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# The Corporate Closet Managing Gay Identity on the Job

James D. Woods

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# The Corporate Closet Managing Gay Identity on the Job

## **Abstract**

Though we tend to think of organizations in asexual terms, a certain model of heterosexuality pervades most white-collar workplaces. Heterosexual behavior and values are disguised by official ideologies that require professionals to be "asexual" at work, in accordance with prevailing beliefs about privacy, professionalism, etiquette, intimacy between co-workers, and the irrelevance of sexuality to work. The hegemony of this model ensures that heterosexuality is rendered invisible, while homosexuality is made to seem disruptive, conspicuous, and unprofessional.

Working within these environments, gay professionals adopt one of three strategies in their management of sexual identity. Some men "counterfeit" a heterosexual identity through the manipulation of outward appearances. Others "integrate" an identity by minimizing, normalizing, politicizing or dignifying their sexuality in the workplace. Still another group tries to "avoid" a sexual identity altogether by verbally or situationally dodging sexual displays. Some men use more than one of these strategies, which requires them to segregate their audiences, carefully monitoring the different approach used with each.

The choice of strategy is influenced by several factors. Men who counterfeit an identity usually do so to evade the stigma of being gay, but feel socially invisible, anxious, and dishonest. Avoidance strategies protect the gay professional from social situations that might expose or discredit him, but deny him social opportunities and relationships he might enjoy. Finally, men using integration strategies pay for their candor by exposing themselves to prejudice, intensified performance pressures, and the double-edged sword of tokenism. The men's choice of strategy was also influenced by their co-workers' attitudes towards homosexuality, by their perceived economic vulnerability, and by the availability of role models.

The study draws on interviews with 70 men in five U.S. cities. They range in age from 22 to 64 and represent a wide range of professional, white-collar organizations.

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THE CORPORATE CLOSET  
MANAGING GAY IDENTITY ON THE JOB

James D. Woods

A Dissertation

in

Communications

Presented to the Faculty of the Annenberg School for  
Communication, University of Pennsylvania, in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1992



Supervisor of dissertation



Graduate group chairperson

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James D. Woods

1992

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the past two years, more than 100 gay men were kind enough to spend a few hours with me: a stranger toting a tape recorder and notepad, who took a seat in their living rooms and kitchens, and promptly began asking personal questions.

"What kind of work do you do?" "Do you consider yourself gay or bisexual?"

"Why did, or didn't, you come out at work?"

To protect their anonymity, these men have been cloaked in pseudonyms, which means I'm unable to thank them by name. In return for their candor, hospitality and trust, I can offer only my sincere gratitude, and the vague assurance that, in some small way, this report may help the cause. I hope that they will find my insights helpful, my criticisms fair, and my note-taking at least reasonably accurate. No doubt that won't always be the case.

Below, I've written about the importance of mentors, about the importance of having footsteps to follow. I've been fortunate, over the past several years, to work with many people who were generous with their time and support.

The report took shape under the supervision of a large and supportive committee, including Professors Carolyn Marvin, Charles Wright and Paul Messaris at the Annenberg School for Communication, and Professor Vicky Smith in the Sociology Department at the University of Pennsylvania. For their comments and encouragement, I'm sincerely grateful. I also received valuable input from friends and colleagues who used their red pencils on early drafts of the manuscript: George Custen, Jay Lucas, Ann Miller, Leslie Mitchner, Nancy Morris, and Charlotte Sheedy.

My warmest thanks go to Professor Larry Gross, my committee chairman, teacher, advocate, and leaver of footsteps. Thank you, Larry, for your support and generosity, and for letting me borrow all those books. And most of all, for not frowning when I came into your office three years ago with an illegible, hand-written proposal bearing the title, *The Corporate Closet*.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, who simultaneously hoped, wondered, and feared that I would actually get this thing written. Now you know, once and for all, how I spent all that money.

## ABSTRACT

### THE CORPORATE CLOSET MANAGING GAY IDENTITY ON THE JOB

James D. Woods

Larry Gross

Though we tend to think of organizations in asexual terms, a certain model of heterosexuality pervades most white-collar workplaces. Heterosexual behavior and values are disguised by official ideologies that require professionals to be "asexual" at work, in accordance with prevailing beliefs about privacy, professionalism, etiquette, intimacy between co-workers, and the irrelevance of sexuality to work. The hegemony of this model ensures that heterosexuality is rendered invisible, while homosexuality is made to seem disruptive, conspicuous, and unprofessional.

Working within these environments, gay professionals adopt one of three strategies in their management of sexual identity. Some men "counterfeit" a heterosexual identity through the manipulation of outward appearances. Others "integrate" an identity by minimizing, normalizing, politicizing or dignifying their sexuality in the workplace. Still another group tries to "avoid" a sexual identity altogether by verbally or situationally dodging sexual displays. Some men use more than one of these strategies, which requires them to segregate their audiences, carefully monitoring the different approach used with each.

The choice of strategy is influenced by several factors. Men who counterfeit an identity usually do so to evade the stigma of being gay, but feel socially invisible, anxious, and dishonest. Avoidance strategies protect the gay professional from social situations that might expose or discredit him, but deny him social opportunities and relationships he might enjoy. Finally, men using integration strategies pay for their candor by exposing themselves to prejudice, intensified

performance pressures, and the double-edged sword of tokenism. The men's choice of strategy was also influenced by their co-workers' attitudes towards homosexuality, by their perceived economic vulnerability, and by the availability of role models.

The study draws on interviews with 70 men in five U.S. cities. They range in age from 22 to 64 and represent a wide range of professional, white-collar organizations.



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## INTRODUCTION

*There is no one so bound to his own face that he does not cherish the hope of presenting another to the world.*

-- Antonio Machado, *Juan de Mairena* (1943)

Every day, millions of gay men take their stations at the desks and telephones from which American business is run.<sup>1</sup> They don their figurative white collars -- hiding private feelings beneath the public garb of professionalism -- and assume their roles as doctors and lawyers, teachers and journalists, accountants and managers. They go to work.

Though we are assumed to make up some 10% of the population, there is no reliable way to estimate the number of gay men in the professional workforce.<sup>2</sup> Professions like design, advertising, travel, and arts management are assumed to include a large proportion of gay men, and popular lore also has us clustered in the world's flower shops, hair salons and food emporia. In other professions, for whatever reason, we seem virtually invisible.

The notion that gay men are scarce in conservative, traditional, non-artistic occupations is one of our culture's more persistent myths. "Certain more 'creative' fields such as advertising and publishing have traditionally had a higher incidence of homosexuality," wrote Richard Zoglin in "The Homosexual Executive", when compared to "the most conservative segments of the business community" like insurance, banking and the utilities (1974:69). Writing in *Commentary*, Midge

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "gay" for several reasons. First, and most importantly, it was the term my participants preferred when describing themselves. Second, though its etymology is unclear (see Martin, 1979:47, n. 54), "gay" connotes a positive social identity, a community and a culture. By contrast, "homosexual" originated as a term of nineteenth-century medicine, and seems to carry a host of assumptions from that period. As Pronger (1990) notes, "Gay liberation, trying to wrest homosexuality and therefore the lives of homosexual men from the notion of sickness and the control of medicine, preferred the word "gay" because it did not have clinical associations" (1990:7n; see also Riordan, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty in making such estimations begins with the vagaries of the category itself (see my discussion of sampling in Chapter 1). Using the familiar data collected by Kinsey and his associates, researchers continue to assume that some 10% of the male population engage primarily in homosexual sex.

Decter drew a similar conclusion. "I do not suppose, but would not be certain," she begins, "that homosexuals have established much of a presence in basic industry or government service or in such classic professions as doctoring and lawyering, but then for anyone acquainted with them as a group, the thought suggests itself that few of them have ever made much effort in these directions" (1980:40).

Even among gay professionals, one finds some version of the myth. A gay insurance agent complained to me that "there are absolutely no other gay people in the insurance industry," while an executive at Ford told me "there aren't too many gays in my business." A New Jersey dentist felt that homosexuality was "real uncommon" in his line of work. "It's just one of those professions in which you don't see it that often. You see a lot more gay doctors."

Like most myths, the notion of the "gay industry" sprang from a seed of truth: gay men *are* invisible in many professions. Gay dentists and automotive executives aren't easy to find. Nor are gay tax auditors or bond traders. An informal poll suggests that none of my friends knows a gay judge or civil engineer.

The problem is that the myth mistakes invisibility for rarity. The "most conservative segments" may well be saturated with gay professionals who simply keep a lower profile than men in so-called "creative" fields. The arts, advertising, and travel may encourage greater visibility among gay practitioners, not greater concentrations of them. If this is the case, our apparent absence in some fields is explained not by an uneven distribution of gay people, but by the different strategies we use when revealing our gayness to others. Given the ease with which appearances can be (and are) manipulated, they are almost certainly deceptive.

Until someone manages to count us up in a systematic way -- which is highly unlikely, under the circumstances -- we must treat the myth of the gay company or gay industry with suspicion. There is ample evidence, in fact, that the true distribution of gay professionals, if known, would surprise us. According to a survey of 4,000 lesbians and gay men conducted by Overlooked Opinions, a Chicago market research firm, more homosexuals work in science and engineering than in social services, 40% more are employed in finance and insurance than in entertainment and the arts, and ten times as many work in computers as in fashion.

"I used to think there were no gay stock brokers," a friend recalls. "Then I got my first job in a brokerage, and little by little they came out of the woodwork. Now I wonder why I didn't see it in the first place."

My own experience suggests the same: though we have evolved vastly different means of managing our visibility, even to each other, gay professionals can be found in every conceivable line of work. True, there are industries or positions that seem to be populated entirely by heterosexuals; professional athletics, primary education and the military prefer to believe this about themselves, as do some branches of the clergy. Yet I doubt there are *any* in which gays are altogether absent. And certainly anyone who claims there are few gay people in medicine, banking, insurance, or any other "conservative segment" has never been in a hospital, bank, or insurance office. Either that, or they don't know a homosexual when they see one -- a point to which we shall return.

We do know, however, that large organizations dominate economic life and are the chief providers of white-collar jobs. Nearly 25 percent of the total nonagricultural labor force work for some level of local, state or federal government, and another 23 percent hold management positions in businesses with at least 500 people on the payroll. To that half of the labor force, we should also add organizations like private universities, hospitals, churches and charities that are not usually called "businesses" but are often run like them.

At the same time, most of the jobs within these organizations are filled by "white collar" workers: professional and technical staffers, salaried administrators and managers, sales and clerical workers that together made up 56% percent of employed civilians in 1988.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the exact number of gay people in such settings -- and it may be different for men than for women, given our unequal distribution in many professions -- we can safely assume that millions of gay men earn a living in white-collar organizations.

If this is so, it is certainly despite the antagonism such organizations have traditionally shown them. The evidence of employment discrimination is so

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Labor statistic. *Handbook of Labor Statistics*, August, 1989, p. 78.

abundant that it scarcely needs repeating. In fact, a staple of existing research on lesbian and gay workers is the documentation of discriminatory hiring, promotion, and compensation practices (see Figure 1). Scanning these studies, one finds that the proportion of gay men who believe they've experienced some form of job discrimination hovers around 30% (the numbers are slightly higher for women). In a secondary analysis of 4 studies conducted between 1971 and 1978, for example, Levine (1979) estimates that "29 percent of the gay male population have had their careers negatively influenced by homosexuality and 17 percent have lost or have been denied employment on account of their sexual orientation" (p. 160). Among the 70 men in my own sample, 5 (or 7%) were convinced that they had lost a prior job due to the prejudice of a boss or client. Another 10 (14%) feared that they *would* be fired or encouraged to resign if their secret were known. And virtually all thought their sexuality had, at some point, cost them a promotion, a raise, or a more comfortable and intimate relationship with a potential mentor.

Discrimination is difficult to define and measure, however, which encourages caution in the use of these numbers. In the first place, because many lesbians and gay men disguise themselves precisely to *avoid* such discrimination, there is no way to know how high these levels would soar if homosexuals were more identifiable targets.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, because there is no way to draw a representative sample of a population that cannot be clearly identified or defined, survey researchers have typically turned to the self-selected samples they found in gay rights organizations, gay bars, or on gay mailing lists.<sup>5</sup> Nor would a representative sample necessarily reveal the actual incidence, if only because actual discrimination is not always recognized as such. As Harry and Devall (1978) observe:

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<sup>4</sup> This same argument has been advanced to explain the increased levels of anti-gay violence in recent years. As lesbians and gay men become more visible, we are more likely to bear the full force of homophobia.

<sup>5</sup> Noting the limitations of the existing research, Levine anticipates the objections of those who might say that estimates are too low to substantiate the existence of job discrimination. "The figures reveal systematic, widespread employment discrimination," according to Levine, and "we must keep in mind that the estimates are probably conservative. The real figures are likely to be higher" (p. 160).



## EMPLOYMENT DISCRIMINATION

Survey research

	Location	Sample	Lifetime rate of discrimination
Gross (1988)	Philadelphia	291 ♂	25%
		146 ♀	19%
	Pennsylvania	170 ♂	28%
		114 ♀	25%
Blumstein & Schwartz (1983)	National	1887 ♂	27%
		1514 ♀	32%
Bell & Weinberg (1978)	San Francisco	686 ♂	26%
Weinberg & Williams (1974)	New York & San Francisco	1,057 ♂	30%
Saghir & Robins (1973)	Chicago & San Francisco	89 ♂	32%
Williams & Weinberg (1971)	New York & San Francisco	63 ♂	29%

NOTE: The studies define employment discrimination in different ways. Comparisons should be made with caution.

FIGURE 1

Many male homosexuals may be discriminated against without their ever having known about it. Yet they are not hired and not promoted because of their sexual preference. The reason officially given usually presents the appearance of being legitimate, for example, "lack of experience," "overqualified," "job already filled," "wouldn't fit in." Many administrators prefer to avoid the somewhat embarrassing situation of directly or publicly denying jobs to persons on the basis of sexual orientation. Other reasons for denial are preferred (p. 161).

Because they are rarely privy to an employer's motives, lesbians and gay men often find it difficult to ascertain whether homophobia did in fact play some role in the

loss of a job or promotion.<sup>6</sup> In theory, only a study of employers, not employees, would reveal the true extent of employment discrimination.

However common they in fact are, discriminatory hiring and firing practices are no more than the tip of an iceberg. For even when these more blatant forms of bias are eliminated, one can identify a process by which traditional white-collar organizations exclude gay people in other, more subtle ways. In prejudicial compensation practices, in the enforced invisibility and "symbolic annihilation" of gay employees, in the social reinforcement of heterosexual mating rituals, in anti-gay commentary that circulates through official and unofficial company channels, even in the gendered nature of bureaucratic organization itself, a certain model of heterosexuality is displayed and rewarded. The traditional white-collar organization can appropriately be called "heterosexist" in the sense that it structurally and ideologically promotes a particular model of heterosexuality, while subordinating, penalizing, or demanding the invisibility of its alternatives.<sup>7</sup>

The roots of organizational heterosexism are deep and tangled. Our prevailing model of "professional" behavior is the product of legal, medical and religious discourse, Western notions about the distinction between public and private behavior, and the ideology of rational bureaucratic organization. Long before the late Nineteenth Century, the period to which historians date both the modern "homosexual" and the modern, bureaucratic business, one can identify the principle frameworks with which our culture continues to define and derogate same-sex erotic activities. The oldest of these are religious and criminal discourses, the

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<sup>6</sup> The same point has been made about the designation of "hate crimes", which require authorities to make judgments about an alleged criminal's motives.

<sup>7</sup> As Neisen (1990) has defined it, heterosexism operates in many ways and at many levels. "Heterosexism manifests itself in blatant discrimination against gays and lesbians as well as in more subtle forms of exclusion or lack of acknowledgement. Heterosexism is alive when individuals refuse to rent to gays or lesbians, when the military discharges someone for homosexual behavior or mere suspicion of being homosexual, and when governments prohibit gays and lesbians from marrying legally. Heterosexism also works in more subtle ways, as when television programs and advertisements show only heterosexual couples, when mainstream media underreport gay and lesbian events like the 1987 National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights, and when magazine articles and obituaries fail to acknowledge the life partners of gay men and lesbians" (p. 36). Each of these examples has an organizational equivalent.

various strands of which date back for millennia, and in the Twentieth Century their condemnations were joined by the scientific voices of medicine, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis. Likewise, in the pre-industrial agrarian family unit, we find the roots of a concept of public space that accommodates sexuality only in limited, masked or mediated forms, pushing it -- especially in its more deviant forms -- into the dark corners reserved for "private" or "personal" activities. Finally, with industrialization and the rise of large bureaucracies in America and Western Europe, came principles of "rational" organization and the prohibition of intimacy between co-workers, especially between men.

Centuries later, most white-collar organizations are hostile places for lesbian and gay professionals. Whether viewed as something sinful, criminal, pathological, private, or organizationally dysfunctional, homosexuality is at odds with our prevailing vision of the "organization man." To "come out" in such settings is to identify oneself as a member of a culturally stigmatized and devalued group.

### **Learning to manage**

Yet millions of gay men build careers within such organizations, and have devised techniques for managing their sexuality on the job. Organizational heterosexism necessitates that they make a choice, that they adopt one or more strategies for managing their sexual identity at work.

For many, going to work means going under cover, hiding behind a mask of heterosexuality. These men invent girlfriends, dates, and wives, or at least claim to be looking for them. They play up "masculine" traits, and are careful to hide interests or mannerisms that might give them away. Sometimes, they share a homophobic chuckle with co-workers. And while they are protected by a counterfeit heterosexual identity, they often pay for their safety with the uneasy feeling that they might be exposed, that they're being dishonest, or that no one really knows who they are.

Others try to manage by avoiding the issue altogether. They steer clear of conversations, relationships, or situations in which their sexuality might be questioned. Ask them about their personal lives, and they'll tell you about a movie they saw, about how busy they are at work, or about the weather. Or they'll tell

you that it's unprofessional to talk about such "personal" matters in the office. These are men with a "strictly business" reputation, and they pay for their secrecy by feeling detached and distant. They don't want to fabricate a heterosexual identity, but nor do they want to "come out." They hope nobody will make it an issue.

Then there are others, a growing number, who reveal their sexuality at work. Secrecy is no longer a concern for these men, but the need to manage information is often replaced by the need to manage stigma. They wonder if being gay has hurt their chances of promotion, and try to compensate by working longer and harder. Some find themselves used as tokens, treated as if gayness were their sole defining trait. Because they rarely have gay footsteps to follow, they struggle to find comfortable and professional ways of relating to non-gay peers, wondering what is appropriate, worrying that they've gone too far.

Each of these strategies brings its own particular penalties and payoffs, and none is a perfect solution for all men, nor for all situations. For the gay professional, the choice involves a complex set of questions -- to tell or not to tell, and in each case, to whom, how, when, where, and with what consequences -- that are central to our navigation of the world.

### **My own story**

In the following chapters, I've tried to describe the process by which gay professionals make these decisions about self-disclosure at work, drawing on the stories and recollections of others. First, however, I want to share one of my own. A particular scene from my past continues to stand out, to shape my entire recollection of a particular company: an anxious, unforgettable day I spent some seven years ago.

The story begins several months before the day in question, when the woman in personnel told me I could relax. I had the job, she said, and my flood of questions would be answered in time. "The job" was an entry-level position with a Manhattan advertising agency, a company famous for its beer, burger and soft drink commercials. Fresh out of college, with a new suit and haircut, I accepted it on the spot. "What time do people usually come to work?" "Do most people

work on the weekends?" "Where do I pick up my paycheck?" The woman in personnel had heard these questions before. "It'll all fall into place when you start," she told me. And she was right, of course. That first day *did* teach me a lot about advertising, about this particular company, and about the corporate world in general. Years later, I continue to learn from it.

On July 8, 1985, a few minutes before nine, I met my boss in the lobby. She whisked me into a grey office and closed the door. We exchanged a few pleasantries, and she explained that I would be working on the men's razor account, "which we thought would be perfect for a young man like you." But first there was something we had to discuss. "Before I introduce you to anyone else, we should decide what you're going to be called." My nickname was "Trey," and I had been certain to include it on my resume. It was a family name, I told her, and I had never really been called anything else. She smiled and crossed her arms. "Well, it's your decision, but you might want to reconsider. It's important that people take you seriously." No one had ever complained about my nickname before, but I quickly consented to "Jim". "That's probably a good idea," she explained, opening the office door. "It sounds a bit more masculine."

My boss escorted me around the agency, introducing me to some of the people I needed to know. I met Karen, who had started work the week before. She seemed as nervous as I was, and we quickly made plans to have lunch so that she could share her "vast experience" with me. (My boss told me, later that day, that Karen was off limits. "I know what you're thinking," she said, "but intrafucking is strictly against the rules.") I met some of the other people in account management and we exchanged a few vital statistics. I asked how long they had been at the agency, what accounts they worked on, how they liked New York. They wanted to know where I'd gone to college, and if I was married or "otherwise involved." When I assured them I wasn't, one of the men told me about the weekly "singles night" at the cocktail lounge on the second floor. "I'll be there," I said.

Finally, I met the head of television production, an older man named Don. He reminded me of my grandfather, with his wispy white hair and Southern accent, and I liked him at once. Don was the first person all morning who didn't make me nervous, who didn't ask the usual questions about girlfriends, wives and kids. As

we left Don's office, I remarked that "he seemed like a nice guy." My boss was amused. "I'm sure he thinks *you're* nice, too." Don had been with the company for years, she told me, and was an important person to know, "especially if you want to have a homosexual affair." She caught my eye, and we shared a chuckle.

Shortly after lunch, I was taken to a tiny screening room, where my boss had arranged for me to see a reel of ads for other brands of men's razors. She also wanted me to see the outgoing campaign for our brand, which featured clean-shaven young men laughing and playing, having a great time in cars, on beaches, at basketball games. The new campaign, which was scheduled to air in a few weeks, featured rock music and a college dormitory setting. The old stuff, she told me, was "really faggy."

In short, Monday was a typical day at the office. I left work thinking that nothing extraordinary had happened. It didn't cross my mind, not even for a moment, that there was anything hostile about the reception I had been given. On the contrary, it all seemed quite ordinary.

Looking back, though, I realize how much I learned that Monday. I've come to recognize the countless ways I was told -- formally and informally, in word and deed -- that homosexuality was unwelcome in this organization. Like the other gay employees I came to know, I sensed the values implicit in social invitations for "you and a girlfriend", in the occasional joke about who was or wasn't a queer, even in the seductive advertisements, depicting heterosexual romance and love, that I helped produce. I learned the rules about dating: "homosexual flings" and heterosexual "intrafucking" were forbidden, even as it was assumed that *of course* I would have an interest in the latter. I learned that there were other people like me in the company, *single* people who gathered on Fridays in the hope of solving that particular problem. Finally, I learned that "fagginess" was undesirable in any form: in other people, in nicknames, and in product advertising.

My response was to adopt what I call a "counterfeiting" strategy. I went to the company's singles night and spoke vaguely about past girlfriends. I was conspicuous about my friendships with women. I told (or at least laughed at) the right jokes. A few months later, Don began to complain of a mysterious ailment, and ultimately wound up in the hospital. When someone commented that "he's a

faggot, so it's probably AIDS," I bit my tongue. Don ultimately died, but in the weeks that followed I was careful not to show too much interest in him, not even to ask what had killed him. In short, I claimed an identity as a heterosexual man, the identity that was expected and rewarded in my organization.

Like my gay co-workers, whom I gradually met through one another, I remember the attention I paid to my presentation of self, to the people with whom I was seen, to nuances of appearance and gesture, and to the information about my personal life that circulated through the hallways. I left the company after a year, but when I speak to these men today, I am struck by the amount of energy they invest in the management of sexual identity.

### **The study**

With these experiences behind me, I set out to study the sexual culture of the white-collar organization in a more systematic way. Between April, 1990, and February, 1991, I collaborated with Jay Lucas, a Philadelphia-based management consultant, in locating and interviewing 70 gay professionals who agreed to tell us about their lives and careers.

The men themselves were drawn from a variety of organizations, and range in age from 22 to 64. They inhabit diverse geographic and cultural settings, including San Francisco, Houston, Washington, Philadelphia, New York, and their outlying suburban areas. As intended, they also represent a wide range of strategies for the management of sexual identity. This database, which is described in Chapter 1, is the empirical basis of my report.

These men spend more than half of their waking lives in the banks, law firms, hospitals, high schools, and travel agencies that pay their salaries. The first part of my report explores these organizations themselves, and the rules they establish with regard to sexuality. Drawing on the recollections of the men in my sample, I've tried to answer several general questions: *What are the rules and ideologies that govern the expression of sexuality in white-collar organizations? How are these norms communicated throughout the organization? In what ways do they vary between and within sites?*

Part two describes the three basic strategies gay men use to manage sexual identity, and attempts to answer several questions: *What personal and situational factors constrain strategic choice? What are the key payoffs and penalties of using any particular strategy?*

Finally, part three moves backstage, and explores the mechanics of choosing and executing a particular strategy or combination of strategies. *How do gay men choose a particular strategy? What role do other gay people play in the execution of these strategies? And what are the consequences of these choices for these men's careers?*

My goal in these three sections has been to describe the sexual culture of professional, white-collar organizations, and to document, at a particular point in time, the strategies gay men use to navigate them. In the coming years, as the workplace emerges as an important frontier of gay activism, it is vital that we understand the reasons it has often been unfriendly to lesbians and gay men. By explicating the myriad ways in which these organizations can be heterosexist, I've attempted to go beyond early studies of employment discrimination and lay the groundwork for a more sophisticated critique of their culture -- but this puts me ahead of my argument.



## CHAPTER ONE

### SEXUALITY AS A MANAGED STATUS

The gay professional finds himself in a problematic situation. Perhaps he has known (or knows about) others like himself who were fired or denied a job. Sometimes he overhears a negative comment about them, or is encouraged to make one himself. Walking the hallways, he notices that others like him, if there are any, don't quite seem to fit in. Or, perhaps he sees and hears *none* of these things within this particular organization (since everyone seems just a bit uncomfortable with the subject), but can't quite forget seeing and hearing them in others: at school, at church, in the neighborhood, with his family. He concludes, for any or all of these reasons, that his sexuality is unwelcome here.

The result is pressure to *manage* the trait that sets him apart, by regulating its visibility, its meaning, and its consequences. Most workplaces are dominated by masculine, heterosexual norms that view women, homosexuals, and other gender fugitives as exceptions of some sort. Even when welcomed and embraced, we are defined by our difference, like immigrants moving in a foreign land. We learn, with time, to manage the visibility and consequences of "otherness".

Management requires effort, however, and few categories of information are considered worth the trouble; fewer still are managed all the time. We rarely fret, for example, about public response to our blood type or shoe size. Under most circumstances, this information is non-significant; we scarcely think about how it should be revealed or concealed. Other categories, meanwhile, are assigned special significance, and bring with them elaborate ideologies about what should be revealed, to whom, when, and how.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, sexual orientation, medical or psychological health, age, and income are all "marked" categories in our culture;

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<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, the cigarette smoker, whose decisions about self-disclosure may be influenced by public norms about vice, civic regulations about when and where one can smoke, government warnings on the packages themselves, and the ongoing public debate about public health and civil rights. All of these considerations might bear upon the smoker's decision to ask: "Do you mind if I smoke?"

they are assumed to reveal something about who you are or how you should be treated. There is thus an incentive to publicize one's membership in the "privileged" category, or at least to claim membership in it by misrepresenting one's status. Those unwilling or unable to claim membership must manage the consequences of non-membership. In all of these cases, identity has become a *managed status*.

The situation is familiar to anyone who has been set apart and devalued for being different in some way. In a study of professional women, for example, Sheppard (1989) identified several ways in which gender became a managed status. In the companies she studied, managerial positions were dominated by men, male imagery and masculine principles -- a situation that problematized the images and self-images of managers who happened to be women. But whether they accepted or rejected these norms, Sheppard found that the women were sensitized to gendered aspects of their language, dress, hair color and style, body language, and vocal style. "Femaleness" was something to be managed:

[B]eing a woman in an male-dominated environment demands handling one's gender in particular ways, and this process is done with reference to one's interpretation of the prevailing power structure in the organization. Without constant vigilance regarding gender (and sexual) self-presentation, these women perceive that they run the risk of not being taken seriously, not being heard, and not receiving necessary information -- in other words, of not being able to participate fully in the organizational system (p. 145).

By privileging a particular status (maleness, in this case), these organizations ensured that its alternatives (femaleness, non-traditional masculinity) would be problematic, that their visibility would have consequences. In these male-dominated environments, women's gender became a managed status.

Gay professionals face similar demands when working in heterosexist environments. Like the women in Sheppard's study, gay professionals are conscious of, and responsive to, organizational norms that often exclude them. But because homosexuals are a self-identified group, the task is somewhat more complicated. First, like other invisible minorities gay men must manage *information* about the stigmatizing trait, and make decisions about the particular means by which it will or will not be revealed to others. When heterosexuality is presumed in organizational settings, gay identities will be the result of special

disclosures or revelations. Second, after publicly disclosing their orientation, gay men must manage *identity* itself, guiding the interpretations and understandings that others have of his sexuality. Its ultimate meaning is subject to negotiation, and is rarely fixed. Finally, gay men manage the *consequences* of that identity, whether favorable or unfavorable, intended or unintended. At different times, most gay men engage in all three of these tasks.

Some men choose to keep their sexuality a secret, and assume responsibility for devising a disguise, for keeping track of their various deceptions and omissions, and for monitoring the credibility of the performance. According to a Houston lawyer, a man in his mid 30's:

When you're closeted, you constantly have to think about the issue: not go certain places, not be in certain situations, keep your guard up all the time . . . I just think any closeted man or woman has to deal with a lot of internal pressures that make sexuality something you can't just set aside. It's always there.

Similarly, a closeted lesbian told Ponse (1976):

When a person is in the closet they, you know, they're . . . operating on all levels, and uh with ah . . . considerable tension. I mean you always know thirty seconds ahead of what you say, you know what you are going to say. And you get, I got so used to that, I became almost inarticulate when I had a chance to say whatever I wanted to say. I lost a lot of spontaneity of speech because . . . because I'd formed the habit of knowing what I was going to say. (p. 318).

To maintain the disguise, these men and women must be ever vigilant. They must monitor their own appearance and speech, carefully assessing the way certain acts or gestures will be interpreted. Work, for those in the closet, is an endless command performance.

Others choose to reveal their homosexuality, but find themselves saddled with a different set of managerial tasks. Though no longer invisible, their sexuality is *still* something to be managed, as decisions must be made about how much to downplay, highlight or clarify it; some find that they have become "token" homosexuals at work, a role that comes with its own special set of demands. For example, though he's openly gay at work, the development director of a Philadelphia AIDS service organization acknowledges that he's still "tremendously self-conscious" about the issue. "I look at people that have been out since age 10,

and while it may seem foolish to say this, I think how much better it must have been. But then I realize, they've just had a different set of problems, a different kind of suffering."

Even when gay men are satisfied with their careers and job security, even when co-workers are sympathetic or supportive, there is still the need to manage. Several of my participants assured me, for example, that they had the "perfect" work situation, and at least one, a New York lawyer named Arthur, explained that his co-workers were entirely "indifferent" to his sexuality:

That's part of the reason people like to live in New York. It's not that people are accepting, and say "Oh, there he is with his male lover. I embrace that. I support that." They just don't *give* a damn, and that's different. I *love* their indifference. I would rather have their indifference than their soulful eyes -- I mean, they can be soulful about other things, where they ought to be. This is something that ought to be treated with real indifference.

Having recently made partner, Arthur has considerable job security and is well-liked by the senior partners in his firm. Many have met his lover and seem comfortable discussing the subject. Arthur has every reason, in other words, to feel secure in his organization. Yet the indifference of his co-workers, however comforting, has *not* made him less self-conscious about his sexual identity. When spending time with clients or co-workers, he still finds himself in situations that require him to manage. When discussing his lover at work, Arthur wonders what is appropriate, how much is enough, where to draw the line; he still feels uncomfortable bringing him to company events. When meeting new clients, Arthur isn't always sure how to broach the subject, and frequently catches himself thinking "here we go again."

This self-consciousness is characteristic of other stigmatized groups (see Lyman & Scott, 1970:71-88), and for gay people it begins long before our careers and extends well outside the workplace. As an advertising executive complained:

When you've been set apart, held up for criticism or ridicule, and told you're illegal, unnatural, inappropriate or immoral *because of this one trait*, your sexuality will never be irrelevant to the way you view yourself in social settings. It will always be somewhere in the foreground.

As several of my participants noted, professional experiences often replicate situations that are familiar from other aspects of our lives, from relationships with

family, neighbors, and friends. In this sense, an office is not unlike a living room, playground, church, or local supermarket. All are sites in which identity must be managed, and this strategic disposition, once learned, is not easily lost.

### **The Framework**

My interest in the management of sexual identity led me in two directions, and suggested several complementary approaches to the topic. On the one hand, I was concerned with the *sexual culture* of the white-collar organization, the environment in which gay professionals find themselves. At the same time, I wanted to explore the *self-presentational strategies* used by the gay men who inhabit these settings. The solution was to weave between organizational and interpersonal levels of analysis, and the final report is organized around these two, overlapping modes of inquiry.

In the first part of the study (Chapters 2 and 3), I describe the white-collar organization in cultural terms, as a particular type of society with its own rules and ideologies that govern the display of sexuality. Part two (Chapters 4 through 6) shifts the focus from the cultural settings to the strategies gay men use to manage identity within them. Part three (Chapters 7 and 8) takes the dramaturgical metaphor further, exploring the process by which gay men make decisions about which strategy to use, about the backstage preparations required to pull them off, and about the implications any repertoire of strategies may have for their careers.

The remainder of this chapter describes the design of the study, the questions with which I began, and the process by which I contacted and interviewed my participants. The reader who is eager for conclusions, spared the mechanics of my reaching them, may proceed directly to Chapter 2.

#### *Sexual culture*

Culture is a lived document, and I have approached it through the interpersonal exchanges and rituals in which it is continually communicated and constructed within the organization. Drawing on Clegg's (1981) notion of "rule analysis," Mills offers this way of conceptualizing organizational culture:

Culture is essentially composed of a number of understandings and expectations that assist people in making sense of life. In organizations, no less than other aspects of social life, such understandings have to be learned and they guide people in the appropriate or relevant behavior, help them to know how things are done, what is expected of them, how to achieve certain things, etc. Indeed, it is the very configuration of such "rules" of behavior that distinguishes one social or organizational group from another, it is an essential part of their cultural identity (1988:360).

As Mills suggests, the understandings that comprise organizational culture are continually *enacted* in the workplace. They manifest themselves in the behavior of the cultural membership, and it is through this means that we can approach them as an object of study. Some of these activities can be termed "sexual", a broad category of biological and mental possibilities that might include "gender, identity, bodily differences, reproductive capacities, needs, desires and fantasies" (Weeks, 1985:15). From these various mental and social activities, we can abstract the general ideologies, norms and expectations that guide them.

A daunting amount of work remains to be done in this area, and this is due in part because decades of organizational theorists, at least since Max Weber, have perpetuated the view that organizations are asexual and gender-neutral. Taking the machine as their model, these theorists have emphasized the rational, efficient, goods-producing aspects of organizational behavior. Consequently, "the absence of sexuality from the vast majority of organizational analyses may be explained as part of a general desexualizing of organizations, which developed as discourses about sex grew up in and out of management theory" (Hearn, *et al.*, 1989:12). From the industrial revolution on, as managers strove to "desexualize labor" (Burrell, 1984), management theory advanced a distinction between the organizational/public and the sexual/private. As Gutek observes:

If sexuality is defined as private behavior, then there is no reason for an organization (or organizational researcher) to be concerned with it. It is outside the scope of organizational behavior. As non-organizational behavior, it need not be discussed, handled or even acknowledged: for all practical purposes, it is invisible (1989:57).

Blinded by this bias, most organizational analysis has inadequately considered the sexuality of organization, and as a topic of study it is notably absent from textbooks and journals (Gutek, 1989; see Burrell, 1984; Zedeck and Cascio, 1984).

In recent years a number of reports have called for a retheorization of organizational analysis and the development of approaches that adequately consider issues of sex and gender (see Mills, 1989). Feminist critics, in particular, have begun to deconstruct the gendered basis of organizations and organizational analysis to demonstrate the masculine and heterosexual ethic implicit in both. As Morgan (1986) has argued:

The links between the male stereotype and the values that dominate many ideas about the nature of organizations are striking. Organizations are often encouraged to be rational, analytic, strategic, decision-oriented, tough and aggressive, and so are men. This has important implications for women who wish to operate in this kind of world, for insofar as they attempt to foster these values, they are often seen as breaking the traditional female stereotype in a way that opens them to criticism, e.g. for being "overly assertive" and "trying to play a male role" (Morgan, 1986:178).

As this suggests, both traditional and critical approaches to organizations originate in the male, abstract intellectual domain and take as reality the world as seen from that standpoint. The production of organizational ideology is thus gendered, as the masculine is mistaken for the natural, asexual, and gender-neutral. In concepts of management, for example, we can discern the conflation of "effectiveness" with "masculinity." As Kanter observes,

A "masculine ethic" of rationality and reason can be identified in the early image of managers. This "masculine ethic" elevates the traits assumed to belong to men with educational advantages to necessities for effective organizations: a tough-minded approach to problems; analytic abilities to abstract and plan; a capacity to set aside personal, emotional considerations in the interests of task accomplishment; a cognitive superiority in problem-solving and decision making (1974:43).

Similarly, in the notion of work, we find gendered values that have been conceptualized not as masculine or heterosexual but as *human*, and thus as inherent to organization (Acker, 1990). Consequently, as Kanter observes, "while organizations were being defined as sex-neutral machines, masculine principles were dominating their authority structures" (1977:46).

Connell (1987) has proposed the term "hegemonic masculinity" to emphasize that these ideologies are formed around dominance over women and in opposition to other masculinities and sexualities. As Acker (1990) has observed:

Symbolically, a certain kind of male heterosexual sexuality plays an important part in legitimating organizational power. . . . Currently, hegemonic masculinity is typified by the image of the strong, technically competent, authoritative leader who is sexually potent and attractive, has a family, and has his emotions under control. Images of male sexual function and patriarchal paternalism may also be embedded in notions of what the manager does when he leads his organization (p. 153).

Though the exact content of this masculine ideal-type has changed as historical conditions evolve -- flexibility and sensitivity, for example, are recent additions to his repertoire -- several of its elements, including heterosexuality, seem quite stable.<sup>2</sup> In short, the "organization man" is alive and well, and he is a heterosexual.

This hegemonic masculinity interprets lesbians and gay men as isolated exceptions and views our sexuality as an aberration, as something private and individual (and thus irrelevant), or as an unwelcome intrusion of sexual matters on an otherwise asexual environment (Burrell & Hearn, 1989:23). Consequently, when it is observed that heterosexuals and homosexuals are affected differently by organizations, it is assumed that sexual attitudes and behavior have been brought into (and have contaminated) the organization.<sup>3</sup> For too long, this bias has hindered theory on the sexuality of organization, and fostered the organizational invisibility of those whose situations it might illuminate.

But how is this hegemonic masculinity enacted in organizational culture? In what ways do organizations privilege heterosexuality and its modes of expression, while subordinating and stigmatizing alternative behaviors or identities? I have organized my answers around several characteristics of organizational culture, in

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<sup>2</sup> In her portrait of the "new man," Ehrenreich (1991) suggests that marriage and breadwinner-status have become less important in the past decade. "I think of the men of my father's generation, men who came of age in the 1950s and who, like my own father, defined their masculinity, if not their identity, in terms of their ability to make a living and support a family. This was a matter of convention as much as of choice, for the man who failed to marry at all (this is, by the age of thirty or so) were candidates for the stigma of 'latent homosexual.' Men of this generation were encouraged to equate effeminacy with un-Americanism and to use their leisure to escape -- into sports, hunting, or simply the basement -- from all things feminine. We recognize that for the most part men aren't like that anymore and those who are seem grievously out of style" (p. 122).

<sup>3</sup> This point is derived from Acker's discussion of gendered attitudes (1990:142).



particular: the rules or norms it establishes with regard to the display of (homo)sexuality; its jurisdiction or boundaries; the payoffs (or penalties) it establishes for observing (or not observing) its rules; and the evidence players use to make judgments about their environments, the attitudes of others, and the strategies available to them. These are the terms in which I have operationalized organizational culture.

Whenever people come together for some purpose there must be *rules* to structure their interaction, and in this way a workplace is like any other organization. Consequently, in any workplace one can identify a normative system that sets it apart as a particular kind of place, gives structure to behaviors within it, and ensures that certain work-tasks will be accomplished in a certain way. The rules themselves are external to any individual, shaped variously by co-workers, by tradition, by the norms of the larger society, or by the needs and expectations of customers.

When rules exist, there are consequences for behaving in any particular way, and thus reason to be calculating in one's behavior. Drawing on Goffman's (1969) use of game theory, for example, one may view an organization as a site for the playing of an elaborate interpersonal game, as goal-oriented "players" execute moves and counter-moves in accordance with its "rules." In this model, participants are said to execute "strategies" in their dealings with other players, who in turn are executing strategies and counter-strategies of their own. Though the game model cannot account for the origins of the normative system itself -- the rules are a minimum condition of play, the starting point from which it begins -- it is nonetheless useful in clarifying several characteristics of normative systems (see also Lyman & Scott, 1970).

The game model suggests that to the extent we can identify sexual norms within an organization, we should expect strategic behavior on the part of its members. One can argue, in fact, that organizations and jobs vary along this dimension, and that sexual identity is not of equal importance in every social setting. When sexuality becomes vital social information, we should expect sexual identity to be handled strategically; at other times, when sexuality is less important

(or when the consequences of accepting a misrepresented identity are less serious), the opportunities for strategic interaction may be limited.

It follows that when there is no penalty for being gay (or payoffs for being non-gay), there will be little incentive to manage sexual identity. A 30-year-old writer described a situation that at least suggests such a possibility. As he described it, the advertising agency for which he works is fairly "liberal about sexuality," and is characterized by a number of intra-office affairs and frequent office gatherings during which "private matters" were discussed freely. "I've worked in other agencies where that kind of thing was frowned on, even mentioned in employee manuals. People would tell you to 'keep it quiet'." At his current job, however, co-workers often introduce him to their gay friends, and seem comfortable discussing their romances with others in the office. Like other gay men in the office, he is frank about his sexuality and relationships. None of these men, as far as he knows, has experienced any sort of negative reaction. "Almost anything goes around there," he told me, which makes it "very comfortable, if a little hard to get work done sometimes."

The game model also highlights the fact that normative systems differ in their *jurisdiction*. For example, most work organizations make demands on their members' behavior that exceed the physical workplace, quitting time, or the immediate work group. In part, this is because organizations routinely assume that behavior outside the organization predicts behavior within (and reflects upon its other members).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, though the ostensible reason most of us go to work has little to do with sexual identity, the workplace is also a principal site for

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<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, the reluctance some of us might feel working with an individual whose religious beliefs were offensive to our own, though this might have nothing to do with the work we could expect from him or her. Consider politicians like Gary Hart, who was publicly discredited when an after-hours liaison was revealed. (Though one might argue, in the case of a politician, that the relevant workplace is the community itself; like televangelists, teachers, and other public figures, politicians are often expected to serve as moral agents-at-large). Or consider organizations like the military, which observe only vague distinctions between the public and private lives of enlisted people, and maintain that both are equally within its jurisdiction. Even in the private sector, companies regularly frown on employees who engage in extracurricular political activities, even when it has little to do with their job performance.

other sorts of social engagement; work, strictly defined, is rarely the only business at hand. Even so, organizations vary in the latitude with which they govern the behavior of their members. It is these boundaries we are describing when we speak of the distinction between company time and personal time, private and public activities, and personal and professional relationships.

