other acts (p. 43). By internalizing the idea that coming out does not end, a gay person works to make peace with an identity, a peace in knowing that a definitive state of relational certainty can never be achieved, regardless of what she or he says or does.

Second, a person who identifies as gay can learn how to "metacommunicate" about interactional paradox. Metacommunication is "communication about communication" (Bateson 2000:215; Watzlawick et al. 1967) and happens when a person talks about implicit premises of interaction. Metacommunication is important because it can clarify and, consequently, lessen the relational workings of the premises. However, when a person does not have the language to reflect on such hidden, constitutive premises, metacommunication is difficult.

Metacommunicating about gay identity means discussing, vigilantly, the premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. In so doing, these premises and, consequently, their paradoxes can come to possess less of a relational impact. This project embraces such an assumption: by metacommunicating about premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet I hope to help facilitate understanding of how paradox can happen in terms of these premises and thus help dilute how paradox informs, and emerges from, interaction.

Manipulating the Front Stage

The second way a person can negotiate paradox is by engaging in "reflexive bodywork" (Schrock and Boyd 2006:54) by manipulating the "front stage" and "backstage" characteristics of interaction (Goffman 1959). The front stage comprises context, audiences, and anything a person sensually emits: sight (such as physical appearance), smell, sound (such as talk), touch, and, in an intimate encounter, taste. Contrarily, the backstage is composed of information often unknown to or inaccessible by audiences: a person's private thoughts, intentions, and strategies for accomplishing particular tasks.

A person who identifies as gay can manipulate paradoxical premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet by making the premises known in unobtrusive, and unapologetic ways; she or he can use front stage assumptions of sexuality while trying to appear as though she or he does not possess backstage intentions. Consider, for instance, my experience in the checkout line of a grocery store:

> A male customer ahead of me pays, grabs his bags, and walks away from the grocery bagger and the cashier. Upon his departure but out of hearing range, I hear the cashier tell the bagger that the customer "was a flaming faggot." Both laugh as I move forward in the line.
>
> The cashier begins to scan my groceries while the bagger bags. Both still laugh about the cashier's flaming faggot remark and neither pay much attention to me.
>
> The casher soon says what I owe. While I usually pay for my groceries with a credit card, I decide, this time, to use a check, a check that has "Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equal Rights" printed above the signature line. My move to pay by check will, I hope, force the cashier to ask for my ID in order to verify the check's signature and therefore possibly see the printed text.
>
> "May I see your ID?" he asks.
>
> "Sure," I respond as I innocently retrieve my wallet. I give him the ID. He looks at its signature and then compares it to the check. It is here where he pauses. I know that he's reading the print above the signature line, and I know that he begins to know that I know he laughed at the flaming faggot that passed through the checkout line before me.
>
> "Uh . . . thank you," he says, followed by, "I'm sorry for what I said about that man."
>
> "No problem," I respond. "Thanks for your help."

Based on his remark, I assumed the cashier was not a "flaming faggot." I also assumed that the cashier didn't think I was one—I don't think he would have made the remark if he did, particularly because he didn't say flaming faggot in the presence of the man he called flaming. Unsure of how to approach the remark, I tried to conceive of a way to make my (invisible) gay identity unobtrusively and unapologetically known or, had I not identified as gay, to find a way to mark myself unobtrusively and unapologetically as a gay ally (Adams and Holman Jones 2008). In the space of interaction, I used my assumptions of the cashier's identity and my assumptions of his assumptions about my identity to negotiate paradox as well as to make a politically charged, unobtrusive point.

What I am calling for is an intentional-but-unobtrusive manipulation of premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet in everyday interaction, a call that uses physical bodies to create dissonance and, consequently, social change (see Faber 2002; Muñoz 1999; Phelan 1993), a "defiant strategy" (Marvasti 2006) that allows a person to purposefully "leak" the backstage (Schrock and Boyd 2006:58). For a person who identifies as gay, this means coming out while coming across as "innocently involved" in interaction (Goffman 1969:88), taking a heightened awareness, a vigilant approach, to coming out in mundane encounters without seeming to do so.

A person can intentionally-but-unobtrusively manipulate premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet in a few ways. A person can embrace contradictory assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality, for example, a man can engage in acts of hypermasculinity while innocently making his gay identity known; in so doing, he rubs against the assumption that a masculine man cannot be gay (see Adams and Holman Jones 2008; Butler 1999; Escoffier 2003; Frank 1993; Halberstam 2005; Meyer 1995; Sedgwick 1993; Walker 1993). A person can wear articles of clothing that do not necessarily say "I am gay" but rather possess an ambiguous symbol that may motivate someone to ask about the symbol, for example, wearing a symbol affiliated with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer organization. A person can make an intentional-but-seemingly-innocent comment about an attractive person of the same sex, for example, a woman saying to a friend "I find Jodie Foster attractive" while making sure the comment is loud enough for others to hear. When a gay person comes out in an intentional-but-unobtrusive, unapologetic way, she or he may be less accountable for being awkward, politically motivated, and selfish, guilty, shameful, and dishonest, manipulative, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible.

Reframing Gay Accountability

While I do not think all gay persons experience paradox in the ways I describe, and while a gay person may not feel as though the premises apply to her or his experience, I consider paradox and the premises relational phenomena: *others* may hold a gay person accountable for experiencing them at various times, in various places. As long as these premises exist—as long as they are talked about, believed in, researched—a gay person always has the potential, in interaction, to be held accountable for them and, consequently, always has the potential to experience paradox. Thus, even though I use my experience to illustrate paradox stemming from the premises, my discussion applies to anyone who believes in or interacts with a person who believes in the premises.