It follows that rules must carry some kind of reward for observing them. If a normative system has no mechanism of *enforcement*, if its norms are without consequence, there are no stakes to the game, and thus no game. Writing about the "creation" of deviance, Becker (1963) has observed:

Before any act can be viewed as deviant, and before any class of people can be labeled and treated as outsiders for committing the act, someone must have made the rule which defines the act as deviant . . . Deviance is the product of enterprise in the largest sense; without the enterprise required to get rules made, the deviance which consists of breaking the rule could not exist. Deviance is the product of enterprise in the smaller and more particular sense as well. Once a rule has come into existence, it must be applied to a particular people before the abstract class of outsiders created by the rule can be peopled. Offenders must be discovered, identified, apprehended and convicted (p. 162-3).

Becker's formulation is useful because it views enforcement as enterprise, the purposive activity of individuals he calls "moral entrepreneurs" (see also Erikson, 1966). To identify an organization's rules, one must look for critical instances in which they have been violated, prompting some kind of effort to reestablish them. To identify boundaries, in other words, we must find someone who has crossed them, and was penalized with stigmatization, social exclusion, professional censure, and so forth. If no such instances can be found, the organization's rules are inconsequential, its boundaries untested.

To understand the nature of the game, finally, we must also try to identify the process by which potential players are inducted into it. Before play can begin, participants must have some means of learning its rules and consequences, drawing on some form of *evidence*. As I will argue, these messages come in multiple forms and from many sources, from official policy and unofficial lore to the behavior of co-workers and its observable consequences. For example, the copywriter quoted above based his assessment on several categories of evidence. Sexuality was a

frequent topic of conversation in his office, not only among peers but at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. There was no official policy on intra-office relationships -- at other companies, he could recall firing policies and specific prohibitive language in company manuals -- and they seemed to be a common occurrence. In addition, he explained that "it's advertising, so it's supposed to be more 'liberal'." His sources of evidence thus include the explicit verbal statements of others (who told him the office was liberal), official company policy (or lack thereof), the observable behavior of others (who were candid about their own relationships), and assumptions drawn from his experience in the culture at large ("it's advertising.").

By contrast, a young insurance executive described his environment, a regional sales office, as "older, suburban, white, very corporate, and very straight." It was also "traditional" in its sexism, with a management hierarchy dominated by men and a support staff of younger women. His immediate boss and peers were married, some with children. They also made comments in his presence about other women. "Men joke about who's cute, who's not, 'catch her swish' and that kind of stuff. It's in a chummy guy-talk more than anything else."

Based on this evidence, he assumes that this environment would be hostile to homosexuality. In addition, while there are no openly gay people in his office, he recalls a telling incident with a particular client. "It was generally perceived that the woman who was the risk manager for [a major client] -- a rather large, butch woman -- was a lesbian." People sometimes made comments about her and an alleged girlfriend, "in a joking manner, not lewd or condescending, but they still made me sort of uncomfortable." In this case, the assessment of the organization was based on several categories of evidence. Some of it is direct, like the homophobic comments of peers. Other clues are interpreted analogically, like the observable sexism and absence of racial minorities. "There wasn't a black in sight," he explained, "so I don't think they'd be able to deal with me."

As these preliminary examples suggest, normative systems vary tremendously from one organization to the next. When making judgments about them, we draw on many kinds of evidence, from the direct observation of boundary-maintenance

activities to the assumptions we bring with us from other experiences. To the extent that an individual is a long-time member of a company, he or she may have witnessed numerous explicit incidents, and may be able to give a highly-nuanced account of its normative system. For the new arrival, these assumptions are often based on more general or analogic evidence.

To return to the game model, then, we can say that some organizations provide a more complex matrix of rules about sexuality, and thus a more complex game. They may set up more situations in which participants will become self-conscious and calculating in their moves, and may clearly delineate the consequences of appropriate or inappropriate behavior. In other organizations, when there are no consequences, when the expression of sexuality is less rule-bound, there can be no game.

In the first part of this report, I've used these concepts to describe the sexual culture of white-collar organizations, and thus to explore the circumstances that compel gay men to be strategic in their management of sexual identity.

### *Sexual identity*

Working in hostile environments, gay men have perforce developed techniques for managing what others perceive about their sexuality. The second half of my report documents their specific strategies for presenting, monitoring, and managing sexual identity. As anyone even vaguely familiar with the subject knows, this means I must contend with a familiar, troublesome metaphor: the closet.

In gay culture, "the closet" has become the guiding metaphor for thinking and talking about sexual identity. To be "in the closet" is to deny or misrepresent one's sexuality to others, and it is common to hear gay men speak of their efforts to "come out" of the closet, the benefits of "being out" or the need to remain "closeted." Secretive individuals are sometimes called "closet cases" and getting-acquainted conversations frequently revolve around whether or not one is "out" to friends and family members. During my fieldwork, at least four people suggested some version of my title, *The Corporate Closet*, and when I described the project to potential participants, certain questions seemed unavoidable: "You mean it's a

study of people in the closet?" "Are you interviewing people who are 'out' at work?" And quite often: "I'm not 'out' at work, so this has to be confidential."

In the interviews themselves, I sometimes encountered more baroque elaborations of the metaphor. Two men complained of "banging into the coathangers" while trying to pass as heterosexuals in the office, and another described a secretive friend who had "locked the door and lost the key." One told me that he "came running out" at an early age, and "left the dresses swinging in the breeze." Another described his efforts at self-disclosure as if they were a plan for home improvement:

I was totally closeted in college, and I realized I had to have more space. It was cramped, and I just couldn't live in there. So I started adding a few windows, told a few of my closest friends. It didn't make the closet any bigger, but it gave me a better view. And after a while, I decided I liked what I saw outside, and I came out completely.

Still others, especially those who wish to maintain their secrecy, describe the "comforts" of the closet, and the years they've had to "furnish" it.

The same language turns up in countless popular books and magazines for and about gay people. We have a growing library of books that use some version of the metaphor, including *The Celluloid Closet* (gays in film), *The Vinyl Closet* (gays in the recording industry), *The Final Closet* (gay fathers), and *The Contested Closet* (the ethics of exposure and self-disclosure), to name but a few. Others, like *Coathangers*, make an oblique reference, while gay periodicals like *Out/Look* and *Out* make use of closet shorthand. We have an "OutWrite" conference for lesbian and gay writers, and a National Coming Out Day. In the past two years, the more radical branches of gay activism have staged flamboyant visitations on straight or homophobic drinking establishments, better known as "outings" or "nights out," and a popular t-shirt proclaims "I am out, therefore I am."

In recent years, the metaphor has found its way into more mainstream discourse about gay people. In the spring and summer of 1990, for example, the "outing" controversy -- which concerned the controversial practice of exposing the sexuality of gay public officials and celebrities -- found its way into most of the nation's major dailies, and into publications as diverse as *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, *US*, *New York Magazine*, *The Village Voice*, and *The National Enquirer*. Recent

episodes of the network dramas *L.A. Law* and *Gideon's Fire* dramatized the same issues, and participants on both sides of the debate have made their cases on *Oprah*, *Geraldo*, and other stops along the television talk show circuit. The term itself first reached a mainstream audience by way of an essay in *Time Magazine*,<sup>5</sup> further evidence of the currency of closet language.

The prevalence of the metaphor is not difficult to explain. It seems likely that its use is due, in part, to our tendency to express self-disclosure in terms of physical or visual access.<sup>6</sup> One "reveals" information about oneself or "shows" oneself to the world; at debutante balls, one is said to "come out" to proper society. At other times, we may be "hiding" something or "covering up" for others. Secrets are "kept from" others, or can be unwittingly "let out of the bag." Information about the self is thus physicalized, giving it the concrete properties of an object that may be hidden, revealed and seen. Other metaphors have been used to express the disclosure of sexual orientation, but none with the tenacity of the closet.<sup>7</sup>

The same language is sometimes used to describe other sorts of potentially embarrassing disclosures. Today people can "come out" as soap opera fans, junk food junkies or sports fanatics. In the Fall of 1990, Lee Atwater, then chairman of the Republican National Committee, was criticized for permitting someone on his staff to write a memo accusing Tom Foley of "coming out" of the liberal closet (an innuendo that was also assumed to imply that Foley is gay). Within support groups one sometimes hears individuals "come out" as rape victims, alcoholics, people with AIDS, or as practitioners of stigmatizing erotic practices like sado-masochism or pedophilia.

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<sup>5</sup> William A. Henry, *Time* 1/29/90

<sup>6</sup> Writing about stigma, Goffman has also characterized known-about-ness in terms of visibility: "Since it is through our sense of sight that the stigma of others most frequently becomes evident, the term visibility is perhaps not too misleading. Actually, the more general term, "perceptibility" would be more accurate, and "evidentness" more accurate still" (1963:48).

<sup>7</sup> One sometimes reads about "confessed" or "admitted" homosexuals (suggesting the revelation of sinful or criminal behavior), or the "unmasking" of homosexuals (which suggests performance and disguise). We might also ponder the metaphor implicit in the expression "practicing homosexual."

The closet metaphor is more, however, than a popular turn of phrase. Since the time of Whorf and Sapir, linguists have demonstrated that language also gives structure to our thoughts and perceptions. Metaphors, in particular, permit us to think of one experience in terms of another, and part of their function is to highlight certain characteristics of that experience at the expense of others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). If so, the closet is often an apt way of thinking about the concealment of gay identity. Most closets are cramped and dark, spaces in which one can hide but in which no one wants to live. They conceal those articles that seem unfit for larger, more important rooms. While hiding in a closet, one is invisible to those outside it. And working in a closet, like hiding or denying one's sexuality, would certainly be a constraining experience.

But the comparison breaks down as we push it further. In this case, "the closet" expresses the communication of sexual orientation as a choice between two possible end-states: one is either in or out of a closet. There is no in-between, except for the brief moment of entry or exit, and there is the suggestion that either status -- being in or out -- is roughly the same experience for all of those on either side of the door. In the logic of this simple, binary metaphor, the world is dichotomized into two broad categories of people, closet-dwellers and room-dwellers.<sup>8</sup>

With these seductive contours, the metaphor encourages rather simplistic thinking about the process by which we communicate sexual identity. It suggests, first, that sexual identity is a solitary, discrete bit of information like eye color or height -- something one could, with a single word or deed, convey to others. With even a moment's reflection, the oversimplification becomes apparent. When we say that someone "came out" at work, for example, we have said surprisingly little. What, in particular, did he reveal? An erotic attraction for other men? His fondness for a particular sexual act? His love for a particular partner of many years? And how did this revelation fit with other information co-workers have

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<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the dualism is congruent with other paired categories, such as gay-straight or hetero-homo, with which our culture dichotomizes sexual activity (see Sedgwick, 1990; Rubin, 1984).



about his sexuality, personality, and appearance? The in-out logic of the closet deflates the management of identity into a single act of self-revelation.

At the same time, the metaphor emphasizes status, not process, by pointing to one's stance in or out of the closet while ignoring the *means* by which one actually got there. As Marny Hall (1986) notes in her study of lesbian professionals, "Coming out' is not an end point in the strategy of adjustment. Rather, it is a conceptual short cut, an abbreviated way of thinking which fails to encompass the extremely complex process of managing discrediting information about oneself." For this reason, saying that someone "came out" of the closet tells us nothing about the means by which this was accomplished. When we speak of someone who hasn't "come out," for example, do we mean that he actively misrepresents his sexuality, perhaps by fabricating girlfriends or sexual exploits in his effort to hide? Do we mean that he avoids all discussions of sexuality, insisting that others respect his privacy? Or do we mean that his sexual orientation is known to others who tastefully (or distastefully) attempt to ignore it? Similar questions may be asked about someone who is "out of the closet." As a 26-year-old advertising executive described his situation:

It's time-consuming, really, when you think about it: I worry not only about who knows I'm gay, but how they know, what else they know, and how I need to behave as a result. . . . I don't have a single policy on how to handle this, so I operate on a case-by-case basis: Do I tell them I'm gay and then drop the subject, or do we make this part of our daily conversation? How do I "normalize" the situation for both of us? And what about my love life, or about sex -- do we talk about that? The gay pride march I went to? Or how about my favorite gay author? My sexuality -- being gay -- is just the beginning of the story.

Not surprisingly, when I asked him if he had "come out," he shrugged at the question. "I'm not sure how to respond -- tell me what you really mean by that. In some ways I'm out, but in other ways I'm not." His sense of his sexuality, his co-workers' sense of it, and the means by which the latter was constructed from the former, cannot be expressed in so impoverished a phrase as "out of the closet."

These same ambiguities became a recurrent nuisance during my efforts to recruit participants for the project. In drawing the sample, for example, I wanted to maximize the diversity of the men with whom I spoke; I wanted a range of personal and professional circumstances. Often, this meant that I would actively

seek men of a certain hard-to-find type, pre-screening potential participants over the phone. Unfortunately, without the benefit of an in-depth interview it was often difficult to ascertain their situations, and I was reduced to asking crude questions about how "closeted" someone was at work. The frequent response, from potential participants, was confusion: "Well what do you mean -- in the closet to my boss?" Or, "Well, I'm pretty closeted, but not entirely." At other times, when I tried to avoid the metaphor, it was volunteered. "I have a friend who might be right -- he's totally closeted at work." Or "I know a few guys who are 'out' in Houston, let me see if they'll talk to you."

The vagaries of such language became especially clear during the actual interviews. Countless participants told me, over the phone, that they were "totally out" at work, only to later reveal that they had never discussed their sexuality with anyone, nor was there any reason to assume that co-workers had surmised it. We clearly lacked a precise way of talking about sexual self-disclosure. Our vernacular, the language of the closet, was vague and misleading.

### *Identity as performance*

To the extent possible, I've avoided closet language when describing the ways sexual identities are displayed, projected and managed in interpersonal encounters. For a more precise vocabulary, I've drawn on the body of microsociological theory concerned with impression management and interaction rituals.

Though its history as a social scientific term is brief, *identity* has quickly become a problematic and elusive term. As Gleason (1983) observes in his "semantic history" of the term, identity was popularized in the 1950s by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, and was assimilated into contemporary sociological thought by those interested in role theory, reference-group theory, and symbolic interactionism. In current use, one definition construes identity-formation as an intrapsychic, developmental phenomenon, the unfolding of a relatively fixed and stable characteristic of a particular individual. One's identity is predetermined, in this conception, by biological or social factors, and finds its expression over the course of the lifespan. "In a word, this sense of identity is essentialist: it is the type of

'identity' that we have in mind when we speak of identity as describing who someone *really is*" (Epstein, 1987:28).

At the other extreme, the psychological reductionism of this position can be contrasted with a sort of sociological reductionism, and the view that identity-formation is the internalization or adoption of socially constructed labels or roles. According to this conception, identities are acquired, exchanged, or even "tried on" and discarded at will, and "this is the type of 'identity' that we have in mind when we say that someone 'identifies as' a such-and-such" (Epstein, 1987:29). Though most theories fall between the extremes of these two positions, by the mid-1960s the term identity "was used so widely and so loosely that to determine its provenance in every context would be impossible" (Gleason, 1983:918).

Discussions of homosexual "identity" first appeared in the relevant literature in the mid-1970s, and today the term is virtually ubiquitous in clinical, sociological and political writings about gay people. As in more general discussions of identity, however, there is little consensus about meaning of the term. In her 1983 survey of the literature on homosexual identity, for example, Cass found that

in these articles it is possible to infer diverse meanings such as (1) defining oneself as gay, (2) a sense of self as gay, (3) image of self as homosexual, (4) the way a homosexual person *is*, and (5) consistent behavior in relation to homosexual-related activity (1983:105).

The most familiar of these theories take the form of identity-stage models, such as those popularized by Kenneth Plummer and others (see Troiden, 1988). For example, Plummer's (1975) model characterizes the process of "becoming homosexual" as a series of four ordered stages. In the "sensitization" stage, boys gain childhood emotional, social and genital experiences that may later serve as bases for defining themselves as homosexual. "Signification" and "disorientation" occur during adolescence, as boys begin to speculate that their feelings are incompatible with a heterosexual identity, and during the "coming out" stage they establish contact with other homosexuals and define themselves as such. The final stage, "stabilization", occurs when they become comfortable with homosexuality and commit to it as a way of life. Subsequent work by Troiden (1988) has refined these stages and added to them, while Ponce (1978) and Cass (1979) have elaborated identity-stage models for lesbians.

While these stage-models imply a "gay trajectory", a necessary progression from homosexual acts to identities, the symbolic interactionists have emphasized the problematic nature of the relationship between behavior and self-concept.

Weinberg (1978) notes, for example, that

ways of behaving may develop to a certain point without becoming fixed and stable, and without the development of "commitment," until one has acquired a self-conception or identity of which that kind of behavior is a necessary component or expression or support. There is, for example, sufficient evidence to demonstrate that engaging in same-sex sexual behavior does *not* necessarily lead one to suspect or label oneself as a homosexual (p. 144).

A telling example is provided by Warren and Johnson (1972), who note that a married man who has sexual relations only with his wife can, nonetheless, perceive himself to be "100 percent homosexual," thus violating the *act*-definition of homosexuality, while validating the *being* significance of homosexuality (p. 75; quoted in Weinberg, 1978:145). Similarly, Hencken (1984) has described some of the conceptual mechanisms that disrupt the progression from acts to identities, and thus the link between "doing" gay and "being" gay.

Whatever their incongruities, these models all conceptualize gay identity as a *subjective* entity. In a typical statement, for example, Larson (1982) defines sexual identity as "the set of self-referential attitudes, thoughts, and feelings about sexuality that, taken together, is a subset of the overall self-concept" (p. 15). And though the models all incorporate some notion of widely-accepted social categories or socially-available roles, they ultimately contend that the meaning associated with categorical membership is constructed by the individual. Consequently, the assumption of a "gay identity" is essentially a matter of self-definition, within certain broad parameters. As DuBay (1987) notes:

The self-concept establishes our place in society. If the "self" can be regarded as the knowing subject, the self-concept is that collection of ideas we have about ourselves. How people think about themselves and assemble a self-concept is crucial in the understanding of gay identity (1987:14).

So, whether they begin with psychological (clinical or experimental) or sociological precepts, existing theories of gay identity center on its acquisition and development, and emphasize its subjective and psychic character.

In this report, I am most interested in the *communication* of sexual identities. Mine is not a study of developmental stages or the process by which one assumes a gay identity, nor is it an attempt to specify the "causes" of homosexuality or heterosexuality. Rather, I take these identities as a starting point, and explore the ways gay men communicate them to others.

Impression management, as an analytic framework, begins with the observation that others come to know us -- our invisible, psychic, internal selves -- only through the manifest self we present to them. When we enter the presence of others, for example, they will try to size us up; they want to know, for example, how we can be expected to behave, how we perceive them and how we will respond to their actions. But, as Goffman (1959) observes,

Full information of this order is rarely available; in its absence, the individual tends to employ substitutes -- cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc. -- as predictive devices . . . And, paradoxically, the more the individual is concerned with the reality that is not available to perception, the more must he concentrate his attention on appearances (p. 249).

The appearances themselves may be verbal, facial or physical gestures, aspects of dress or adornment, the quality of the performer's demeanor or mood, or information contained in the temporal or spatial backdrop of the encounter; these are the performer's signifying equipment, the raw material of the performance. All are capable of conveying impressions, and thus all can be of use in the management and presentation of identity. The performer, "a harried fabricator of impressions," can thus be distinguished from the net result of his or her performance, the "character." (1959:252).

An "identity", from this perspective, is a bundle of characteristics by which one is identified and identifiable to others. As Goffman has argued, it is an ideal type, a public model or role that people enact socially, rather than a subjective entity they possess privately (see Collins, 1985:215). Consequently, in my effort to explore the construction of sexual identities, the processes I describe are

*interpersonal* and *transactional* rather than cultural (as in the case of national identity) or *intrapersonal* (in the case of subjective or psychic identity-formation).<sup>9</sup>

To manage or perform a sexual identity, then, one requires only an audience. And whenever one is available, whenever we believe ourselves to be under the scrutiny of others, we are performing. The audiences themselves may be found at home and work, among friends or co-workers. Each of us has a segregation scheme with which to categorize these various audiences, and each adapts his performance to the audience at hand.

### *intention and signification*

But what constitutes a "meaningful" gesture or behavior? What signifying equipment can performers mobilize in their presentation of sexual identity?

In their study of the "symbolic strategies" we use to interpret the world, Worth and Gross (1981) distinguish nonsign-events -- those that we ignore, or code transparently -- from sign-events that evoke a conscious interpretive process. The distinction, they argue, lies not in the events themselves, but in the nature of our response to them:

It is important to note that the distinction between sign- and nonsign-events must not be taken as a categorical classification of persons, objects, and events. Any event, depending upon its context and the context of the observer, may be assigned sign value. By the same token, any event may be disregarded and not treated as a sign (p. 25).

Sign-events, in this sense, are those from which we draw meaning. In personal encounters, they might include any aspect of appearance or behavior that is perceived by an observer to contain information.

Among sign-events, Worth and Gross further distinguish natural from symbolic events. "Natural events" may be produced either by human or nonhuman agency,

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<sup>9</sup> None of this is to deny the importance of macrosociological or psychic processes in the construction and adoption of identities; on the contrary, the interpersonal phenomena I describe are situated between, and link, these other levels of phenomena. To put it another way, between self and society, between the elaboration of self-concept and the elaboration of social roles, between the construction of gay identity (one's own) and gay identities (as available social types), there are countless interpersonal events in which identity-information is presented, exchanged, and monitored.

but are interpreted without any assumption of authorial intent; they are sign-events only to the extent that we designate them as such. For example, Gross (1981) cites the following encounter:

. . . I may decide that a person whom I observe on the street is a former member of the armed forces because I notice that he has a crew cut, a very erect posture, and walks with a slight limp. In this case, I would be basing my interpretation upon stereotypic knowledge of the factors that would result in this configuration of characteristics. Needless to say, I could be mistaken. The point, of course, is that I would be treating the signs that I attended to as informative about stable or transient characteristics of the person whom I observe and of their interactions with the situation in which I observe that person (p. 25-6).

The observer, in this encounter, treats several personal traits -- haircut, posture, stride -- as natural events from which to extract information about the observed individual. He does not assume, however, that they were intended to give a certain appearance.

"Symbolic events", on the other hand, are those we assume to have been intended to communicate something to us. As the authors explain:

In order to recognize the structure which defines a communication event, as distinguished from a natural event, we must bring to that act of recognition an assumption of intention. We must assume that the structure we recognize is, in a sense, "made," performed, or produced for the purpose of "symbolizing," or communicating (Worth and Gross, 1981:134).

In the case of the war veteran, suppose the limp and haircut were all part of an act, that he was a spy, actor or an incognito who effected them as part of his false identity. Knowing these intentions, we would interpret his traits quite differently, not as natural events from which we can extract information, but as symbolic events *intended* to communicate something about identity.

Because the distinction between sign- and nonsign-events lies in the mind of the observer, we must ultimately turn our attention to the informational context in which the particular event will be interpreted. We must know something, in other words, about the store of information the observer already has about the observee. Did the witnessed event convey *new* information? Or did it serve to corroborate something already known or suspected? A performance can either confirm or disconfirm an existing assumption, and in each case it will evoke a different

symbolic strategy. Likewise, a gesture that would be coded as a sign-event in one situation would be background information, largely ignored, in another.

In work environments, most signs of sexual identity are coded as nonsign-events. In fact, given the presumption of heterosexuality in most organizations, an event or symbol that signifies heterosexuality, like as a wedding ring, will often attract little notice; it confirms what was already assumed, conveys no new information, and will not be coded as a sign-event. On the other hand, an unexpected political button, or a photograph featuring a same-sex lover, would convey new information, and thus evoke a different symbolic strategy.

Consequently, in order to pass as heterosexuals, some gay men do no more than avoid the disruption of existing assumptions. By communicating as little as possible about themselves, they seem to project a heterosexual identity.

This paradox may help explain why gay men are usually able to identify the sign-events that reveal a co-worker's homosexuality, though they are sometimes unable to say why they assumed other co-workers to be heterosexual; in the latter instances, there were simply no sign-events to disconfirm their assumptions, or at least none they could remember. As a 24-year-old insurance executive explained, "My co-workers just *seemed* straight, though it's hard to say why. I guess there was nothing to make me think otherwise."

The point is further illuminated by those rare instances in which the presumption is reversed. Rightly or wrongly, we sometimes assume that certain individuals -- waiters and hairdressers, effeminate men or masculine women -- are homosexual, and these assumptions sensitize us to sign-events that would disconfirm them. For example, one participant recalled a local hairdresser who surprised him with a frank reference to a girlfriend, a comment that in another setting might have been a nonsign-event. The signifying power of any behavior is thus relative to its context, to the normative system of the particular workplace, and to the assumptions made by those in it.

### *instrumentality and cynicism*

Performances vary in several important respects. At times, we may be self-conscious in our efforts at impression management and in our manipulation of



signifying equipment; like stage actors we may witness ourselves stepping in and out of the characters we present, consciously evaluating our own performances and the responses they elicit. At other times, an act may be entirely spontaneous, practiced to the point of tacit, unthinking competence.<sup>10</sup>

Nor do performers always believe the parts they are playing. Performances may be either sincere or cynical, and the crucial difference lies not in the perception of the audience, but in the intention of the performer. A confidence man, for example, creates impressions that he presumably knows are false; he knows his character is a fabricated one. Through the mobilization of his signifying equipment he attempts to persuade others of its reality.

Self-conscious performances can also be instrumental, with the actions calculated in terms of the desired impression they will have on others. Talk show hosts, news anchors and other performers are presumably chosen, at least in part, for their ability to manage appearance in order to project sympathy, concern or warmth, as required. When making inferences about the performer, the audience must rely on these appearances, not knowing if the performance is cynical or sincere, instrumental or not.

Not all of the signifying equipment is equally under the performer's control, however, and while he may be quite adept in managing some aspects of behavior, he may have little skill in managing others. For example, the gay man who scrupulously cultivates a masculine gait, an interest in sports or some other trait thought to signify heterosexuality may yet have trouble avoiding an unconscious, significant glance at another man. Similarly, the Freudian "slip" has betrayed a false identity on more than one occasion.

For this reason, according to Goffman, careful observers will often train their attention on the features of a performance -- especially its non-verbal elements -- that are less readily manipulated. As an advertising executive told me, a woman in his office "could tell I was gay from the start. She's very beautiful, and there was

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<sup>10</sup> While any sign-event holds the potential to convey information, a limited number are communicative in the sense that Worth & Gross (1981) use the term. Strictly speaking, only self-conscious performances -- those in which the performer is aware of the impression he or she makes -- can be called "communicative."

just no 'sexual energy' between us -- that's what she called it. I didn't look at her the way other men do, and my body language must have been off the mark, too." Similarly, consider the information used by a naval draftsman to discredit the heterosexual identity of a fellow officer (in Kitsuse, 1964):

Interviewer: "Then this lieutenant was a homosexual?"

Subject: "Yes."

I: "How did you find out about it?"

S: "The guy he approached told me. After that, I watched him. Our company was small and we had a bar for both enlisted men and officers. He would come in and try to be friendly with one or two of the guys."

I: "Weren't the other officers friendly?"

S: "Sure, they would come in for an occasional drink; some of them had been with the company for three years and they would sometimes slap you on the back, but he tried to get over friendly."

I: "What do you mean 'over friendly'?"

S: "He had only been there a week. He would try to push himself on a couple of guys -- he spent more time with the enlisted personnel than is expected from an officer" (p. 92).

In the same study, a 21-year-old woman cited the haircut, heavy eyebrows and husky build of a woman she assumed to be a lesbian. Another man, a 22-year-old engineer, based his judgment on more general social activities:

All of a sudden you just get suspicious of something. I began to wonder about him. He didn't go in for leave activities that most sailors go for. You know, girls and high times. He just never was interested and when you have been out at sea for a month or two, you're interested. That just wasn't Navy, and he was a career man (p. 93).

In some cases, Kitsuse's participants could point to specific evidence in the form of a direct sexual advance, a rumor or general reputational information; in others, his respondents had difficulty explaining exactly how they made a judgment, citing only vague cues that "everyone just knows" (p. 94). Because the cynical performer may be unable to control such behaviors, those who make it their business to discredit them -- professional detectives and litigators, to name a few -- will often focus their attention on cues that are more difficult to manipulate. The conductivity of skin, for example, is assumed to be beyond an individual's control, and for this reason the polygraph test is often used to expose the liar.

Performers who maintain a discrepancy between fostered appearances and reality thus place themselves in a precarious position. At any moment, with the revelation of discrepant information, their entire performance might be discredited. The audience might discover that the individual "did not have the right to play the part he played, that he was not an accredited incumbent of the relevant status" (Goffman, 1959:59). In Kitsuse's interviews, for example, the participants used discrepant information, cues they assumed to be indicia of homosexuality, to question the identity of persons they suspect were gay. Under such circumstances, the performance has failed, and the performer may be forced to improvise.

### *strategies*

Whenever an individual mobilizes the available signifying equipment to make a particular impression, to communicate something to an audience, we may say that he or she is behaving strategically. As Lyman and Scott have argued,

The goal-directed actions undertaken by an actor constitute the "moves" of the game. When an actor conceives and executes or attempts to execute a set of moves -- which in context take into account the moves, including countermoves, of those with whom he is interacting -- he is carrying out a strategy (p. 74).

To view a situation as a game, then, we need only establish the strategic intent of one of the players. Whenever he perceives the situation as rule-bound, estimates his own and others' interpretation of self and situation, and undertakes a line of action designed to achieve a particular goal, an individual can be said to execute a strategy. The game ends when some other activity is taken up by the group, or when the social encounter itself is terminated.

This is not to say, of course, that the players necessarily think in terms of goals and game-playing. In fact, as long as the game proceeds according the rules, there is no reason for the participants to become aware of them. It is only when a breakdown occurs that the internal workings of the game are exposed:

[O]nce an interruption or breakdown of these "recipes" or "background expectancies" occurs, there arises in the minds of the interactants a heightened awareness context in which the expectations of self, others, and the scanning of reciprocal meanings becomes manifest. To put it another way, the awareness of self, and the need to properly interpret the language, signs and gestures

of others becomes conscious when the situation is made problematic (p. 73).

The players need not be aware, in other words, that they are behaving strategically. One might argue, in fact, that the rules are *most* effective when the players execute their moves unself-consciously, with only a tacit awareness of their own strategic behavior.

Individuals are most likely to think in terms of game-playing -- to become self-conscious in the deployment of moves and countermoves, and in the observation of rules -- when they perceive their situation to be problematic. For gay men, who frequently experience friction between internal feelings and social expectancies, the situation is a familiar one. Like certain other categories of people, including social scientists and the stigmatized, gay men learn at an early stage to regard their social world as problematic; one consequence of stigmatization is a tendency to exhibit a sharpened sensitivity to situational characteristics that are taken for granted by others. As Goffman (1963) has argued about the stigmatized individual:

He can become "situation conscious" while normals present are spontaneously involved *within* the situation, the situation itself constituting for these normal a background of unattended matters. This extension of consciousness on the part of the stigmatized persons is reinforced, as earlier suggested, by his special aliveness to the contingencies of acceptance and disclosure, contingencies to which normals will be less alive (p. 111).

Among the stigmatized, this self-consciousness is perhaps most evident among those who attempt to "pass" as normal in social settings. Most homosexuals have tried, at one point or another, to conceal their sexuality; similarly, spies pose as ordinary citizens, and the old may at times try to seem younger (or vice versa). The result, for the "passer" is a situation in which precautions must be taken to preserve the counterfeit identity. He or she must continually monitor the presentation of self, and more heightened awareness of ordinary matters than those for whom concealment is not an issue.

This was the situation faced by R. R., a young (presumably heterosexual) man described by Westwood (1960). When his sexuality became a matter of concern to the others in his workplace, R. R. responded strategically. The problem began in a

encounter with his employer, when R. R. admitted to an interest in music and a distaste for baseball, at which point his boss remarked that there was "something wrong" with him. The result, for R. R., was a heightened awareness to the strategic situation in which he found himself:

To him [the boss] my behavior is not usual. Maybe to him it isn't normal for a young man to prefer music to a baseball game. Evidently, people have formulated ideas and opinions that I have an unusual personality. Rather than being a strong young man interested in athletics, I am more interested in light things. I must appear effeminate to them (Westwood, 1960:186).

The strategies open to R.R., once he begins to gauge the meanings his peers attach to events like listening to the radio, are many and varied:

[R. R.] might try to convince his fellow workers that love of music is not unmasculine. He might try to "compensate" for his one "feminine" trait by excelling in another activity that demonstrates masculinity, such as, for example, use of obscene language. He might confine his music listening to the privacy of his home, join his co-workers in listening to ball games, feigning interest in the subject, even reading up on it in private so as to be able to validate his meretricious interest. He might purchase a tiny transistorized portable radio outfitted with an earphone so that his taste in radio programs will be unknown to his peers, but actually tune it to the ball game so that when asked he can prove he is a "man" by handing the earphone to the interrogator. And he might -- and in fact, R. R. does -- avoid as much as possible any social contact with his peers (Lyman & Scott, 1970:79-80).

In other words, once he becomes aware of his goal in the interaction -- and in this case, it is taken for granted that he wants to maintain a heterosexual identity -- R. R. must make use of the signifying equipment available to him. He may seek to reorganize his own behavior, image or environment in order to communicate a identity different from the one he currently projects. He may correctly or incorrectly implement his strategy, make wise or inept tactical moves, succeed or fail to achieve his objective. He must, in other words, carry out a strategy in his management of sexual identity.

### **Design of the study**

The study was designed with the aim of developing "grounded theory" about the sexual culture of the white-collar organization and the self-presentational strategies

used by gay men who work within them. In this final section, I describe the design of this study and the methodological considerations that have guided my work over the past two years.

In their classic methodological treatise, Glaser & Strauss (1967) distinguish two methods of generating sociological theory. One method is to generate hypotheses by means of logical induction and subject them to empirical verification. According to this model, the terms of the theory are operationalized, data are collected and analyzed, and the theoretical argument is subsequently advanced. Grounded theory, on the other hand, is derived in a more circuitous fashion, as the hypotheses are formulated, reformulated and revised *as* the data are being collected. As Glaser & Strauss emphasize, this approach ensures a constant give-and-take between data and theory:

Generating a theory from data means that most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research. *Generating a theory involves a process of research.* By contrast, the *source* of certain ideas, or even "models," can come from sources other than the data. . . . But the generation of theory from such insights must then be brought into relation to the data, or there is great danger that theory and empirical world will mismatch (p. 6).

This is not to say that a researcher enters the field with no *a priori* assumptions; nor is there any logical conflict between the verification and generation of theory. On the contrary, existing ideas and models will always guide the gathering and ordering of data, and the verification of theory will always coexist, as an ambition of fieldwork, with attempts to derive it. The distinct feature of grounded theory is the flexibility of the researcher's categories and constructs, and the iterative nature of the process.

The principal method for developing grounded theory is comparative analysis. The researcher enters the field with a general subject of inquiry and several working assumptions. Cases are sought and compared as the researcher formulates categories and categorical relationships. Then, as one generates categories and their properties from the evidence, "the evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept" (1967:23). Whether these abstractions will hold up in subsequent data-gathering cannot yet be determined; most, of course, will

not. The point is that they are inductively derived from -- and are thus strictly relevant to -- the data at hand.

The rigor of this method lies in the subsequent refinement of the working theory, as the researcher seeks data that would disconfirm it. Kidder & Judd (1990) refer to this process as "negative case analysis," and argue that "what makes qualitative research systematic is not standardization but negative case analysis."

As they note:

The search and the data collection are not routinized; in fact, they usually require asking new and different questions in each search. The measurements are not standardized, the data are not uniform, and they do not yield numbers that can be added or averaged. But the *procedure* is systematic (p. 181).

To conduct qualitative research, then, one must make a thorough search for cases that require the modification of the working hypothesis. When a negative case is found, the researcher attempts to revise the theory so that it accounts for that case. As a practical matter, this is a time consuming process, in which theorizing must proceed apace with the collection of data.

In my own work, this meant that the fieldwork was broken into a series of stages, with periods of analysis between trips to the cities in which the interviews were conducted. The interviews were drawn out over a 9-month period, which meant that after each set of interviews, I was afforded an opportunity to reformulate questions, expand the scope of some topics, and bring these insights to bear on the interview that followed.

### *Sampling*

Over 100 gay men contributed to the final database of stories, observations and career histories on which this report is based. Some participated in the focus groups and exploratory interviews I conducted in the Spring of 1990, while others spoke to me in passing, and shared recollections that challenged my thinking and have been included. Most important, though, were the strangers -- the men I call "the sample" -- who spent several hours telling me about their work experiences and lives. Between July, 1990, and February of 1991, I collaborated with Jay

Lucas, a Philadelphia-based management consultant, in locating, screening and interviewing 70 of these men.

My collaboration with Jay Lucas grew out of our mutual interest in the impact of gay sexuality on career choice, but quickly centered on strategies of self-presentation in the workplace: I was eager to document these activities in my dissertation, and Jay wanted to incorporate an understanding of them in his growing consulting practice, applying them to issues of corporate culture and organizational design. As we outlined several potential projects in the Spring of 1990, we soon realized that database of the proposed size -- almost 150 hours of tape -- would require the energies of more than one researcher. We also knew that as a team we could cover more ground, observe it in greater detail, and gain access to a wider circle of contacts through whom to recruit participants.<sup>11</sup>

During the interviews themselves, the two-interviewer team has several distinct advantages. First, tandem interviews ensure a high level of efficiency. With professional men whose time was at a premium, we were often under pressure to keep the discussion moving. Interviewing as a team, we took turns asking questions without pausing while one of us took notes or formulated his next question. Second, the tandem technique often made it easier to establish rapport. Each interviewer brought different personal qualities and interests to the meeting, increasing the chance that the participant would feel comfortable with one of us. In some interviews the respondent seemed to have a negative reaction to one of the interviewers, either because of personal factors or because of the line of questioning. In these cases, the other interviewer was usually able to salvage the situation. Third, by supplying two observers, each with a different perspective, the tandem technique encourages a broader and more careful exploration of the topic. As Kincaid and Bright (1957) note:

Our experience indicates that two persons can more effectively explore an uncharted field than the single interviewer. The different perspectives of two interviewers alert them to different things. What one person may pass over at the time as irrelevant, the other may pick up as a potentially important idea (p. 309).

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<sup>11</sup> Our work together will be the basis for several projects. Jay Lucas is currently using some of these materials in his consulting work, with the company Kaplan, Lucas & Associates.



Finally, when two interviewers work as a team, each provides a constant check on the performance of the other. Leading or misleading questions were more easily caught, and steps in the procedure were less often forgotten.

In discussing these cases, I've made every effort to preserve the telling details and circumstances, within the bounds of my agreement with participants. In most cases, confidentiality has been ensured by using first pseudonyms and omitting all named references to specific companies or co-workers. When more extended examples are used, I have sometimes changed a few specific (but ultimately inconsequential) details, usually about the nature of the participant's industry or the location of his company. Though some participants were willing -- and in some cases, eager -- to see their names in print, I felt a responsibility to ensure the confidentiality of their bosses, co-workers and subordinates. Consequently, unless I specifically state otherwise, all of the names in this report are pseudonyms (See Appendix I).

In finding the sample, I encountered a problem familiar to any ethnographer who works with populations that are difficult to identify and define. When I described this problem to a friend, a lawyer in his mid-30s, he volunteered the following anecdote from his childhood:

The first time I bought a gay magazine I remember being struck by this horrible vision. I had just hidden it somewhere in the garage when I thought: *Larry, now you've done it.* Don't you know you're going to be caught? Don't you know that they keep *lists* of people who buy these things? Somewhere, in a giant computer -- I was 15, so I worried about giant computers in Washington -- they've just recorded your name on the master homosexual list. Maybe this is my Jewish heritage, or maybe it's just that I'm paranoid, but I was convinced: You'll start getting phone calls, then junk mail, then one day they'll round the whole list up.

Despite my friend's vivid imagination, no one has produced evidence of such a master list, and for researchers interested in gay people this has made sampling a problematic issue.

Without such a list, there is no way to obtain a representative sample of gay men. In fact, some of the same conditions that make lesbians and gay men an interesting subject for research -- the diversity of our lifestyles, the sanctions that exist against our sexuality, our option of remaining "invisible" -- ensure that the exact parameters of our community are unknown. Even the term "community"

must be used with caution. There are no natural borders around our population, no single trait or behavior by which we can be distinguished, no roster of elected officials who speak for "our" concerns.<sup>12</sup> Steven Epstein (1987) has argued convincingly that gay identity is analogous to "ethnicity," but his characterization applies primarily to evolving political and academic discourse, not to the subjective experiences of most gay people. Nor does it deny the internal stratifications and subdivisions that exist within the proposed ethnic category.<sup>13</sup> In fact, one effect of gay "ethnic" politics is to exaggerate the homogeneity of its constituents. As Epstein notes,

[W]hile affirming a distinctive group identity that legitimately differs from the larger society, this form of political expression simultaneously imposes a "totalizing" sameness *within* the group: it says, this is who we "really are." A greater appreciation for internal diversity -- on racial, gender, class, and even sexual dimensions -- is a prerequisite if the gay movement is to move beyond "ethnic" insularity and join with other progressive causes (p. 48).

In short, while it may be fashionable and politically expedient to regard homosexuals as a coherent group -- as an ethnicity, community, country, nation,

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<sup>12</sup> In her study of female impersonators, Esther Newton observes some of the factors that militate against the formation of a gay "community," and some of the internal divisions that fragment the communities that do exist. Though her fieldwork was conducted in the early 1970s, several insights remain timely:

"Not all self-defined homosexuals belong to the homosexual community, however. The community is an on-going social reality in, around, and against which people align themselves according to their own self-definitions. Many kinds and degrees of participation in the community are possible and available, and people move in and out of various statuses at different times in their lives" (p. 21).

"All people who define themselves as "gay" are placing themselves with other homosexuals as opposed to heterosexuals. However, this by no means implies that homosexuals are united, or that they are prepared to act in unison on any issue whatsoever, be it moral, political, religious, or economic. Indeed, the *only* thing they *all* share is the name itself, together with the agreement that they are deviant. Although one can discern the beginnings of a homosexual movement, the fragmenting differences between homosexuals still outweigh any potential solidarity" (p. 22).

<sup>13</sup> As Epstein notes, in his conclusion: "[I]f 'ethnicity' is to serve even as an analogy for comprehending gay and lesbian group identity, then ethnicity must be understood as something that is neither an absolutely inescapable ascription nor something chosen and discarded at will; as something neither there from birth, nor something one joins like a club; as something that makes one neither fundamentally different from others, nor fundamentally the same. It is in the dialectics between choice and constraint, and between the individual, the group, and the larger society, that 'identities,' 'ethnic identities,' and 'gay and lesbian identities' emerge" (p. 43).

tribe, people -- we are, in fact, none of these things. There is yet no consensus on exactly "who we are" (see Cohen, 1991). And more to the point, for purposes of sampling, there is no list of names.

Despite these constraints, my strategy was to sample for *diversity*. Because negative case analysis compels the researcher to find exceptional cases, I needed to contact men whose personal and professional situations were as varied as possible. In particular, I wanted a range of ages, professions, geographic locations, and self-presentational activities. The sampling frame was narrowed somewhat by the focus on white-collar professionals and my limited geographic mobility, but within these boundaries I cast as wide a net as possible.

In June of 1990, my research associate and I set out to interview at least 50 gay men who work in white-collar environments. Many of these organizations were large, international corporations with familiar names. Some were hospitals, churches, schools, laboratories, and other professional institutions. Others were small businesses with only a few employees. When screening a candidate, we were concerned only that his workplace shared the key attributes of a white-collar organization: a management hierarchy, a central office environment in which work is done, a professional or service orientation, and work-tasks that necessitate interaction among workers. An individual who earns a living on a freelance or at-home basis, such that he is not part of an organization's internal social network, fell outside the boundaries of our sampling frame. Likewise, we excluded salesmen and field representatives whose only contact with their employers was by phone. Because we wanted participants for whom work was their primary commitment, we also ruled out part-timers, retirees and students with summer jobs. Finally, we set our lower age boundary at roughly 22, just above the age of the average college graduate.

We were relatively unconcerned, on the other hand, with the actual sexual practices of our participants. Anyone who considers himself gay, whether or how he acts on that conviction, must face the identity issues I describe in this report. In at least one case, this meant that we included a celibate man who considers himself gay. Had we found any, we would have excluded men who have sexual

contact with other men, but who have not personally or socially taken on a gay identity (see Weinberg, 1978; Hencken, 1985).

Potential participants were easily found through the networks of interpersonal relationships that link gay men to one another, but our procedure for contacting them was complicated by several practical considerations. My partner and I realized, at the outset, that it would be uninformative to interview friends and acquaintances. On the other hand, we were wary of contacting complete strangers, and feared that many would react with suspicion if they received unexpected call from two gay researchers. In particular, they might be angry to learn that a friend had shared their names and phone numbers without first asking permission. We were also afraid that some men would mistake us for members of the press or a gay activist organization. Because it was crucial that we establish rapport with these men, especially men worried about confidentiality, we didn't want to startle them with an unwelcome call.

Our solution was to work with "liaisons" who matched us with potential subjects and told them about the project before we made contact. We began, in the summer of 1990, by choosing the five cities in which we planned to conduct our fieldwork. In each city, we contacted friends who knew professional gay men and who seemed willing to help us with the footwork. With these friends (and their friends, and so forth) as liaisons, we set out to find men who met our criteria.

After a careful briefing, the liaison would contact a potential participant and tell him about the project, our backgrounds, and our procedures for ensuring confidentiality. If the candidate gave his permission, we would then call to see if he met our criteria. Usually, we asked a few general questions about his personal background and degree of self-disclosure at work. As the fieldwork progressed these criteria became increasingly strict, and we were sometimes forced to exclude a candidate whose age, occupation, or self-presentational strategy placed him in an already-filled category. If a candidate met our criteria in this brief pre-screening, we'd invite him to take part in the study.

Because potential candidates often volunteered other candidates, this initial phone call sometimes set off another round of introductions and calls, and by the time we reached a qualified candidate it was often through a long string of liaisons.

Participants in New York and Philadelphia volunteered the names of friends in Washington and San Francisco, and our network of referrals grew geometrically over the course of our fieldwork. To secure just five interviews in San Francisco, for example, we ultimately spoke with almost 50 men, and as many as five friends-of-friends sometimes linked us to a single qualified participant.

As the fieldwork neared its completion, we supplemented this "snowballing" technique with attempts to recruit participants through more direct channels. In one case, a friend sent us an article from the *Bay Area Reporter*, a gay weekly in the San Francisco area, about Levi Strauss's newly-formed gay employees' union. The article included the name of its founder, whom we called and invited to participate. He, in turn, arranged for us to speak with other men in the San Francisco area. With the cooperation of another friend in the San Francisco area, we also arranged to post an advertisement on a gay computer bulletin board. The posting described the project, and encouraged users (who use on-line pseudonyms) to contact us by phone. Though we received more than a dozen on-line queries for more information -- usually regarding our own sexual orientation -- only one of the men, an engineer in Minneapolis, encouraged us to call.

Between July '90 and February '91, we conducted 70 interviews in five cities -- Houston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, New York and Washington -- and ultimately spoke with men who lived or worked in ten different states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia. All but a few lived or worked within 25 miles of a major urban area, and all worked -- either currently or recently -- for a company with at least six employees. Some were between jobs, while others had recently retired or gone on medical disability.

The demographics of the final sample are described in Figure 1.1. While I made every effort to gather a diverse group of participants, my method ensured that certain professions, age groups and strategies would be better represented than others. Also, because I sought men who worked in white-collar, professional environments, I found it more difficult to ensure diversity with respect to race or class. With this in mind, I should say something about the relationship between my participants and the population of gay men-at-large.

**PARTICIPANTS**  
Demographic profile

	TOTAL (70)	% OF TOTAL
<b>Age</b>		
21-25	2	3 %
26-30	17	24
31-35	19	27
36-40	12	17
41-45	7	10
46-50	5	7
51-55	3	4
56-60	3	4
60+	2	3
<b>Religion</b>		
'Important'	31	44 %
Protestant	17	24
Catholic	10	14
Jewish	2	3
New Age	2	3
'Not important'	39	56
<b>Racial identity</b>		
African-American	2	3 %
Latino	1	1
White	67	96
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married	2	3 %
Divorced	3	4
Never married	65	93
<b>City of interview</b>		
Philadelphia	23	33%
Houston	16	23
New York	17	24
Washington	9	13
San Francisco	5	7

See Appendix III for greater detail.

FIGURE 1.1

Some gay men were more difficult than others for our liaisons to find. By definition, certain self-presentational strategies ensure that their users would be less likely to know our liaisons and less likely to read or respond to our computer posting. For men using a strict "counterfeiting" strategy, for example, their

inaccessibility is in fact a sign that the strategy is working. And though we made a special effort to include such men, they are likely underrepresented in my report.

Other men, once found, were unwilling to participate. Some made it clear, by their words or actions, that sexuality was an uncomfortable topic. A Catholic priest gave me a typical response: "I just think I'd be uncomfortable doing that. I'm sorry, but it's not something I want to talk about." Others, especially those who work in homophobic organizations, were concerned about confidentiality. Because of the military's aggressive anti-gay employment practices, for example, enlisted men were difficult to find and reluctant to participate. A junior engineer at a major defense contractor explained that he was periodically subject to polygraph tests:

It makes me nervous even thinking about this stuff, because that's one more thing that could turn up on the test. It took me six months to get a security clearance, and this would be a disaster; I know other people who've lost their clearance when [their homosexuality] got back to management. . . . The less I think or say about it, the better.

Others were concerned about their public reputations and the specter of media exposure. A Houston lawyer in his mid-30s agreed to take part, but informed us that despite our assurances, "all of your tapes and notes would turn up in court if you were ever sued." A U.S. Congressman told us he'd "love to help," but had been made nervous in recent months by the "outing" controversy, and the unwanted press it had brought to several other gay politicians. I had met the Congressman several years earlier at a small party in the Philadelphia area, yet despite our network of mutual friends he seemed wary of my intentions. As a compromise, he agreed to answer a few questions "off the record", and to act as a liaison. "Let me put you in touch with Barney Frank," he suggested. "He loves to talk about this stuff."

Whatever their reasons for being inaccessible, these were the men who got away. The refusal rate was quite low once we had spoken to candidates over the phone; fewer than 10 declined after speaking with us. But there was a much larger group who never made it to the phone conversation. Our liaisons approached only the men they assumed would be willing to participate, eliminating at the outset anyone they feared would be reluctant. And even among those they

thought would agree, the answer was often no. Though we made a special effort to appeal to these nervous or hard-to-find men, especially during the latter stages of the fieldwork, we didn't always succeed.

### *Interviews*

We began the interviews in the spring of 1990, with a series of group sessions designed to elicit the vernacular language and conceptual categories used by gay professionals when discussing self-disclosure. We asked them to talk about "coming out" at work, and heard their own definitions and their own emphasis in explaining them. We asked them to talk about their careers, and heard their concerns about the future. Then, as the interviews became more structured, we developed specific and closed-ended questions, and began meeting with individual participants in July of 1990. The full-length interview is outlined in Appendix III.

Each interview began during our initial phone contact. After a liaison gave us permission, Jay Lucas or I called a candidate and initiated a brief conversation. We told him about our personal backgrounds, and introduced by project with several standard statements:

The project is sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania, and is a study of the career issues faced by gay and bisexual men. Since last April, we've been speaking to men in several different cities and professions, and our goal is to talk to about 50 people. This database will be the basis for several projects, including a dissertation (by James Woods), and other publishing projects by one or both of the researchers.

Our goal, briefly, is to understand the ways gay and bisexual men manage their relationships with co-workers, bosses and subordinates in large organizations. We're particularly interested in the ways they manage information about sexual orientation.

Because many of our participants are concerned about confidentiality, we've established strict procedures for ensuring that you remain anonymous. All of the interview materials -- the tape recording, the notes that we make, anything [the liaison] told us about you -- remain the sole property of the authors. Under no circumstances will publishers, editors, or our colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have access to any of the primary data.

To the extent that we use these materials, we'll do so in a way that makes it impossible to identify the individual. Geographic location, names, and any



details about employers or work situations will be changed to ensure that you remain anonymous.

The interviews take about 2 hours, and we're happy to meet you at your home, or at the apartment we'll be using in [the city].

Usually the candidate responded with some information about his work situation and answered our questions about his personal background and availability. If he met our criteria, and if he agreed, we then arranged a time and location for the meeting.

As we built rapport with a participant, my partner and I carefully managed what we revealed to subjects about ourselves. We said as little as possible about our own values, about our affiliation with gay organizations perceived to be militant, like ACT-UP and Queer Nation, or about the research tradition in which we were working. We said nothing about "strategies" or "impression management," and we avoided conversations about gay politics and the ethics of self-disclosure. During the interviews, we also tried to show restraint when a participant provoked a particularly strong positive or negative reaction. Our goal was to establish a neutral, supportive environment in which participants felt they could be candid.

Without saying much about our personal backgrounds, we made certain that participants knew we were gay. Most had assumed this without being told, or had asked the liaison before our meeting.<sup>14</sup> There were several reasons for this disclosure.

At the outset, Jay and I felt that our self-disclosure was necessary to create a trusting environment. A code of mutually-assured secrecy has long characterized gay communities -- a friend refers to this as "trading hostages" -- and our own candor seemed to bolster our assurances of confidentiality. In fact, we were supported in this assumption by decades of social psychological research on self-disclosure. Commenting on his famous series of experiments, for example, Jourard notes that "much of social science is founded on a person's willingness to reveal

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<sup>14</sup> Even so, one of the men seemed puzzled. He knew, from our phone conversation, that I was gay. But he apparently misunderstood that my partner was not gay, which led him to comment during the interview that "it's great one of you is here to provide the straight person's perspective."

himself to researchers; the conditions and dimensions of authentic self-disclosure therefore bear directly upon the validity of many 'facts' in the social sciences" (1971:3). He and his colleagues found, in particular, that subjects disclosed more with a interviewer who had himself disclosed information of a personal nature. When such information was withheld, participants were less likely to feel they could trust the interviewer (see Chelune *et al.*, 1979).

I also felt that my sexuality would serve to establish my credentials as a gay researcher, improving the quality of the exchange in other ways. There are certain experiences one will only share with, and expect to be understood by, others of the same sexual orientation. In his study of American Indians, for example, Walter Williams (1986) found that his "berdache" participants had been unwilling to confide in the heterosexual researchers who preceded him. As a gay anthropologist, Williams used his own sexuality to build rapport and gain access:

If I had been the typical ethnographer, because of the fact that such private behavior is not talked about, I might have concluded that nothing sexual was occurring among these men. I doubt that I could have gotten the men to admit to their sexual activity with the berdache (p. 106).

In fact, many of the earliest ethnographic accounts of lesbians and gay men were marred by the limited access granted to nongay researchers. As Krieger notes in her 1982 review of the literature on lesbian identity:

[The researchers] have been for the most part nonlesbian. . . . Many of the studies report that access to lesbian populations has been affected by whether or not the researcher was a lesbian; access and trust are viewed as problematic because of the secret and stigmatized nature of many lesbian populations (p. 229).

When the participant has reason to mistrust the researcher, both access and understanding will be limited.

My own experience confirmed that in the eyes of the participants, my sexuality made me credible as a researcher on gay lives and careers.<sup>15</sup> It verified my

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<sup>15</sup> The importance of insider status can be weighed against the limitations proposed by other researchers. For example, consider the caveat made by Marny Hall in the introduction to her study of professional lesbians: "My embeddedness in the lesbian community - personally, socially and professionally -- as well as my gay-affirmative politics precluded an 'objective' method of data gathering or analysis. Instead I employed a naturalistic mode of enquiry. Such an approach, because it emphasizes the multiple, constructed, context-bound nature of reality and acknowledges the intersubjectivity of interviewer and interviewee, was

membership in the culture-at-hand, and for this reason the interviews were often characterized by an instant camaraderie and the sense that Jay and I had been accorded "insider" status.<sup>16</sup> Participants took conversational shortcuts and assumed we were able to follow. They were liberal in their use of gay argot and elliptical remarks like "you get the idea" and "you know what I mean." Because the men assumed we had shared (or at least heard about) similar life experiences, stories about sexual awakenings and "coming out" were often told in schematic terms:

I did the "coming out" thing in the usual way: wet dreams and fantasies about the football captain, misguided attempts with girls, guilt and a few drunken oh-god-I-was-so-drunk-I-don't-remember-a-thing nights with buddies in college. Then the discos, the self-help books, conversations with my parents. Sound familiar?

The importance of this camaraderie was most evident when it was inadvertently breached. Due to a misunderstanding, one participant assumed through the first section of the interview that we were heterosexual, and found himself at a loss when trying to explain a particular sexual scenario. When we assured him that we understood, that we were gay ourselves, he apologized and started again. "I wasn't going to get into the whole story," he explained, "because I didn't think two straight guys would have any idea what I was talking about."

This anecdote underscores the dependence of the ethnographer on the trust of his or her participants, especially when the subject matter is sensitive; our ability to build rapport was crucial. But, at the same time, the very process by which we built rapport betrays our vulnerability to the broad class of validity threats called "interviewer effects." To illustrate this point, it will be useful to note certain

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most consonant with my values as a lesbian and feminist" (1989:129). See also Plummer's discussion of scientific "objectivity" (1981:220-222).

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the case for "insider" status is made best by Style's (1979) report on his study of gay baths. As Plummer (1981) recounts it: "[Style] contrasts the earlier phases of his study where he used an *outsider* strategy -- 'observation without sexual participation, and a correspondingly heavier reliance upon informants as original sources of ideas as well as a means of testing these notions -- with an *insider* strategy -- 'observation and sexual participation in the baths, the heavy use of these as a source of original typologies and images, and the employment of informants as a way of testing, revising and evaluating these typologies and images'"(p. 220). Though I asked only a few questions about explicit sex, the research situations were analogous.

characteristics of the interview that may have created pressure to withhold or distort information.

Our encounters with participants generally took the form of a one-sided conversation in which one party was granted privileged, non-reciprocal access to information about the other. We asked participants to divulge information that often signifies intimacy in our culture -- information that is normally reserved for lovers, friends, priests or therapists -- and claimed the ability to analyze it in some special fashion. Not surprisingly, participants often wanted to know what we "thought of" their decisions. How did they measure up to the other participants? Did we approve of the decisions they had made? At other times, participants seemed to regard us as new-found friends with whom they were to spend a few hours of intimate conversation. They served us drinks and snacks (and in one case an elaborate spread of hors d'oeuvres), and assured us, as we finished the interview, that we had been pleasant company. Several offered to "show us around" the city, and urged us to let them know "the next time you're in town." Five men called within a few days of our meeting to suggest that we have dinner. When I agreed, they inevitably used the opportunity to justify or elaborate on their comments, or to seek my feedback.<sup>17</sup>

But whether they viewed us as confidantes or authority figures, it is reasonable to assume that most participants sought our approval or favorable judgment. Consequently, it would be optimistic, and untrue, to say that I collected data on the ways gay men actually behave at work. My access was far more limited. My data reflect, rather, what gay men recall and choose to reveal about their own behavior at work. The snapshots I've taken are not exactly candid because, as

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<sup>17</sup> During our de-briefing sessions, several of the men spoke as if they had just taken part in some kind of therapeutic exercise. Dan, the director of a psychiatric clinic in Houston, explained that "You asked questions that I've never really . . . that I've thought about maybe just superdicially, but not anything more than that. It was really mind-provoking." Likewise, Eric, a Delaware banker, was especially moved: "You've helped me a great deal, because you've made me bring out some things that I've hidden about the way I feel about myself and being gay. That's basically why I wanted to have you interview someone who was still married, and who worked in my profession. I think what you're doing is great, and I really respect you for doing this. I think . . . I hope your book is going to be real positive in the marketplace, and that the world accepts it. I think it could have some good meaning for a lot of straight people who have negative thoughts on people being gay."

Hochschild observed, "people pose even in their confessions" (1983:57). If impression management is indeed an endless process, we must ask not *if*, but *in what ways* it may have distorted my view of gay men in white-collar environments. As my participants "posed" in their meetings with me, what information did they suppress?

Several points come to mind. Though Jay and I tried to create a neutral interview situation, our efforts were ultimately frustrated by the very nature of the encounter: our role, as gay researchers, was burdened with significance. Imagine a typical interview scenario. We arrived with tape recorders and note pads, asking questions about sexuality in a comfortable, non-judgmental way. I told participants that I planned to publish these findings (sometimes prompting the question, "Are you using your real name?") Though we told them we had no pre-conceived notions about how one *should* handle his sexuality, our own lifestyles proclaimed otherwise. Perhaps this is why our questions sometimes provoked a defensive reaction. "I know you probably think everybody should just 'come out,' but it's not that easy," one participant asserted. Another told us that "it's not the same in my business, you know. Universities are liberal, but that's a luxury not everybody has." In at least some cases, participants interpreted our lifestyles as a sort of dare; implicitly, we seemed to criticize any effort to disguise one's homosexuality.

Perhaps this is why, on at least one occasion, a participant's story conflicted with information we gathered about him through other means. Kirk, a 31-year-old medical researcher, spoke with pride about the way his colleagues had accepted his lover, Jeff. Early in our interview, he explained the process by which he had first introduced them to Jeff:

I could have avoided the issue entirely and not socialized with [my co-workers], but we all really do like each other and we wanted to socialize, so it just became natural. And they said, "Well, are you going to bring anybody?" And I said, "Well, look, let me tell you. I'll bring somebody, but I just don't want ya'll to fall out of your chairs." And they said, "Why? What do you mean?" But after I told a couple of them, I just said "fuck it, I really don't care anymore." . . . I started saying "Jeff" every now and then. Sometimes they would have to call me at home at night, and he would answer the phone. So I figured the hell with it.

In a later chapter, I will describe the "normalizing" strategy Kirk is now using, and the pride he takes in feeling honest and intimate with his colleagues. I believe his

description of his present-day situation is an accurate one. What Kirk didn't volunteer in our interview, however, was an important fact about his past. Several weeks after our interview, we learned through another friend that Kirk had not always used the same strategy. Before he introduced Jeff to his colleagues, he had sometimes disguised him with a woman's name. For example, when talking about their life and activities together, Kirk allowed co-workers to believe that Jeff -- whom they had never met -- was actually a woman. For whatever reason, this information did not surface in our interview. Perhaps we didn't ask the right questions. Or perhaps Kirk was reluctant to describe a "counterfeiting" strategy he has now discarded, and of which we perhaps seemed to disapprove.

For this reason, among others, I am circumspect when approaching this body of data about interpersonal exchanges. As an interviewer, I tried to gain access -- through the verbal recollections of our participants -- to a range of interpersonal phenomena that were often nonverbal, non-conscious, and unmemorable. Consequently, it is often difficult to recover these phenomena from the debris of past experience. The passing glance, the meaningful comment or gesture, and the practiced ritual usually pass unnoticed, and like other details of an encounter they are unrecoverable. Those that *can* be recalled often misrepresent the encounter; they were exceptional in some way, and for this were experienced consciously, remembered, and recalled.

This is not to suggest, of course, that interviews yield nothing of value. On the contrary, by approaching ethnographic data with care, and from more than one angle, the researcher can recover what is needed.<sup>18</sup> It is merely to stress that the inevitable distortions should be treated as a sort of "data" in their own right. If it were possible to study them in a systematic way, these distortions would undoubtedly reveal much about the subject at hand -- but that, as they say, is another story.

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<sup>18</sup> Recent work in cultural anthropology has encouraged us to view the researcher as a positioned subject (Rosaldo, 1989), whose very presence shapes the nature of the interview situation. The practice of ethnography, consequently, must be viewed as attempt to represent, in words, the experiences one has lived through or heard described by others, when your stated purpose was to study a culture.

Finally, I'd like to anticipate several questions about the nature of this report. There are certain things, I should say at the outset, that I have not tried to do.

First, this report is not meant to represent the experiences of all gay men, nor even of all professional gay men. In studying the circumstances and adaptations of gay men in white-collar organizations, I have suggested certain ways of looking at the issues and have described whatever patterns I observed. No particular theory has been subjected to verification, and the theories I do propose are grounded in the experiences of a limited and non-representative sample. Before verification can be attempted we must confront the task of thinking about something that has been the object of surprisingly little thought. And given this early stage of the inquiry, the most promising way to use these empirical materials is to point, to illustrate, and to comment. That is what I have tried to do.

Nor can we assume, second, that my findings bear directly on the experiences of professional lesbians. Beyond the few published accounts that are available (Hall, 1989; Weston, 1991; Schneider, 1987), I haven't studied the self-presentational strategies used by lesbians in work environments, and am unwilling to presume that they are identical to those used by men. Such an assumption would be neither fair nor accurate, and my observations about lesbians would inevitably seem tacked on to an essentially male model of sexuality. As the anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood has noted:

[D]ifferent constraints placed on women and men demand a separate analysis of lesbian behavior in order to identify the contexts of women's roles that uniquely shape its expression. Past research on homosexuality reflects the implicit assumption that lesbian behavior is the mirror-image of male homosexuality. Yet the act of having sex with a member of one's own sex may be culturally defined in rather divergent ways for women and men (1985:6).

One of the key tenets of recent lesbian activism has been precisely this point: lesbian existence cannot be understood in the terms supplied by gay male existence; there are no "female equivalents" to the gay men I interviewed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> As Adrienne Rich noted in an influential article, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980): "Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through 'inclusion' as female versions of male homosexuality. To equate lesbian existence

I would venture, further, that the professional experiences of lesbians and gay men will *remain* different so long as women's experiences in our culture are fundamentally different from those of men. As Escoffier (1975) has noted:

The working lesbian suffers the added problems of being a woman. . . . The dynamics of passing and self-isolation exist for gay women both as *discredited* persons who must control tension in their interactions with men and as *discreditable* persons who must control information about their stigma among women *and* men (p. 16).

Like the larger society in which they are situated, white-collar organizations are profoundly sexist (as well as heterosexist), and this differentiates the experiences of those on either side of the gender divide. One can argue, in fact, that the "mirror-image" fallacy described by Blackwood is itself a product of a heterosexist culture that equates and lumps together the experiences of its various sexual outlaws.

Third, nor do I mean to suggest, with my emphasis on self-presentation, that sexual "identity" is something fixed and immutable in the lifespan of an individual. I met with participants only once, and have little to say about the means by which each of them acquired his gay identity. I know little about their pasts, and can only speculate what shape their identities will assume in the future. The "gayness" of these men was the starting point for my research, and I leave the important developmental work to social psychologists and sociologists with an interest in identity-formation.

Nor are "identities" fixed within the lifespan of the larger culture. On the contrary, the social roles available to an individual are the products of a particular cultural and historical moment, and one would be mistaken to assume that they do not change. If nothing else, the social constructionists have demonstrated the instability of sexual roles and concepts over time. Beginning with McIntosh's (1968) influential article, they have revealed the process by which the modern "homosexual role" was constructed, and the process by which "homosexuality" came

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with male homosexuality because each is stigmatized is to deny and erase female reality once again. To separate those women stigmatized as 'homosexual' or 'gay' from the complex continuum of female resistance to enslavement, and attach them to a male pattern, is to falsify our history" (p. 650).



to reside in a category of persons rather than acts.<sup>20</sup> And just as there were no "homosexual" persons (though plenty of acts) until the late Nineteenth Century, there were no "gay men" or "gay identities" until the later half of the Twentieth. Consequently, the specific self-concepts and modes of self-expression available to my participants were not available to men in past centuries (or even decades), and may be lost to those who follow in the next.

Even the notion of sexual identity -- as an analytic construct -- must be kept in its appropriate context. Just as particular identities are grounded in a period and place, so are the modes of analysis to which they give rise. Consequently, we must be cautious when exporting a Western, Twentieth Century notion of "identity" to the study of other cultures. The temptation, in much existing fieldwork, has been to use constructs like "homosexuality" and "sexual orientation" to describe sexual beings to whom such terms are foreign, beings as diverse as the North American berdache (see Herdt, 1991; Williams, 1988), and the ancient Greeks (see Halperin, 1989; Padgug, 1989). As Gilbert Herdt (1991) noted in a recent essay on cross-cultural representations of the sexual,

[T]he comparative study of sexuality across cultures, as in so many other areas of anthropological research, is saddled historically with the conundrum of situating entities, objects (roles, institutions), and meanings between universal processes and particular situations" (p. 484). [And as a result], comparative accounts have always had to address this representational issue, by way of metaphors and tropes deriving from our own folk model of homosexuality" (p. 486).

Recent comparative historical and ethnographic work has revealed the flaws of this universalizing approach (Blackwood, 1986; Herdt, 1991). In fact, the chief virtue of social construction theory may well be the questions it forces us to ask: whether something we call "gay identity" existed at other times and in other places, and

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<sup>20</sup> Hencken (1984) describes some of the conceptualizations of homosexual behavior that preclude self-labeling as a homosexual. To avoid the stigma of a gay identity, men who have sex with other men sometimes offer alternative explanations of their behavior, including: "I was drunk," "I was just horny," "I was just experimenting," and so forth.

whether we can productively analyze those situations with the analytic tools fashioned in our own.<sup>21</sup>

Mindful of these efforts to historicize sexuality and its modes of analysis, I have made no attempt to find cross-cultural or trans-historical comparisons. The gay identity I describe is historically and culturally situated -- an artifact of white-collar, urban culture as I observed it in the late 20th century. Those who apply it to other populations do so at their own risk.

Finally, this is not an attempt to document whatever objective evidence exists for corporate norms about sexuality. I have viewed the white-collar organization through the eyes of the 70 gay men who gave me access to it, and my portrait is a highly subjective one. I made little effort to corroborate their stories with other evidence, nor did I seek a second opinion from their co-workers; rarely did I even set foot in a participant's office. My goal has been to describe the sexual culture of white-collar organizations *as perceived by* the gay men who work within them, who build their careers around them, and who structure their sexual self-presentation according to their norms and strictures. These men served as guides on my tour of the white-collar organization. If something escaped their notice then it is not part of their subjective reality, and as such it falls outside the scope of this report.

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<sup>21</sup> To be sure, when taken to its logical extreme the constructionist position poses an epistemological quandary. As Carol Vance observed in 1987, at the International Conference on Lesbian and Gay Studies: [T]o the extent that social construction theory grants that sexual acts, identities and even desire are mediated by cultural and historical factors, the object of study -- sexuality -- becomes evanescent and threatens to disappear. If sexuality is constructed differently at each time and place, can we use the term in a comparatively meaningful way? More to the point in lesbian and gay history, have constructionists undermined their own categories? Is there an "it" to study? (1989:21-22). The solution seems to lie in the recognition that our modes of analysis and thought are themselves cultural artifacts; any notion of sexual identity -- indeed, the notion of sexuality itself -- cannot be unproblematically applied to other populations.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PRIVATE LIVES, PUBLIC JOBS

In 1980 it was revealed that Mary Cunningham, the vice president of strategic planning at Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, was having an affair with William Agee, the chairman of its parent company. The result was an unprecedented flurry of speculation and criticism in the national press. Though she had earned honors at Harvard Business School, Cunningham was portrayed as a sexual opportunist. Since joining the company in 1979, she had won a string of promotions and raises, and these were now subject to intense scrutiny. Why had she been promoted so quickly? Had she been rewarded for professional performance, or for her extra-professional dealings with her boss? Meanwhile, Agee was attacked for behavior that seemed to weaken his legitimacy as the company's chief executive officer. The relationship with Cunningham was not the issue, according to his critics; the problem was the lapse in judgment it seemed to reflect. Dogged by these accusations, Cunningham resigned.<sup>1</sup>

The Agee-Cunningham affair, like countless others that do not capture national attention, demonstrates our tendency to think of organizations in genderless, asexual terms. Whether it's a company, law office, hospital or charity, an organization is usually described in structural terms, as a hierarchy of abstract "slots" to be filled by generic "workers." Activity within it is ostensibly organized around getting something done (managing an activity, manufacturing a commodity, providing a service) and behaviors not relating to that central endeavor are pushed to the fringes. Sexuality, when acknowledged at all, is usually assigned one of several marginalizing labels. It's a friendly social diversion, a imprudent distraction,

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<sup>1</sup> In her 1984 memoir, *Power Play: What Really Happened at Bendix*, Cunningham protests the limitations we place on romance between co-workers. In it, she wrote: "Men and women who work together will fall in love. And why should this surprise anyone? People who work together come to know each other in a way that is far more meaningful by most standards than meeting in a singles bar. To put these people off-limits to one another is unrealistic. And to presume that such romances are "not worthy of truly ambitious women," as one popular magazine would suggest, is an affront to love based on mutual admiration and respect." The Agees were married in June 1982.

or an unwanted (and in the case of harassment, illegal) intrusion. Whatever it is, it's not official business.

One can argue, in fact, that the legitimacy of bureaucratic authority is grounded in its apparent asexuality. Bureaucratic principles emphasize formal chains of command, and when one member of an organization is linked to others by ties of affection or attraction, the flow seems to have been diverted. Relationships like the one that developed between Agee and Cunningham seem to short-circuit the impersonal, hierarchical lines along which companies are expected to allocate authority. As Greenberg (1988) notes,

Even when decision-makers actually remain uninfluenced by personal loyalties, the appearance of impartiality that a bureaucracy must maintain to preserve its legitimacy can be threatened if intimate relationships are publicized (p. 438).

To protect themselves from these threats to legitimacy, most companies try to expel sexuality from their ranks. Many have official or unofficial rules against nepotism, and fraternizing with clients is usually forbidden. Judges are expected to disqualify themselves when they have personal ties to one of the parties in a trial, and nothing is more discrediting to a manager than the appearance that he or she acquired a position of power "unfairly," by using sexuality in some way. Ten years after the Agee-Cunningham affair, the resignation of Standley H. Hoch, former head of the General Public Utilities Corp., suggests that the rules have changed only slightly. When word got out in the summer of 1991 that he was having an affair with Susan Schepman, the company's vice president of communications, it was Hoch who resigned. As the *New York Times*' headline duly noted, "The Boss Who Plays Now Pays."<sup>2</sup>

More subtle manifestations of sexuality are usually restricted by an informal code of "professional" behavior -- and what I call the "asexual imperative". In office hallways, we hear people remark that "sexuality is a private matter, and doesn't belong in the office." "It's irrelevant to the task at hand." "People shouldn't be that intimate at work." Or, "it's rude, disruptive, and tacky." In many companies, this notion of professionalism manifests itself in dress codes that

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<sup>2</sup> Front page of the business section, June 13, 1991.

prohibit seductive or revealing clothing, policies that require office decor to be in "good taste," and informal taboos against off-color jokes. In her *Complete Guide to Executive Manners*, Letitia Baldrige places questions about a co-worker's "sex life" among those "too personal to ask,"<sup>3</sup> and insists that "an executive's sex life should be kept out of the office before, during, and after marriage. If you feel the need to talk to someone about yours, whether to boast about it or complain about it, find a sympathetic and helpful source *outside* the office" (p. 53). The cumulative message is loud and clear.

For gay people, this poses a curious paradox. The "asexual imperative" would seem, at first glance, to render sexuality irrelevant to work, keeping homophobia out of the office. In an organization that compels one to be asexual (and defines itself in opposition to sexuality), shouldn't people be indifferent to the sexual orientation of peers? Yet even as organizations claim that sexuality *per se* is beneath their notice, they seem uncomfortable with homosexuality.

To resolve the paradox, I will first explore our prevailing beliefs about professional behavior, and the "asexual imperative" that encourages us to think of organizations in mechanical, asexual, gender-neutral terms.

### **The asexual organization**

Our tendency to dichotomize "organization" and "sexuality" is embedded in an even broader dichotomy, one that distinguishes "society" and "sexuality."

As Weeks (1985) has demonstrated, our culture's prevailing religious, philosophical, social scientific, and sexological discourses uphold the notion that sexuality is somehow part of an animal nature -- biologically or psychodynamically driven, irrational, innate -- that exists prior to (and is at war with) civilization, society, and the forces that would repress or tame it. Much of our sexual discourse can be viewed as skirmishes between these opposed camps: those who would liberate sexuality (releasing it *from* society) and those who would regulate, repress or limit sexuality (protecting society *from* it). In either scenario there is an

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<sup>3</sup> Even more taboo than questions about "anyone's sex life" are direct inquiries about homosexuality, which merit their own entry on Baldrige's list of "questions that are too personal to ask" (p. 77).

opposition, some version of which is woven through all of our dominant accounts of sexuality.<sup>4</sup>

Even a brief reconstruction of organizational history turns up the same sex-versus-society formulation. The tendency to pose sex as a threat to bureaucratic authority can be found in the paleo-bureaucracies of medieval Catholicism (Burrell, 1984), and in the Quaker prisons, workhouses, and schools of the 17th and 18th centuries (Child, 1964). Its ideological roots are in Western, patriarchal-liberal notions of "privacy" (Pateman, 1983; Elshtain, 1981; Weeks, 1981), in the Puritan restriction of sexuality to procreation and the domestic sphere (D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Barrett & McIntosh, 1982), and later in Weberian theories of the rational, impersonal bureaucracy (Hearn *et al.*, 1989; Greenberg, 1988:434-454). The notion of the asexual organization is thus the product of religious discourse, the dichotomization of public and private spaces, the domestication of sexuality, and the bureaucratic rationalization of time and the body.

Contemporary management theory and policy reproduce this dichotomy. In thinking and theorizing about organizations, we tend to locate sexuality somewhere outside their walls, from which point it often seems to intrude, encroach or sneak up on those who toil within.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Weeks (1985), the sex-versus-society formulation has yielded two basic responses, which he calls the "repression" and the "liberatory" models. On the one hand are those who view life as a ceaseless duel between animal instincts and morality; on the other lie those who view sex as a beneficent energy, distorted and perverted by the efforts of a 'civilization' gone wrong. Though thinkers in each camp disagree on what constitutes the "natural" or "social," all pose some version of the division and opposition between civilization and sexuality.

For example, Weeks notes that Havelock Ellis concluded the influential *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* with a volume entitled "Sex in Relation to Society", and suggests that: "This formulation is so taken for granted that its validity has scarcely been questioned. Yet, as becomes clear with a moment's pause, this problem already assumes a response in terms of the pre-existence of two given entities: 'sex', the arena of natural, individuality, and identity, and 'society', the domain of cultural norms, social laws and (sometimes) history. The sex/society divide evokes and replays all the other great distinctions which attempt to explain the boundaries of animality and humanity: nature/culture, individual/society, freedom/regulation" (p. 97).

### *Asexuality in theory*

In his essay on "bureaucracy," Max Weber notes that one of its first effects is to "segregate official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life," and emphasizes that "the executive office is separated from the household, business from private correspondence, and business assets from private fortunes" (1946:197). Though he makes no mention of sexuality *per se*, Weber implicitly locates it in the realm of the private, the personal, the non-organizational. Like F. W. Taylor, Fayol and Urwick, and the many other "founding fathers" of organizational theory, Weber was primarily interested in effectiveness and efficiency, an orientation that tends to render sexuality and gender invisible (see Burrell & Hearn, 1989:9-14).

Since Weber's time, decades of organizational theorists have advanced the view that organizations are asexual and gender-neutral. With their emphasis on the rational, goods-producing aspects of organizational behavior, these theorists have concerned themselves with sexuality only insofar as it could be commodified and made part of the output (see Hochschild, 1983). The limits of this modernist vision have been amply demonstrated by feminist and post-modernist critiques, but as an ideal type it retains a powerful hold on the popular consciousness. As Pringle notes: "People's views of how organizations actually do work and how they 'ought' to work are still filtered through Weber and the theory becomes, in some sense, a self-fulfilling prophecy" (1989:160).

Consequently, from the industrial revolution on, as managers strove to "desexualize" labor (Burrell, 1984), management theory advanced a distinction between the organizational/public and the sexual/private. Sexuality was assumed to belong outside the organization, and was excluded from its conventional wisdom:

If sexuality is defined as private behavior, then there is no reason for an organization (or organizational researcher) to be concerned with it. It is outside the scope of organizational behavior. As non-organizational behavior, it need not be discussed, handled or even acknowledged: for all practical purposes, it is invisible (Gutek, 1989:57).

Blinded by this bias, most organizational analysis has scarcely considered the sexuality of organization, and as a topic of study it is largely neglected in textbooks and journals (Gutek, 1989; Zedeck and Cascio, 1984).

In part, this is undoubtedly because researchers have narrowly defined sexuality as a category of discrete behaviors (innuendos, affairs, flirtations), rather than as a subtext to organizational behavior in general (see Burrell & Hearn, 1989:20-21). Typical of this approach is Quinn's (1977) report, "Coping with Cupid," which regards organizations as a vast marketplace for potential "romantic entanglements." His method was to ask informants to describe the (heterosexual) couples they had observed in the workplace, thus defining sexuality in terms of "a relationship between two members of the same organization that is perceived by a third party to be characterized by sexual attraction" (p. 30). A subsequent report by Warfield *et al.* (1987) employs a similar definition, with questionnaire items limited to "personal/romantic relations" and "extramarital affairs." In a book titled *Sex in the Office*, Horn & Horn (1982) seem to begin with a broader notion of sexuality, noting that "sex in the office is really a range of subjects," but quickly narrow the field to six categories of sexual behavior: flirting, one-night stands, casual dating, affairs, sexual harassment, and commitment (p. 15-16). Defining sexuality in terms of sexual activity, the authors then concern themselves with its impact *on* (rather than its suffusion *of*) the organization: How do organizational romances affect the image of the firm? How do they impact the morale or productivity of co-workers? And what is the organization's policy for dealing with them?

Most reports on sexual harassment accept the same distinction between sexuality and organization, and regard the former as a category of intrusions on the latter. Consequently, while some researchers have explored subjective definitions of what is considered harassment (Cohen & Gutek, 1985; Schneider, 1982), most have attempted to gauge the frequency and effect of particular harassing behaviors. As Gutek (1989) notes:

The early research on sexual behavior at work focused on description of the frequency of sexual harassment, description of harassing encounters, people's reactions to harassment, the behaviors that are defined as harassment, and the like. . . . [T]here is little systematic description of non-harassing sexual behavior at work and few attempts to understand sexuality at work aside from determining whether some particular class of behavior is or is not harassment (p. 57).

While useful for policymakers and law enforcement officials, this approach scarcely suggests the full importance of sexuality as an organizational dynamic.



In this way, the dominant paradigm in organizational studies has viewed sexuality as the deviation of actors into gendered or sexual territory, not as an inherent component of behavior.<sup>5</sup>

### *Asexuality in policy*

If sexuality is indeed external to organizations -- something that interferes with their primary purpose -- it follows that it should be regulated, prohibited, or otherwise held at the company gates. Official and unofficial corporate policies are often established with this purpose in mind.

The informal policy, in most organizations, is to look the other way. In a survey of Fortune 500 companies, Warfield (1987) found that only 2 of her 37 respondents had written policies on romantic relationships at work (though 16 had policies on nepotism). When asked how they handle relationships in the office, for example, most responded that they either "tried to overlook them" (36%) or "felt the problem will resolve itself" (18%). Only 2 respondents (6%) said that their companies supplied some form of "orientation or instruction" to new employees "about personal/romantic relationship involvement" within the organization (p. 28).

In the absence of a formal policy, most companies seem willing to ignore a liaison until it becomes a nuisance. Queried by *Business Week* ("Romance in the Workplace," 1984) about his company's policy on in-house romance, Thomas A. Nossem noted that Leo Burnett Co., an advertising agency, didn't have one. "As long as the relationship doesn't affect our ability to get out ads, it is none of our damn business" (p. 70). In her survey of managers, Warfield (1987) asked "at what point might you have a sense of responsibility for your subordinates' sexual behavior?" The responses revealed a consistent tendency to look the other way:

Most of the respondents answered they would take responsibility for their subordinates' sexual behavior when it interfered with job performance. Respondents said they would intercede "if it blatantly interferes with their credibility with other employees -- i.e., becomes a source of gossip so that

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<sup>5</sup> As Acker (1990) notes, even feminist perspectives on organization tend to reproduce some version of this dichotomy: "Some of the best feminist attempts to theorize about gender and organizations have been trapped within the constraints of definitions of the theoretical domain that cast organizations as gender neutral and asexual" (p. 144).

others might avoid the person"; "if it became offensive to others or disrupted the normal flow of business"; and "when it was creating talk" (p. 30).

Sexuality is thus treated as a non-issue until the point at which it seems unavoidable, and even then it is usually handled on a case-by-case basis.

Explaining the absence of a more formal etiquette on organizational sexuality, Letitia Baldrige (1985) advises that "there is no book of sexual manners in the office, because sex simply doesn't belong in the office. It exists, in lesser and greater degrees, but the greater the degree becomes, the closer the situation approaches disaster" (p. 53).

When companies do acknowledge sexuality in employee manuals and personnel policies, it is usually to guard the organization *against* it. Policies that prohibit nepotism, fraternizing with clients, and immodest clothing all take the form of organizational prophylaxis; office romances can be stopped before they start (the implicit purpose of a dress code), or firmly escorted outside company doors (in the case of married co-workers, one of whom is usually asked to leave). Likewise, it has become common for companies to have an explicit policy against sexual harassment (Feldman, 1987), though the prescribed solution is usually the same: the sexual offender is simply expelled from the organization.

As these examples suggest, the official, top-down view of organizational life regards sexuality as an extra-organizational phenomenon. Formal and informal policies acknowledge sexuality only when it seems to trespass on company ground, and when it does manifest itself (in the form of discrete sexual "acts"), the typical response is to expel the intruder. In theory and policy, the contemporary white-collar organization is, or should be, asexual.

### **The asexual professional**

The sex-versus-society formulation can also be found in the distinctions we maintain between "individuals" and the "jobs" they are called upon to perform. Just as we separate individuals (who are sexual) from organizations (which are not), we tend to think of "workers" and "careers" in abstract, asexual, genderless terms.

The dichotomy has been formulated in many ways, but it consistently distinguishes jobs from the people who do them. As Pateman (1983) notes, the "public" and the "private" are the central categories of patriarchal-liberal society, and our culture tends to divide social space along these lines. "The public sphere, and the principles that govern it, are seen as separate from, or independent of, the relationships in the private sphere" (p. 282). It follows that companies are public institutions, and when private individuals step into their offices and boardrooms they cross an important cultural boundary. They become public actors. This same distinction is upheld by labor laws that attempt to separate private and professional roles. For example, federal statutes prohibit an interviewer from asking questions about an applicant's lineage, ancestry, national origin, marital status, parental status, birthplace, spouse, children or other relatives. Implicit in these restrictions is the notion that such personal matters have no impact on the job; the person being hired is a "professional" who can be stripped of such "personal" characteristics. In *The Work/Life Dichotomy*, Morf (1989) addressed this same distinction, noting that work is "imposed by society and done for society. It is collective and public activity. Thus, the work sphere is associated with society rather than the individual" (p. 5). One's "life," he maintains, is suspended when there is a "job" to be done.<sup>6</sup>

### *Separate spheres*

Gay men embrace this same dichotomy when speaking about their careers. In my interviews, it was most often expressed as a distinction between public and private activities, but can also be found in the distinctions we make between professional/social friends, work/leisure hours, public/domestic spaces, official/unofficial duties, and so forth. However it was expressed, the doctrine of

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<sup>6</sup> For Morf, and for some of my participants, the split is caused by the often uninteresting or dehumanizing character of work. Many romanticized the notion that in other fields, or under other circumstances, there would be no split. According to Todd, a benefits administrator at a public utility, "I don't have a passion about my job. I'm not crazy about my job. I'm really envious of people who are, like entrepreneurs, or someone who's in the arts, or journalism, or medicine. Their jobs and their personal lives are basically the same."