Consequently, I find it important for persons of all sexualities to acknowledge—and be held accountable for—the interactional paradoxes a gay person can experience in terms of the premises of sexuality, gay identity, and the closet. I find it ignorant to say that a gay person does not risk safety in coming out to others; unfortunate for a gay person to feel guilty, shameful, and dishonest for not coming out; and naive to consider a gay person awkward, selfish, and politically motivated for coming out too early or manipulative, unhealthy, and politically irresponsible for coming out too late or not at all. When any of these assessments are made of a gay person, then I believe we must reflexively assess ourselves, recognizing that we may be holding a gay person to contradictory standards.

If any action a gay person takes with coming out has the potential to be deemed "illegitimate" and "unreasonable" (Scott and Lyman 1968), then a different kind of accounting must exist for a person whose cultural identity—and premises of this identity—makes conflict; for a gay person, there must be room, in interaction, for positive evaluations of (not) coming out, for coming out too soon or not soon enough. I do not believe we should exempt gay people from accountability, just from negative evaluations made solely on whether, and how, coming out happens.

Acknowledgments: I thank the anonymous reviewers for their assistance with this manuscript. I also thank Art Bochner, Carolyn Ellis, Gerardo Moreno, and Dennis Waskul for their faith in, feedback on, and support for me and my work.

NOTES

1. I do not believe all gay persons consider themselves stigmatized; as Marvasti (2006:528) observes, stigmatizing only happens "under a specific set of social rules and social conditions" (see Goffman 1963).
2. Some of the authors I mention here (e.g., Chee 2006; Delany 1996; McLean 2007; Phellas 2005; Plummer 1995; Rasmussen 2004; Rust 1993) do not conceive of, or advocate for, coming out as a linear, able-to-be-completed process. Rather, they write against research that conceives of coming out in such a finite way. I thank the reviewer who brought this to my attention.
3. These observations resemble Du Bois's (1897) concept of "double-consciousness," but I want to make some distinctions between Du Bois's formulation and my project. First, Du Bois defines double-consciousness as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 194). While I agree that a person who identifies as gay may look at herself or himself through these "generalized other" premises, I do not believe that a gay person is always looked on, or looks at herself or himself, with contempt or pity; like stigma, the meaning of contempt and pity vary with context (Goffman 1963; Marvasti 2006). For a gay person, contempt and pity exist when the person is viewed, by herself or himself as well as others, as sinful, sick, and in need of correction, but contempt and pity do not necessarily exist when a person is held accountable for—and consequently evaluated because of—how and when and if she or he came out.
   Second, Du Bois (1897) says that double-consciousness encourages a person to live with a contradictory "double self"; in Du Bois's situation, the contradiction was being a "Negro" *and* an "American" (p. 195). In this project, I do not believe a gay person struggles with a double self, that is, with two contradictory identities. Sexuality, gay identity, and the closet are constituted by various contradictory premises, not necessarily two, and I do not see a contradiction with what a gay person can and cannot be. For instance, a person can be gay *and* healthy, but may also be held accountable for being evasive, manipulative, and dishonest; a person can be gay *and* self-hating, but may be held accountable for being a good gay role model.
4. While I describe my experience with masking sexuality, gay identity, and the closet in mundane interaction, people who study other potentially taboo topics may encounter a similar dilemma. If a research topic might be taboo, a researcher may worry about coming forth with specific information about the research; she or he may say "I study communication" rather than "I study sex" out of self-protection. However, what makes the masking of gay-themed research unique for a gay person is that assessments of the person's health and sense of worth may be at stake if disclosure of her or his research does not happen. For instance, a man who masks his sex research with "I study communication" may not necessarily be considered unhealthy, immature, or politically irresponsible because of such masking; while others may disparage the man for the potentially taboo topic of study, I do not think others would consider the man a pervert and, consequently, disparage him for being immoral. However, a man who masks his identity by masking his work—for example, saying "I write about ways people talk about nature" instead of "I write about sexuality, gay identity, and the closet" out of fear that the latter statement may mark him as gay—may be considered, by others, unhealthy for being self-hating, immature for being unable to come out, or politically irresponsible for being a bad gay role model; I am not aware of research that advocates for *not* coming out or research that frames not coming out just as good as disclosing a gay identity.

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Students Who Strip: The Benefits of Alternate Identities for Managing Stigma

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We apply interactionist theories that highlight the contextual nature of stigma and the relational quality of stigmatization to the case of college students who work as topless dancers. We explore how the "toll of stripping" might be mediated by having an alternate, positive identity like "student." Our analysis demonstrates that students who strip are distinctive from other strippers in important ways that stem from their salient, positive identity as students. Although they often feel as if they live a "double life" because they hide their occupation from family and friends, they benefit from sharing their student goals and ambitions with club customers. "Student" is a socially acceptable identity to share in routine social interactions and helps student strippers frame dancing as a transient occupation, offering them an opportunity to maintain a positive sense of self while buffering them from some of the negative effects of stripping.
Keywords: stigma, sex work, stripping, interaction, deviance

Goffman's treatise *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963) fundamentally transformed how scholars conceptualize and study deviance, marginality, and stigma. In our view, one of the most promising lines of inquiry that continues to thrive today is the contextual or situational nature of stigma (Crocker 1999; Crocker and Quinn 2001) and a focus on the relational quality of the stigmatizing process (Jones et al. 1984). This research elucidates the power that individuals have over their own and others' perceptions of stigmatizing or deviant traits, and helps explain the contradictory effects of stigma on self-esteem (Crocker and Quinn 2001). Despite sociology's strengths in attending to contexts, situations, and relationships, the bulk of the research exploring these processes has largely been conducted

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