"separate spheres" implies the existence of a public, work-producing, professional self that can be shorn of its sexuality during office hours.

The dichotomy is implied by a question that became a sort of familiar refrain during the interviews: "What does being gay have to do with my career?" In a typical case, a Philadelphia consultant named Michael agreed to talk to me about "the way he managed his career" -- the ambiguous phrase I often used when introducing the project. He seemed eager to help, and spoke candidly about his job, his plans for the future, how he was compensated, how he felt about his boss and co-workers. But after the first 30 minutes, Michael seemed perplexed, and gradually a bit annoyed. "I thought we were going to talk about being gay," he said, as though he'd suddenly found himself in the wrong interview. "Isn't that what the study's about -- being gay? These questions are all about my job."

I tried to explain the connection, emphasizing that I wanted to understand the ways gay men manage their sexuality on the job, especially in their relationships with clients, bosses and other co-workers. Michael smiled, and looked a bit apologetic. "I guess you'll be disappointed with me, then. I keep them totally separate. I keep my private life private, and I don't let sexuality interfere with my work." Like other personal matters, he explained, sexuality didn't belong in the office. And that being the case, he couldn't help but ask: "What does being gay have to do with my job?"

The answer, for most of my informants, was that one's sexuality is separable from, or irrelevant to, one's career. When speaking about their work, my informants tended to downplay the importance of sexual orientation, insisting that it was a relatively superficial, secondary characteristic. For example, the manager of a Houston psychiatric clinic explained:

At the clinic, I know that everyone knows who's gay and who's not, and some are more verbal about it than others . . . but it doesn't matter to anybody. They're people first, and sexual orientation comes second.

When asked if he considers himself gay, an insurance salesman told me that "my sexuality is secondary to who I am as a person and as a professional. It's really a separate issue." Similarly, a Houston records clerk told me that "if someone [at work] knows I'm gay, I'd like to think that they can overlook that, that it's secondary to the person I am."

At other times, my informants attempted to de-essentialize sexual identity by describing it as a random, superficial trait. A Houston airline executive was passionate in his insistence that he not be "reduced" to sexuality:

*I happen* to be gay, but I'm a lot more than that. That just happens to be the cards I was dealt. Wilma [a co-worker] just happens to be a Jehovah's witness. And Rosalie [his boss] just happens to be from a dysfunctional family. I'm not living because I'm gay, that's not my reason for *being*. That's not who I am.

A senior banking official in Delaware made a similar distinction between his "self" and his "sexuality":

I'd love to be able to talk to people about being gay, cause they don't understand what it's all about. You know, "See, I'm gay, but you never thought I was gay." It doesn't change me as a person. What difference does it make whether I'm gay or not? I'm still *me*."

In his study of college faculty, Louie Crew (1978) encountered a similar reluctance to characterize sexual orientation as an essential component of identity. When asked to describe their sexuality with a few brief adjectives, many of his respondents refused to include sexual orientation, substituting more general labels like "unique" or "human." Some insisted that they "don't like to be identified" by sexual orientation at all, or that they were "fed up with crap like this." Like many of my informants, Crew's respondents saw sexual orientation as a trait to which one was "reduced," one that failed to represent them as complete individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Others pose the dichotomy in more oppositional terms. A Philadelphia architect, when asked if sexuality had impacted his career in any way, told me:

It never did. No, believe me. As far as career is concerned that's the way I treat it. That's exactly what it is, it's only one aspect of my life and it really doesn't have anything to do with the other aspects of my life unless it interferes with my personal life. I mean, I'm in the career to sustain my personal life, and if the career takes over, forget it. It's just not worth it. I haven't yet been in a position yet where I can say this is really worth giving up my personal time for, so it just never happened.

In this case, a "career" is posed as something that actively competes with, and threatens to eclipse, a "personal life."

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<sup>7</sup> There is an revealing paradox, however, in Crew's data. While his informants felt that being categorized by sexual orientation was somehow dehumanizing, they were not insulted by the labels "man" and "human," which categorize by gender and species.

Barry, a lawyer in his early 40s, volunteered this version of the dichotomy. Several years before we met, Barry had worked for a prestigious New York firm at which he was openly gay. "It became self-perpetuating," he told me, "because people knew I didn't care if anybody knew. They'd take new people around and say 'this is the xerox room, this is the mail room, and by the way, Barry's gay.'" Most of his co-workers handled the information well.

"Unfortunately," Barry admits, "this did not go well with the macho standards of the litigators." Several of them took a strong dislike to him and became verbally abusive at times. The conflict finally peaked over Barry's handling of the recruitment program for summer associates. As head of program, he arranged picnics in the park, trips to the ballet, individual dinners with candidates, and other social events, all of which made him highly visible within the firm. The response, from several people, was a series of jokes and comments:

For instance, when I was running the summer program, this note circulated about the "Turkish Bath Outing" and how we were all going to dress up in high heels. The first prize was going to be a night with a big hunk, and they called it a "weenie roast," that kind of thing. One of the partners circulated it. . . . Of course, the subtext to this was "we're hiring a bunch of fags," which we weren't, as a matter of fact, but that's not the point.<sup>8</sup>

Realizing that he had made "too many enemies," Barry ultimately left the firm. Summing up the situation, he recalls the ways his co-workers treated him, both "personally" and "professionally":

They persecuted me, but professionally they treated me very well. I always got the highest raises, the best work, I always got off when I wanted to, that kind of stuff. . . . I knew it was best to leave before [partnership] came up. But professionally, at least up until I left, I certainly was not treated badly at all. It was personally.

Barry thinks that his co-workers treated him well *as a professional* (who earns raises, does work, and takes vacations). It was only *as a person* that he was harassed. Though the recruitment program was technically part of his job, Barry considers the mistreatment "personal" because it was his sexuality that provoked the attacks.

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<sup>8</sup> Barry went on to note that "if somebody had written something about the 'Uganda Dinner' -- you know, how all the niggers were going to get together and do this -- management would have stomped all over them! But in this case, of course, they didn't."

As these examples suggest, our prevailing definition of a "professional" activity or identity seems to exclude sexuality. When one acts in a professional capacity, sexuality is postponed or suspended, and when speaking about their careers gay men tend to separate the spheres, insisting that sexual orientation is part of their "lives," not their "jobs." Whether opposed, unimportant, or irrelevant to one's work, sexuality is always the "other."<sup>9</sup>

### *The asexual imperative*

The separation of spheres was embraced and defended by most of my informants, who argued that it was necessary or useful in some way. "My sexuality *shouldn't* be an issue at work," according to an advertising executive, "and that's true for everyone. We're here to do work, and that means we leave sexuality outside the office door." Not only are the spheres distinct, my informants told me, they're that way for a perfectly good reason.

The argument for this separation took a number of characteristic forms. When asked why they had or had not "come out" at work, for example, my informants cited a series of ideological constructs, described below, that seem to rationalize their own invisibility. Taken together, these constructs comprise a multilayered argument for professional asexuality, a mandate that I call the "asexual imperative." Though its particular ideological fragments overlap (and sometimes contradict one another), I've attempted to explicate them, one at a time.

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<sup>9</sup> Weston & Rofel's (1984) ethnography of Amazon Auto Repair illustrates a situation in which the personal/professional split was at least temporarily bridged. The shop was founded in 1978, and "to the degree that Amazon integrated these spheres by hiring lesbians and bringing them into an environment that encouraged them to be 'out' on the job, it not only provided a space sheltered from the heterosexism of the wider society, but also undermined the compartmentalization of lives and self characteristic of most workplaces" (p. 202). The result, at Amazon, was an integration of work and non-work activities. "Women went to flea markets together, carpooled to work, cooked dinner for one another, and attended each other's sporting events. Lovers were treated as members of the extended Amazon 'family' and welcomed into the shop during business hours" (p. 203). When a labor dispute erupted, several years later, efforts were quickly made to reinvokethe private/public split, and to make things more "businesslike."

*privacy*

Professional culture establishes vague and shifting boundaries between public and private spaces, activities and relationships, and gay professionals often invoke some notion of privacy when defending the asexual imperative.

In this scheme, sexuality is strictly located in the private sector, to the point that gay men often use the terms "sexuality" and "private life" interchangeably.<sup>10</sup> When asked to describe how and to whom they disclose sexual orientation, for example, my participants often answered in euphemisms: "My boss doesn't know about my *private life*," or "I haven't told her about my *personal situation*." A 30-year-old financial analyst told me that it was important to "keep my private life private," and that to broach the subject of his sexuality with co-workers would thus be to "bring my private life into the office." Though I carefully avoided the term "private life" in my questions, many of the men volunteered it as a synonym for sexuality.<sup>11</sup>

Offices, by contrast, are defined as public places, and the result is a familiar syllogism: "Sexuality is private; offices are public; therefore, sexuality doesn't belong in the office." When asked why he was reluctant to tell co-workers about his lover, for example, one of the men invoked this binary logic: "Sex belongs in the bedroom," he noted, "not the boardroom." Steve, a records manager in his late

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<sup>10</sup> The unthinking tendency to regard sexuality as a paradigmatically private activity can be found in countless essays about sexuality and civil rights, such as Alida Brill's (1990) book, *Nobody's Business*. In her criticism of a gay pride march, she blithely asks: "What was wrong with the picture of that spring day? These citizens were undeniably exercising their legitimate rights to speech, to protest, to assembly. Yet there, on the streets, they were also giving up a part of themselves, that most intimate, and in some ways most sacred, part of all humans. They were voluntarily revealing the identity of their sexual souls . . . This was not the same as a march for the right to vote or to engage in other public activities. Taking to the streets to announce openly and publicly that most inherently private aspect of life -- a person's bedroom behavior -- they represented a striking paradox." Brill never pauses to question her assumption that sexuality is "inherently private," "intimate," and "sacred."

<sup>11</sup> The equation of the terms "sexuality" and "private life" is even more striking in an anecdote supplied by Steven, a Houston accountant. When a co-worker moved next door, Steven was afraid to bring dates or lovers to his apartment. "It wasn't that much of a problem, but he [the co-worker] used my stairwell that runs right up to my front door. I guess I kept my personal life -- my personal life didn't come to my apartment. I went out for my personal life. No close calls." Because his sexual and romantic encounters were arranged off-site, Steven concludes that his "personal life" had been moved outside his home.



20s attributed the same thinking to his employer: "I think management would probably look at [self-disclosure] as a conflict of interests, in other words, that I'm bringing my personal life to work and I shouldn't be." He later told me that he expects to be promoted within the next few years, provided "*my life* isn't becoming a problem with *the job* I'm doing."

Non-disclosure is thus expressed as a matter of boundary-maintenance, as gay men think in terms of keeping public and private behaviors in their proper domains. A 27-year-old advertising executive explained: "There are lines you don't cross. Personal matters, private matters, just don't belong in the office. You have to be aware of those boundaries." Glen, a Houston oil executive, elaborated on the importance of these boundaries:

I don't need to be socializing more with the people I work with. I need to have balance anyway. It's just like I don't particularly need for my parents to know more of the details of my private life than they know. *It's mine*. Privacy has a function, it seems to me. I think it's -- I'm not sure that if somebody's dating women or is in a marriage and is having problems should discuss all those details with his colleagues, either. . . . I feel like I've got an equilibrium that I'm comfortable with.

A "private" life is thus posed as something distinct from (and opposed to) work, something that can be "balanced against" the counterweight of work. Something that requires one to seek "equilibrium."

In some organizations, my informants seemed to learn this bifurcation from an influential boss or co-worker. Jeff, a financial analyst in his early 30s, is one of three analysts in a small Philadelphia investment firm. Though he considers his co-workers liberal and open-minded, he is reluctant to talk about his sexuality at work. "I don't think they'd have any problem with it," he explains, but at the same time, they don't seem to invite any discussion of "private" matters:

I think about telling Jack [his boss] sometimes, but I'm not sure what the reason would be. I know his whole attitude toward work is that he really keeps his private life private . . . To actually talk about it would sound as if it were a bigger deal -- I'd be bringing my private life into the office to a degree.

Jeff explained that in keeping his sexuality a secret, he was merely taking his cues from Jack, who rarely spoke about his wife and children. "We all keep our social lives pretty separate," Jeff concluded, adding that he only knew "pretty superficial

stuff" about Jack's life outside the office. Even if he weren't gay, he thought the boundaries would remain in place. "Jack is someone who'd feel very awkward if I were married and I came in one day and said 'I'm getting a divorce.' It's bringing the personal into the office."

Even the most elaborate efforts to mislead co-workers are sometimes justified in the interest of privacy. Louis, a lawyer in his mid-40s recalled his first few years at one of Boston's most prestigious firms. With a growing client base and considerable expertise in tax law, Louis was considered one of the firm's rising stars. Other associates found him easy to work with, and in a few years he was considered a likely candidate for partner. The word in the hallways was that Louis was "going places."

There were others, however, who considered him somewhat of an enigma. He rarely attended office social events, and although invitations were often extended, no one at the firm had met his wife and family; nor did she call the office. Some of the partners had attended a party for which she prepared a lavish meal, but even then she had been called away and was unable to meet the guests. An otherwise friendly, sociable man, Louis seemed to avoid conversations about his home life and would sometimes protest that he "wanted to keep private matters private," or that it was "unprofessional" to bring family concerns to work. When a secretary asked about his wife's birthday, Louis told her that "he didn't like to get the worlds mixed up. People should learn to keep those things out of the office."

His notion of privacy seems somewhat strict until one is told -- as the partners ultimately were -- that the wife-in-question was actually a man, a lover of many years who had been carefully kept out of sight, disguised in countless conversations and excluded from office gatherings and parties. Louis' wedding ring was a family heirloom, and the photographs on his desk were of a college girlfriend long since married to someone else. At the mysterious dinner party, Louis' lover had in fact prepared the meal -- and hid in the garage until the guests were gone. The scheme had been an attempt, Louis told me, "to set up some boundaries, and mark off a little space for my private life."

### *intimacy*

A second argument for asexuality views sexual self-disclosure as a token of intimacy, a sign of affection or friendship, and thus deems it inappropriate for professional relationships. Like our notions of privacy, it rests on simple logical argument: "Sexual self-disclosure signifies intimacy; professional relationships are not intimate; therefore, professional relationships should not include such disclosures."

Perhaps because they've invested so much in keeping information about sexuality a secret (and have suffered or imagined penalties for letting it fall into the wrong hands), many gay men reserve sexual candor for their most intimate relationships.<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, self-disclosures become invitations to, or confirmations of, interpersonal intimacy. Friends are divided into the categories of those "who know" and those "who don't," and the act of self-disclosure can become a turning point in the growth of a friendship. A New York public relations executive recalled that after his secretary learned that he was gay, their relationship seemed to change. "Suddenly she assumed that she knew me very well, just because she knew that I was gay." Tony, a Philadelphia investor, sensed that by avoiding the subject with his peers, he had prevented those relationships from developing. Coming out, he thought, "might actually make us -- it might open up the opportunity for us to become close friends. In fact, I might be blocking it." Likewise, a Houston lawyer felt that his decision to maintain sexual secrecy in the office had made him "a bit colder than I might have otherwise been."

Decisions about self-disclosure are often based on the direction a relationship is desired or expected to take. When business associates are regarded as potential friends, self-disclosure often becomes an issue. In "strictly professional" relationships, on the other hand, the rules are different. I asked Scott, a marketing representative for a Philadelphia insurance company, how he would

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<sup>12</sup> At least one of my informants, a San Francisco architect, acknowledged that these same beliefs posed a conflict during our interview. Speaking about his co-workers, he told me: "I don't want to get all that close to them. I have a real problem with people knowing that much about me." He paused for a moment, and laughed. "In fact, it's very strange to me, even doing this interview, but I'll never see you guys again, so it doesn't matter."

respond if a someone asked, "Are you gay?" His answer placed co-workers in two general categories:

I have said to myself that if someone I knew very well asked me that question, I would tell them. If someone asked the question just to be nosy, I would probably tell them no, or say it's none of our business. But if it's a close friend of mine who had the gall to ask me that question, I would tell them yes.

Others insisted that none of their co-workers were friends, which made self-disclosure a non-issue in the office. When asked why he hadn't "come out" to co-workers, for example, a 32-year-old investment banker explained:

It's not as if I have a personal friendship with most of these people, nothing that goes beyond a basic work friendship. I've socialized once with three or four people, but it's not as if we're close friends. I'm sure there are things they haven't discussed with me.

Likewise, according to Greg, a Philadelphia architect in his early 30s:

It's none of their business -- it is absolutely none of their business. I have a tendency not to get into relationships with the people I work with. Work is not a social activity, it's not the place I need people on a level where I can get to know them for who they really are.

In all of these examples, professional relationships are deemed unworthy of sexual self-disclosure. Sexual candor is reserved for more intimate, personal, or friendly relationships. As Charles, a Virginia travel agent, pointed out, it was only when professional relationships crossed over this boundary that self-disclosure became an issue. "After a while, somebody's not your co-worker, they're your friend, some who's stepped over the boundary from co-worker to friend. They have a new definition in your life." Only then does he discuss his personal life with the other men and women in his office.

Some men described proactive efforts to enforce this model of a professional relationship. An art director for a New York advertising agency explained that he didn't want to be too close with his co-workers, because "I just don't think it's proper behavior in the office." Though the firm is small and friendly, "I don't want to be there just to be there and socialize with everybody. I work with these people, and if I like them, *fine*. And if we get along, *great*. But I'm not going to do it on a regular basis." Justin, a college professor in his mid-40s, described his

attempts to maintain professional relationships with the faculty at a small Northeastern university:

[My approach was] to deliberately not make friends, and to deliberately not get to know anybody too well, and just do my work and the teaching and research. . . . I would avoid all social invitations, I wouldn't even get into conversations in the hall with people, because I didn't want to get into the situation where I knew someone well enough that they would say "Oh, how was your weekend. What did you do?" I didn't want those things to come up. . . . I just lumped everything at the university into this one category: "It's just your job." I never let myself get attached to people or develop any feelings -- though they were trying. I just wouldn't let it happen, ever.

In all of these anecdotes, friendships are judged categorically different from professional relationships.

Many defend this model of a "professional" relationship, fearing that if the lines are blurred -- if professional relationships become too intimate -- they would be unable to do their jobs. "I have too many other things on my mind during the course of the day," according to Arthur, a New York lawyer who insisted that "I don't think it's appropriate to get that involved in other peoples' personal lives." Dan, the director of a Houston psychiatric clinic, warned that "there's the potential for it to get too loose, too comfortable, too friendly" when co-workers are open with one another. "It's real nice to have that comfortable feeling," he notes, "but you can't cross the line. People start personalizing and not being objective." An oil-industry executive in his late '30s had a similar criticism of office friendships, calling them a form of "modified nepotism" that would ultimately lead to poor business judgment.

Others fear that intimacy with co-workers would render them too sympathetic, not tough enough. Grey, the leasing agent for a large Houston mall, explained his reasons for avoiding self-disclosure:

I don't feel comfortable socializing with them at all -- I don't want them to know that much about me and I don't want to be their friend necessarily because the next day I may have to come in and have a fight with one of the accountants or something. . . . I just don't like to be that familiar with people.

The one exception, Grey noted, was his assistant Courtney, with whom he was on more friendly terms. "It's a bad thing," he admitted, "but we go out a lot and do

stuff together." Chip, a Houston software engineer, recalled a similar relationship with his assistant:

I don't feel close to my new boss at all. My former boss I felt close enough on a business relationship, and I feel uncomfortably close to David [his assistant] because I know all the stuff that's going on in his life and that makes me feel kind of sympathetic to why he is underperforming. I try to remove myself and look at it as if I didn't know anything, and just see the underperformance.

When he shared this dilemma with someone in human resources, Chip was told to "keep some distance to avoid problems."

Les, the business manager of a technical high school in New Jersey, shared a similar anecdote. Several years ago his school hired a new horticulture instructor, Paul, who was rumored to be gay. The two men became friendly, but before long Les felt it necessary to pull back:

There's an old adage, "you never dip your pen in the company ink well." Are you old enough to know that one? There must have been half a dozen times in my life when I wanted to do that. But I'm always glad that I didn't, because eventually I'd have to fire someone, or there'd be some static or something. When Paul [the horticulture teacher] first came, we would talk gay things, but we don't talk gay things anymore. We only talk business.

Les explained that the relationship, which began with the mutual disclosure that both men are gay, had become too friendly; ultimately, it became necessary to pull back. Similarly, the 27-year-old supervisor of a records-management company was afraid that personal disclosures would bias his judgment:

I just think you have a better workplace if people keep their private lives to themselves. If they bring too much of it to the office -- if I know too much about a person's social life -- it's going to influence my decisions on merit increases or disciplinary actions, that sort of thing. Specifically, if I know that this person has gone through a divorce, and it's an unpleasant divorce and there are children involved, I'm going to be more sympathetic in my treatment of that person. And that really shouldn't impact what goes on in the office. That you leave at the door at 8:00, and it really shouldn't become involved.

Intimacy between co-workers is thus viewed as a conflict of interests, as something that would compromise their objectivity and professional judgment. To maintain the proper distance, they suggest, it's often necessary to withdraw socially. Clay, an executive secretary, explained that while he and a co-worker "could have a lot

more fun in a social way," he felt certain that "it would interfere with work. It can't be both ways, it just can't." The solution, for many gay men, is sexual secrecy.

*relevance*

A third argument for asexuality takes the position that sexual matters have nothing to do with professional performance. Not only are the spheres separate, they're unrelated. And if there's no need to disclose sexual orientation, the reasoning goes, then why bring it up?

Like arguments about privacy and intimacy, the relevance argument is grounded in the notion that "work" and "sexuality" are distinct classes of activity. "Who we sleep with or what time we come to work is beside the point," according to the business manager of a technical high school, adding that there's no need "to talk about something that's not part of the job relationship." Similarly, a high school teacher in his 40s explained: "I don't think my sexuality has anything to do with my job. They're two totally different things."

Implicit in this argument is the notion that the separation of spheres is natural and normal, a condition that should be changed only when there is a need. "I don't think that personal knowledge about one's sexuality is *necessary* for working relationships," according to a senior airline executive, and "if there's *no reason* to bring it up, then why go to all the trouble?" A graphic artist offered a similar explanation, and saw no need to change the status quo:

I'm not one of those people to go around advertising my sexuality because I don't think it's *necessary*. What's necessary is what I do for a living, and the job's not who I sleep with, or who I date.

Likewise, a management consultant told me that he had "never found the *need* to just announce to someone that I was gay."

Typical of this view is an emphasis on the job itself, and the insistence that all other matters, including sexuality, are secondary and irrelevant. When asked what his co-workers know about his sexuality, Les told me, "I do *my job*. I'm competent. I treat them fairly. My sexuality is irrelevant." A Ford executive in his 40s once overheard his boss say that he "didn't care if people came to work in their fucking

pajamas, as long as they did *the job*." Jerry, a securities trader, was even more insistent:

On Wall Street -- a place of *work* -- it really isn't a place to discuss sexuality. With your friends, on non-work time, it's perfectly fine to discuss sexuality. And if your friends happen to be co-workers, when you're not on work time, if you want to discuss sexuality that's fine. But in a business setting, there isn't really any reason to gossip.

Similarly, Grey recalled his boss' advice: "You want to be judged on your *accomplishments*," she told him, "not on your relationships."<sup>13</sup>

In all of these examples, there is the presumption that the sex/work dichotomy is a natural or inevitable condition. Asexuality is considered a status-by-default, and self-disclosure is framed as a positive, disruptive act that must be justified. It follows that unless a compelling reason can be found, one should simply *remain* asexual. The relevance argument is thus characterized by a conservative appeal for asexuality; the burden is placed on the listener to demonstrate the need for change.

Jason, a senior executive at a pharmaceutical company, shared this recollection. In the early '80s he had been part of a gay physicians group in Philadelphia, and was contacted by a pediatrician who wanted more information about AIDS. When they met, the woman asked if Jason thought she should tell her employers that she's a lesbian. Jason responded with a defense of asexuality:

I had to tell her very honestly you know, that if somebody came into my office with that information, applying for a job in our organization which was a four-man pediatric group, I would question "Why are you telling me this? Why should that make any difference?" That was just my impression as a prospective employer. If somebody came to me with that information, I would question their judgment. Its so unusual, people don't come in and tell me their heterosexual or they're bisexual or they're homosexual, that's not a part of the employment interview. I guess, rightly or wrongly, my

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<sup>13</sup> A sales manager in a Washington department store invoked the criterion of relevance when disciplining a sales clerk who was spreading rumors about his sexuality. "This part-time sales person (who I think was a huge queen himself) said to someone else 'He's queer, he's queer as a three dollar bill.' I overheard it, and I was furious. Working in retail, everyone's gay, but I was closeted there. I remember I confronted him. I said 'Andre, is there something you wanted to say to me?' and he said 'No, what are you talking about?' I said 'I'll bet you three dollars that there is.' I said 'My personal life is none of your fucking business. And if you don't like, that's too bad. You can transfer to another department, or quit.' We never talked about that or much else again."



own bent is that it's not part of the workplace. At least in this environment.

Implicit in Jason's response is the notion that people are asexual -- not heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual -- until they affirm otherwise. In a working environment, he argues, such affirmations are unnecessary.

If sexuality is indeed irrelevant to work, then "coming out" can be made to appear trivial, even laughable. To prove the point, a Washington lawyer assured me that "if someone ever said to me 'are you gay?' my immediate response would be 'well why are you asking me?'" A software engineer in his mid-30s made the same point by painting an absurd scenario:

I've thought about it a couple of times -- actually coming out at work -- but I don't see how it's relevant. I don't need to go round saying "I'm gay, I'm gay," and write a memo to everyone saying "Oh, by the way, I'm gay." [laughs]. It doesn't seem like it's really important.

Others described equally unlikely situations. According to an advertising executive in his 20s, "unless you're a prostitute or a porn actor -- or maybe Mae West -- what does your sexuality have to do with work?"

Joel, a Washington consultant, works in a small office with one other consultant and a small clerical staff. He and his partner Mary have worked together for almost 10 years; at one point, they owned a building together. Yet Joel has never discussed his sexuality with Mary, and considers it irrelevant to their relationship. Joel explains that he "can't think of any reason" Mary needs to know, and doesn't expect she'll ever get around to asking:

I would feel that it's an intrusion. I certainly expect that anybody with her proximity in my friendship circle has the *right* to ask that, but I would wonder why she felt that it was *necessary* to ask. I mean, there might be a good reason: maybe I'm going to win a million dollars if I'm gay, or something. Then I could understand why she's asking. But until I knew why, and was sympathetic to her reasons, I would hold back. I would think it was an intrusion.

I asked Joel if his disclosure might enhance their friendship, and thus their business relationship. Perhaps Mary would ask because she wanted to know him better:

I don't know if that would enhance our friendship. Sometimes people need to know everything about you to be your friend, but I don't feel that that's the basis for friendship. My friends are not Republicans, or

Lutherans, or rich people, or gay people. They're *all* people. I have lots of minorities, straight, non-Lutherans as friends. So it won't enhance our relationship.

Finally, I asked Joel if there was any situation in which he might disclose his sexuality in the context of a professional relationship. He thought for a moment, and recalled something that had happened a few years ago. As part of his involvement with the Lutheran church, Joel frequently meets with students from Georgetown, American, and other local universities. "They come in and have dinner here, and socialize," he explained. One student, in particular, seemed eager to talk, and lingered after one of Joel's dinners. "He said to me, as he discussed his life, that he was gay. He wanted to talk to me. He was a graduate student, and he taught bible studies. And as I listened to him, my sense was that he needed a gay friend. He was really reaching out for help." For Joel, this was ample "reason" to reveal himself. "So I told him that I was also gay, and invited him to go with me to get a broader range of experience in gay life in Washington." Though Joel considers such circumstances unusual, he maintains that he's willing to "come out" when the circumstances warrant it. "If there's a *need*," Joel explained, "then I'm happy to address that. But if there's no need, I'm not prepared to take the risk."

### *professionalism*

Asexuality is also defended in the name of professionalism, by men who suggested that sexual self-disclosure would constitute a disruption, a threat to office harmony.

"Professionalism" was often characterized as a code of decorous behavior that excludes personal or intrusive conversations.<sup>14</sup> A New York attorney assured me that his co-workers rarely discussed sexuality at all. "That would be unprofessional. It would be overly personal. It would be out of character." Most of his co-workers

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<sup>14</sup> At least one of my informants equated "professionalism" with the keeping of secrets among gay people. When asked if he worked with other gay people, Scott told me: "Of course in any organization you'll have other gay people that you'll see out [at gay establishments]. Everyone is still professional about that. . . . When you associate yourself with that kind of group it sometimes becomes evident that you are gay. And sometimes you'll hear it in the conversation, but at the same time they keep it on a professional level. They don't spread it."

know that he is gay, but "they obey the rules of decorum and protocol, and good lawyerly professionalism." At other times, the "professional" was described as a category of person. "My boss is a professional," according to Brent, a 27-year-old records management executive, "and my colleagues are somewhat professional. Everyone else is clerical, so it's a different kind of person. They tend to be busybodies, discussing people's personal -- you know, gossiping and that sort of thing, not as serious about their work."<sup>15</sup>

In this scheme, self-disclosure is criticized because it distracts others from the work at hand. Dan, the director of a psychiatric hospital in Houston, felt that this was a potential problem, and regularly cautioned his gay employees to remain secretive about their sexuality; one therapist was almost fired because he wore a suspicious-seeming earring to the clinic. To disclose one's homosexuality, Dan argued, was unprofessional:

A mental health professional has to be a blank screen, so that a client can project whatever they have on you. If you disclose something inappropriate about yourself, that's going to make the process less clean and effective than it could be. . . . I try to portray the professional atmosphere that you need in this society.

Les, the business manager for a technical high school, had similar concerns about the disruptive potential of his sexuality:

It's much better the way it is, because they [his co-workers] don't have to face the issue. We all have our jobs to do, and who we sleep with or what time we come to work is beside the point. If you talk about something that's not part of the job relationship, then it becomes a compounding factor.

Similarly, a 28-year-old human resources trainer at a Washington hospital explained that his boss -- herself a lesbian -- insisted that her gay employees remain in the closet when dealing with the medical staff at the hospital. During the workshops and training sessions, "she thinks that trainers should be anonymous in a sense. The content is what's important." To "come out" would disrupt the

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<sup>15</sup> Brent later contrasted "professional" behavior with "effeminate" or stereotypically gay mannerisms. When describing a gay co-worker he thought was somewhat flamboyant, he observed: "I think he presents himself very professionally and appropriately, but there are some minor things that I don't think he realizes -- or perhaps I'm overreacting. Certain gestures or certain expressions that seem very gay. Perhaps I'm just oversensitive."

training procedure and limit the effectiveness of the work. "It would be inappropriate," he says, "because it draws attention to yourself."

Gay men who cite this definition of professionalism worry that "coming out" would either shift the emphasis away from work or actively interfere with it. "It could become dangerously unprofessional around here," according to a Houston manager with a staff of 15, "if people found out that I'm gay." In a classic example of in-group discrimination, an executive secretary, refused to hire an otherwise-qualified candidate because he learned through mutual friends that the man was gay. The secretary explained: "It was important to me that I maintain a professional environment," something he felt would be impossible with another gay man in the office. A Houston-based consultant received an even harsher demonstration of the perceived antagonism between professionalism and self-disclosure. While traveling with a co-worker, he found himself in a heated argument during which he revealed himself to be gay. Though the disagreement ended amicably, he received notice several days later that he had been fired. The official explanation: unprofessional behavior.

#### *etiquette*

Closely related to this notion of professionalism is a general sense of office manners intended to ensure the stability of work relationships. Sexual self-disclosure, it was often suggested, would be a breach of office manners, and to "come out" is thus to risk being disruptive, impolite, offensive, or rude. The emphasis, in this case, is not on the flow of work but on relationships with co-workers, and the potential for sexual issues to disrupt them.

When describing their office environments, many of my informants explained that sexual topics were unwelcome in most company settings. A New York lawyer described the atmosphere at his firm, and the "lawyerly etiquette" that seemed to prohibit sexual disclosures:

I think lawyers have it easier than any other profession. It's just not an inquisitive profession. We're paid to ask questions, and when it comes to our relations intramural, we just don't. It would be unseemly for me to ask another single associate -- I might ask what he did over the weekend, and he'd say "I saw *Postcards from the Edge*." But it would be unseemly to say "Well, did you go with a girl with big tits, and did you [hand gesture

suggesting sex]?" I think law is one of the more fortunate, white-glovey professions in that respect.

A Houston software engineer received this demonstration of his co-workers' sensitivity about sexual etiquette:

I put a joke on the messaging system once about "What has a thousand teeth and eats weenies?" The answer is "a zipper." One of the guys called me and said he didn't think that was appropriate because women were on there.

In both of these examples, sexuality is deemed unworthy of interpersonal exchanges between co-workers.

Specific conversations about one's homosexuality were also dismissed as being potentially rude and disruptive. Chris, a management consultant in his 40s, thought that this was a function of his personal style and upbringing:

I always find it -- because of my Southern background -- to be a bit crass. You know, as Southerners we don't talk about things like that. We just *do* it; we don't *talk* about it.

Another man feels certain that his secretary considers him gay, but assured me that "she would *never* bring it up. She knows that it would make me uncomfortable, so she wouldn't do it. She would consider it inappropriate." Similarly, a New Jersey dentist in his mid-30s was asked by a co-worker if he's gay, and his response was to upbraid her for what he considered a breach in office etiquette. "I told her 'I'm not, and I think you're rude for bringing it up.'"

At the heart of both the professionalism and etiquette arguments is thus the notion that sexuality (and homosexuality in particular) is a disruptive topic; people will be upset or distracted by it, and that disturbs the harmony of the office. To reveal one's gay identity is to interfere with the primary purpose of the company, and it follows that in order to be professional, gay people must maintain a polite invisibility.

The notion of asexuality is thus a central, pervasive feature of professional, white-collar culture. Whichever specific argument is used to advance it, asexuality becomes a sort of model against which professional gay men judge their own behavior, a norm they are compelled to observe (even in the breach). It turns up in their assessments of their own behavior, their judgments about the behavior of

others, and their general normative statements about how one should behave in a professional setting. Common to all versions of the argument is the notion that sexuality and work occupy distinct spheres, a separation that most of my participants seemed eager to maintain. To understand white-collar culture, then, one must begin by acknowledging that organizations -- conceived as public, ordered, rational institutions of civilization -- have long been viewed as the antithesis of private, chaotic, irrational, pre-civilized sexual "nature."

The asexual imperative is thus comprised of several entwined ideological strands, and one should take care not to exaggerate the differences between them. I have tried to untangle the basic arguments made in its defense, but have based my distinctions on subtleties in my informants' language that may or may not reflect actual conceptual categories. Many of my participants cited more than one version of the imperative, sometimes in the same breath, and their contradictions were many. The lines could be drawn in a number of different ways, eliminating or combining categories simply by changing their level of specificity.<sup>16</sup>

Still, the various ways of articulating and defending asexuality are joined at the base, in their shared assumption that "work" (and its corollary terms "organization," "professional," and so forth) and "sexuality" (or "personal life") are inherently

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<sup>16</sup> We might also ponder the reason that constructs like sex/society, and private/public take the form of dichotomies. Weeks (1985) has suggested that sexuality is a relational concept; it exists through its relation to other concepts (the non-sexual), and is thus dependent upon these dichotomies for its linguistic unity (p. 177). Weston (1991) supplies these examples: "In any relational definition, the juxtaposition of two terms gives meaning to both. Just as light would not be meaningful without some notion of darkness, so gay or chosen families cannot be understood apart from the families lesbians and gay men called 'biological,' 'blood,' or 'straight'" (p. 28).

But these same terms might be given continuous, rather than dichotomous, definitions; the public and private are not inherently opposed, and one can imagine *descriptive* definitions that acknowledge their tendency to interweave, the fuzziness of their borders, and so forth. According to Benn & Gauss (1983), however, we tend to favor dichotomous definitions because the words are used in a *prescriptive* way, to distinguish behaviors that are or are not permitted. "When finding something to be public (or private) calls for or permits one sort of action rather than another, a continuous conception will not do" (p. 13). Because these terms play a part in the regulation of sexual displays, we will favor prescriptive/dichotomous rather than descriptive/continuous definitions.

distinct. For gay professionals, whose sexuality has often cost them dearly, one can well imagine the appeal of this distinction.

### **Sex at the fringes**

But how is sexuality regarded when it *does* appear in organizational settings?

When sexuality is acknowledged or condoned at work, how is it reconciled with the asexual imperative?

The imperative is operant not only when the organization is thought to be devoid of sexuality. In fact, it is precisely when sexuality *is* acknowledged in organizational settings that the arguments I've described are most often hurled at the trespasser, who will be viewed (depending on the circumstances) as a temporary guest, as a benign wanderer, or as a menacing intruder. Whether the act is explicit sex between co-workers, a joke or story, a date at the company function, or an appealing article of clothing, it will be identified, evaluated, and monitored with some notion of asexuality in mind.

One needn't look far to realize that there are countless situations in which sexuality is implicated in organizational life. Spouses are often invited to company picnics, co-workers trade stories about their sexual conquests, and the water cooler is a near-legendary site of office gossip about sexual goings-on. Hearn and Parkin (1987) describe the pervasiveness of sex in more general terms:

Enter most organizations and you enter a world of sexuality. In addition to the foyers, lifts, corridors, shopfloor machinery, filing cabinets, computer, paper work, desks and telephones, there is usually much (else) that can be called "sexuality". This can include a mass of sexual displays, feelings, fantasies, and innuendoes, as part of everyday organizational life, right through to sexual relationships, open or secret, occasional sexual acts, and sexual violations, including rape (p. 3).

For example, my informants often acknowledged the degree to which sexuality is part of their organizational lives, often without realizing they had done it. Almost all knew the marital or relationship status of their co-workers. Most could describe specific circumstances under which sexuality had become a subject of conversation, interest, or fantasy. In passing, they spoke of their co-workers' wedding rings, baby pictures, vacation photos, and phone calls from spouses and lovers that often betoken sexual matters. Yet these were the same men who

(in most cases) defended the notion that organizations, and professionals, are asexual. The apparent paradox prompts several related questions: How does an ostensibly "asexual" organization respond to these displays of sexuality? Or, put another way, how is sexuality regarded when it does find its way through the office door?

As I've noted above, the asexual imperative is grounded in the dichotomization of "sexuality" and "work", and compels us to view sexuality as external to or apart from organizations and professional activities. Consequently, when an act is defined as sexual, professionals have various ways of signifying that it is (or should be) marginal. Whether seen as harmful or benign, sexuality is symbolically, spatially or temporally kept at the fringes.

### *Trivializing sex*

When my informants described situations or behaviors that they considered "sexual," they often characterized these activities as being marginal or trivial.

For example, many of the men used special labels to distinguish sexuality from the flow of "normal" work. When sexuality was discussed verbally, for example, it took the form of "locker room talk" or "just kidding." Ralph, a Houston oil executive, described a typical conversation:

We joke about it, you know. "Did you get any sex this weekend?" Or, "I'm gonna go out and get some sex this weekend." You know, we joke about that a lot. I'll ask Danny [a co-worker] when's the last time he and his girlfriend Jackie had sex. That happens a lot.

Rob, an instructor at a private music academy, recalled the behavior of another man on the faculty:

There's this one gay guy at school -- he's so outrageous, he's an absolute nut. He'll sit in the chair and start massaging himself right in front of me. "Just think of what would happen if someone came in," I tell him. "Just calm yourself!" But it's become merely a joke, I don't think it's serious. . . . In general I find it amusing.



As in both of these cases, conversations about sex are often accompanied by a sense of surprise that denotes their "exceptional" status.<sup>17</sup> "It's *amazing* what people will tell you if you ask them," according to Peter, a Philadelphia realtor who claims to know "a lot" about the private lives of his co-workers. Matt, a senior automotive executive, added, "I'm always *astounded* that people will engage in that sort of locker room talk" about their sexual conquests on the road. Others confessed a sort of guilty pleasure in talking about sex while at work, as if they were indulging a passion that should be kept secret. Peter continued, "It's terrible, but we *shock* each other by saying outrageous things, just to pass the time when the market is slow." A Philadelphia insurance salesman agreed, "You'd be *amazed*, or maybe you wouldn't, at what people will ask after they've had a couple beers or a couple drinks. And how forward people will get!"

Others took a less charitable stance toward sexual banter, considering it crude or inappropriate. Burt, a paralegal for a large Philadelphia firm, had no patience for his boss' sexual small talk:

I would not respond to his [boss'] heterosexual jokes. As I would be taking notes, he would say things like "Did you see the piece of ass on that chick?" I gave him nothing. "What do you think of that tits on that one, Burt?" To me that's just gross.

In this example, sexual banter is frowned upon, dismissed as being "beneath" the organization. But whether it was deemed amusing or offensive, most of my informants experienced it as a sort of "lived exception" to the asexual imperative, something that surprised or shocked them, or produced a sort of guilty pleasure. By labeling sex as an intrusion or joke, they also signified its second-class status in the organization.

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<sup>17</sup> George, an airline executive, suggests that because he works closely with several executives from Scandinavia, his organization differs from others in this respect. "People talk about sex in Scandinavia like they talk about going to the store. They just don't have the hangups we have in America. Our president is Scandinavian, so that atmosphere is indicated. People don't go around talking about sex acts or anything, it's not explicit, but it's understood. You wouldn't talk about sex because it's so boring. It's like everybody has sex and that's all there is to it."

In many cases, the men distanced themselves from sexual banter by suggesting that it was typical of a category of persons, usually those of lower status within the organization. Recall the comment made by Brent, who told me that:

My boss is a professional, and my colleagues are somewhat professional. Everyone else is clerical, so it's a different kind of person. They tend to be busybodies, discussing people's personal -- you know, gossiping and that sort of thing, not as serious about their work.

Sex talk is thus associated with a lack of seriousness about work, and this may explain why professionals find it insulting to be told that their appearance is or should be part of their work. As Gutek (1989) observed in her study of female professionals:

Our finding that the majority of women say they would be insulted by a sexual overture from a man at work (but think that other women are flattered) may reflect their basic understanding that they make a trade-off between being sexual and being skilled workers. The effect of the sexual compliment is a trivialization of their work (p. 66).<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, workers who *do* acknowledge their use of sexuality are usually deemed *non*-professional or are criticized for being *un*professional. We tend to trivialize work environments in which physical attractiveness is emphasized (Gutek, 1989:65), and are reluctant to assign "professional" status to those whose jobs require them to be physically attractive (sex workers, flight attendants, models, and so forth). Recent efforts to "professionalize" some of these jobs, by turning "stewardesses" into "flight attendants" or "secretaries" into "office managers," are often little more than campaigns to desexualize them.

Perhaps this is why most organizational romances are kept a secret, at least during their early (and less "legitimate") stages. Quinn's (1977) study of romances in the workplace found that about two-thirds of the couples involved in an organizational romance initially attempted to keep the relationship a secret. "In

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<sup>18</sup> Gutek is correct, however, in noting that fewer jobs require men to be physically attractive. The backhanded compliment or sexual overture is undoubtedly more insulting and threatening to women because they have traditionally been viewed as sexual objects in a way that heterosexual men have not. In this respect, gay men and all women have much in common; we are all judged in terms of an (exaggerated) sexuality that tends to eclipse our other characteristics or accomplishments. (I discuss the hyper-sexualization of gay identity in chapter three. See Rich (1980) or Sheppard (1989) for a discussion of its effect on women.)

some organizations, there are explicit or implicit rules against fraternization and disclosure could lead to some form of punishment. In other cases, there is the fear of gossip or general disapproval among members of the organization" (p. 37). Even after co-workers became aware that a relationship had developed in the office, there was a tendency to avoid open discussion or acknowledgement of the romance. "Despite the fact that everyone knows, and everyone knows that everyone knows, the participants continue to act as if the relationship was a secret and members continue to act as if they were unaware of it" (p. 38). This form of discussion-avoidance is consistent with the forbidden status of intra-organizational romance.

When my participants did engage in sexual banter, they tended to limit their discussions to those equal or below them in the professional hierarchy. Like other discrediting or "unprofessional" behavior, sex talk tends to travel downwards along the chain of command. A Philadelphia legal assistant explains:

With people below you in the hierarchy, no problem. You can joke and have a good time, you can do whatever you want. But there are lines of demarcation about what you say to people above you.

Similarly, a senior banking official in Delaware likes to tease his secretary about her boyfriend, and says that they "talk about sex all the time":

She is quite well built, and she definitely has the reputation of going to bed with a lot of people. I'll make comments to her, back and forth, like "when's my turn?" That kind of thing, you know. She'll say "Wait," or something like that. "Your turn is coming."

A Houston accountant shares a series of secret nicknames with his peers and subordinates, like "the F F Look" (for the "fresh fucked look"), which are carefully kept out of his bosses' earshot. A sales manager for a Houston hotel regularly "cruises" the nearby mall during lunch hours, usually with the women in his secretarial pool.<sup>19</sup>

Tip, a third-year surgery resident in a large Manhattan hospital, described a typical relationship with his support staff. Though he tries to avoid sexual topics with his various supervisors, Tip considers himself close to several of the nurses:

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<sup>19</sup> See my discussion in Chapter 8 of "vulnerability" and the tendency for disclosures to flow downwards in an organization.

Because of the intensity of the emergency room and operating room, you bond with everyone. It's kind of neat. The nurses that I run into know that I'm gay -- I seek them out. I go down there when I have nothing to do and visit. We chat, and discuss relationships.

Darren, a dentist in central New Jersey, described a similar relationship with the secretaries and hygienists in his office:

A lot of flirting goes on at our office. As you can imagine, there are so many young women, and I'm just about the only young man there . . . I'm the only unmarried man there, so you have a lot of these women between 20 and 30, and flirting with me is a big part of their lives.

Like Tip, Darren carefully avoids sexual conversations with his peers or superiors. The casual, lighthearted nature of these exchanges would be impossible with more serious or senior people, and in only one case did an informant discuss sexual matters openly with a superior.<sup>20</sup> Sexual banter is thus considered a trivial activity, and is usually reserved for trivial people.

### *Marginalizing sex*

The organizational view of sexuality also compels us to keep sexual matters at the fringes of the central work activity, confining them to the temporal and spatial margins of the job. In a sense, sexual matters are given the sort of limited access one accords any visitor: only to certain physical areas and at certain times, usually when "normal" office activities have been temporarily suspended (lunches, breaks, travel, after-hours, special events). Sexual displays are usually permitted, in other words, during specks of "personal time."

In the most obvious sense, personal time commences when the work day ends, with the transition from business hours to "social" or "leisure" time. Many of my informants described after-work outings or special events, and acknowledged that these events often seemed to raise sexual or romantic issues (a compelling reason, for many, to avoid them). The restraint that co-workers often showed during the day seemed to dissolve over drinks or dinner. When I asked Clay, an executive

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<sup>20</sup> It is also significant that these comfortable exchanges usually take place between a senior male and a coterie of female subordinates (nurses, secretaries, and so forth). One can argue that the organizational hierarchy is complemented by a gender hierarchy, which further trivializes the individuals with whom sexuality is discussed.

secretary, if he ever discussed sexual matters with his co-workers, he explained that the subject usually came up after hours. "Have you ever gone to a dinner with 25 secretaries?" he asked. "That's all they talk about!" Miguel, a medical resident in Philadelphia, explained that the other residents in his program organized several semi-formal dinners and cocktail hours during the year, a schedule that made him uncomfortable:

I can't interact socially with them [his co-workers] that much because they'll ask me "Where's your girlfriend?" And if we have ten parties a year, I'll select which one I'll go to. I can't go to all of them, because I can't justify showing up alone at all of them.

The marketing director for a Houston mall shared a similar concern. Explaining his tendency to skip company parties and happy hours, he told me: "You talk about things when you drink that you're not -- I just don't like to be that familiar with people."

Several of my informants were quite insistent that sexual matters be restricted to personal time, and were critical of co-workers who failed to observe these boundaries. Recall, for example, Jerry's comment about the appropriateness of sexual disclosures:

On Wall Street -- a place of work -- it really isn't a place to discuss sexuality. With your friends, on non-work time, it's perfectly fine to discuss sexuality. And if your friends happen to be co-workers, when you're not on *work time*, if you want to discuss sexuality that's fine. But in a business setting, there isn't really any reason to gossip.

Likewise, a New York advertising executive complained about a co-worker who seemed to confuse personal time with work:

If you want to talk about it, we can talk about it *after work* or some *other time*. . . . I just don't think it's proper behavior in the office. If [a co-worker] said to me, "Can we go out after work and talk about X, Y or Z?", I'd say "Sure."

The temporal distinction between company time and work time is further reinforced by the spatial segregation of the "office" from the various off-site locations usually favored for cocktail hours and company parties.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> As any corporate party planner knows, nothing kills a company gathering more quickly than the decision to hold the event on company grounds. Perhaps because the spatial location (work space) is at odds with its temporal location (after work) and purpose (non-work), the

Blocks of personal time or space can also be snatched at other times during the day, when "official" duties are temporarily suspended. In professional behavior, one can identify verbal and spatial maneuvers that function as transitions between the spheres. Sometimes the transition is verbal. A New York advertising executive recalled a pang of fear when his boss suggested that they "have a friendly chat." "I just knew he wanted to talk about personal stuff, which really made me uncomfortable." Other men chuckled at the tendency of their co-workers to whisper when talking about personal matters, as if they were sharing a dirty secret. A Washington human resources trainer described a typical situation. "They don't say 'she works in respiratory therapy and she happens to be gay.' It's more like [he whispers] 'she's gay.'" Verbal cues ("Let's get back to work") or nonverbal cues (withdrawing eye contact, shuffling papers) often signalled the end of a personal moment.

At other times, the transition seems to be spatial. Co-workers often seek the refuge of a private office, or call one another "aside" in the hallways before trafficking in sexual information. Travel with co-workers was a source of concern for many men, who found that it occupied a hazy gray area between office and leisure activity. "You talk about things on the road that just don't come up in the office," according to a New York ad executive. "It's a great way to bond with people in the office, and shift the relationship to more personal terms -- if that's what you want." Company picnics, dinners, and outings are designed for this purpose, to encourage "social" relationships between people who might otherwise know each other only on a limited, professional basis. Moments of personal time are thus bracketed off from the "normal" flow of work, and seem to temporarily suspend the usual restrictions on sexual displays.

When co-workers encounter one another unexpectedly during non-work hours, the boundaries can become unclear. A Houston lawyer recalled his dismay when he boarded a plane to Hawaii with four gay friends, only to find that a client and his wife were sitting directly behind them. He quickly alerted his friends and urged them to be "on their best behavior." A New York advertising executive ran into

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frequent result is ambiguity about appropriate social behavior, and a lousy time for all.

his secretary at a popular gay disco, and was infuriated the following Monday when she complimented him on "the shirt I was wearing on Saturday night." Though no one else overheard their exchange, he was angered by the "inappropriateness" of her comment. In the first case, personal time (a vacation) was unexpectedly converted to professional time; in the second, a personal event (a night out) was unexpectedly drawn into professional time (which the man feared would expose him). Arthur, a New York lawyer, described a similar situation in which the boundaries between personal and company time became unclear:

I've known for a long time that David [a paralegal with the firm] was gay. Sitting on the Long Island Railroad, getting off at the right stops, you know, that kind of stuff. I've seen him, he's seen me with groups of four men, I've seen him with groups of four men. We never really talked about it. Then I went to a performance of the Gay Men's Chorus, and there he was singing baritone. I thought about whether I should congratulate him on a wonderful concert, and I realized "that's a very public sort of thing, to get up there on stage." . . . I mean Carnegie Hall, that's pretty public. And so I did, and since then we've been friendly.

Arthur's initial uncertainty about how to behave stemmed from the confusion of personal and professional activities and roles. He was reluctant to congratulate David because to do so would be to raise a personal subject (David's sexuality) in an otherwise professional relationship.

The distinction between personal and company time is thrown into further relief by those exceptional institutions that seem to reject such boundaries. According to Greenberg (1989), most organizations permit the segregation of professional and personal lives, a split facilitated by the large size of modern cities. It is a different matter, however, when the "total" quality of an organization precludes such distinctions. Tip, a surgery resident who is accustomed to long hours and frequent nights "on call" at a Manhattan hospital, complained about his lack of any personal time. Even when not at the hospital, he was usually required to be at the beck and call of the hospital -- practically and symbolically reinforced by the beeper he is often required to wear. Tip also complained that his boss "doesn't like you to take vacation, even though it's allowed. He feels you're wasting your time if you come in with a tan, and he'll give you grief about it because you were not at home reading." Other organizations, like the military, assume that their members are at all times public representatives of the

organization, and tend to collapse the boundaries between personal and professional space, time and activity.<sup>22</sup> A marketing manager for a Philadelphia investment firm complained that his boss "has this view of officers as representatives, 24-hours per day, of the company."<sup>23</sup>

For John, an Episcopalian priest in his early 40s, these boundaries posed a series of challenges and opportunities. Though few people think of the church as a company, John feels that the seminary has modeled itself on other white-collar organizations, and has become increasingly professionalized in the past two decades. As he explains:

Younger priests have to draw on "professional" models because you don't have anything else to draw on. For example, you have to learn how to do counseling, how do you talk to people, how do you write a sermon -- all these skills. . . . There's been incredible professionalization pressure. For example, we've upgraded our degrees the same way everyone else has. All of this buys into a professionalization model that I think is not helpful for church work.

The result, in the church as in other organizations, is pressure to detach one's personal life from the skills or tasks that define the profession. For John, this professional model tended to render his sexuality invisible at work, and permitted him to "hide out" on the job. In many ways, he thinks this may be what drew him to the priesthood:

Part of what appeals to people -- why they go into the ministry -- is that it allows you to be very, very close to people without having them ask *you* any questions. So there's a sort of voyeuristic part of the ministry, and I think that's why it appeals to other gay people to some degree. Most of us are really good at viewing other people's lives, kind of like spies. You've been planted in this heterosexual world and we're always a little bit outsiders, and we take a certain amount of delight in that. And the ministry's exactly the same kind of thing, it's very much like being gay in general, only raising it to another level. Because I can go into any

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<sup>22</sup> In Greenberg's (1989:443-445) opinion, this is why organizations like the military and the church have shown such an exceptional preoccupation with homosexuality in their ranks.

<sup>23</sup> He recalled a particular story he heard about a man named Larry, the director of human resources, shortly after he joined the company. "I've never asked Larry whether this is true or not, but somebody told me that he was told by the President of the company that he didn't want Larry seen going in to the all-male theater, the Tom Cat bookstore. Apparently he'd been seen going in there a couple of times." My informant admitted that the story may be apocryphal, but it has obviously become part of the organization's sexual folklore.



situation and ask embarrassing personal questions, really participate in people's lives, in a way that no other person can as an outsider, a non-family member. Yet I can be confident they're not going to ask a single thing about me, unless I offer it or give them permission.

In John's experience, the church is like many other professional organizations. Despite his apparent involvement in the lives of other people, the separation of spheres is still very much intact. As in other "helping" professions, self-disclosure is non-reciprocal and is limited by a professional model that discouraged John from becoming too personal with his parishioners.

Unlike many of his fellow clergy, however, John ultimately revolted against the separation of spheres. In 1984, after five years with a wealthy suburban congregation, John accepted a position at a church in downtown Philadelphia, one known for its large gay following. "I wanted to be in a place where I could be gay, and where my being gay would have some positive influence on the lives of the gay people in that congregation -- on the straight people, too." The professional model of the ministry, John felt, had limited his ability to connect with his congregation:

After a while, you come to discover that the ministry isn't about those [professional] skills. You have to learn them, but it really is about allowing people into your life -- in a funny way -- and them allowing you into your life. It's more like a model of friendship, which completely goes against everything people coming out of seminaries today are hearing.

To be effective, John decided that he had to integrate the spheres. After arriving in Philadelphia, he came out to his congregation and began to involve himself in the local gay community. The result, sometimes, was resistance:

The first week I was here, I went up to the Venture Inn [a gay restaurant] for dinner and two members of the parish were there. And one of them said to me, "I don't think it's really very good that you're here." And I said, "Why, is the food that bad?" And I remember going home and calling one of my friends and saying, "This may be a real mistake."

Some of these men ultimately left the congregation, uncomfortable with John's efforts to integrate his personal and professional activities. At times, he has also felt ostracized by other gay clergy, who avoid him at conferences and exclude him from the gay cocktail party circuit. "But that's all fine with me," John says, "because I don't want to divide my life up the way those men do." He explained that he has replaced the professional model of the priesthood with a "friendship"

model, adding that his goal "is to become more and more *myself* in my job. I'm not just a priest, I'm not just my job."<sup>24</sup>

Even in his efforts to reject it, John reveals the prevalence of a certain model of professional behavior. Our prevailing image of the "professional" is a rational individual who keeps his emotions under control and his personal matters out of the office (or brings them in only under special, exceptional circumstances).<sup>25</sup> Most forms of sexual banter or display are thought unbecoming of such a person -- something professional people do only in their spare time, but which "spare" people do on professional time.<sup>26</sup> For gay men, as for other professional men and women, this asexual "imperative" supplies the interpretive framework with which sexual displays are viewed and evaluated. It helps to create a moral environment, to dictate norms of appropriate or worthy action, and to establish barriers to action.

In this sense, the imperative cannot be reduced to a set of discrete normative positions. It is much more than the sum of its component concepts -- "privacy," "relevance," and so forth -- and resembles, instead, what Elshtain (1981) has called an "intersubjectively shared realm":

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<sup>24</sup> In many ways, John's "friendship" model resembles the "intermediate" organization described by Parkin (1989), in her study of residential health care organizations. These organizations, often called "homes", occupy a sort of intermediate zone, and incorporate elements of both the public world of professional work and the private world of sexuality and the family. She calls for "attention to the false dualism of the public/private divide, and an exploration of the ambiguous 'intermediate zone' where the public and private domains overlap and merge" (p. 117).

<sup>25</sup> This ideal is in striking contrast with the vision of organizational life presented on television. In prime time depictions of professional situations, co-workers are often linked by personal, romantic, and marital ties, and treat one another as a sort of extended "family." As Vande Berg & Trujillo (1989) observe in *Organizational Life on Television*, prime time programming "teaches us that it is extremely difficult to separate one's personal life from one's professional life. After all, most prime time organizational members, including managers, professionals, operatives, and service workers alike treat their work as far more than a mere job -- it is an important part of who they are" (p. 258).

<sup>26</sup> I've borrowed this construction from Larry Gross, who makes the same observation about art, artists and "real people."

Intersubjectivity is a rather elusive term referring to ideas, symbols, and concepts that are not only shared but whose sharing reverberates within and helps to constitute a way of life on both its manifest and latent levels. The particular meaning *to* each social participant of a concept intersubjectively shared may differ strikingly from its meaning to any other given individual, but a range of shared meaning must also be present. Wittgenstein claims that when we first "begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole)" (p. 4-5).<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, when we learn to use a concept like privacy, we invoke a conceptual vocabulary not as a discrete conceptual act, but by referencing a web of other concepts, contrasts, and terms of comparison.

Notions of asexuality are thus representative of an entire cultural stance toward sexuality, and the "imperative" has been my way of describing this organizational mindset. It should also be clear from this discussion that the asexual imperative is not absolute, nor is it universally imposed (or self-imposed). Organizations vary in the restrictions they place on sexual displays, just as subjective interpretations of that imperative will vary from one individual to the next.

Still, despite variations from company to company and from person to person, the imperative has the general effect of *delegitimizing* sexual self-disclosure and display. In most white-collar settings, the revelation or display of homosexuality is framed as an overt and (usually) unnecessary act. It must be affirmatively justified and carefully managed so as not to conflict with the prevailing rules about privacy, intimacy, professionalism, relevance, etiquette, and the other ideological strands that comprise this web of intersubjective meanings. Because the imperative compels the invisibility or marginality of sexuality, it is often difficult to find justification for anything else. For many gay men, this translates into an obligation of sexual secrecy, and supplies the means by which millions stay in hiding.

During the interviews, I was repeatedly struck by the conviction and passion with which my informants defended the imperative. As we spoke, the men often adopted a tone of voice reserved for sensitive subjects; though each had a slightly different way of describing the imperative, it was clear that they had used these

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<sup>27</sup> Quoting Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1979) *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, p. 21e.

words before, that the argument had been carefully rehearsed and worked out. Reading their words, it may be difficult to hear their sense of frustration, the tone of urgency that was evident in their voices.

Yet their repeated insistence -- that sexuality *doesn't* matter, *doesn't* belong in the workplace, *is* a private matter -- scarcely conceals their recognition that things are not always so. The notion of asexuality holds great appeal to those whose sexuality has been stigmatized, criminalized, medicalized, morally condemned, and subject to interpersonal penalties of all sorts. It seems to promise social and professional acceptability, an environment in which sexuality is no longer burdened with its excess of significance. Even more, asexuality permits gay men to rationalize the painful efforts they must often make to misrepresent their sexuality. Terry, a Houston lawyer described this vision of an ideal world:

It is unfortunately not a perfect world, and that is the world we live in. If you could, if there was such a thing as being in a perfect world where sexuality had no impact on the people you work with and upon clients and upon business development and all of that, then great. And I know some people in town that do that, but there are damn few.

The result, in many of my interviews, are what appear to be contradictions, as gay men articulate their wishes (the hortatory "Sexuality *shouldn't* matter") in the form of observations or statements of fact (the declarative "Sexuality *doesn't* matter."). When pushed, most will admit that sexuality continues to matter very much, and therein lies a source of continued hurt and outrage.

## CHAPTER THREE

### HETEROSEXUAL HEGEMONY

At 60, Jason is proud of his marriage, grown children and long, successful career. In 1980, after 25 years as a pediatrician, he joined a top-5 pharmaceutical company and has soared up through the corporate ranks. Last year he was asked to take over the company's operations in Washington, as ambassador-at-large to Congress, and in a few years he plans to retire with his wife, and open a small bed-and-breakfast in Maine. In many ways, Jason's situation illustrates one of the central paradoxes of organizational sexuality.

When speaking about his career, Jason insists that private and professional matters be kept apart. He defends the notion of professional asexuality, and has never spoken to co-workers about the fact that he's gay:

I guess I don't see my sexuality as an issue at work. Or any of the people that report to me. I could care less who they're sleeping with, when, where or why. As long as they get the job done. As long as their behavior outside of the office isn't going to bring the roof down on all of us, that's none of my business.

Jason's philosophy seems to reflect the professional culture of his company, with its traditional image and familiar, all-American advertising. The atmosphere at work is "paternal" and "conservative," and he suggests that "sexuality, sexual implications, sexual jokes of any variety are really frowned on." To illustrate his point, Jason recalls a particular episode that he considers typical:

You sit down at the lunch table and somebody tells a joke that is off color, someone will say "Hey, in the age of managing diversity," which is the key phrase that's being used in the organization "that's just not appropriate." Or somebody will tell a story about someone else and eyebrows will be raised in terms of "wow, why would you ever say something like that." There really is a climate that says we just don't do business that way. That's just not part of what goes on here.

In short, Jason strives to keep sexual matters out of the workplace, and he expects the same from those who report to him. "It's a raised-consciousness kind of place," he concludes, one in which sexuality "really has no place."

Yet all around Jason, there is evidence of sexuality. Jason takes his wife to company events, and co-workers regularly ask about his family. Perhaps because of his seniority, some even seek his advice on marital or family problems:

I think of one guy, Tom, who used to report to me, and Tom loves to talk. Tom comes in and shares with me all about his marriage, his family, and his parents, and his father's death, his friends. It's almost as if I'm part of the family.

When describing the company, Jason frequently uses the term "family-oriented," and mentions corporate policies, programs and events that recognize spouses and children. "In the employee benefits program there's always family stuff coming up," he explains. "They're running seminars for employees who have older parents that they have to care for, on-site day care, stress management, family communications." When I asked Jason to describe a particular program, he cited an in-house seminar designed to educate employees about AIDS, featuring videos with C. Everett Koop; past programs have targeted male chauvinism and discrimination based on sex. The company also plans social events for its employees, and frequently invites their spouses and children. "When we come up for big party kinds of things, it's not just 'employee day' or 'employee recognition day' -- it's '*family* day.' Bring the kids, bring the grandparents, we're going to have a big family party."

How do we reconcile Jason's beliefs about asexuality with these displays (direct or otherwise) of sexuality? Even as he insists that sexuality is irrelevant to his work, Jason paints a picture of a company suffused with it. In private conversations with co-workers, in official company policies and programs, in social events that include spouses, even in his ability to thrive in a culture that he describes as "family-oriented," Jason trades on his identity as a heterosexual, married man. Why, then, does he believe that his organization is (or should be) asexual?

The paradox lies in the elusive way Jason seems to define sexuality. In the last chapter I described the pressures gay men felt to banish, marginalize or trivialize sexuality in professional environments, but left the definition of sexuality itself unexplored. In Jason's case, the term "sexual" is usually reserved for explicit acts, forbidden acts -- those that take place outside the institution of marriage. His own

identity as a married heterosexual is described as a *social* status; he doesn't think of it as sexual at all. Alternative sexualities, meanwhile, are viewed as exceptions to this norm, and seem more sexual, more visible, and less compatible with organizational life. When speaking about gay co-workers (and his own relationships with gay men), Jason uses the terms "sexual" and "private life." But when describing his married co-workers, he speaks of "family."

Jason's comments hint at a much larger process by which a particular, narrowly-defined range of sexual identities is hegemonized in white-collar culture. These mainstream identities -- the ideal being that of the married, monogamous, procreative heterosexual -- become the norm against which all others are judged. Alternatives are viewed as exceptions, and are subject to greater scrutiny, sharpened criticism, and efforts to render them invisible in the name of "asexuality."

In this chapter, I explore the process by which a certain kind of male heterosexuality has been hegemonized in white-collar culture, and the consequences for those identities that do not fit its narrow contours.

### **Mainstream identities**

Asexual imperatives to the contrary, there is abundant evidence that white-collar organizations are central sites for the construction and display of sexual identity. In the first issue of the *Harvard Business Review*, Daniel Starch made the commonsense observation that "business consists of human reactions and relations because business is done by human beings, and in that broad sense business is psychological in nature." To this observation, one might add that humans are also sexual creatures, and we cannot help but bring these capacities along when we step through the office doors.

If this is so, it should surprise no one that sexual texts and subtexts can be found at many levels of professional interaction. As Pringle (1989) has argued, "far from being marginal to the workplace, sexuality is everywhere. It is alluded to in dress and self-presentation, in jokes and gossip, looks and flirtations, secret affairs and dalliances, in fantasy, and in the range of coercive behaviors that we

now call sexual harassment" (p. 162). Focusing on the boss-secretary relationship, for example, she gives this reading of an ostensibly asexual relationship:

No one seriously believes that secretaries spend much time on the bosses' knee. Actual sexual interactions are the exception rather than the norm and, jokes aside, the centrality of work to the boss-secretary relationship is generally conceded. Yet the sexual possibilities color the way in which the relationship is seen. . . . Even if the cruder representations are discounted, the relationship is seen to be oozing with sexuality which is suppressed, sublimated or given limited expression in flirtation and flattery. It bases itself on personal rapport (some bosses call it "chemistry"), involves a degree of intimacy, day-to-day familiarity and shared secrets unusual for any but lovers or close friends, and is capable of generating intense feelings of loyalty, dependency and personal commitment (p. 159).

In this example, the male boss and female secretary are clearly partners in a relationship with an underlying sexual dimension. But again, there is the paradox. We can imagine both parties earnestly denying that there is anything "sexual" about their relationship. Both might insist that they keep their professional and sexual lives apart -- in the name of privacy, professionalism, etiquette, and so forth -- and feel insulted that we had "trivialized" their work by suggesting otherwise. "We are both professionals," they might say.

My own informants cited countless situations in which sexuality was implicated, but were often reluctant to characterize them in sexual terms. The most common examples were professional interactions in which a spouse, girlfriend, or significant other was somehow involved (whether in attendance or in name only). The benefits manager for a public utility in New Jersey cited a typical situation:

When I travel, we have an office in Florida that I go down a couple times a year. The branch manager there is very very friendly and a very very nice guy, and he always asks me to come over to his house. He knows I've spent a couple of weekends where I'll schedule a trip Thursday and Friday and spend Saturday and Sunday in Fort Lauderdale. He knew that, and he just *assumed* that I would bring someone down with me. When I said "no, I'm by myself," he said, "Oh, you left your little lady at home?" -- or whatever quaint thing he would say. I'd just nod. One time when I brought a female friend, and the four of us, with his wife, we all went out. Things like that always happen.

A Houston executive in his late 20s mentioned that his company has a "singles club," and could recall several instances in which co-workers had tried to fix him up with a single cousin, neighbor, or daughter. The director of a Houston



psychiatric clinic recalled the excitement generated when one of the nurses announced her plans to have a baby. Her efforts to become pregnant, even her ovulation status, became part of the office lore.

In some cases, overtly sexual contexts were a regular part of doing business. The women in Sheppard's (1989) study mentioned bars, taverns, strip joints, fishing trips, hockey, golf and ball games and even bathrooms "as places from which they are in varying degrees excluded but where they know that important organizational information is exchanged and decisions made" (p. 153). Though gay men are not necessarily unwelcome in any of these situations, they often find themselves unable (or unwilling) to take part in the sexual banter that often accompanies them. A New York media executive described his sense of exclusion when co-workers shared an informal moment:

There's a lot of male camaraderie involved in sex that you're not sharing. You're not making comments about the secretary, and there are lots of ways that you don't play the same game they're playing. Spouses and kids is a huge one.

Others recounted jokes and anecdotes, office pranks, and "shared, meaningful glances" at women that are often part of professional fellowship.

It was also clear to some of my informants that their sexual identity had been used to judge their suitability for work.<sup>1</sup> Tip, a surgery resident at a large Manhattan hospital, was shocked by the number of social events he was expected to attend as part of his "training." Several times a month, he found himself invited to a barbecue, a weekend trip, the ballet, or dinner at the home of another surgeon. His boss, the chief of surgery, tried to arrange dates for him and even told him how to trim his sideburns so that he would look "more professional."

"They wanted to know everything about my personal life," he told me, and "it was

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<sup>1</sup> The point was definitely not lost on Dr. Jeffery Collins, a former employee of Triton Biosciences Inc., a division of Shell Oil Co. Collins was dismissed in 1985 when his secretary stumbled onto a memo Collins had written outlining the rules for a gay safe-sex party. In June of 1991, a California superior court ruled in Collins' favor, awarding him \$5.3 million in damages, the largest award ever made to an individual for a gay employment bias claim. In her ruling, Judge Jacqueline Taber of Alameda County Superior Court noted that "This case presents the relatively new issue of how far a corporation may go in demanding that its managerial staff, in their respective private lives, deport and conduct themselves in a manner acceptable to and meeting the corporation's concept of propriety." As the *New York Times* reported (6/23/91), Mr. Collins now earns about 20 percent of his former salary working as a dog shipper in a veterinary clinic (p. E7)

just part of being a team, part of the job." When Tip didn't respond to their overtures, he realized that it may have damaged his ability to do the job:

When the general surgery resident asked me to his house for dinner, he said that I had to bring a date. And I said fine, then I won't go. So I didn't go, and now I don't feel like I fit in there. I've had numerous invitations from other good friends of mine. Joe [another resident] was my roommate and has asked me so many times to his house, but finally he quit asking, and then you drift apart socially. That was my choice, and I'm cognizant that that was going on but I'm glad its over. Things are a little less stressed. Do I fit in? No. I *make* myself fit in when I'm at the hospital. Then I wear my boots when I'm outside.<sup>2</sup>

Because he tends to avoid socializing with co-workers, Tip thinks that the other doctors consider him somewhat of an enigma. He worries that his performance evaluation will suffer as a result.<sup>3</sup>

As these brief examples suggest, the organizations I studied are suffused with behaviors that might be considered sexual; in particular, according to my informants, a certain type of heterosexuality is very much in evidence. Yet these were the same men who defended the notion of asexuality and posed "professionalism" as a code of behavior that specifically excluded sexual, personal, or private matters. How do we reconcile the apparent ubiquity of heterosexuality with claims that sex is (or should be) absent in organizational settings?

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<sup>2</sup> Though the expression "wearing boots" is hardly a central figure in gay argot, Doc Marten work boots were a symbol of radical gay chic at the time of our interview (due largely to their popularity among members of ACT-UP and Queer Nation). When we spoke, in the fall of 1990, Tip was breaking in his first pair.

<sup>3</sup> The Hoch-Schepman affair illustrates the same point. When Standley Hoch was forced to resign from the General Public Utilities Corporation, it wasn't because he was a poor senior executive. "Hoch was a terrific administrator and a superb C.E.O.," according to Henry F. Henderson, one of the company's directors who was quoted in the *New York Times*. Hoch was fired because his affair with Susan Schepman, the company's vice president of communications, was thought to reflect poorly on his judgment in other areas. Hoch had to go, the *Times* concluded, "lest the public worry that personal lapses in some way presage business lapses" (p. D7). The article went on to quote J. Gerald Simmons, president of Handy Associates HRM, New York executive recruiters: "When people in high places are having extramarital affairs, no one says, 'Hey, you can't prove it affected their business operations.' We don't live in a world of reality, we live in a world of perception."

### *The invisibility of heterosexuality*

In most organizational settings (and theories), a certain model of heterosexuality is so pervasive that we often fail to think of it in sexual terms. Its most familiar manifestations are taken for granted, tacitly acknowledged and processed to the point that they become invisible; they become non-sign events (Worth & Gross, 1981). Sexuality, as an analytic category, is reserved for exceptions to this model.

Feminist scholars must be credited with the rediscovery of sexuality and gender in organizational studies. In a growing number of theoretical essays and field reports, it has been amply demonstrated that sexuality and gender are endemic to organizational life, despite protestations that they have "no place" in business, and despite definitional maneuvers that seem to render them invisible. As I observed in the first chapter, organizational theorists since at least Weber's time have seen sexuality as something grafted onto the essential business of the workplace, and one of the consequences, according to Sheppard, has been "the removal of sexuality and gender from the ongoing context of everyday life."<sup>4</sup> Once defined and bounded as organizational 'topics' or 'problems,' they become invisible as *intrinsic* parts of organizational structure" (p. 139-140). Malestream theorists (including some who identify themselves as feminists) have produced a corpus of theory that is blind to gender and sexuality, and only recently have there been attempts to account for them in organizations (see Hearn *et al.*, 1989; Acker, 1990).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Though the "machine" is the guiding metaphor of Weberian organizational analysis, it is of far less importance in popular representations of organizational life. As Vande Berg & Trujillo (1989) note in their study of television, the "family" is the dominant metaphor in prime time narratives about the workplace. "For better or worse, very few regular or single appearance prime time organizations are cast as machines, and those organizations that were cast as such were usually depicted in a negative light" (p. 247).

<sup>5</sup> Gutek (1989) suggests another explanation for the belief that sexuality is private. Drawing in a survey of 1,232 working people in Los Angeles, she suggests that "people tend to think positively about sex; sexual encounters affirm one's sexual desirability and probably indicate that the two people are interested in each other and perhaps already intimate." (p. 58). My own research does not support Gutek's conclusion that most professionals view sexual behavior as something "benign or even positive" (and thus extra-organizational), though this may merely reflect self-evident differences in our research populations. The gay men I interviewed were more circumspect about sex; it was a source of complications and risks, something expected to provoke the censure of others, an indulgence that brought with it a sort of guilty pleasure. As I argue in the

As these theorists have argued, organizational theories and ideologies that presume or advocate asexuality are nonetheless constructed around and legitimated by sexual discourse. The veneer of asexuality, they suggest, conceals an implicit masculine, heterosexual ethic. As Acker (1990) has argued:

The abstract, bodiless worker, who occupies the abstract, gender-neutral job, has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate. The absence of sexuality, emotionality, and procreation in organizational logic and organizational theory is an additional element that both obscures and helps to reproduce the underlying gender relations (Acker, 1990:151).

For example, in our notions of "rationality" and "efficiency," and in our prevailing model of the competent manager, one can identify masculine principles and imagery. In this sense, "Weber's account of 'rationality' can be read in gender terms as a commentary on the construction of a particular kind of masculinity based on the exclusion of the personal, the sexual and the feminine from any definition of 'rationality'" (p. 161).<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, male sexual imagery pervades organizational language, as do military and sports metaphors, which serve to legitimate a certain model of professional competence.

Alternatives to this model of masculinity, including femininity and all other masculinities, must adapt to their subordinate position. As Connell (1987) notes, they frequently remain inchoate, incompletely articulated, precisely because they "need not be as clearly defined -- indeed, achieving hegemony may consist precisely in preventing alternatives from gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives, confining them to ghettos, to privacy, to unconsciousness" (p. 186). But above all, "the most important feature of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual, being closely connected to the institution of marriage; and a key form of subordinated masculinity is homosexual" (p. 186). Male homosexuality is the persona against which hegemonic masculinity has been defined.

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introduction to part 2, sexuality is also a "managed status" with profound consequences for their careers -- hardly a "benign" trait.

<sup>6</sup> Acker (1990) has argued that even our notion of "a job" -- an abstraction that distinguishes workers from the work processes they dominate -- conceals an implicit masculine ethic (p. 154).

Despite the fact that it is grounded in heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity is rarely seen in sexual terms. When faced by those behaviors that typify the model, for example, we rarely assign a sexual label; they are invisible *as sexuality*, and are usually coded in other ways. As Gutek (1989) observes,

Sexual pursuits and conquests, jokes and innuendos can be subsumed under the stereotype of the organizational man -- goal-oriented, rational, competitive and assertive, which are expected and recognized as male traits. Men may make sexual overtures in an assertive, competitive manner. Likewise, sexual jokes, metaphors and innuendos may be seen as part of competitive male horseplay. Thus the traits of competitiveness, assertiveness and power-orientation are noticed, whereas the sexual component is not (p. 62; see also Hearn, 1985).

When this model of hegemonic masculinity is in place, sexuality becomes the province of *alternatives* to it; women, homosexuals, and men who don't fit the model are regarded as sexual actors (consistent with the stereotype that they are unsuited to organizational life). And while men's heterosexual behavior usually goes unnoticed at work, subordinated groups are routinely judged according to an exaggerated sexuality expected of (or attributed to) them.<sup>7</sup>

It becomes clear that the asexual imperative is part of a larger system that compels the invisibility of certain actors while ignoring (as asexual) the displays of others. Displays of male heterosexuality are deemed quite compatible with a professional work environment and organizations continue to be suffused with them, even as official ideologies render the workplace genderless and asexual.<sup>8</sup>

As Burrell & Hearn (1989) conclude:

The configuration that *appears* dominant now, in industrialized societies at least, rests on the *apparent* separation of the "organizational" and the "sexual", however misleading such appearances are. Organizations have

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<sup>7</sup> This may help explain why women are sometimes slow to recognize and report instances of sexual harassment in white-collar settings (Schneider, 1982; Cohen & Gutek, 1985). After experiencing an episode of harassment, heterosexual women are often unlikely to identify the behavior as harassment, focusing instead on the positive, non-sexual aspects of the encounter. Significantly, lesbians and women identifying themselves as "extremely feminist" are far more likely to regard the unwanted sexual advance as harassment.

<sup>8</sup> Collinson & Collinson (1989) cite an example from a non-professional setting, the shop floor of an industrial manufacturer: "The evidence indicates that so long as women were excluded from the shop floor, men's discourses about sexuality, their initiation ceremonies, practical jokes and banter, and displays of 'pin ups' and other pornographic literature were tacitly accepted by managers who could see no major incompatibility between these demonstrations of masculinity and production" (p. 98).

historically become a series of sites where the danger and pleasure of sexuality can be both repressed and exploited within forms of oppression (p. 5).

Perhaps this is why gay men often see their nongay co-workers in asexual terms, ignoring the countless ways in which their heterosexuality is on display (from wedding rings and baby pictures to conversations about what "we" did over the weekend).<sup>9</sup> Like Jason, whose story introduced this chapter, gay men are often reluctant to characterize their co-workers' marriages, spouses and children in sexual terms. Consequently, white-collar settings have become archives of (often invisible) heterosexual privilege. Just as masculine principles masquerade as gender-neutral values (rationality, competitiveness, and so forth), heterosexual modes of organization are perceived as asexual ones.

As Plummer (1975) has observed, "nothing is sexual, but naming it makes it so." Likewise, the behaviors we define as sexual, and the sexual display we sanction and permit, say much about the relative status of particular sexual actors. The hegemony of heterosexuality ensures that most manifestations of it will be sanctioned, naturalized, and rendered so "normal" as to fade into a vast background of expected, taken-for-granted organizational behavior. Given the traditional invisibility of women and gay men in organizational settings, it is little surprise that this model has remained implicit and poorly understood. Gender and sexuality are relational phenomena, and are difficult to see when only the masculine or heterosexual are present (see Acker, 1990:142).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is undoubtedly this same tendency that permits writers like Seymour Kleinberg (1980) to make this somewhat typical observation about sexual displays: "Like prostitutes, who are most tolerated when they are off the street and behind red lights, homosexuals create anxieties of critical proportions when they insist on being seen and heard. Even people with no special distaste for gays ask why they have to be confronted with gay sexual lifestyle. *I would guess that these people consider heterosexual displays in public just as vulgar and intrusive as homosexual ones.* A longstanding tradition unites decorum and sexual oppression; some people don't want any dissemination of sexual information -- of any sort, at any time -- outside the bedroom. *Their fear of sexuality may be far more intense than their fear of homosexuals*" (p. 71; emphasis mine). Kleinberg is right when he says that some people categorically disapprove of sexual displays, but this only returns us to the ambiguity of the category; people who fear any display of sexuality would likely ignore a man and woman holding hands, even as they would be shocked by the sight of two men embracing.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer (1989) has made the same point about race.

As I will argue in the remainder of this chapter, our means of constructing "sexuality" as a category reveals much about the activities we have traditionally permitted, and those we wish to regulate, stigmatize, and prohibit.

### *The presumption of heterosexuality*

As long as the prevailing model of a professional is a heterosexual male, all others will be seen as some kind of exception or deviation from the norm. Homosexuality will be viewed as a "change" from a prior identity, as the disruption of the expected pattern, or as the "choice" of an alternative lifestyle. In most settings, this means that professional men will be considered heterosexual until that assumption is overturned.<sup>11</sup> For example, in a 1979 survey Jay and Young asked gay men if "most people can tell instantly that you are gay?" Only 5% said that they could. Most (78%) assumed that they could not (and 17% weren't sure).

The presumption of heterosexuality is most evident in the questions people ask about their co-workers' marital or romantic status. Almost all of my informants had been asked, at one time or another, if they were married, and many reported that well-meaning co-workers had tried to "fix them up" with single female friends. Tip recalls a typical episode in which assumptions were made about his sexuality (and marital ambitions):

I'm the only one that's still single. Out of the whole group, they're all married, every single one of them is married. That was clear the first day I got here 4.5 years ago. There was a barbecue the day before internship. Everyone showed up with their wives. The question to me was not "Are you married?" but "Where's your wife?" I got that like six times. And I was thinking, *goddamn*. "Where's is she? Where's *who*? I don't have a wife. What do you mean where is she?"

Steve, a Houston accountant, remembers a conversation he had with one of his co-workers. "We had this discussion on marriage and how I don't believe in marriage and Michelle says 'the right girl hasn't come around yet.' And I'm thinking 'OK, fine,' you know, 'whatever.' Marriage is not for Steve." Tony, an executive at a

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<sup>11</sup> Weston (1991) cites a typical situation in which assertions of this kind are made: "A relative's first reaction [to coming out] was often to question this 'change.' Could this be a case of self-delusion? A 'phase'? The person coming out frequently responded by presenting gayness as an essential identity, something that had been there all along but was only recently recognized . . ." (p. 79).

Philadelphia investment company, recalled similar assumptions about his marital status:

The Senior VP is such a character. The second day I was at Vanguard, I ran into him coming from the parking lot after lunch, and he said "Well, Tony, are you married or are you single?" And I said, "I'm single." And he said, "Give these Vanguard women a year, and you'll be married." And I said, "I don't think so." And he said, "I wouldn't doubt their tenacity."

As these examples suggest, questions about marital "status" are a matter of course in professional circles; it is simply assumed that one is, or will be, married. As a Houston engineer told me, "When you're a young, reasonably attractive, professional guy who doesn't have two heads, a drooling problem or an offensive body odor, they just assume you're straight. That means you're either married or you just haven't found the right girl yet."

The pervasiveness of the assumption is demonstrated by the fact that other masculinities, other sexualities, are rarely seen as likely or viable alternatives. A claims negotiator for a Philadelphia insurance company recalled a typical encounter with two co-workers:

At a recent lunch with these two female attorneys, one of them asked -- she's very inquisitive -- "Are you married?" And I said "no." "Well, do you have kids?" And I said "no" again. It just never dawned on her that I might be gay.

Jeff, a Philadelphia investment manager, recalled this conversation. He and a female co-worker were describing their evening rituals to each other, which prompted an assumption on her part:

She said, "My husband and I generally work out and watch TV. Someday you'll have someone in *your* life." And I said, "Why do you assume I don't have anyone in my life?" And she said, "Oh I just assumed." And I said, "Well, your assumption's wrong." And that's the last I heard; that's as far as she went.

Russ, a Philadelphia attorney, described a similar situation. When asked if co-workers know that he's gay, Russ told me that it's unlikely it would ever have occurred to them:

I think that most attorneys, male attorneys especially, they're real nice guys, but they just would never have thought of it. It's just not something that would have entered their heads even if somebody never talked about girlfriends, blah, blah, blah. They don't think about things like that. Which



doesn't mean that they're opposed or homophobic or anything, it just never would have entered their heads.

Russ assured me that he had never misled his co-workers, and has made no effort to hide the fact that he lives with another man; "I even talk like I have a spouse," he says. Yet Russ remains convinced that co-workers are oblivious to the fact that he's gay. "It's incredible to me that people don't *think* about more than they *know*. People would never think that someone is gay just because they've never had any contact with it. Or they'd never think that someone has a black spouse -- just because they couldn't imagine anyone doing that."

The presumption is often so strong that even in the face of conflicting evidence, co-workers often continue to assume that men are heterosexual. Justin, a college professor in the Washington area, felt fairly certain that his students knew he was gay, only to find that most of them were entirely unaware. Several years ago, he received a grant from the Centers for Disease Control to study AIDS-prevention behaviors among gay men. At the outset, Justin realized that his enthusiasm for the project might lead others to speculate about his sexuality:

I thought it was pretty clear. It was CDC-sponsored, and it was announced that awards were given to community-based organizations, and this was given to a gay organization, Black and White Men Together. It seems to me that it would be pretty clear. I had a number of undergraduates working on it, and since leaving the university, I've run into one of them out at the bars -- he was just shocked, he was really, really surprised. So after he got over that -- after I ran into him a couple more times -- we chatted a little bit, and he said it just didn't cross his mind -- even though we were working on this survey about gays. He said "I assumed that since you had so much experience, this was just another consulting job you happened to get. And since it was such a big project, anybody would grab at it." So that surprised me; I thought it was more obvious.

A Philadelphia attorney put himself in a similar situation, by taking his boyfriend to a baseball game with two of his clients. Though he never identified his companion as a lover, he felt certain that their relationship would be clear:

I have my car, but Rob, my boyfriend, always drives it. So we went down to the stadium in my car, except I handed him the keys. [The clients] kind of lifted their eyebrows at that. Someone said "Wait, I thought this was your car," and I said, "Well, yes it is, but he's driving." . . . Spouses communicate in a certain way; it's very intimate. Even if it's not physically intimate, maybe it's the way they glance at each other. But since these lawyers aren't in the mindset to perceive that these are two gay men going

to the baseball game, they may not have picked it up. It's very doubtful to me that they did.

In these cases, the conflicting evidence was largely ignored or selectively processed, leaving the model of heterosexuality intact. As a gay man told Jay and Young (1979), "I find that sometimes I have to furnish photographs of myself engaged in sexual acts with another male for people to believe that I am what I say I am."

The presumption of heterosexuality is thrown into further relief by those rare instances when it is reversed. Harry, the director of development for an AIDS service organization, told me that in his office "probably 80% of the men are gay." As a result, disclosure was no longer an issue, and it was the scattered heterosexual employees who suddenly found themselves the exception. "When someone straight joins the organization," he chuckled, "they have to 'come out,' or everyone will just assume they're gay." One of the men produced a wife at a company function shortly after he was hired, and his "disclosure" came as a surprise to many of his peers.

The circumstances are rare, however, that one must "come out" at a heterosexual. In all but one case, my informants felt that homosexuality had to be actively disclosed, a self-presentational maneuver that distanced them *from* the initial, presumed state of being (i.e. heterosexuality); homosexuality was never a starting point, but a status to which one moved *to*. Perhaps this is why my informants often felt the need for special linguistic tags to identify those who didn't fit the model of hegemonic masculinity (see DeVito, 1981:203). They spoke of the gay accountant, the lesbian engineer. A Washington human resources professional was concerned that "people see me as the gay trainer, as opposed to the trainer who happens to be gay." Likewise, a New York consultant says that his sexuality probably figures prominently in his public persona, and he imagines a headline in the paper, "'Chris Jones, President of American Craft Council, *gay*.' I mean, 'the gay' president is like being the 'black president.' I think we do too much labelling like that."<sup>12</sup> In all of these examples, heterosexuality is posed as a

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Sullivan's appointment as editor of *The New Republic*, in the fall of 1991, is another case in point. Shortly after his promotion, there was a flurry of press coverage, much of which framed him as an "unlikely" or "surprising" choice as editor. With few exceptions, the "surprise" seemed to be his age (28 years),

sort of primordial state, one that precedes lived experience; homosexuality becomes an adjunct trait, one that is added to (or that removes one from) that initial, unspoiled, presumed state of grace.<sup>13</sup>

*The naturalization of heterosexuality*

The presumption of heterosexuality is further assured by its characterization as a natural or biologically-determined state of being. Heterosexuality is merged, in the popular consciousness, with notions of an "essential" humanity and a natural order that seem to stand outside history and society. The result is a cloaking of the arbitrary and socially-constructed character of heterosexuality. As Adam (1978) observes, "the language of naturalism functions as an effective device in closing the universe of discourse to alternative constructions of reality. . . . The term *natural* inoculates against reason or critical inquiry. The biologization of social phenomena shrouds them in a casing of immutability and permanence" (p. 34). In this scheme, homosexuality is cast as an escape from the imperatives of nature and biology.<sup>14</sup>

In white-collar settings, the equation of heterosexuality and nature is most often found in the mythology of "the family." Displays of heterosexuality are expressed as a function of family life, a construction that lends them the moral authority of biology, and the timelessness of nature:

The prevailing form of family is seen as inevitable, as naturally given and biologically determined. As such, however, it is imbued with a unique

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and the fact that he was "openly" or "admittedly" gay.

<sup>13</sup> In her provocative essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich (1980) describes the ability of this presumption to render lesbians invisible: "The assumption that 'most women are innately heterosexual' stands as a theoretical and political stumbling block for many women. It remains a tenable assumption, partly because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease; partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic; partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and 'innately' heterosexual" (p. 648).

<sup>14</sup> In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston (1991) explores the use of biological ties in the construction of kinship and genealogy. Gay relationships, she notes, represent a challenge to the notion that procreation constitutes kinship, and that "nonbiological" ties must be patterned after a biological model (see pp. 33-41).

social and moral force, since it is seen as the embodiment of general human values rather than the conventions of a particular society (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982:27).

Our model of the married, heterosexual professional is thus granted nature's stamp of approval, and displays of family life (or at least the aspiration to it) are a defining feature of hegemonic masculinity.

Consequently, when professional men wear wedding rings, show baby pictures or share honeymoon plans, they rarely think of these gestures as sexual displays. The family becomes an asexual vehicle for demonstrating one's heterosexuality, one's status as a member of the sexual elite. As a result, Jason sees no inconsistency in his behavior when he insists that "I don't see my sexuality as an issue at work," and says that "I could care less who [my co-workers] are sleeping with, when, where or why. That's none of my business." When Jason brings his wife to company events, he makes his sexuality *everybody's* business, but doesn't see this gesture in sexual terms. Likewise, Dan insists that his gay male employees keep their "sexuality" out of the office, while joining conversations with a female co-worker about her efforts to become pregnant.

In many organizations, family status is an informal requirement for top-level executive positions. When selecting their successors or peers, for example, executives reflexively seek men who share their social characteristics, and this sort of "homosocial reproduction" tends to keep a certain type of person in power.<sup>15</sup> "Family" status becomes symbolic of other shared life experiences, and for this reason many organizations seem to fill their key positions with "family men" who share an understanding of the pressures of feeding a wife and children. Those who do not fit this model can seem enigmatic, less familiar, and less likely to perceive situations in the same way. Their professional skills, in turn, seem less dependable. George, who trains in-flight crews for an international airline, cited

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<sup>15</sup> As Kanter (1977) has observed: "It is the uncertainty quotient in managerial work, as it has come to be defined in the large modern corporation, that causes management to become so socially restricting: to develop tight inner circles excluding social strangers; to keep control in the hands of socially homogeneous peers; to stress conformity and insist upon a diffuse, unbounded loyalty, and to prefer ease of communication and thus social certainty over the strains of dealing with people who are "different" (p. 49).

this example. One of the training programs required George (and the other trainers) to share personal stories about their "families" during the training session:

There were two gay guys in the class, and [the leader] did not believe a gay man could get up and do this seminar. In the seminar you have to tell stories about fictitious family members -- people don't know it but everybody has a Marvin and Elliot and Shirley. Nobody knew this when they were hired, but the gay guys have to go back to their bases and teach this stuff. They have to stand up and talk about Shirley and their son Elliot, and they had a major problem with that.

The notion of "family" was deeply embedded in the training materials, and because the gay trainers couldn't model their presentations on actual experiences with a wife and children, their manager deemed them unfit for the job. Rather than enlarge the notion of "family," or substitute other intimate relationships, the leader insisted on using an exclusive, hegemonic, family model.

Under these circumstances, non-hegemonic sexualities are exoticized as "exceptions" or trivialized as "choices," "preferences" or "lifestyles." Arthur, a New York lawyer, recalls the episode in which he came out to one of the senior partners in his firm. While the two were eating dinner, the partner began a conversation by saying "there are things about you we don't talk about." Arthur recalls thinking:

I'm sort of looking down at my veal parmigiana thinking "are we gonna have that conversation now?" And I thought "Fuck it, why not? It's exactly the time we ought to have it." And so I just looked up and said, "are you talking about personal *inclinations* and *social life choices* here?" And he said "yes," and he got sort of pink.

Likewise, a Philadelphia investment analyst could tell me a wealth of details about his boss, Jack. He knows where Jack's kids attend school, how they spend their vacations, the fact that one daughter is dyslexic, and could recall the dates of his wife's last three trips out of town. "It's all very superficial stuff," he told me. Yet for three years he has carefully avoided revealing anything about his weekend plans, the bars or clubs that he frequents, even the fact that he's single. "That would be making too big a deal," he says, and "I'd be bringing my *personal lifestyle* into the office." When I asked Jason what would happen if co-workers found out that he's gay, he explained that his new identity wouldn't fit with the "family-oriented, baby products, nurturing image of the company." In fact, homosexuality

would be seen as the antithesis of home and hearth, because "a gay person is somehow antithetical to that, a real culture clash, image clash." Under those circumstances, he expects that he would be moved into a less visible role within the company.

In this way, the naturalized world of heterosexuality is contrasted with the exotic, trivial "lifestyles" of sexual others. The family is the central institution of hegemonic masculinity, and frequent displays of it are taken for granted. It is this configuration that permits Jason, and many professionals like him, to describe their companies as "family-oriented" while insisting that they are, at the same time, "asexual."

### **Marginal identities**

When a particular sexual identity is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere -- so pervasive, expected, and "natural" that it becomes largely invisible -- what will be made of its alternatives? Given the hegemony of male heterosexuality in white-collar settings, how are other sexual identities interpreted?

When one enumerates the alternatives, it becomes clear how narrowly white-collar culture has defined the boundaries of acceptable sexuality. Male homosexuality, as I've described it, is only one of many sexual identities that are subordinated to this particular model of heterosexual masculinity. Even most forms of heterosexual sex -- from extramarital affairs to intergenerational sex -- are considered marginal and unfit for public display. When heterosexuals engage in illicit office affairs, for example, they are usually careful to keep them under wraps (even when marital status isn't a problem). Likewise, other alternatives to married heterosexuality were marginalized or rendered invisible. A Philadelphia attorney recalled the firm's reaction when one of the partners was having an affair with his secretary. When the woman became pregnant, there was a deafening silence about her increasingly obvious condition:

She stayed at work through her pregnancy. Everyone knew they were seeing each other, everyone knew he was were still married to this other associate, and people talked about it very cautiously. Nobody was particularly condemnatory, nobody was particularly enthusiastic about it, they just sort of walked around it very carefully. And then she had the baby, his divorce came through and they got married and there was a

congratulatory little note in the firm bulletin. There was also a note when she had her baby.

Similarly, a New York advertising executive recalled his surprise when two of his office mates got married over the weekend, having kept their relationship (and shared apartment) a secret for almost two years.

Though it may be small comfort to lesbians and gay men, we apparently haven't cornered the market on transgressive sexuality. As Rubin (1984) has argued, the full spectrum of sexual behaviors or identities can be viewed as a pyramid or hierarchy of sexual value:

Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamoring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously. . . . Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries (p. 279).

In white-collar settings, those whose behavior stands high in the pyramid are granted visibility, social acceptability, and the labels "natural" and "normal." Others are cast as exceptions to this model, and are subject to heightened attention and scrutiny, and the exaggeration of (and reduction to) those traits that distinguish them.

### *The foregrounding of gay identity*

There are more heterosexuals than homosexuals in this country -- according to our best estimates, anyway -- and the resulting proportions ensure that gay people (even *if* we were all visible) will stand out against a vast, heterosexual background. In office environments, this often means that a gay employee is an anomaly. Co-workers may be unaccustomed to having a gay person around, and may worry that they don't know how to talk about him, think about him, or work with him. His mere presence commands a disproportionate amount of the group's attention (Kanter, 1977:206-242; Kanter & Stein, 1980).

This often means that even the most subtle or conservative disclosures will be interpreted as "flaunting" or "promoting" homosexuality. Any effort to "come out" will be provoke the objection that one is "making an issue" out of sexuality, and this tendency encourages gay professionals to be ambiguous and vague in their "comings out." "I've left room for people to think I'm gay, but I'm not open," according to the credit manager for a coal company. "I really don't want to come out and *say it*. I feel like I've struck a good balance." Similarly, Kirk, a Philadelphia doctor, described one of his interviews for an internship in Obstetrics. When the conversation turned to the subject of spouses, he recalled:

I certainly didn't say "girlfriend" or "she" with them; I'd say "significant other" or "partner," and if they picked up on it, they picked up on it. I certainly wouldn't have been coy about it, had they asked me, I just felt uncomfortable bringing it up in an interview with people whom I was meeting for the first time. But had they flat-out asked me I would have told them -- and then I would have been pissed off and not taken their job right then and there because I would have thought it was rude.

In this case, the applicant demanded obliqueness on both sides; he insinuated that he's gay, permitting the interviewer to "read between the lines," while insisting that neither party raise the issue in explicit terms.

The concern with overvisibility often prompts a vigilant concern with balance and discretion. Jack, the VP of human resources for a Washington publishing house, came out to his co-workers in 1978. Although he is generally comfortable being openly gay, he is always cautious about broaching the subject with them:

The biggest problem for me that I have to be careful about and have to work at and am not always successful with is realizing that there's a difference between accepting my sexuality and flaunting it. I think I make some people uncomfortable by alluding to my sexuality unnecessarily, and I have to be careful about that.

When talking about his lover, for example, Jack is concerned about striking a balance:

For years, I put up with the frustration of having my male drinking buddies talk openly about what was going on sexually and all with them. By god, now that I'm open, I'm going to discuss my life as openly as they discuss their lives! So, I do that, and I don't see any reason that I should stop doing that. Sometimes, though, trying to draw that line is very hazy; it's tough for me . . . but I have to be careful that I stop short of deliberately rubbing peoples noses in my sexuality when I don't have to, and when it can make them uncomfortable. It's not an easy line to walk.



His fear of overvisibility has prompted a concern with discretion and balance.

Though he is generally comfortable at work, Jack worries that he should "do more editing than I do now."

Some men found meaning in the distinction between "knowing" about, and "seeing" evidence of, someone's sexuality. A New York lawyer felt certain that all of his co-workers consider him gay, but was reluctant to make his sexuality more visible:

It's fine if you're gay, but I don't know that anybody would think it so great if I brought my lover to the firm dinner dance. As long as it doesn't interfere on a day-to-day basis, or makes them feel uncomfortable, it's fine. I'm sure that that's the attitude, except among a few very special people. But I'm sure it would create problems, if I suddenly started wearing ACT-UP pins.

Often, these men cite the discomfort co-workers would feel when confronted with physical "evidence" of gay sexuality. The director of development for a Philadelphia AIDS service organization told this story about a former co-worker:

I was walking down the street with Alan -- Alan was somewhat of a femme -- and that bothered my boss quite a bit. I mean, I think that's when he probably *saw* it for the first time. It's one thing to sort of know about it, but I think a lot of straight people have problems with it when it gets beyond a certain point. There's a threshold, I think.

Milton, a Washington lawyer, described a similar situation. Through his involvement with the Whitman-Walker AIDS clinic, his fellow partners had learned about his sexuality. Yet he was reluctant to talk about the clinic at work, and had carefully removed an article about the clinic from the file of press clippings that circulates throughout the firm. "I know that on some level it gets to be too much," he told me, adding that if he became more visible, "I think they'd all run away. Beyond a point, it's best to neither confirm nor deny."

Striking a balance, in other cases, means avoiding self-disclosure altogether. A lawyer in his 30s claims he was reluctant to "come out" because he didn't want to make his sexuality "a cause" or "wear it as a badge." "I don't choose to let it be the dominant issue in my life," he told me, and was critical of those "whose sexuality is the primary focus of their lives." An advertising executive made a similar decision. "I thought about coming out," he told me, "but I asked myself 'why flaunt it?' 'Why throw it in their faces?' So they all assume that I'm straight."

Fears of overvisibility are implicit in the embarrassment gay professionals often feel when in the presence of their compatriots (Adam, 1978:49). Consider the case of two gay men who work in the records management department of the same Houston company. Brent, who supervises the division, expressed concern about one of his employees, Keith, who is also gay. Keith, he explained, is somewhat "flamboyant":

I think Keith does it a little more than he thinks he does. . . . There are some minor things that I don't think he realizes -- or perhaps I'm overreacting -- certain gestures or certain expressions as being gay. Perhaps I'm just oversensitive.

Because he thinks that Keith is "obviously" gay, Brent practices a studied disassociation from him in the office. He avoids being seen with Keith during office hours and avoids anything that might be interpreted as a personal conversation. He has also counseled Keith to be more "professional" at work:

We just discussed the reality of our situation, that we work for a conservative company and some things are just not appropriate. Whether that's personally objectionable to us or not, we're not on our own turf, we're on somebody else's turf.

Keith, meanwhile, thinks that Brent is obvious. When I interviewed Keith a few days earlier, he recounted a number of situations that had made him self-conscious. Several years earlier, after a vacation, Brent had come to work wearing facial bronzer, which made Keith uncomfortable. Brent's boyfriend has an English accent, "which is pretty hard to disguise in Texas," and his telephone calls attract special notice among the office staff. "Brent comes in his Hugo Boss suits and Armani ties, decked out," according to Keith. "They've got him pinpointed." Brent and Keith both assured me that the other is more visible, more effeminate, more "recognizable" as a gay person.

The theme of overvisibility is implicit even in the figurative language of self-disclosure. When they speak of "coming out," gay professionals worry that they are "making an issue of it," "shouting it from the rooftops," "flaunting it," "blurting it out," or "letting the whole world know." They liken disclosure to "wearing a badge" or "carrying a sign." A New York public relations executive supplied this anecdote:

There's was political cartoon in Canada, when one of the Members of Parliament had declared his homosexuality in the Calgary newspaper. There was a picture of him coming through customs, standing on this little

box, holding up a sign that said "I'm a homosexual," and another sign, "I'm gay, hooray!" or something like that. And the caption read, one customs inspector talking to another, "I only asked him if he had anything to declare." I always think of that in my mind, because I don't stand up on a box and declare my homosexuality, but it's not something that I push under the carpet.

The implicit metaphors, in all these examples, are those of parades, public announcements, inappropriately showy or ostentatious dress. Other men talk about not wanting to "volunteer it," as if one's sexuality were an interruption, beside the point.<sup>16</sup>

### *The sexualization of gay identity*

Gay identity also attracts a particular kind of attention. As tokens or minorities in most white-collar settings, not only will gay people seem overvisible; their distinguishing trait, sexuality, will also seem to eclipse all other aspects of identity. Because sexuality sets us apart, lesbians and gay men are frequently reduced to sexual identity, and sexual identity to sex alone (Weston, 1991:22-23).

Kanter (1977) calls this perceptual tendency the "contrast" effect, and argues that it is inherent to minority status. The polarization and exaggeration of differences results whenever one group (the few) is surrounded by others (the many), who bear different social characteristics. As she notes:

In uniform groups, members and observers may never become self-conscious about the common culture and type, which remain taken for granted and implicit. But the presence of a person or two bearing a different set of social characteristics increases the self-consciousness of the numerically dominant population and the consciousness of observers about what makes the dominants a class. They become more aware both of their commonalities and their difference from the token . . . There is a tendency to exaggerate the extent of the differences between tokens and dominants.

For this reason, those in the minority will often be perceived and judged in terms of their distinguishing trait (sexuality, race, gender, to name a few familiar examples), which will in turn seem important, conspicuous, and laden with special meaning.

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<sup>16</sup> We might also ponder the metaphors implicit in the familiar statements, "I don't want to rub their noses in it," and "I don't want to shove it down their throats."

The contrast effect seems especially powerful in the case of sexuality, which has long occupied a position of exalted significance in Western culture.<sup>17</sup> As Weeks (1985) notes, "the deeply rooted injunctions against homosexual sex have had the effect, especially amongst gay men, of focusing attention upon the act of sex itself" (p. 221). The result, in white-collar settings, is a tendency to perceive gay identity in terms of an exaggerated sexuality that tends to eclipse all other personal or professional traits.<sup>18</sup> Consistent with our prevailing stereotypes about gay men -- that we are hyper-sexual, promiscuous, indiscriminate -- professional gay men are often judged entirely in terms of their gayness, their sexuality, their non-conformity.<sup>19</sup>

The result is a tendency to hyper-sexualize gay identities and lives. As Hall (1989) noted in her study of professional lesbians:

An obvious and intense flirtation between two heterosexual colleagues may not elicit actual censure until the two are discovered *in flagrante delicto* in the staff lounge. In contrast, the person known to be homosexual must do nothing in particular in order to be perceived in terms of excessive eroticism (p. 125).

It follows that the identical disclosure made by two men -- one gay, the other straight -- will be interpreted in radically different ways. If both men admit to having a "spouse," for example, one disclosure be viewed as a statement about his affections, his future plans, his family-orientation and good character. The other will often be interpreted sexually, as a lurid statement about his erotic life. The tendency is most evident when turned on its head. Imagine telling someone that a marriage license is no more than a sexual contract (for the exclusive use of a spouse's genitals), or that baby pictures are pornographic (as evidence of specific

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<sup>17</sup> As Sontag (1969) has noted, in an oft-cited passage: "Since Christianity upped the ante and concentrated on sexual behavior as the root of virtue, everything pertaining to sex has been a 'special case' in our culture, evoking peculiarly inconsistent attitudes."

<sup>18</sup> As Adam (1978) demonstrates, the stereotype of hypersexuality has been applied to other "inferiorized" groups, notably Jews and blacks (see pp. 44-46).

<sup>19</sup> Sheppard (1989) demonstrates a similar problem faced by professional women. In male-dominated environments, she notes, women's sexuality can become a sort of master trait, which can be used to judge and manipulate them. "Managerial and professional women in male-dominated environments are vulnerable to having their organizational status overridden by their sexual identity" (p. 154).

ejaculatory practices). In white-collar environments, gay lives are routinely scrutinized with this sort of reductionist logic.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps because of this tendency, gay men often seem to make only vague distinctions between homosexual orientation, identity, fantasy and practice. Expressions of homosexuality are often lumped into the same category, such that identifying one's orientation is the same as specifying one's erotic experiences or preferences.<sup>21</sup> The statement "I'm gay" is conflated with far different statements, like "I find so-and-so attractive" or "I had sex with so-and-so, and here's what I did, wanted to do, or fantasized about doing."

The tendency to confuse gay identities and acts is especially characteristic of gay professionals who keep their sexuality a secret at work. When explaining their desire to remain invisible, for example, my respondents often compared themselves to non-gay people, pointing to the equivalent secrets they presumably keep -- but look closely at the nature of the comparisons. Burt, a legal assistant in his 40s, has worked for years with a woman named Bonnie, and came out to her shortly after they both joined the company. But when Bonnie shared Burt's secret with another woman in the office, he was furious. "She can get a little too open about my sexual preference at times when she should not -- I mean, I don't talk about her or her yeast problems, ok?" Gay identity, in this example, is equated with a vaginal

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<sup>20</sup> Weston (1991) cites a typical example of this tendency. One of Weston's informants, a lesbian she calls Misha Ben Nun, found herself in a conversation with her father during which he asked specific questions about her sexual activity: had she ever kissed a man, touched a man, or had any other sort of heterosexual contact? Misha's response was to talk about the community of women she had found in San Francisco, attempting "to move the discussion in the direction of friendship and kinship, but her father insisted on reducing sexual identity to a matter of sex. When her father elevated (hetero)sexual activity to a signifier of sexual identity by asking Misha if she had had sex with a man, he mixed erotic with nonerotic forms of love" (p. 94).

<sup>21</sup> In a *Gaysweek* editorial, David Rothenberg (1979) offered a protest against this tendency: "Someone recently commented to me that gays keep announcing what they do in bed. He then asked, 'Wouldn't it be embarrassing for heterosexuals to do the same?' Another myth. I never tell anyone what I do in bed when I state that I am gay. When a candidate for office parades wife and children into a TV commercial, he is 'coming out' to me as a heterosexual. When a man nibbles on a woman's ear in the seat in front of me at a theater, he is 'coming out' while 'coming on'" (p. 19). In a letter to the *Village Voice* (4/24/90), Vito Russo made a similar point: "When I say my brother and his wife are heterosexual, that doesn't mean I'm talking about their sex lives. Likewise, when we say someone is gay, we're talking about *sexual orientation*, not their sexual activity. It's not our fault that every time someone says 'gay,' people think 'sex.' That's *their* twisted problem" (p. 4).

infection. Another man made a similar comparison: "I don't particularly need for people to know the details of my private life. I'm not sure that if somebody's dating women or is in a marriage and has sexual problems should discuss all those details with his colleagues either." In this case, the man's sexual orientation is compared not to the other man's marriage -- presumably a sign of *his* sexual orientation -- but to "all those details" of his sexual dysfunction. Finally, a Houston lawyer in his 30s offered this reason for not disclosing sexual orientation:

Being gay is not something I wear on my sleeve. When I was straight and all that implied, I didn't run around the office talking about what woman I'd slept with last night. And I don't go in the office and talk about what man I slept with last night.

Self-disclosure is thus equated with "talking about what man I slept with last night," and on that basis he deems it inappropriate.

In this way, gay identity -- the mere disclosure of sexual orientation -- is made subject to the restrictions we place on displays of explicit sex, dysfunctional sex, and disease. As long as "coming out" is equated with "a yeast infection" or "talking about sex," we can expect such disclosures to rouse opposition from those who would desexualize public life, even when restrictions would *not* be placed on equivalent, heterosexual disclosures. Barry, a New York lawyer, faced precisely this quandary when he decided to come out at work. "Well, it's kind of hard to know exactly how to do it," he explained. "You know, one of the partners doesn't come in and sit down and pick his coffee up and say 'By the way, I like my wife to get on top.'" Barry's solution, ultimately, was to be indirect:

There was a guy in the tax department, who I was very friendly with. And he had the biggest mouth, *the biggest mouth*. So I took him home and introduced him to my then-lover, and I knew the next day it would be all around the firm. So that's the way I handled that.

Fearing that his co-workers would conflate sexual identity with sexual practice, Barry went to great lengths to engineer a disclosure that would be as unobtrusive and generic as possible. To do otherwise might provoke the accusation that he was merely "talking about sex."

## Sexual hegemony

White-collar, professional culture is an ideological stew that serves to justify the visibility, naturalness and pervasiveness of a certain, limited type of heterosexual display. It further ensures that alternative displays will be misread as statements about sex, and that their relative rarity will earn them disproportionate attention or criticism. The result is a veiled but far-reaching double standard, one both imposed upon and propagated by gay professionals.

Consider a few examples. The men in my study often deemed their sexuality unfit for public consumption, even as heterosexual co-workers granted access to theirs. For example, when I asked a lawyer how much he really knew about his partners' lives, he replied:

I know that they all belong to country clubs, play a little golf on the weekends, take the wife to dinner, take nice vacations, and have cute and smart kids and send them to all the right schools and that's really as much of their private lives as I want to know.

But when I asked the question in reverse -- how much do they know about *you*? -- he admitted that they knew nothing about his lover of many years, nor even that he's gay. "They know I live alone," he said, "and I don't think they would take it much further than that." Steve, an accountant in his mid-20s, supplied this anecdote:

I don't think I'd be fired, and I don't think I'd be harassed [if co-workers knew] that I'm gay. I think my bosses would probably call me in and the two of them would say 'it doesn't matter, we all keep our personal lives out of the office.' But when Dana is dating someone that works two offices down, and Jay is dating Tamara and someone else is dating an auditor -- I mean, aaaaaagh! -- people are bringing their personal lives into the office whether they like it or not. It's the Love Connection around here. And now someone in internal audit is dating someone in personnel.

Whatever specific construction we place these events, the double standard quickly becomes apparent. Gay professionals are encouraged to believe that their sexuality is a *private* activity -- one that should rightly be excluded from public spaces -- but acknowledge that heterosexual co-workers wear wedding rings, display

pictures of children, and display wives and girlfriends at company functions.<sup>22</sup> They fear that self-disclosure will lead to unwanted *intimacy*, and that professional relationships should remain distant -- even as they watch office friendships develop around them, as they complain about feeling socially withdrawn in the office, and as they watch promotions and perks go to better-liked peers. They contend that sexual orientation isn't *relevant*, but seem to know -- or presume they know -- the orientation of every heterosexual in the place, and list the penalties, like feeling socially withdrawn, for being mysterious. They feel it would be *unprofessional* to disclose their sexuality, while noting that most corporate managers are married heterosexuals who face no stigma for "coming out" as being wed. And finally, they sense that office *etiquette* forbids such disclosures, even as they feel compelled to fabricate romantic lives and relationships that can be disclosed.

Under these circumstances, efforts to appear asexual are actually efforts to blend in, to fade into the woodwork by confirming (or not disconfirming) the presumption of heterosexuality. For example, bringing a female date to the office Christmas party is organizationally-expected behavior; bringing a male date is not. And while either companion might constitute a "statement" about one's sexuality, the female date is often justified as an attempt to appear asexual -- as an effort to preserve one's privacy, to be professional, or to observe office etiquette. In this way, my informants' efforts to *desexualize* can more accurately be seen as efforts to *heterosexualize*.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Many of our cultural "authorities" uphold the same double standard. Etiquette doyenne Judith Martin, who writes the column *Miss Manners*, once received the following question from a reader. "Dear Miss Manners: How should I handle people who ask if certain of my friends are gay." The suggested reply -- "I have no idea. I wouldn't dream of asking them anything so extremely private" -- comes from a woman who has written columns -- nay, *books* -- on the proper ways to discuss the weddings, children, and divorces of heterosexuals. (Try using her response when someone asks if a friend is married).

<sup>23</sup> In his study of English chairpersons, Crew (1978) cites a perfect example of the double standard: "Only a member of the ruling class could enjoy the luxury of saying, 'I am no more concerned with the sex life of my faculty than I am with what brand of underwear they wear, and I would consider their flaunting of either in equally bad taste.' The key here is the word *flaunting*. The heterosexual dictators of our culture have so defined our way of life that heterosexual references to one's wife, husband, children, even in the most academic of settings, are not considered *flaunting*; yet let a gay professor just quietly place a picture of her wife or his husband on the desk in the office like anyone else . . ." (p. 19; ellipses his).



It was this same logic that encouraged Dan, the director of a Houston psychiatric clinic, to prohibit his gay subordinates to wear earrings at work. "A mental health professional has to be a blank screen," he explained, by which he meant, of course, a heterosexual. Earrings on men, he feared, were inconsistent with the pattern. "If you disclose something inappropriate about yourself, that's going to make the process less clean and effective than it could be." When Dan's subordinates protested that the rule was sexist, that as women they would have been allowed to wear earrings, Dan insisted that the policy (e.g. the appearance of heterosexuality) was just a matter of professionalism (e.g. the "blank screen"). Sexism had "nothing to do with it," he told them. "We have to fit what's gonna go with society. We have to be as blank as possible."

In this way, white-collar culture ensures the hegemony of heterosexuality by rationalizing the well-being of a certain kind of individual -- the heterosexual, married "organization man."<sup>24</sup> It explains the visibility and privilege of some groups, while justifying the relative invisibility of others.<sup>25</sup> All others are deemed unprofessional, insensitive, or offensive. Someone who can't separate public and private lives. Someone who brings irrelevant concerns into the workplace. Someone who's just not a team player.

Hegemony is not, however, a mere system of rules that establish ordinate and subordinate classes. Rather, it is a whole body of practices, expectations, and definitions-of-the-situation in which such inequalities are imbedded. It manifests

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<sup>24</sup> As Lipman-Blumen (1984) has observed, commenting on the function of ideologies: "They offer interpretations, even justifications, for the contradictions we confront daily: for why one group constitutes the powerful, another the powerless . . . In addition to providing explanations for life's contradictions, institutional ideologies suggest several approaches for dealing with existential paradoxes: accept them as proof of a better life in the hereafter; accept them because they are rooted in human nature; accept them as necessary for the "collective good"; accept them because they are traditional and unchangeable. This is the message woven into the very fabric of our major ideologies" (p. 18).

<sup>25</sup> Mainstream journalism has a comparable set of ideological principles -- invoking notions of privacy -- to justify the traditional invisibility of lesbians and gay men in the mass media. See Gross (1989).

itself not as a system of coercion, but as a world-view, a sense of "how things are" and "who we are."<sup>26</sup> As Williams (1977) notes:

It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives (p. 110).

Unlike a system of coercion, hegemony maintains itself through the manufacture of consent. It is not viewed as manipulation because it is wholly embodied in social institutions and ideologies; people are unaware of its influence even as it supplies their definitions for living and relating to one another. It relies, in other words, on the acquiescence of those its oppresses, and its *invisibility* is the ultimate measure of its success. As Connell (1987) notes in a discussion of masculine role models, though "few men are Bogarts or Stallones, many collaborate in sustaining those images." Likewise, though a numerical minority of Americans may live in monogamous, procreative, heterosexual marriages, most of us show obeisance to that ideal.

It is the hegemony of this same model that must be blamed for the sense of impoverishment expressed by many of my informants. To reveal that one is gay is to talk about "who you're sleeping with" -- nothing more -- while heterosexuality is expanded to encompass friendship, love, and family. A New York consultant told me that he wouldn't like working in an all-gay environment, because "I don't like to be in a ghetto situation; I'm really not that kind of person." Likewise, when asked if he would enjoy an all-gay environment, a software engineer in his 20s told me: "I like having straight coworkers. It helps me feel part of the human race, which I might kind of lose contact with if I were in a totally gay environment." Heterosexuality, in his mind, has also cornered the market on humanity.

Writing about the literary world, Michael Denny (1989) supplies this anecdote:

A couple of weeks ago, I watched an almost classic liberal, Bill Moyers, on his television show ask August Wilson, "Don't you ever

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<sup>26</sup> In this same vein, Lipman-Blumen (1984) makes the useful distinction between macromanipulation and micromanipulation. Macromanipulation is invisible because it is embodied in the major institutions of society. Those denied access to these institutions become adept at micromanipulation, using "intelligence, canniness, intuition, interpersonal skill, charm, sexuality, deception and avoidance to offset the control of the powerful" (p. 8).

get tired of writing about the black experience?" A question of such breathtaking stupidity that even Wilson paused. Would Moyers ask John Updike whether he ever gets tired of writing about the white experience? Would he ask Dostoyevsky if he ever gets tired of writing about the Russian experience? Would he ask Sophocles whether he ever gets tired of writing about the Greek experience? (p. 19).

The implication is that "the black experience" -- or the "gay experience" or "the women's experience" -- "is somehow limited, is something one could get tired of, is not inexhaustible the way life is" (p. 20). As Denny points out, one can't quite imagine Moyers asking "Don't you ever get tired of writing about the human experience?" And unfortunately the reason one can't imagine him asking Updike if he tires of "the white, heterosexual experience" is that he probably equates whiteness and heterosexuality with life itself.

White-collar culture claims the "professional experience" as a uniquely heterosexual one, just as it renders the "office" a heterosexual place. For millions of lesbian and gay professionals, this construction invites the belief that their lives are somehow smaller or of less consequence; the ability to communicate is a form of power, and it follows that invisibility or inaudibility are a kind of symbolic annihilation (Gross, 1989). In my effort to untangle these constructions, I don't mean to suggest that we rid professional environments of sexuality. On the contrary, I concur with Pringle (1989), who concludes her study of female secretaries by noting:

It makes no sense to banish sexuality from the workplace. What needs to be challenged is the way it is treated as an intruder, for this is the basis of the negative representation of women/sexuality/secretaries. It is by making it visible, exposing the masculinity that lurks behind gender-neutrality, asserting women's rights to be subjects rather than objects of sexual discourses, that bureaucracy can be challenged (p. 177).

The same can be said of lesbian and gay professionals, whose very lives are regarded as violations of professionalism. Rather than renewed crusades to desexualize the workplace, we need efforts to expose the machinations of hegemony and the guise of asexuality in which they have been cloaked.

PART TWO  
STRATEGIES AND IDENTITIES

*A man without a mask is indeed very rare. One even doubts the possibility of such a man. Everyone in some measure wears a mask, and there are many things we do not put ourselves into fully. In "ordinary" life it seems hardly possible for it to be otherwise.*

-- R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self*

*A baby has no subvert life, and by contrast everyone else you know seems muffled, cloaked, and full of sad little tricks.*

-- Michael Cunningham, *A Home at the End of the World*

Unlike most stigmatized groups, sexual minorities usually have the option of remaining invisible, of hiding the trait that sets us apart from the majority. Like political and religious outlaws, we are distinguished by a category of forbidden thoughts and deeds, and have no identifying marks or physical characteristics.<sup>1</sup> Even the personal mannerisms assumed to betoken homosexuality -- effeminacy in men, mannishness in women -- are unreliable signifiers of sexual orientation.

The incorporeality of sexual orientation has profound consequences, for it prevents direct perceptual access to our defining "trait." Like other self-identified groups, we are capable of detaching *virtual* social identity, those traits by which we are known to others, from *actual* social identity, those traits we in fact possess (Goffman, 1963:41-42). As Milton, a Washington attorney, pointed out:

Every white gay man and every white lesbian can at some point choose not to correct people when they say homophobic things, to cross their legs a little bit differently, to walk into a room differently, to be silent, to hide. As a person of color, I don't have that choice.

For gay people, the potential gap between psychic and social reality poses countless decisions -- to display or not to display, to tell or not to tell, and in each

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<sup>1</sup> Recent biomedical research has revived the search for somatic markers (or "causes") of homosexuality, most recently by suggesting a link between brain structure and sexual orientation (see the *New York Times*, front page, Aug. 20; also, a follow-up letter from William M. Byne, M.D., to the editor, September 19; see also Bailey *et al.*, 1991, for a review of the biological literature on sexual orientation).

case, to whom, how, when, and where -- that become central to our navigation of the world.

Gay lives and careers are thus characterized by a preoccupation with self-disclosure and a self-consciousness in the management of sexual identity. "Coming out" stories figure prominently in gay folklore, and there is an elaborate argot within gay communities for talking about self-disclosure and its consequences (Goodwin, 1989).<sup>2</sup> Since at least the 1950s, "coming out" has also been a focal concern of lesbian and gay activists, who continue to debate its importance as both an ethical issue and political tactic. As Richard Dyer (1991) notes, in his study of lesbian and gay film:

No other group is quite so literally socially invisible. Being lesbian/gay does not show -- unlike gender, color or disability, it is not physiologically apparent; unlike class or ethnicity, it is not something the visible markers of which you have to *unlearn* if you wish to disguise it; only if you choose to behave in an "obvious" style is being lesbian/gay in any sense visible. This of course does afford a measure of protection. Coming out is a deliberate decision to do without that mask of invisibility (p. 249).

In this way, the issue of self-disclosure distinguishes lesbian and gay politics from social movements organized around gender, ethnicity, disability, or social class.

These arguments and stories about "coming out" reveal several key assumptions about social identity. Embedded in the discourse about self-disclosure is the concept of a core, authentic self -- a "real me" -- that is the source of one's personhood. In gay parlance, it is usually described in spatial terms, as part of an "inner" world to which its owner has exclusive access. When they speak of "coming out," for example, gay men distinguish a social identity, located on the surface and directed at the outer world, from an essential self based deep within the body. In Weston's (1991) language:

In coming out, a person acts to create a sense of wholeness by establishing congruence between *interior* experience and *external* presentation, moving

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<sup>2</sup> For example, a 1990 study conducted by the American Society of News Editors made this observation: "While nearly three-fifths of survey respondents consider themselves 'out' in their newsrooms, the issue of being or not being publicly gay carries agonizing import for these journalists. No topic seems to hold more emotional weight for those who commented with their surveys. Respondents struggled over whether to come out, to whom to come out, the impact on their careers (some in dread about it), the impact of their effectiveness as journalists, the yearning to be accepted and the anger when they are not. Clearly, in this respect, newsrooms are a microcosm of the larger society" (p. 15).

the *inner* into the *outer*, bringing the *hidden* to *light*, and transforming a private into a social reality (emphasis mine, p. 50).

"Coming out" is thus conceived as an effort to locate the inner self on the outer social landscape, while "staying in" confines it to the private, interior space known as the closet.<sup>3</sup> When one is "found out" or "outed," the self is uncovered against one's will.

### **Strategies and moves**

Working in white-collar environments, gay men have become adept at managing and thinking about self-disclosure. They have learned, often at great pains, that different sexual identities have different social consequences, and they have learned to control and manage these identities, even to fabricate them when necessary. They have learned, in other words, to be *strategic* in their presentation of self.

In the simplest sense, a strategic behavior is intended to influence the impression others have of its performer, whether or not he was aware of this purpose (Tedeschi, 1981). Much self-presentational behavior is automatic and habitual, and falls outside our self-awareness. When introduced to someone, for example, we may extend a friendly hand or nod hello, entirely unaware that we are behaving strategically. Perhaps the intention was just to be polite, but our behavior send a message about our relationship to the other person, about our desire for social acceptance, and about our ability to play by certain rules. The greeting was a way of making a certain impression, and was thus goal-oriented even if the goal remained tacit and unconscious. At other times, strategic behaviors may be conscious, calculated and intentional. We may have nodded in a certain way, in a calculated effort to appear confident. Perhaps we rehearsed the handshake, practicing the opening line before a mirror: "It's so nice to meet you." In either case, the gesture was strategic.

The scheme I describe below focuses on the strategic moves and intentions of professional gay men. An "identity strategy," as I use the term, is the set of

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<sup>3</sup> As a friend noted, "it's ironic that gay people, when talking about self-disclosure, use the language of interior design."

behavioral moves and countermoves that establish the performer's sexual identity for a particular audience. These strategies fall into three basic categories -- counterfeiting, avoiding, integrating -- each of which is characterized by a different intention on the part of the performer.

## CHAPTER FOUR COUNTERFEITING

The counterfeiter wants others to believe that he's heterosexual. He knows that they will base their conclusions on the things he says and does, so he tries to say and do the things they expect of straight men. To be known as a heterosexual, he tries to *act* like one.

But what, exactly, do straight men do? The answer at first seems obvious: they have, desire or fantasize about sex with women -- that's why we call them *heterosexuals*. But on closer inspection, this definition has little to do with the ways we make social judgments about others. Sexual identities, heterosexual or otherwise, are rarely determined by actual sexual behavior. Except in the unlikely case that we've caught someone *in flagrante delicto*, we are accustomed to accepting alternate evidence of sexual orientation. After all, how often does one see others engaged in sex before making judgments about their sexual orientation?

In most cases, sexual identity is *inferred* from behaviors that are not themselves defined as "sex." We hear second-hand accounts of actual, intended or desired sexual contact. We are introduced to girlfriends, boyfriends, and spouses, and accept the sexual implications of these labels. Often without thinking, we spy wedding rings, baby pictures, or swimsuit calendars and code them as signs of sexual interest. We hear that a male co-worker saw a new movie -- the one about two straight people falling in love, the one featuring the sexy starlet, the one he attended with the single woman in accounting -- and discern the multiple, entwined heterosexual scripts that were performed that evening. Even more indirectly, we assume that straight men will be masculine, and tend to accept the latter as evidence of the former. Virile men, and feminine women, are simply assumed to be straight. The paradigmatic heterosexual act, sexual contact with someone of the opposite sex, is the one we are *least* likely to see.



### The basic moves

When personal traits are inferred rather than directly perceived, there is always the opportunity for false inferences. The behaviors and symbols that signify sexual orientation can usually be manipulated, hidden, or fabricated; only under the most extraordinary circumstances must actual sex be performed for the direct inspection of one's public.<sup>1</sup> As Goffman (1959) notes, "It is always possible to manipulate the impression the observer uses as a substitute for reality because a sign for the presence of a thing, not being that thing, can be employed in the absence of it. The observer's need to rely on representations of things itself creates the possibility of misrepresentation" (p. 251). One can *counterfeit* sexual orientation, in other words, through the manipulation of its various signifiers.<sup>2</sup>

In this sense, counterfeiting is akin to "passing" as the term has been used by many others.<sup>3</sup> I've chosen the former term for several reasons. First, "counterfeiting" stresses the active nature of the task, and distinguishes it from strategies that permit the performer to be more passive. The counterfeiter actively constructs and asserts a false identity, marshalling whatever props, settings, and supporting players are necessary, and must carefully monitor his performance along the way. Secondly, the term "counterfeit" captures the sense, on the part of the

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<sup>1</sup> And even then, one need only go through the motions. In some fraternity rites, for example, there is the requirement that one have sex during the initiation ceremony, fully observed by the elder members. The body willing, however, the evidence can be faked (or, as I discovered, one can accept the lesser humiliation of "passing out" first). In either case, one's sexual identity has more to do with presumed intentions and desires than physical performance.

<sup>2</sup> In some cultures, for example, there is the custom of showing evidence (i.e. bloody sheets) after the wedding night, to demonstrate that the couple had sex, and to verify the bride's virginity. In the film *Yentl*, based on the novel by Issac Bashevis Singer, the groom (who is actually a woman, played by Barbra Streisand) substitutes a cup of red wine.

<sup>3</sup> Adam (1978) supplies this composite portrait of the person (whether black, Jewish or homosexual) who passes: "Passing' represents an escape from identity which is not bad faith, but duplicity. It is an escape from identity more for the other than for the self. Allegiance to dominant norms is paid by 'lip service'; a compliant facade is adopted to facilitate social interaction. The actor is likely to be somewhat integrated into the subordinated community; his denial of identity continues on a part-time or ambivalent basis. To other inferiorized people, the actor reveals a more 'authentic' identity, discarding a pseudo-identity constructed for superordinate audiences. The former identity is experienced 'at ease'; the latter as inhibited -- an act" (p. 95-6).

actor, that the performance is fraudulent; it's "just an act," and is often experienced as a form of deception. Gay men who pass as heterosexuals often lament that they aren't being "themselves" in public, and are vaguely troubled by the idea that their behavior is dishonest.

Though virtually all men counterfeit an identity at some point in their lives, less than a quarter of my participants (21%) were currently using this strategy at work. Fewer still (10%) were using it exclusively. As a group, the men using counterfeit strategies were not significantly different from the others. They ranged in age from 27 to 60, and all but one worked for a company; the one exception was a medical student. Two were currently married (see Appendix II for a more detailed description).

As their stories demonstrate, there are many ways to counterfeit a sexual identity. The repertoire includes several basic moves, described below, but permits an almost endless array of new combinations and variations. The repertoire remains in flux as cultural conditions continue to change, making new moves and countermoves possible.

### *Inventing a sexual life*

Some gay men counterfeit by supplying evidence of sexual relationships or fantasies that do not, in fact, exist. Through direct or indirect means, they disseminate a sexual biography that has been made up.

In its most direct form, this tactic involves women, real or imagined, who are presented as girlfriends or lovers. Miguel, senior resident at a large Philadelphia hospital, found himself in a typical situation. Early in his residency, Miguel's co-workers took a special interest in his social schedule. Miguel was attractive and shy, and had only recently moved to the United States from Puerto Rico. His co-workers took this as their cue to fix him up with single women, to introduce him to the female nurses in the hospital, to show him around town. On a few occasions, he agreed. "If you go out with a nurse," he explained, "the next day all of them would know, so it was really good. I went out with one and the next day I thought, 'Well, nobody's going to bother me any more. No one's going to have the suspicion that I'm gay.'"

By his second year, the frequent invitations had become more than Miguel could handle. As long as he remained single, he was fair game for any single female who needed a date. One time, to avoid one of these invitations, Miguel made a vague reference to "Kathy," a woman he hinted had become "sort of special." Much to Miguel's surprise, the name stuck, and Kathy quickly became the center of attention in the hospital. "Suddenly people were asking me about the famous 'Kathy' -- who doesn't exist. 'What does Kathy do? Where is she from? Why don't you come over for dinner -- and bring Kathy?'" The pressure to date was alleviated, but was replaced by pressure to elaborate Kathy's life history, to bring her to social events, and to explain why she was always too busy to attend. Miguel spun the entire relationship out of thin air.

Clay, an executive secretary in his 50s, found a way to improve on this technique. On his application forms he noted that he was "divorced," and word quickly spread that he had been married. Periodically, Clay grumbles something about his ex-wife, or recalls some episode from their past life together. When someone asks, he simply says "I'm divorced, she's in New York. I see her every once in awhile, and that was twenty years ago." Sometimes, he updates the story a bit. "I go on vacations, and my boss will say, 'Oh, going up to New York to see the Ex?' I just say, 'yeah.'" Because failed marriages are often a touchy subject, no one pushes him for a more detailed explanation, no one expects for him to produce a spouse at company functions.

Other men began with some shred of fact -- an actual person, an actual event -- and used this as the basis of their fictional relationships. Ralph, an account executive for a Houston oil company, described one of his romances:

[P]eople ask me a lot about a girl that I met at one point. That was probably about a year ago, when I lived in this high-rise apartment building, and I knew a girl there who kept calling me up. So I told people "Oh, this girl keeps calling me," and I finally said that I'd gone out with her once. Then people asked *all the time*. "What does she do?" "Where does she live?" That was really uncomfortable, given that I hate having to lie, and you always wonder if you *look* like you lied; I mean, even in my mind, I kept a biography of her, where she worked, how old she was, and stuff like that.

The story had a basis in fact, which Ralph hoped would lend it credibility, but it was otherwise the product of his imagination:

She's a girl who called me all the time, but I didn't really know anything about her. I knew she worked at Texas Commerce Bank, that's about it, and she used to call me a lot and see me out at the pool and all that stuff. But I really didn't know anything else about her, I didn't know where she was from, or all that other shit.

To make his story believable, Ralph filled in the missing facts, making up the things "that you would obviously know about somebody if you went out with them a couple of times." Then, after about a month, Ralph gave the romance a conventional ending, telling co-workers that he wasn't going to call her anymore. "They thought I'd just kind of blown her off."

Fabricating personal details, and keeping track of these fabrications, was easiest when the romance had a more substantial basis in fact. Several of the men were involved in long-term relationships, and found it convenient to use them as the basis for their fictional romances. Rodney, a Wall Street trader, used this approach with the other traders. About a year after he joined one of New York's largest investment banks, Rodney became seriously involved with a man in Holland, and ultimately requested a transfer to the company's Amsterdam office. He explained to his bosses that he and "Tracy" were planning to marry, and they were sympathetic to his request. The transfer was arranged, and Rodney made plans to leave.

Shortly before the transfer was scheduled, however, the relationship ended. Rodney elected to remain in the United States, and returned to the New York office. The news spread like wildfire. "You should have heard them: 'Tracy, that lovely woman Tracy. What he did to Tracy.'" The story finally unraveled several years later, when Rodney was diagnosed with AIDS. When he abruptly left the company on long-term disability, his co-workers concluded that he was gay:

Everybody figured it out real quick. They all just assumed it. I remember having a conversation about a month later with the head of the arbitrage desk, and he said "So, Rodney, just a question here. That girl in Amsterdam, it was a man wasn't it?" Yeah, yeah, it was a man. It was kind of like it all began to fall into place. "Boy, you put on quite a show, you had us fooled."

The story had been relatively easy to construct, Rodney recalls, because the details were essentially accurate. "All I had to do was switch genders, which was no big

deal; it became second nature after awhile." Because "Tracy" was almost four thousand miles away, there was little risk that the key biographical detail -- Tracy's gender -- would find its way to New York.

The more complicated the drama, the more difficult it is to perform effectively. In some cases, when the cast of characters becomes too large, or the narrative too complicated, the drama can take on a life of its own. For Tip, a surgery resident at a large New York hospital, this almost spelled disaster. Among the other residents, Tip was famous for his series of romances, all of which were loosely based on actual events. When asked if he was dating, Tip typically tried to avoid specifics, describing only the basic outline of his social activities:

I always use generic terms in an effort not to lie, but you can only do that so long. You have to give someone a name sooner or later. So Marlene [one of the nurses] would pick out the names that I would use. She does that instantly. I tell her about a date and she'd say "We'll call this one Jenny."

Two years ago, when Tip became seriously involved with a man who worked for the New York City Ballet, he quickly supplied his co-workers a heterosexual version of the romance. He renamed the boyfriend "Amy" -- coincidentally, the name of the company's prima ballerina -- and the romance quickly became hospital lore.

Tip was involved with "Amy" for a year and a half, and found his story remarkably easy to document. Through his boyfriend, he obtained a steady supply of tickets and publicity shots of the real Amy, which he distributed throughout the hospital. On several occasions, he accompanied the ballet when it toured. "I went to Paris twice and to Hawaii twice with the ballet group. Since I didn't have any money, they assumed that I was being bought. I let that go, of course, since it helped my image." The ruse was only threatened once, when one of the senior physicians, Dr. Wu, suggested that they go to the ballet *together*. To keep his story together, Tip made certain that he and Dr. Wu weren't seated together, and warned Amy that she might be called upon to help. Amy knew that she was part of Tip's cover, and "she was sharp enough not to blurt out anything." After the performance, Tip said goodbye to Dr. Wu, and slipped backstage -- supposedly to see Amy.

A few months later Tip broke off the relationship with his boyfriend, and told co-workers that he and Amy were finished. Since then, he's kept a low profile. "I haven't provided any names lately, although it's probably time for it. I should talk to Marlene and figure out another scam."

Few of the men went to such lengths in their efforts to counterfeit an identity; a fictional romance (like an actual one) requires tremendous effort to maintain, and in most cases such elaborate evidence was unnecessary. Rather than fabricate an intricate, long-standing romance, most men settle for brief and uncomplicated "dates" with women.

After his close call with "Amy", for example, Tip tried to keep his stories less complicated. He needed to maintain a highly visible sex life, but wanted to minimize the amount of time and energy these performances required. The solution, for awhile, was to date women who worked in the hospital, women who were highly visible -- the nurse who ran the paging system, for example, renowned for her "big mouth and big tits". After an evening at a club or restaurant, "we went back to the hospital, and people were saying, 'oh, I heard you two went out.' That meant security that you're straight."

Clay, an executive secretary, confined his "strategic dating" to company parties and social events. "I'm waiting for the next time we all get together. Then I'll bring a date. Of course, it'll be fun; we'll really create an impression. They'll be talking about it for days." The goal, in all of these cases, was to ensure that the dates were duly noted. As a New York advertising executive pointed out, "it's like any other staged media event; there's no point in doing it if no one hears about it. It's like the mayor kissing babies and opening shopping malls. You do it for the publicity, but instead of a photo-op, it's a 'gossip-op.'"

Sometimes, these opportunities were supplied by the intended audiences themselves. Especially when the counterfeiter was young and single, co-workers seemed eager to furnish strategic dates, and eager to accept them at face value. An account executive for an oil exploration company marveled at the way his boss, Jerry, supplied a steady stream of these women:

He always knows some girl who's in the neighborhood, and who he thinks would be good for me. He always starts it out with "Now, I don't want you to feel obligated, feel like you have to go out on this date, but I know this girl, and she's really cute . . ." That's kind of how it starts out. The first time, I didn't know what to say, and I said yes because he just caught me totally off guard. So I said "Sure, just give me her name and number." She was an Australian girl that lost her Visa before I could call her, which was great.

When dates were furnished by co-workers, the women were usually unaware that they were part of a counterfeiting operation. For this reason, intra-office relationships were usually limited to one or two dates, at which point the counterfeiter usually moved on.

Because the counterfeiter ultimately has no interest in a romantic relationship, these dates are considered risky. When it comes time to abandon the unwitting accomplice, before the relationship gets serious, the counterfeiter sometimes finds himself in an awkward position. Charles, a travel agent in rural Virginia, was in the habit of taking female escorts to social events around town. Sometimes, there were romantic complications:

Never in my career have I put up a screen, but there are always single women who enjoy going out without getting serious. You don't always make the right choices, though, and sometimes you have to say "Whoah, let's back off here." But there are times when you have to have an escort of the opposite sex.

Because of the potential for such complications, Matt, a senior executive at Ford, is no longer willing to engage in this sort of strategic dating:

I'm at the point now where I don't want to have any more intimate relationships [with women]. I know where I am now, and would probably feel more comfortable in the future dating lesbian women. It's not fair to the dates, because when the relationship comes to a point where she's getting serious, I tend to run away like a scalded rabbit -- especially when she starts talking things like marriage or something. That usually ends the relationship.

A few months earlier, Matt had become involved with a flight attendant in her mid-40s, and found that he couldn't carry on. "Her time clock was running out, and she was getting serious," he told me. "Obviously it wasn't fair for me to continue leading her on. It would have been an ethics issue to let her continue to think that there was a possibility of a marriage."

Because these relationships often end in a messy way, the counterfeiter is frequently the subject of public scorn. Especially in intra-office relationships, the woman's anger or disappointment may find its way into the company grapevine. After a string of such dates, a 33-year-old construction manager in San Francisco recognized that he had earned a reputation as a "bad catch":

I'm known as the swinging bachelor who never has a date for more than three nights. I'm out every night partying and all that, and friends think I just can't find the right woman. If I take someone to a party and everyone meets her, then they don't see her again, they'll ask: "Oh, what happened to Mary Ellen? Where's Maria?" And I always say, "Oh, we broke up." So in their minds I'm this basically irresponsible person who can't keep dates.

Even when the publicity is negative, however, it is usually considered better than no publicity at all. The reputation of a "swinging bachelor" is a useful smokescreen, deflecting the more damning identity of homosexual. Even when these men earned a bad reputation at work, they felt that it served their strategy.

At other times, the female accomplice was aware of her participation in the ruse. Sometimes she was a friend -- a "beard," in gay parlance -- who was pressed into service for an occasional evening; some were lesbian counterfeiters who expected the men to return the favor.<sup>4</sup> As a Houston lawyer explained, "there are quite a few attractive lesbians in this town who are happy to do things like that, because they need to take people to things, too. So it's a trade off." A New York lawyer had a similar arrangement with his female escorts to company events:

Usually, we would have a little prep session. One time I went with this girl I barely knew, a friend's secretary. We didn't know each other very well, so if anybody asked questions about us, she wouldn't have any idea how to answer. So we had a little session where we sat down and said "Ok, this is where I went to college, this is where I went to law school. Let's make up a story about how we met in case anybody asks."

Many men considered these arrangements ideal; they ensured a stream of strategic public appearances with skilled, supporting players. One referred to the

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<sup>4</sup> The practice is a time-honored one in Hollywood. Revisionist biographies have already blown the whistle on celebrities like Rock Hudson, Cole Porter, and their female accomplices. The latest trend seems to be counterfeit marriages between lesbians and gay men, or so we hear about John Travolta, Julie Andrews, Blake Edwards, Olivia Newton-John, Calvin Klein, and their reputedly gay spouses.



arrangement as a "dial-a-dyke service," explaining that it was the easiest way of dealing with social obligations at his company.

Strategic dates rarely provide a long-term cover, however, because "dating" is itself a temporary status. The heterosexual model of romance implies forward motion -- toward either marriage or separation -- and makes it unacceptable to "just date" indefinitely. Consequently, gay men often find strategic dating a temporary ploy. Gary, a tax administrator for a Philadelphia utility, found himself in this position when his "arrangement of mutual convenience" began to expire. Co-workers made comments about his female friend, and asked why he didn't marry her:

I thought, "I've got to rotate these women -- I can't be seen taking the same one every year." It turns out there's another gay man in the department -- I didn't know this at the time -- but he brought the same lesbian year after year, and that's how I got clued in to his story.

Dan, the director of a psychiatric clinic in Houston, anticipates a similar problem. His work often requires him attend social events in the local community, and his solution is usually "to invite a single lady in the community."

Every time [a social event] comes up, I think "What am I going to do for a date?" People expect me to be single because I'm younger, but as I'm growing older I'm finding that people are expecting that . . . When am I going to get married? How come I'm not dating anybody? That type of thing. And I know that as time goes on, if I keep bringing somebody different, or if I keep bringing the same girl for 40 years -- What's going on here?

Though both men are in their 30s, Gary and Dan realize that their status as "eligible bachelors" has a strict time limit. Gary ultimately changed companies, which allowed him to begin another round of strategic dating. Dan isn't sure what the future will hold. If they intend to maintain a counterfeit identity, the men will have no choice but to adopt one of several more long-term roles: as confirmed bachelor, lothario, or married man.

Sometimes the object of one's affection needn't even have a name, face, or address. In many cases, she could be merely suggested, implied into existence with a well-chosen word or glance. As many men discovered, it was often sufficient to counterfeit an identity by manipulating more oblique symbols of sexual activity.

Rather than display the partner herself, for example, some men alluded to her with photographs, birthday cards, and other props. An advertising executive in his mid-20s adopted the habit of wearing a wedding ring to work (to fend off advances from both men and women). A Houston records clerk used a similar tactic:

I've got a picture of me and a girl on my desk, and I talk about her. Anybody who asks, I say "Yeah, that's my girlfriend -- and she is a *girlfriend* of mine. Once they've seen it on my desk, they don't ask if I'm dating anyone.

Often, these concise symbols of heterosexual romance were all that was needed to verify one's sexual identity. Because he moves from one job to the next, for example, a construction manager in San Francisco is constantly called upon to establish his sexual identity with new co-workers. Whenever he reports to a new site, he prominently displays a photograph of a female friend:

There's a picture of Maria on my desk. And sometimes the new superintendent will come into my office, and they always ask, "Who's this gorgeous woman?" And I say, "Oh, it's the woman I'm dating right now." Once the superintendent knows, he basically spreads it through the crew that I'm okay.

In this way, a photograph becomes the centerpiece of a more elaborate counterfeit operation; it is the springboard for conversations and speculations about unseen romantic activities, an efficient symbol of a relationship for which there is rarely any other evidence.

In some cases, even a minor display of sexual interest was sufficient. Sexual jokes, innuendos, and feigned displays of attraction were often used to demonstrate heterosexual intentions, if not experiences. Men who supplied no evidence of an actual relationship (imaginary or otherwise) could thus make it known that they were at least *thinking* about one. Chip, a Houston man in his mid-20s, described a situation in which a series of practical jokes cemented his reputation as a heterosexual. The exchange began when Chip played a joke on Phil, who worked in another division of the company:

I was at Lobos, the gay bookstore, looking through all the magazines and I ran across this one straight magazine that showed this girl on her knees looking up, and she was just covered in cum. It was really tacky, so I bought it. I thought, Phil needs this. I looked around and found these inter-office envelopes and found one from -- the first person on it had been the President of the division, and it had gone to several other key

people. I put Phil's name next and opened up the magazine to that page and slipped it in there. So in interoffice mail he got this cum-covered woman.

Phil quickly figured out who played the joke, and retaliated with a conspicuous reply, which Chip framed and displayed prominently in his office:

Phil gave me this letter with a picture of a lady, with her big ta-ta's. I just cracked up, cause here she is looking all gorgeous and the letter says [he reads]: "I'm so sorry I won't be able to be with you on this Thanksgiving. I so much wanted to be with you. Remember last year when we covered each other in gravy and sweet potatoes and then ate until we just about burst? Remember when you dressed up like a pilgrim and I like an Indian maid? God, what memories. I love it when you say "I'm going to stuff you like a turkey." God, you make me crazy -- I still get excited every time I see cranberry sauce. This is the year that you wanted to be the Indian maid, and now I won't be able to see you. I know that you've already made your costume, so save it until Christmas. I'm sending you a photo of me to keep you company through the holiday. Enjoy. Love and kisses and you know what. Simone.

After Chip pinned them to his office wall, the photograph and letter quickly became a legend within the company. To others, their practical jokes had the appearance of a fraternity prank or an off-color joke, both of which are within the bounds of adolescent, boys-being-boys, heterosexuality.

Other men employed meaningful glances and comments to similar effect.

Without specifically stating sexual intent, they insinuate it through indirect means, leading others to the desired conclusions. Scott, a sales representative for Blue Cross of Philadelphia, described a typical situation:

If I find a woman who's beautiful and attractive, I speak on it, not necessarily directly to her. I will just comment on how nice she's looking and I may even inquire "Who is she?" And god knows because I'm a single man, if you ask about a girl like that, it sends out waves of rumors . . . My questions and my interests are sincere, but I never carry it to the point of getting myself in trouble. But my comments are very sincere because I'm attracted to women, or intriguing women.

A marketing officer for a Delaware bank used a similar tactic:

I have a tendency to come on to women in the office. To prove to them that I'm masculine and not gay, I think I have a tendency to portray the stud, or come on to them, or make certain comments to them like "You've got a great body," or that type of thing. I've done that quite often. They get the idea that I'm definitely straight.

Without producing evidence of a specific sexual partner, these men intimated at least the desire for one.<sup>5</sup> Co-workers were thus left to speculate about specific practices, having been given the basic outline of a (yet unspecified) heterosexual biography.

Efforts to invent a sexual life were thus based on the fabrication of imaginary sexual partners. Seen or unseen, real or imaginary, these supporting players became evidence of a sexual life that doesn't actually exist. Sometimes they were friends, acquaintances, or strangers whose physical presence was real, yet whose relationship to the counterfeiter had been misrepresented, sometimes with their consent. At other times, it was merely insinuated, through displays of sexual interest, that such partners *might* exist. But whatever form these illusory sexual partners took, they become props in a performance, evidence for a sexual identity that the performer knows is inauthentic.

*Playing against (stereo)type*

Heterosexual identity can also be established through the display of other traits that, while not sexual in themselves, are frequently (mis)taken as evidence of sexuality. Because we are taught to associate heterosexuality with masculinity, and homosexuality with effeminacy, the counterfeiter has yet another set of symbols and appearances at his disposal -- this time grounded in prevailing assumptions about gender-appropriate behavior.<sup>6</sup>

We all have an image of the stereotypical gay male, with his mincing ways, effeminate speech, and flamboyant dress. This characterization is woven through

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<sup>5</sup> The signifying power of a glance was made painfully clear to one man who temporarily let down his guard. Steve, a Houston accountant, recalls a mishap on the beach, when a co-worker caught him cruising another man. "I think I got 'clocked' by Michelle once. A cute guy walked by -- you know how sometimes your head will do that before you realize you're doing it? And Michelle just happened to be looking at me. And the look on her face was utter disgust. Michelle is a good Catholic girl and we're friends . . . But I think she caught me at the beach."

<sup>6</sup> A recent episode (9/91) of "Designing Women" dramatized these same assumptions. The narrative revolved around Julia's new boyfriend, a man whose effeminate behavior led the other characters to believe he was gay. As it turned out, he wasn't, much to the surprise and amusement of all.

much of our sexual culture, and supplies the key imagery with which the mainstream continues to represent and identify gay men. The "telltale signs" of homosexuality are such familiar targets for ridicule that most adolescents have learned them even before leaving grade school.

Among most gay professionals, mention of this stereotype provokes a cool response. Some men flinch at even the suggestion of effeminate behavior, flamboyance, or camp; it makes them uncomfortable, and they are careful to strip it from their own behavior. In gay circles, one often hears someone else described as a "screaming queen," which is rarely meant as a compliment. "We're not all like that," an advertising executive told me, shaking his head in frustration. "That's what most people don't understand." Many explained that this was their key motivation for coming out at work, so that co-workers would realize, as one man explained, "that we're not all flaming faggots."

Trouble is, many of us are effeminate, flamboyant or "stereotypically gay". Writing about film, Dyer (1991b) has pointed out that "it might be inaccurate of straight movies and television to make out that all gay men are screaming queens and that that is something frightful to be, but plenty of gay men do enjoy a good scream" (p. 199). These images may be distortions of the truth, or truthful for only a tiny proportion of us, but they are not in any simple sense "untrue." The problem, rather, is that they purport to represent more of us than they in fact do.

For gay professionals, these images represent an opportunity. As Adam (1978) has noted, stereotypes about gay men "can be so wildly inaccurate as to identify only the smallest part of the group" (p. 14). Even as some men fit our popular image of the "fag," many others do not.<sup>7</sup> As a result, most gay men remain invisible to straight peers, who naively associate homosexuality with a largely unrelated criterion: deviation from sex role. When the association between sex role and sexual orientation is most powerful, "heterosexuality" can be established through displays of "masculinity."

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<sup>7</sup> Kinsey (1948) and his associates estimated, for example, that only about one in seven males, and one in twenty female homosexuals, are recognizable as such to the general public. Lee (1977) gives a slightly higher estimate: "As a visit to any gay bar will demonstrate, something less than 20% of all homosexuals fit into that stereotype" (p. 75).

Gay professionals often find that they can counterfeit a heterosexual identity with a display of "manly" interests or abilities. Scott, a Philadelphia marketing executive for Blue Cross, found it especially easy. At 6'2", with broad shoulders and a muscular frame, Scott fits the popular image of an athlete. When he joined Blue Cross, he was immediately approached to join the company's baseball team, and to represent it in corporate sporting events. Scott thinks that this identity, as an athlete, counters any suspicion that he's gay:

I was an athlete for years, and in the straight world you put someone on a pedestal for that. Not only that, but I'm a very *good* athlete . . . They've seen that in the Battle of the Corporate Stars because I did very well in the track and field, and swimming events. They also know that I was an athlete in college, and when someone finds out about that it spreads -- especially among the guys, you know. All of the sudden, people are talking about it.

For Scott, this made it relatively easy to counterfeit an identity. "I think I have a big advantage in that sense," he explained, "I think it throws off even the slightest hint that I'm a homosexual."

Our traditional notions of masculinity also include a kind of macho gentility, and an attentiveness to women. Eric, a senior official at a Delaware bank, plays on these notions when hobnobbing with the women in his office. He makes a point of complimenting their appearance, and is quick with a flirtatious comment. On business trips, he socializes with female friends, and makes no secret of this in the home office. All of this has earned him the reputation as the office "super stud":

I never give them [his co-workers] any indication that that's what I do on my trips. . . . I don't know why they think that. I'm a very friendly person and I like women, I like females to be friends with, and I'm very close to the females that I work with. I probably go overboard sometimes. I'm very polite with them. I treat them very nicely, and I think they like that, therefore a lot of those things come out as thinking this guy is womanizing.

To shore up these traditional images of masculinity, he also takes part in the office banter about men who don't fit the model. "If they bring up the topic of being gay," he says, "I just go right along with everybody else." He recalled a particular incident in which comments were made about another man in the group. "There's an attorney that works for the group that works for us and they say he's a little bit strange or gay. One time, my boss said 'Watch out, he's a great attorney but watch

out for him because he's gay." To position himself as "a man" who attends to women and makes fun of queers, Eric gave his boss a nod. "I just said 'Ok, I'll make sure I watch out for him.'"

Counterfeiters find it easiest to play against these gay stereotypes when those stereotypes are clearly defined. Common, familiar images of homosexuality supply the sharpest point of comparison, the clearest model against which to define his own identity. His task is made even easier when this antonym comes in the form of an actual person, a peer whom others ridicule, a co-worker one is told to "watch out for." It is easiest to align oneself with the angels when the devil is visible, unmistakable, and close at hand.

A marketing executive for a Houston oil company seized this opportunity in his own efforts to counterfeit. Ralph is young and attractive, and took part in company athletics to bolster his "jock" image at work. In particular, the sporting events were an opportunity for Ralph to distance himself from a particular co-worker, David Miles, who is known to be gay:

Whenever you do something kind of gay or something, somebody will say "We're going to set you up with Miles." People make comments like that a lot. Anything gay -- like in volleyball, if you go for a spike and you don't spike it as hard as you should have or something, they'll say "Oh hell Miles, that's too bad." The other night, last Wednesday, I got really hyped up -- the ball was coming to me -- and I yelled something like "Set me up babe." And everyone said "Oh, man, set me up babe, *babe*." So someone made a comment about David Miles.

Notions of non-masculinity are thus made concrete -- in the person of an effeminate co-worker -- and supplied a model of behavior against which Ralph defines himself at work. By participating in the collective criticism of David Miles, Ralph reinforces a particular standard of masculinity, and aligns himself with it:

I've made jokes before when I thought something someone else said was kind of gay, or -- like my friend Danny, he always notices everything about people. He'll make comments about people, at volleyball or whatever, like "Hey, look at that guy's muscles," or "Wish I had a body like that guy's." And I'll come back with something like "Maybe I can set you up with him." Just stuff like that, never anything derogatory about gay people . . .

In this way, David Miles permits Ralph to counterfeit a non-gay identity at work. David personifies homosexuality to his co-workers, furnishing an image from which Ralph can publicly distance himself.

Some gay men cultivate specific traits or behaviors that can be used to repel a gay identity. By highlighting the ways in which he differs from David Miles -- by avoiding soft spikes and comments like "set me up, babe", for example -- Ralph hopes to drive a wedge between his own identity and his friends' credulous image of gayness. A Philadelphia accountant described some of the biographical details that set him apart from these same images:

I really like sports, I like football, so I can have a conversation with anyone about that. I'm not doing it to mislead them -- I *enjoy* it -- but I think most people think the typical gay male has no interest in those things. I don't do anything on purpose; I don't do it self-consciously. I think that living out in the suburbs, buying a house -- maybe there's a subconscious effort there to say "Look, I'm not a typical gay male, living in the city in an apartment."

While they claimed not to consciously affect these traits, several men were willing to capitalize on them in their efforts to counterfeit. A New York advertising executive noted a similar interest in sports. "I love football and I have a good memory for statistics, players, scores. Most people take that as a sign that I'm 'one of the guys.' You don't associate that with gay people." Likewise, a Philadelphia investor found it easy to use a masculine cover. The secretary in his office had a number of gay friends, and clung to a fairly narrow vision of the role:

She used to be a dancer herself, in New York, and I think she assumes -- the gay men she must have known were very effeminate -- and she assumes that's the way all gay men are going to be. It never crosses her mind that she could be working in a small investment company in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and run across a gay man there. She associates it with this artistic environment in New York.

Consequently, by capitalizing on her naive assumptions, by steering clear of the arts, he finds it easy to counterfeit a non-gay identity. These counter-stereotypical traits, like a love of sports or a distaste for the arts, can be viewed as "wedge"



characteristics.<sup>8</sup> The performer, sensitive to his audience's image of homosexuality, uses them to pry his own identity away from it.

At the same time, counterfeiterers are often self-conscious about the behavioral cues that *do* seem to signify homosexuality, behaviors they consider effeminate. While cultivating "masculine" behaviors and appearances, they are also careful to avoid "effeminate" or "gay" ones. Especially when these behaviors posed the threat of exposure, gay men sometimes go to great lengths to avoid them.

Among the most noticeable, and hardest to control, is vocal behavior. A Houston airline executive was worried, for example, that his voice made him an easy target. "I really demonstrate gayness in my voice," he explained, exasperated. "I wish I could have a different speech pattern and just be able to fade into the woodwork when I wanted to. But I don't." Likewise, a Wall Street trader complained that his lisp, which was virtually undetectable, had been a source of concern over the years. He often worried that this trait would give him away. "Nobody ever called me faggot or anything that led me to think that they might think I was gay. I just assumed -- I mean I have a slight lisp, and I was a loner, too."

Tip, a surgery resident at a New York hospital, was frustrated by his voice, and the tendency of his peers to interpret it as a sign of effeminacy. "I'm soft spoken, especially when I'm put on the spot," he explained. "Maybe my voice trails off or something." He first became concerned when the comment turned up in his evaluations at Tulane Medical School:

The head surgeon showed me a departmental evaluation, and it kept popping up, that I'm "soft spoken." Which of course means I'm gay to me. They wrote "soft spoken" in quotation marks, and to me that meant I was gay and they didn't want me . . .

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<sup>8</sup> "Wedge" characteristics are similar, in this sense, to the symbols that Goffman (1963) calls "disidentifiers." "In addition to prestige symbols and stigma symbols, one further possibility is to be found, namely, a sign that tends -- in fact or hope -- to break up an otherwise coherent picture but in this case in a positive direction desired by the actor, not so much establishing a new claim as throwing severe doubt on the validity of the virtual one" (p. 44). Goffman gives the example of educated Negroes who speak "good English" when visiting the rural South, the illiterate who wear eyeglasses, or vagrants who appear to read a newspaper in Grand Central terminal, to avoid being molested by the police.

Years later, during his residency in New York, he encountered the same criticism:

In my evaluation here, all the professors were happy about speed, precision, etc. My supervisor's comment, his *only* negative comment on my evaluation, was "you're meek." I mean, I *hate* that. To me he's saying I'm not like him in some respects, and I should be tougher. He always comes up and slaps you on the back and says "Come on." You know, "Get tough."

The macho standards of the surgical staff became a recurrent issue for Tip, who felt he had to cultivate a hyper-masculine image to be accepted by his peers.

Usually, he tries to play along:

After he said I was meek, you know what the next question was? This is during an evaluation of my job performance. Do you know what he asked me? His next question was "Have you ever been in a fist fight?" I just wanted to go "Yeah, how about right now?" I *hated* that. I said, "Yeah, I have been in a fistfight. I actually broke some guy's nose in the subway, and I got arrested for it." So he liked hearing that story. Of course you can beef it up if you want, you know. It's just like talking pussy. Disgusting, the whole thing. That's the worst part of my job, that's what I feel it is.

Tip's voice and demeanor were a source of concern at the hospital, and to compensate he found himself using more overt counterfeiting strategies. Because he felt that his masculine cover was in question, he resorted to more active tactics, inventing girlfriends and sexual exploits, dating women in the hospital, and actively cultivating a reputation as a promiscuous "party boy."

Other men were cautious to disguise personal interests that they feared would fit the gay stereotype. Taste in clothing and design, an interest in the arts, and extensive travel, were all cited as signs of a gay personality. A Washington consultant was careful to downplay his sardonic humor, which he thought was typical of gay men:

If I'm in the office -- I really have an open door -- and I'm talking to somebody, I'll be less likely to be either cynical or sarcastic about gay things than I might be otherwise. And it will impact how I treat the subject, especially from a humor perspective. I try not to be campy.

Similarly, a New York airline executive was convinced that his personal tastes had "given him away":

I walk around with the assumption that people think I'm gay. I'm 55 years old and single and living in New York and go to Lincoln Center twice a week. Given what I like to do, what interests me -- and everyone who knows me knows -- I assume they just have to put two and two together.

In both cases, these signs of "gayness" provoked efforts to disguise or camouflage them. Likewise, a New York advertising executive didn't like coming to work with "a glorious suntan, because everyone will assume I've been sneaking off to Fire Island or someplace." A Houston man even found it necessary to feign ignorance about gay activities. One of his co-workers, a woman in her mid-20s, let it be known that she was a drag show aficionado:

She started talking to me saying that she has lots of friends that are gay, and she goes out to the gay bars every once in a while. And I'd say "Why would you go there?" You know, just played very dumb. "We'd watch the drag shows" And I'd say "Drag shows?" and raise an eyebrow and cock my head like I don't understand.

Later, he made sure to cultivate more masculine interests, periodically scanning the newspaper so "I can talk sports if I have to."

The "masculine" cover only worked, however, when homosexuality was associated with effeminacy. These tactics are available only when co-workers associate sex role with sexual orientation; one can't play against (stereo)type when that type doesn't exist. As the president of a Houston oil exploration company discovered, for example, his cover didn't work with everyone in the office. His older co-workers, because they held more stereotypical views of gay people, were most susceptible:

It doesn't occur to them [that I'm gay], because my geologists are all men in their 50s. It's a little trickier if we hire younger people. The people in their 50s, unless they know someone specifically, have a stereotype of what a gay person is. I don't equal that stereotype, therefore I'm not gay. It's not part of their normal experience, it just wouldn't occur to them. It's just not one of the possibilities on the menu. It seems so obvious to us, but it's not obvious to them.

One of his co-workers, a lesbian in her late 60s, used a similar strategy to disguise herself. Because she didn't fit the image of the "typical" lesbian,

[P]eople would never dream in a million years that Shirley is a lesbian. She's divorced and widowed; she's a grandmother. She has four children, and goes to see her daughter- and son-in-law. It never occurs to them that she's gay.

Conversely, when stereotypes were weak, or when co-workers had first-hand experiences that negated them, a counter-stereotypical camouflage was an ineffective cover. As a New York advertising executive noted, he was "wary of

women who know too many gay men, because they see through the cover. It takes more than a little sports talk to throw them off the track. They don't fall for the butch-equals-straight act."

### *Hiding contrary evidence*

Not all counterfeiting operations require imaginary girlfriends, fag jokes, or an interest in sports trivia. To be known as a heterosexual, in many settings, one needn't do anything in particular. Until it is demonstrated otherwise, co-workers will simply assume that one is heterosexual.

Gay identities are *unexpected* in most organizations, which is both a cause and consequence of our invisibility. Co-workers anticipate a typical, unremarkable sexual identity -- heterosexuality, in most cases. As long as he takes care not to upset these assumptions, hiding whatever evidence exists to the contrary, a gay man can often remain undetected. In these cases, counterfeiting involves "being accepted as being 'just like everybody else' when in fact some aspect of the person's character or biography, if known, would serve to set the individual apart" (Ponse, 1976:316).

In its simplest form, this approach involves the suppression of discrediting information. Personal information can be presented out of context, while other, conflicting evidence is kept out of sight. The classic example is that of a married man, whose public identity is based on incomplete revelations about his sexuality. His reputation is established through public displays of a wife, children, and the countless symbols we have for marriage, while aspects of his sexual life that would discredit this identity -- his gay relationships, fantasies or intentions -- are kept out of sight. As a Delaware banker acknowledged, "because I'm married, they don't have any idea."

Married men find this tactic especially easy to use. Phil, a man in his late 20s, recently divorced his wife and left North Carolina for New York City. His co-workers know that he's divorced, which has made it easy for Phil to counterfeit an identity:

I have pictures of the kids in my office, so even if I meet someone who doesn't know my background, they walk in and see the kids and they think either you're married or divorced. . . . This past week, a girl who works on

my floor, who I don't know very well, walked in and wanted to borrow my paper. And she said "Oh, are these your kids?" So, typically, I immediately tell people that I'm divorced. And they typically don't ask a lot of questions once you say you're divorced, about whether you're gay or whatever, or why you got a divorce. I just seems to be a closed chapter.

Though Phil has never intimated to co-workers that he has any interest in dating or re-marrying, they have no idea that he's gay. He talks with them about his plans to visit his children, his adjustment to bachelorhood, and the circumstances of his divorce. What he doesn't mention is the *reason* he left his wife -- and the lover with whom he now lives.

Other men counterfeit by discussing romances from their heterosexual past, without alluding to the gay present. Though he is usually evasive when asked about his private life, a Philadelphia architect has no problem talking about his past girlfriends:

If there was some funny anecdote that I could bring up from some past relationship, I brought it up. But that was about it. I was just telling them what my past life was like. "I had a girlfriend once who did this," or something like that. Nothing ever pointedly saying that "I had a girlfriend once, but then I had a relationship with a married man in 1982." I wouldn't go that far.

When asked about his current living situation, he judiciously avoids mentioning the lover of many years with whom he now shares a house. At work, his sexual identity is based on biographical details that are almost 10 years old.<sup>9</sup>

The presumption of heterosexuality also seems to encourage co-workers to interpret non-sexual matters in a sexual way, to see a romantic life where there isn't one. The counterfeiter, for his part, was often content to leave these assumptions in place. In a typical scenario, a Philadelphia accountant capitalized on his friendship with Kathy, the President's secretary, who was widely assumed to be his girlfriend. Because the two of them live downtown, they often found it convenient to spend time together on the weekends:

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<sup>9</sup> A New York advertising executive recalled a situation in which this tactic failed. "I remember going to a Christmas party with one of the people in my office, a guy in his mid-30s. The talk got kind of raunchy, and before long Joe was talking about his old girlfriends, their pet names for him, their idiosyncrasies. And then it hit me: this guy's talking about women he dated *fifteen years ago*. I knew right away, just like that, that he was gay."

We do things socially, and I think that's kind of helped me maintain an image, even though it's not very important to maintain an image of being straight. [My boss] knows that Kathy and I do things socially, and I guess he thinks we're dating. People in the company think that we've dated, and I don't do anything to change their assumptions. People come up to me and say, "When are you gonna marry Kathy? I think you guys should get married." And all that kind of stuff, so I know that people think that we're dating.

Similarly, an insurance executive in New Jersey was often visited, at work, by an old friend from school. Because the two were obviously intimate, her visits seemed to bolster the assumption that he's straight:

[P]eople just assumed that we were going out. And I have to say, that was kind of convenient. It stopped people from asked questions. We went to a party at the College of Physicians here, and I took her. I was renovating my house at the time, and she was living there, and it became very easy for us to act like spouses. People would ask about our house -- never specifically about *us* -- but about how the renovations were going. I think that's true of my neighbors, too. They all thought that we were married, when we bought the house.

A Houston lawyer, Andy, found that even his travel plans inspired assumptions about heterosexual activities. Because he frequently visits a lover in San Diego, "people always ask what I'm doing, before I leave; when I come back, how was my trip? What did I do? Where did I stay? Who's this woman I must have met in San Diego?" Andy is careful not to specify the gender of his "mystery person" on the West Coast.

Sometimes the discrediting information involved a roommate or friend whose precise relationship to the counterfeiter had to be disguised. By omitting a few key details, for example, gay men reduced lovers to roommates, and friends to mere acquaintances. Ralph, a marketing representative for a Houston-based oil company, found himself in this situation when co-workers began to inquire about his bachelor roommate. For the past few years Ralph has lived with Jack, a lover of many years, and worries that Jack's identity, as an unmarried man in his mid-30s, will spoil his own efforts to counterfeit:

I think 30 is kind of a threshold. I mean you think *30*, and then all of a sudden it starts clicking in people's minds. "Gosh, he's 30 and he's not married and he's not bad looking, and he's doing well. Why isn't this guy married? Or, why isn't this guy living with a girl?" And then what do you do? "Why does this guy have a roommate? He doesn't *have* to have a

roommate. He can afford to live wherever, but he doesn't. And why is his roommate 35?"

To keep his own identity intact, Ralph tells co-workers as little as possible about Jack. He doesn't talk about the time they spend together, or their plans for the weekend. Sometimes he goes even further, inventing a sexual life for Jack:

I tell everyone he's got a girlfriend. He used to live with a girl for 3 or 4 years, and I act like she's still his girlfriend to people. Even now, people think it's kind of weird that I -- they don't think it's *too* weird that I have a roommate, but it's a little different. I can afford to live in a nice place without a roommate. . . . I've almost volunteered this information, it's like "Yeah, I have a roommate, but he pretty much lives with his girlfriend, he's never there," and shit like that.

Because Jack's own identity is in question, Ralph found it necessary to counterfeit an identity for him.

For Ralph, the result is a complicated pattern of omissions and fabrications, and a considerable amount of stress. On one occasion, Ralph feared that the cover was about to fall apart. While leaving the grocery store with Jack, he ran into a co-worker and his girlfriend:

Jack and I were leaving the grocery store with bags in our hands, and that always kind of looks -- maybe I'm really paranoid about it -- but when two guys walk out of the grocery store carrying bags . . . I mean they *may* go grocery shopping together, but let's face it. . . .

After spotting his co-worker in the parking lot, Ralph thought quickly and turned a potentially discrediting situation into another opportunity to counterfeit. "We went up and talked to them, and I said something really stupid, like that we were cooking steaks for these two girls tonight, or something like that." So far, Ralph's counterfeiting operation seems to have been a success.

In other situations, the information withheld was the gender of a friend or acquaintance who figured prominently in the counterfeiter's life. Rather than admit that he went to the movies with a male friend, a Houston man told co-workers that he went "with a group of friends from college." Michael, a Philadelphia consultant, found himself in a similar situation:

One client said "You're single, right?" And I said, "Yeah, I guess." So he said, "When you're in Boston next summer, I'm going to fix you up with a girl, a nice Jewish girl." And I said, "Look, you really don't have to do that, I'm really quite taken."

The two men exchanged meaningful glances, and let the matter drop; the client simply assumed that the unnamed third person was a woman (or so it appeared to Michael). In subsequent conversations, the two of them have simply referred to Michael's "better half." A Philadelphia architect had a similar exchange:

Several of us went to lunch one time and they were talking about how they met their husbands. They were asking questions like, "Are you seeing someone right now?" And I said "yes" -- actually I didn't say yes, I said no, because I was already *with* someone at the time, I wasn't *dating* someone. I was living with a guy. But she never came out and asked me if it was a woman or a man or anything like that, so I think basically they respected the fact that I wanted to keep my private life private.

To maintain the ruse, he also avoided talking about where he lived, or the fact that he shared a house with someone. His co-workers had no reason to doubt that his lover was a woman.

Gay friends and lovers are often disguised in this same fashion, through the selective omission of details. A string of evenings with a particular person -- whose name, if reported, might be remembered -- were often described in generic terms, as "just a quick dinner" or "just a little get-together," with "somebody I know from the neighborhood." A consultant in New York explained he regularly answered questions with these sorts of evasions:

People ask if I'm seeing someone, and I always answer them truthfully -- except that I leave out the gender. If I'm seeing someone, they'll know; if they say, "What does she look like?" I'll say "blonde hair, blue eyes." Or "What do they do?"<sup>10</sup> and I'll tell the truth. I just never say whether it's male or female.

Likewise, a Houston manager found it necessary to omit some of the details about a summer vacation he took with his lover:

If I take a trip, and everyone wants to see pictures, I censor the pictures. There will be photographs of things, other people -- but not my roommate, who I traveled with, or of my roommate and me together. There've been enough of those situations where I think they're starting to see the pattern that when we see Brent's pictures from vacation, it's just Brent and just

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<sup>10</sup> One sometimes wonders if lesbians and gay men didn't pioneer the (mis)use of the third-person plural "they" to replace the singular "he" or "she." A New York advertising executive was quick to make fun of the tendency to dodge the use of gender-specific pronouns. "You can always tell someone's gay when he refers to his dates as 'they.' He'll say, 'I was in a relationship years ago, but they got too demanding.' Yeah, right. I mean, was he dating more than one person? Or is he trying not to specify whether 'they' is a girl or a boy?"



things, never people he's traveled with. One of my employees mentioned that. "These are nice pictures of you -- *whoever* took them."

Similarly, when Clay, an executive secretary in his 50s, went to Provincetown with a boyfriend, his co-workers began to ask questions. "I just told them 'Oh, I'm going to the Cape with a friend.'" When forced to elaborate, he simply dodged the question. "I told them I wasn't sure."

Counterfeiters also feared that their identities would be soiled by contact with gay organizations, activities, or people. Consequently, most counterfeiters were cautious to hide personal interests or concerns that were associated with gay life. For example, Clay was worried that the circumstances of a friend's death might spoil his identity. When he asked to leave work so that he could attend the funeral, it seemed that his boss was especially inquisitive:

I know that's what's going through her mind, it's flashing at me as she's talking to me. She says, "Oh, I have a friend who's in the hospital, who's sick." I changed the subject. . . . A friend of mine died, and I asked to get off, to go to the service. And right away, she wanted to know what did he die of. "Oh, I think he died of liver failure or something." And they didn't have it in the paper; she read the whole article, and it mentioned nothing about AIDS. But she was hoping that it would come out.

Though his boss continued to raise the issue, offering her condolences, he refused to supply any further information about his friend.

To avoid guilt-by-association, counterfeiters often felt it necessary to disguise their relationships with other gay people. Gay friends were kept out of sight, and gay co-workers were met under circumstances that ensured mutual invisibility. In general, these men steered clear of co-workers who used a different strategy -- especially those using an integration strategy -- for fear that the relationship would spoil their own efforts to hide. Especially when the presumption of heterosexuality was weak, they didn't want co-workers to begin asking questions, rethinking their assumptions, wondering amongst themselves.

For these men, the goal was to do as little as possible to disrupt the presumption of heterosexuality. By selectively hiding information about themselves -- details about other people in their lives, about their social activities, or about their living arrangements -- they forged a counterfeit identity, usually without fabricating specific sexual exploits or intentions. They misled their audiences and

counterfeited an identity through acts of *omission*, by permitting the presumption of heterosexuality to remain in place.

As these examples suggest, one can counterfeit an identity through the manipulation of any symbol, action or appearance that suggests a heterosexual orientation. The specific manipulations take many forms, from the active fabrication of a sexual track record to the passive defense of false assumptions about that track record. Sometimes, these were acts of commission, false claims, staged events, and white lies; other times, they took the form of calculated omissions, or the willingness to capitalize on the naive assumptions of others.

The choice of manipulation was determined, in part, by the judgments a performer makes about his audience: What evidence will be required, with this particular audience, to establish a heterosexual identity? How far must I go? The answers to these questions help the performer determine which moves were required to pull off the counterfeiting operation.

### **Consequences**

When gay men counterfeit a sexual identity, they play a role that is at odds with their sense of who they really are. Their performance, however convincing to the audience, is still an act, and the performer is forever constrained by the demands of his role and the expectations of his audience. Even the most skillful of performers, playing a role for the thousandth time, are performing.

The dramaturgical metaphor is appropriate here, because it helps explain the concerns most often cited by men who counterfeit sexual identities. The first of these results from the sheer strain of mounting a performance, of remembering lines and cues, and of monitoring the audience's response knowing that the whole enterprise might come crashing down at any moment. The second results from the performer's sense of detachment from his role, and his possible desire to be more at ease with the audiences for whom he performs.

### *Performance anxiety*

Identity performances, like theatrical ones, require planning. A plausible plot must be devised, the needed props and settings arranged. The cast must be assembled (whether or not they know it), and the necessary steps taken to ensure that the performance will be as believable as possible. Because much of it will be improvised, the performer must closely monitor his audience, gauging their reaction, making whatever changes are needed along the way. At any time, if the performance ceases to persuade, it may grind to a halt.

For the gay man, thrust into the combined role of playwright, director and performer, the result is a state of constant anxiety, an alertness to the missteps that could bring the entire performance crashing down. Even in the most familiar of social situations, "the stigmatized individual is likely to feel that he is 'on,' having to be self-conscious and calculating about the impression he is making, to a degree and in areas of conduct which he assumes others are not" (Goffman, 1963:14). Because his performance may be discredited at any time, the counterfeiter must be vigilant whenever in the presence of his audience. "I constantly have to guard myself as to what I say to whom," according to a Philadelphia manager, a man who periodically brings a female escort to company events. When gay men speak about their efforts to counterfeit a sexual identity, they almost always complain about performance anxiety (see Lee, 1977:61).<sup>11</sup>

Much of this anxiety centered on the need to contrive, and keep track of, the plot. Imaginary people and events, once elaborated, take on a social life of their own; one's audience may reasonably expect the author to supply further installments: "Whatever happened to so-and-so?" "Remember what you told me about your friend what's-her-name?" Or, "I know someone who works at that same company. Maybe she knows your friend so-and-so . . ."

Gay men often complain that this is the toughest part of any counterfeit operation, and many could recall situations in which their storytelling got out of hand. Geoff, an architect in San Francisco, had invented a sexual life with a

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<sup>11</sup> As Lee (1977) found, in his study of 24 gay men, "the greatest cost for those whose current social status is built around the assumption that they are heterosexual is the fear of disclosure, and with it attendant guilt and anxiety" (p. 61).

particularly large cast of characters, and found it increasingly difficult to keep track of them all. When asked to describe the major drawback of this approach, he explained:

It's keeping this imaginary life going. It's difficult, and what I've done, at times is, if I'm going out with some guy who's named Brian, he'll become Brenda. I'll find a name that I can attach well enough that I won't get it confused. Ken, Karen, whatever. But it's very difficult to keep an imaginary life alive, keeping all the facts straight. I need to keep notes on my continuing saga.

The saga held together for years, however, until it ultimately became too contradictory. In at least one instance, after Geoff was careless with a few details, a co-worker began to take notice:

There was a guy at the developer's office who had a memory -- he would remember all the details. And he'd say, "Well, wait a minute. You said *this* and then you said *that*. The stories don't jive." When I'm drunk, I'm trying to keep this imaginary life going, and I'm losing the details and not remembering the details. And here's this guy who's filtering everything through his computer.

Ultimately, Geoff realized that his performance had failed, at least with the most alert members of his audience. The man asked, several months later, if Geoff was gay.

Even when the story holds together, it can require tremendous energy. Tip, a surgery resident in New York, recalled the planning that went into his highly-publicized affair with "Amy". He recalls showing the other residents her publicity photos, talking about their travel plans, even supplying his co-workers with tickets to the ballets in which Amy performed. When one of the senior physicians, Dr. Wu, insisted that they attend one of the performances together, Tip asked his lover, Bob, to help with the details:

Everything was planned, even where we sat was planned. Bob said, "I'll make sure there's not four seats together so you don't have to sit with them, I'll put them in front of you so they won't see you fall asleep if you do." The whole thing was planned well.

Today, Tip looks back at the evening with regret. At one point in the evening, when he had supposedly slipped backstage to see Amy, he was forced to duck into the men's room to hide from Dr. Wu and his wife. "It takes too much effort," he

explained, and "too much energy is just wasted." Though he continues to counterfeit an identity, he says "I wish everyone knew."

Miguel, a medical resident in Philadelphia, found himself in a similar situation when his imaginary girlfriend became the center of the other residents' attention. "Kathy" was born in a moment of desperation, when another resident tried to arrange a date for Miguel. Before long, he realized that the improvisation was a mistake. Rather than relieving the pressure to date and socialize, "Kathy" seemed only to intensify it. "They keep asking me for the famous 'Kathy,'" he explains, "who doesn't exist. If we're in the lounge, or eating, and the conversation starts to get too personal, I just switch the conversation to avoid it. And it's a pain, because they keep inviting me to different things. "Come over and eat, bring Kathy." When the other residents ask about Miguel's social plans, "I tell them 'I went with friends.' I use the plural. 'We went to eat.'" The wife of a friend was especially persistent. "She came by and said, 'My girlfriend is perfect for you, she would love you. So, would you like to meet her?' And I don't want to tell her about 'Kathy,' so I said 'I'm a mess . . . I'm having so many problems, I don't think I could have a relationship now.' I didn't want to start the Kathy thing again."

Today, Miguel is still trying to put "the Kathy thing" to rest. "I would never do that again," he explains, hoping that co-workers will gradually forget about her. As the staff turns over, Miguel has gradually been able to change strategies:

That was last year, and many of the people working with me last year left; it's a 3-year program. And I was glad that they left. None of the new people know [about Kathy], because I decided I don't want to do that again, I don't want to tell anyone. So the people who know about "Kathy" are third year residents, or they're on my same level.

After graduating, Miguel hopes that Kathy will be behind him. "I'm just trying to play that topic down," he explains, "because it was a mistake I made at one point, while I was trying to find a solution."

At least one man feared that the constant stress had led to more serious physical consequences. Eric, a Delaware banker, considered his performance anxiety the major cause of his current medical troubles. If he didn't have to counterfeit an identity, he explained, "it would relieve a lot of stress. You're

always trying to keep the two apart -- you know, I'm straight here, I'm gay here -- so that they don't come together and get mixed up somehow. You've always got to be on top of things so you don't screw up." When I asked Eric to describe his stress, he lifted his shirt to reveal a long red scar.

Well, I've lost 24 pounds since June. I was thin to begin with -- I mean, I'm not a heavy person. The job itself has a lot to do with it. I also have a lot of headaches, I've had severe ulcers, I've had half my stomach removed due to ulcers which were definitely a result of being gay and straight all at the same time. It definitely affects me inside, physically. Sometimes I get depressed because of it.

As Eric looks forward to the rest of his career, it is with apprehension. Something has to change, he knows, as he finds it increasingly difficult to juggle his gay and straight lives. "It's not that I wish I weren't gay," he explains, "I just wish I could do one or the other."

The performance was usually easier to manage -- and the level of anxiety lower -- when the story had a more substantial basis in fact. Men who invented sexual lives were often at great risk of being exposed, and invested considerable time and energy in their performances. On the other hand, there were fewer complaints from men who managed to counterfeit an identity through more subtle means. Men who based their heterosexual identity on masculine stereotypes, for example, experienced relatively little performance anxiety. "I really *do* like sports," one man insisted, "so I've always found it easy to throw people off the track. I can't help it if they don't see how ridiculous their assumptions are." Often, these men expressed relief that their co-workers were so backward in their understanding of homosexuality. As a New York advertising executive explained, "I don't worry too much about people who think only faggy men are gay. It doesn't take much energy to fool them. These are the people who still think Rock Hudson was straight."

Likewise, counterfeiters who found it sufficient to hide discrediting facts, rather than invent fictions, experienced far less performance anxiety. Carl, a San Francisco realtor explained that the basic outlines of his cover story were accurate, which keep his level of performance anxiety remarkably low. When Carl first moved to San Francisco in the early '70s, he began a relationship with Lisa, with whom he lived for several years. Though he realized he was probably gay, and

continued to have sexual relationships with other men, Carl had little trouble counterfeiting his identity. "The relationship with Lisa was stormy," he explained. "She wanted me to be straight, and I wanted her to be a man. It was doomed." None of this was obvious to Carl's co-workers, however. "I didn't have to lie, or make up stories about doing things with women so that I could pass, because I *was* doing things with the woman I lived with." Rather than invent a sexual life, Carl needed only hide a few details about his relationship with Lisa, namely that he found the sex unsatisfying.

But even those who complained most bitterly about performance anxiety acknowledged that they could, if necessary, pull off the act; most gay people have been learned, at one time or another, to counterfeit. Raised (almost always) in heterosexual environments, coached (by parents, peers, teachers) to behave as heterosexuals, and warned (in numerous ways) that there are penalties for straying from the prescribed path, most gay people go under cover when they first acquire a sense of being different.<sup>12</sup> With no exceptions, the men in my study had all counterfeited a sexual identity at some point in their lives.

After years of rehearsal, these performances sometimes cease to feel unnatural. Whatever stress they produce has become familiar, invisible. For this reason, a Wall Street broker explained that he "was always very comfortable in the closet. I didn't have a lot of angst about it." After years of switching genders and inventing women's names for his boyfriends, Rodney had grown accustomed to keeping up his guard:

I certainly had arguments with gay friends who said "Oh its great to be out of the closet" and stuff like that, or "you should do it." But I said "Well listen, you know, where I'm working and with the family I have I don't need the grief." And as far as I could tell all it would be is grief. And I'm not suffering from being in the closet. If it were a position of great angst,

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<sup>12</sup> Jennie Livingston (1990) describes an experience that will be familiar to many lesbians and gay men. "When I was about eleven years old I figured out that people who dressed a little funny or walked too hard or too soft *got it* from the other kids, and that I was one of those. Objectionable girls were "tomboys" or "dogs," and boys -- before anyone really knew about homosexuality -- were "fags." . . . We were the ones who couldn't play the gender game right. The boy who couldn't walk tough: *faggy*. The girl who spoke up too many times, too loudly, or who didn't have breasts yet: *doggy*. We didn't know exactly *why* what we were doing was wrong. But we couldn't help committing multiple acts of what was called in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* "gender treachery" (p. 6).

then yeah, I'd say there are some tradeoffs here. But there really wasn't much of a tradeoff. It seemed I was much happier in the closet.

To avoid any unnecessary anxiety, Rodney kept his counterfeit operation as simple as possible. A Dutch boyfriend gave Rodney the raw material for his romantic smalltalk at work, and with a few minor modifications -- the man's name, which was changed to "Tracy" -- Rodney could tell co-workers a story that was otherwise true. "It was much easier on me," Rodney concludes. "I had just gotten so used to lying that there was no great angst about it."

Among gay men who counterfeit an identity, anxiety levels seem to vary most directly with the complexity of their (fictional, heterosexual) narrative, the amount of it that has been invented, and the amount of rehearsal time they've had to perfect it. One can counterfeit an identity in a number of different ways, each of which places different demands on the performer: by direct commission (by inventing a sexual life), by oblique commission (by emphasizing one's masculinity, or some other counter-stereotypical trait), and or by omission (by hiding discrediting details about one's sexual life). As I'll discuss below, the choice of approach was often keyed to the performer's assumptions about his audience, and his desire to construct a performance they would find believable.

The performance is thus a kind of balancing act. The gay professional must weigh the demands of his audience against his own finite resources. What would it take to convince them? How active or passive must the counterfeit operation be? And how much will be required of me to pull it off? Some men were explicit about these trade-offs; others seemed only vaguely aware that their efforts to counterfeit had placed them in stressful situations. But for all, there was the sense that a counterfeit identity came at a price.

### *Ethical dilemmas*

All forms of counterfeiting, from the occasional substitution of "she" for "he" to the complete fabrication of a heterosexual life, place the gay man in a difficult moral position. He knows that his actions are intended to mislead others, which is condemned by our culture's prevailing beliefs about honesty. Worse yet, he has been encouraged by others in the gay community to view his behavior as an act of



cowardice or, increasingly, as a betrayal of the struggle for equal rights. As Marny Hall (1989) notes in her study of professional lesbians, "Not only is she denying what she knows to be true, but she is also ignoring the strong exhortations of the lesbian community to come out" (p. 136). The result is a series of ethical dilemmas for gay men who counterfeit their sexual identities at work.

The dilemmas are familiar to gay men, who often invoke ethical terms and concepts when explaining their efforts to manage sexual identity. Without prompting, the men in my study frequently volunteered an ethical interpretation of their behavior. They wondered if their behavior could be considered "dishonest," if it was "morally wrong" to mislead the boss, or if co-workers will find out someday that they've "told a lie." In the interviews, I scrupulously avoided these normative tag words. Still, at least half of the men invoked an ethical framework when explaining their behavior at work.

For example, when asked to describe "the biggest disadvantage, if any, of being 'straight' at work," many of the men pointed to "all the lying you have to do." The chief counsel for a Houston oil company explained that he hated taking female escorts to company events "because it reinforces everyone's presumption that you're a straight bachelor. Reinforces the lie, so to speak." A New York advertising executive complained that "I don't like feeling dishonest all the time. I hate all the petty deceptions, the countless little lies you have to tell."

There was no consensus, however, about what constituted deception. The men seemed to represent a wide range of ethical beliefs, and varying definitions of "truth" and "lying." As the men described their situations, many struggled to find the proper terms, sometimes pausing to clarify their thinking. Steve, a Houston accountant, described a situation in which he felt he had been dishonest:

We went to the beach one day and we all went in separate cars, and I had a date that night. And I'd come to the conclusion that if they asked me what I was doing that night, I would tell them. And so Jay asked me what I was doing, and I said "I have a date." And he said "Oh, yeah, how'd you meet her?" Well, I didn't bother to correct Jay. I just said "through a friend." I didn't say *her* anywhere, I didn't use -- I was very careful. I know that's deception, but still . . .

Others described situations in which they had "lied" only to quickly retract the term. "It's not really lying," according to a New York advertising executive. "I

don't think it's lying when you're put on the spot like that. Or if it's anything, it's a white lie." Other men took a stricter view, and held that any deceptive situation or behavior was immoral. "I know they all assume I'm straight at work," one man explained. "I never said anything to that effect, but it still makes me feel dishonest."

As these comments suggest, our definitions of lying and deception are shrouded in a definitional fog. One person's "lie" was clearly another's misinterpreted silence, ambiguous remark, or failure to correct a false assumption. To clarify our own discussion, it will be useful to draw on the definition supplied in *Lying*, Bok's (1978) classic meditation on the ethics of deception:

When we undertake to deceive others intentionally, we communicate messages meant to mislead them, meant to make them believe what we ourselves do not believe. We can do so through gesture, through disguise, by means of action or inaction, even through silence. Which of these innumerable deceptive messages are also lies? I shall define as a lie any intentionally deceptive message which is *stated*. Such statements are most often made verbally or in writing, but can of course also be conveyed via smoke signals, Morse code, sign language, and the like. Deception, then, is the larger category, and lying forms part of it (p. 14).

As Bok points out, one can mislead others in any number of ways, through acts of omission or commission, in any of the various codes with which we communicate.

Even so, my informants consistently distinguished the *concealment of information* from the *revelation of misinformation*. In the former category we might include that which is true, but which we have forgotten, ignored, hidden, kept secret, or deemed unsuitable for expression to others. It might include something about an individual that he has simply neglected to mention (an irrelevant fact, a forgotten nickname) or something he has actively concealed (a shameful secret). The information remains unrevealed in either case, and the net effect may be that others are misled.

Gay men rarely view this sort of behavior as *lying*. Because he plays a relatively passive role in this sort of deception, the counterfeiter can excuse himself of any moral wrongdoing. Phil, a New York consultant, uses this distinction to explain his own behavior. Because he is recently divorced, and continues to visit his children in North Carolina, Phil has found it relatively easy to counterfeit an identity without feeling that he's being dishonest:

I don't feel that I'm not being true to myself. I don't feel like I'm scheming just to project an image. And I really get the sense that the people that I work with don't really care. If anyone ever pressed me on it, I would not lie to them. . . . I don't have to do anything other than what I normally do.

Phil suspects that he will eventually come out at work, and expects that this will prompt a series of questions from co-workers: "Is that why you divorced? Is that why you didn't move back to North Carolina?" But he doesn't worry that he'll be criticized for posing as a heterosexual. "I don't think they could really say anything about it, because I've never gone overboard in saying that I'm not gay. It's not like I've really tried to deceive them. I just don't come out and tell them what I do at home in bed, just like they don't tell me what they do in theirs." Phil bases his moral argument on the distinction between active and passive deception, and explains that his conscience is clear because he didn't really "try" to deceive anyone.

As Phil discovered, essentially truthful statements can be used to deceive, and the result is a sort of ethical gray area. For Scott, a Blue Cross marketing representative, these statements became the basis for his efforts to counterfeit. When co-workers ask about his private life, Scott tends to respond with true, albeit misleading, statements. "I say I don't want to date," he explains, "which is true. Sometimes I border on a white lie, but on the whole, I would say I'm telling the truth. I just don't want to date." When co-workers have tried to arrange blind dates for Scott, he sometimes plays along. "I'm attracted to women, and I may make comments about a particular person, but I never follow up." He describes a typical conversation: "They'll say 'Don't you like her?' I say 'yes I do.' 'Why don't you go and ask her out?' And I'll say 'I don't want to.' That's a little white lie. Or I would say 'She's not really my type.' That would be a little white lie, too."

These same dilemmas discouraged Terry, a Houston lawyer, from bringing female dates to company events. "I try very hard to avoid that situation," he explained. "My job is not one that requires as much socializing as a lot of jobs. If it did, it would be more difficult. I really try not to live a lie that way." When I asked Terry to explain what he meant by "living a lie," he put it in legal terms. "When you start having to 'affirmatively misrepresent', life becomes incredibly

complicated. There are situations in which you have to, unfortunately. There are certain functions, either dinners with clients or whatever where you need to take a date. It's difficult to take a 6'2" blonde boy with strapping shoulders, so you either go with friends, or you get a female date."

Terry was most troubled by these situations in which he was called on to "affirmatively misrepresent" his sexuality, and found that he often tried to avoid them. "There are times when I get tired of lying to people," he explained. "I get tired of being two-faced about it, two-faced in the sense of not admitting [that I'm gay] or not standing up to somebody who makes some derogatory comment about homosexuals." Terry paused for a moment, and I asked if he ever overheard (or sometimes took part in) derogatory comments about gay people. "I don't do that," he assured me. "It's not like I go up there and live a complete lie, 'Go hang all the queers that are marching in the street during the economic summit.'" He tried to limit himself to more subtle efforts to counterfeit, like an occasional date at a company party, or a conspicuous friendship with a woman he knows from college. But even these tactics made Terry uncomfortable, and to avoid them, he finds himself pulling back. "You tend to shut other people out of your life if you are a little closeted because you just get tired of lying to them. You get tired of being in an uncomfortable situation, so you don't do as much with them. Which is sad, but it's also reality."

It was these same ethical concerns that encouraged George, a Houston airline executive, to come out at work. He had tried being discreet at work, but quickly felt that he was "living a lie." As he grew closer to his boss, a woman in her 40s, George felt it was time to change strategies. "I respected her so much and she was so valuable to me, the thought of *not* acknowledging it was anathema to me. It would have been so false, our relationship. So we went out to dinner and I had four martinis before she got there, and then I just blurted it out. She was so wonderful about it." Years later, George feels his conscience is clear. "You're free and you can eliminate that one area of lying that so many of us grew up with or evolved with at some point."

Because several of the men anticipated coming out scenes like this, they were sometimes cautious not to do anything, in the present, that they could be criticized

for in the future. When I asked Ralph, a marketing representative for a Houston oil company, what would happen if he came out at work, he seemed troubled. One of his co-workers "probably won't want to play tennis with me," and "I even dated one of these girls at work, so she would feel kind of weird. She'd probably sit there and worry that she may have AIDS or something." She would also know, Ralph realized, that he had lied to his co-workers. "The 'straight thing' has been part of me at work, and people might lose trust in me. I mean, you've lied to people, they'll know you've lied to them."

In anticipation of his own coming out, Miguel, a medical resident in Philadelphia, has become increasingly wary of anything resembling a lie. He worries that his conspicuous relationship with "Kathy", his fictional girlfriend, will someday come back to haunt him. "My co-workers, with whom I have a great relationship, will feel hurt because I was never honest with them. And the last thing I want to do is hurt their feelings, though I admit that I may have done something wrong." Today, he no longer talks about Kathy, and tries to avoid situations in which he'll be called upon to lie. When other residents make a comment about a sexy nurse, Miguel's response is more oblique. "Before, I used to make a comment also. Now, I make a comment that won't compromise me if they find out I'm gay. I used to say 'Yeah, I'd fuck her.' But now I won't say that, because I don't want to do it. So I'll say, 'Yeah, she has big tits.'" For Miguel, the distinction between active and passive deception has become an important one. The net effect may be the same for the receiver, the one who is deceived, but Miguel feels he can only be held accountable for direct, intentional misstatements. "Somewhere down the line, when they find out, they don't have to blame me for anything. I was honest with them, I just didn't tell them everything. But I didn't lie."

Not all men were troubled by the moral implications of their efforts to counterfeit. Even while they acknowledged that their heterosexual identities were false, misleading -- even a form of lying -- they were often quick to point out that it was justified by the circumstances. For example, some men expect that at some point in the future their co-workers will understand. A Houston executive

explained that he would be "very upset" if co-workers find out that he is gay. I asked if he was worried, in part, that exposure would make his previous efforts at concealment seem deceptive or dishonest. He didn't think so. "I think it would be more of a concern that I was gay [than dishonest], because if people really thought about it, they'd realize I didn't have any choice."

There are situations, in fact, in which we regularly condone deception. In a time of war, for example, we consider it fitting to engage in counterintelligence activities, lying to our opponents about the movements of troops or equipment. Likewise, when one is in personal danger, he or she might lie to avoid being robbed or raped, or to escape some kind of torture. As Bok (1978) notes, we often condone lies told as part of an effort to survive, to avoid harm, or to avert crisis. These deceptions are usually justified on one of two grounds, and fall into the general category of "lying to enemies":

Such lies appeal, first, to a sense of *fairness* through retribution. Enemies are treated as they deserve to be treated; they receive their due. In addition, the *defense from harm* is invoked in all adversary relationships (p. 142).

Enemies are those who seem to promise some kind of harm, and lies can be used either to divert their attentions (in this case, by disguising oneself as the enemy, as a heterosexual), or as part of a larger effort to defeat them (perhaps in order to circumvent whatever harm it was they had in mind). The deception might be justified, in either case, as an effort to avoid harm and restore fairness. To justify a deceptive sexual identity, then, a gay man need only demonstrate that the other person, the one deceived, is an enemy.

Gay professionals invoke some version of this argument when they talk about homophobic co-workers and bosses who "wouldn't understand." A Houston accountant, Steve, struggled with these same concerns while trying to decide if he should come out at work. Tamara, a woman in his department, was a source of special concern. "Four months ago I had a strong urge to tell Tamara," he explains. "I went on this honesty binge. I wanted to tell everybody, I wanted to buy a neon sign." He and Tamara had become close, and she had been frank about her blossoming affair with another co-worker, Jay. Over time, Steve had begun to think of Tamara as one of his closer friends. When he turned 24, Steve

remembers thinking "You're 24, what are you going to do with your life? Living this big lie in front of everyone?"

He stopped short, though, after telling his mother. "I recently came out to my mother who is not handling it well at all. I came out to a few friends; Lisa handled it great, our relationship just grew and blossomed even further than it already had. So I said 'OK, everyone is going to react like Lisa.' But then I thought they might react like my mom." Steve gradually lost his nerve, and decided he couldn't be sure Tamara would respond as he hoped. His desire for honesty was outweighed by his fear of its potential consequences. "So the honesty binge went bad," Steve says. "Let's not do this honesty thing too much."

For many men, the desire for honesty was secondary to the need for self-protection. Eric, a Delaware banker, was quick to see his former boss as the enemy. "I feel bad," he begins, "because I'm really lying to myself and everybody else. But I still don't think being gay in today's world is as acceptable as everybody thinks it should be. You still have to be very careful, and I think it would hurt, especially where I am." If Eric were to change strategies, he expects that it would lead to disaster:

My boss is so ultra -- so super macho, and hates anybody gay. I mean he just had a *hatred* for gays, absolute hatred. Every sport was his sport, his son had to play every sport, that type of person. He just hated gays. He just would make it very obvious that he hated anybody who was gay or black. He had definite prejudices about a lot of things.

Eric's response was to counterfeit an identity, using his wife, his womanizing manner, and his frequent sexual innuendos. All of this was justifiable, he explained, because his boss was so unreasonable; he was the enemy, and didn't deserve Eric's honesty. "I really had to play up to him. I had to be very careful there to be sure that my image was not ruined. If he found out he would have fired me on the spot."

A San Francisco architect had a similar attitude about his employer, the Catholic Church. Geoff supervises construction at a college in northern California, and describes his working environment as "incredibly homophobic." When speaking of the Brothers who supervise his work, he speaks with near contempt, and expresses no remorse about the numerous ways in which he's misled them

about his sexuality. In fact, Geoff suspects that if he were to come out, the church would have more trouble with his sexuality than with his years of dishonesty.

"They would be upset that I'm gay, not dishonest. They'd say, 'I understand it was hard to come out, so I understand why you've been doing what you've been doing.' I asked Geoff to imagine that I was one of the priests, and had just confronted him on his fabrications. Geoff chuckled, and shrugged. "Everyone has to lead their lives the way they see fit. It's the way I feel most comfortable, and I can't do something to please you because you think I'm a liar. I'm not leading my life for you; I'm leading it for me. So if you don't like it, it's unfortunate." Working in a hostile world, with people he doesn't respect, Geoff has no qualms about counterfeiting an identity.

Like Geoff, many of the men had carefully rationalized their counterfeit identities. Though none described a situation in which he had actually been called to task for his deceit, almost all could outline the arguments they would offer as a defense. Whatever ethical framework they used, counterfeiters are often quite adept at refuting the assertion that they're being dishonest.<sup>13</sup> Some felt that while they were undoubtedly misleading their co-workers, they couldn't be accused of lying *per se*. Others justified their deception in the short-term, explaining that they eventually planned to change strategies. Still others shifted the moral responsibility onto co-workers, whose homophobia had made honesty unnecessary or impossible. The greater moral villainy lay, they thought, in the way their organizations treated gay people, and therein lay their defense.

### *Social invalidation*

Our sense of who we are is based, to a degree, on the feedback we receive from others. According to Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison, people look to "social reality" to obtain feedback and ultimately to validate their self-concepts. Other persons help an individual to define the appropriateness or correctness of his or her attitudes, beliefs, and values. Consulting with and

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<sup>13</sup> Weston (1991) makes a similar point about accusations that gay people, because we don't form traditional families, are selfish or irresponsible (p. 158).



confronting others, or seeking the advice of friends and associates, may help a person to decide on a course of action in dealing with a situation. This function of self-disclosure is commonly known as *social validation* (see Derlega & Grzelak, 1979:157).

But what happens when your internal, psychic world isn't reflected back at you? When others respond not to you, but to some fictional persona who stands in your stead, it is often difficult to feel affirmed, disconfirmed, or responded to in any meaningful way *as you really are*. The result, for men using a counterfeiting strategy, is the recurrent sense that their social world has become unreal. The more effectively a gay man presents a facade, the greater his difficulty in experiencing the reality of his everyday life, or in getting information about the reality of the relationships in which he participates (Lee, 1977:62).

In numerous reports, lesbians and gay men have complained that being in the closet places a "distance" between themselves and their families, friends, and co-workers (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Weinberg & Williams, 1974). In his study of gay fathers, for example, Bozett (1980) notes that the desire for closeness and intimacy is the factor that most often motivated them to reveal their sexuality to sons and daughters. "The gay father discloses to his children (and to others) primarily in order to explain to them his social and personal world" (p. 175). Without shifting too far into psychological analysis, one can speculate that it is often not the distance that troubles these men, but the artificiality of the closeness.

Tip has an active social relationship with many of the hospital staff. He chats with them about his romantic escapades, both real and imaginary, and has taken some of the women dancing and drinking. One of the residents, Steve, has been especially friendly. "He's probably the wildest person at the hospital," Tip explains, "and somehow he saw this in me, and we partied together. We've done drugs together. We run across to the bar and drink together, and then he smokes cigarettes. He thinks it's a big sin, so he doesn't want me to let it out." Last year, Tip took a trip to the Jersey shore with Steve and some of the other residents. "I drove down there, and we had fun, but in a straight way." The group baked lobster, went bike riding, and danced at some of the straight clubs. "We did what straight guys do in bars, talked pussy, and all that."

Looking back, Tip describes the trip as "a gay person's nightmare." Because he counterfeits an identity at work, Tip didn't feel he could be himself with his co-workers. "It's fun up to a point, but it gets boring for me. That's a shame, because I really like them. Our relationship is casual and supportive, as straight friends go. But see, they don't really know who I am."

Tip's sense of detachment came to a head last year when he attended a meeting of a lesbian and gay organization on campus. Most of the members were younger than Tip, some of them not yet in medical school:

It was fun, and I longed to have what they had. Because they're students, and they're out, and they had their boyfriends there, and everyone knew the volleyball players, the theatrical group, screaming *Mary* all over the place. And I was jealous. Really was. It pissed me off. I was like "Shit."

Tip doesn't complain about being socially withdrawn at work -- he's not. On the contrary, he is fully integrated into the social network of the hospital, and participates in many of the staff's extracurricular activities. But he realizes that his integration is predicated on a counterfeit identity. As purveyor of that identity, Tip complains that others "don't really know who I am," and finds himself confined to the sidelines, simultaneously anxious and bored.

As his social and psychic worlds fall out of alignment, the counterfeiter sometimes finds himself in absurd situations. Ron, a psychiatrist with a practice in rural Maryland, explained that he never revealed his own sexuality to patients, even when the situation seemed to warrant it. At least once, with one of his patients, this led to an awkward situation:

I had this patient who was married and was part of a group. He said he needed to talk to me individually, there was something he had to talk about, so we set up a time. So he tells me all about this terrible conflict he has because of his sexual attraction to men, and it's something that he can't act on because of his marriage -- though he actually has acted on it a couple of times. He's just so tired of having to be one way on the outside and another way on the inside, and he goes on and on, and then he looks me right in the eye and he says "I just want to be like *you*! I don't want to be conflicted about this stuff!" And I thought "Great, if he only knew."

For Ron, the situation was a memorable one, perhaps because it echoed his own sentiments so exactly. Yet even as his patient complained about his own sense of social invalidation -- of having to be "one way on the outside, and another way on the inside" -- Ron felt unable to reveal himself.

For other men, these moments of invalidation were more tedious than painful. Because their strategy requires them to feign enthusiasm and experience in areas where none actually exists, they often find themselves in irrelevant, trivial social situations. Steve, a Houston accountant, felt this way about Michelle, one of the women in the office. Because Michelle assumes that Steve is heterosexual, her assumptions about his life are often wildly inaccurate. For Steve, this is tiring:

Michelle sometimes gets a little too nosy in my personal life. Like "What are you doing tonight? Where are you going? Who are you going with?" If it's a guy, you're like, ugghhh. "I'm going out to a show and dinner." And she's like "Who are you going with?" You don't want to say "Bill" every time, because she starts to wonder. I have a good friend, and his name is Todd, and Todd and I do a lot together. And Michelle has once said -- Michelle has been married once -- she once said "I guess Todd is Joel to you, like Joel is to me." And Joel is her husband. She was comparing Todd and Joel, like I was married to Todd. I said, "No baby, we don't do that. Todd is *not* my Joel."

Yet Steve found himself unable to explain who Joel *was*, why they spend so much time together, or how their relationship differed from a heterosexual marriage. Not surprisingly, Steve often found his encounters with Michelle tedious, in part because they were so disconnected from the reality of his life.

Because he is denied validation for being himself, the man using a counterfeit identity often finds it difficult to navigate his organization effectively. His professional and emotional needs have been misrepresented, which affords him only distorted feedback from others. A New York advertising executive explained that this was one of the major drawbacks of hiding his sexuality. "Eventually, I'll have to come out," he says, "because there are so many social demands placed on people in this business. I can't get away with it for more than another year or two." Yet he was unsure about the impact this would have on his career. "It's hard to know how I'll handle it. I mean, should I get out of this business now? Or will it be fine? When you're in the closet, you're never sure how people will react to *you*. They've never really met you."

The lack of social validation was most conspicuous in organizations that placed the heaviest social demands on their members. Andy, a Houston lawyer, found that his social life was almost entirely populated by people from work. "My relationships with people at work are very significant. We spend, as lawyers in a

big corporate practice, a significant amount of our lives together." Andy is accustomed to working long weekends and late nights, and finds it most convenient to socialize with many of the same people, "just as a function of the opportunities to meet other people and spend time with other people." He feels close to many of the people in his office, and admits that "they're all particularly inquisitive. It's just the nature of the way we operate, for better or worse, that we know a lot about everyone else's lives."

Until last year, Andy found it relatively easy to counterfeit an identity. He was closely involved with a woman named Susan, and had rarely acted on his sexual desires for other men. "In a sense," he explained, "I've led a heterosexual lifestyle through age 33." Today he considers himself bisexual, and believes that he's probably in transition. Several months before our interview, Andy ended his relationship with Susan, and began dating a man in San Diego. When we met, in the summer of 1990, his personal life had fallen increasingly out of step with his public image. Co-workers remained inquisitive, but seemed puzzled that Andy had "pulled back" from them. Because they knew nothing about the changes Andy was experiencing, they were unable to offer any kind of support or feedback. Andy quickly realized that he'd rather spend time with those who could. "I'd rather socialize with other gay and bisexual men, between that and the amount of hours that I spend working, it's very very demanding to do all that work and all that socializing and still find any time for myself."

Some men tried to alleviate the artificiality of these encounters by devising situations in which they could seek some measure of social validation. While keeping their masks tightly affixed, they sometimes found it possible to reveal themselves in oblique or incomplete ways. They talked about *a friend* who was gay, and initiated a conversation about sex, civil rights, or AIDS without identifying the true nature of their interest in the subject. They cultivated alternative identities -- as liberals, feminists, or worldly urbanites -- that allowed principled stand-taking without casting suspicion on their counterfeit identity. "I've discussed homosexuality with other people in the office," a New York consultant explained.

"I've never said I'm homosexual, but I did say lots of my friends are. It was my way of giving my side of the story."

Sometimes, the veiled disclosure brought the desired response. Joel, a Washington consultant, used this approach to air his personal convictions about civil rights. Over the years, he has been involved with the Lutheran church, and a number of activist organizations. As an example, Joel cited a seminar on race, class, and sex that he gave several weeks before we met, at a local church. "I feel very comfortable talking about these issues," he explained, "and do so frequently." Another time, he wrote a letter to the bishop in San Francisco about the ordination of gay priests, and his business partner knows that he gives money to AIDS organizations like Whitman-Walker. "I've been a traditional fighter against discrimination, whether it's against gays or blacks," and no secret is made of this in the office. Yet Joel is scrupulous in avoiding any discussion of his own sexuality, and doesn't know what his co-workers suppose it to be. "I don't know what they'd say about my sexuality," he explained, but "it's important they know where I stand on civil rights."

Often it was no more than an emotion or experience the men wished to share. A New York advertising executive recalled this situation:

A friend died after a long fight with KS, and I was a total wreck. I was really busy at work, but I kept falling apart, forgetting things, running to the bathroom to splash water in my face. So I thought about telling everyone I'd seen a really sad movie or something like that, but that sounded too hokey. So I finally told them I had a sick relative. "My uncle's dying of cancer," or something like that. Next thing I knew, I was bawling in the office, and my secretary's bringing me coffee, telling me it's okay, that she *understands*. And, of course, she really didn't understand. But in another way, in the way that probably matters, she did.

Disclosures like these seemed intended to inject a shard of reality into an otherwise artificial situation, to lessen the sense of detachment many counterfeiter feel in the workplace. By setting clear boundaries around these moments of authenticity -- by framing the disclosure in generic political terms, as something that happened to "a friend", or as an emotion that sprung from some other source -- the men sometimes felt that they could commune, however briefly, with those around them.

Despite these efforts, men who counterfeit place an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their co-workers, and describe professional relationships that seem desiccated and artificial. When speaking of their contact with bosses and peers, they recall feeling bored, invisible, and insulted -- the lament of one who goes unnoticed, or who find himself treated as if he were someone else.

Like other efforts to assimilate or pass, a counterfeit identity seems to promise a "deal".<sup>14</sup> The organization holds out the lure of success, promotion or wealth, but only for a certain category of persons. The gay professional, who can disguise his status as a member of the underclass, accepts the offer. Like a forged passport, a heterosexual identity permits him to travel freely in the privileged circles of heterosexuality, posing as one of the elite.

But to do so, he must enter a Faustian bargain, and accept the penalties that come with his entitlement. As Lee (1977) observed in his study of self-disclosure among gay men, "The costs of going public are obvious, but what is often neglected in asking why any homosexual would be willing to pay these costs, especially if he has no difficulty in 'passing' as a heterosexual, is the less obvious fact that passing also has its costs" (p. 61). A substantial psychological literature, especially in the humanistic clinical tradition, emphasizes that the achievement of a healthy personality requires significant self-disclosure to others. When some salient personal characteristic is withheld from others, the frequent result is stress, anxiety, and depression.

During the interviews, I asked the men if there were "any penalties for being in the closet" at work. What became clear, as they formulated a reply, was that some men were afraid even to contemplate the question. It is well known, and has been well-documented, that a gay identity can lead to discrimination in the workplace. That bigotry and ignorance can destroy the careers and lives of gay people is undeniable; the *incentive* to counterfeit is obvious. What is not well understood,

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<sup>14</sup> As Adam (1978) explains, in the language of class analysis: "The identity, culture, and values of the inferiorized are to be negated (or at least concealed) for the *promise* or opportunity of improved life chances. Submission to the social rules which preserve the superordinance of the white, Gentile, heterosexual group(s) supposedly mitigates the barriers confining inferiorized existence" (p. 120).

however, is that efforts to hide or misrepresent one's sexual identity carry their own penalties. The closet, in any of its various forms, is an imperfect solution, one that creates as many problems as it is sometimes thought to solve.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### AVOIDING

Rather than fabricate an identity, some gay men try to elude sexual identity altogether, cultivating an image that is essentially *asexual*. They provide co-workers with as little evidence of sexuality as possible, and provide alternative, non-sexual interpretations for what evidence does exist. Sexuality becomes no less managed a status in these cases -- here, as always, the performer must monitor and direct his behavior -- but the management now has a different aim: the avoidance of gay identity via the elimination of *all* sexual displays, situations, and identities.<sup>1</sup>

#### **The basic moves**

Avoidance strategies are rationalized by a web of ideologies that seem to proscribe sexual displays in the workplace. Our prevailing ideologies about privacy, professionalism, and etiquette all converge in the belief that all men, heterosexual or homosexual, should use some version of this strategy while at work (see Chapter 2).

Yet sexuality is everywhere. In the workplace, as in other settings, it is implicated in myriad behaviors, appearances and situations. Conversations often turn to sexual topics, or imply sexual intentions and practices. In our dress and physical comportment, we communicate adherence to, or departure from, prescribed sexual roles. One's mere presence, in some situations, implies a sexual orientation. To avoid a sexual identity, then, one must withdraw from countless situations in which sexuality is part of the exchange.

Avoidance strategies are by far the most common strategies used by gay professionals. More than half of my participants (59%) used them with one or

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<sup>1</sup> I should distinguish my use of the term "avoidance" from a more common usage, which concerns the subjective formation of gay identity. In several identity-stage models, psychologists and sociologists have described a process by which same-sex interests or experiences are suppressed or "avoided." As Troiden (1988:47-9) has argued, this kind of avoidance takes several forms, including the inhibition of same-sex interests, the curtailment of exposure to opposite-sex peers, or the adoption of antihomosexual postures (see also Cass, 1979).



more co-workers, while a third (33%) used them exclusively. Some (10%) used avoidance strategies with some co-workers, while counterfeiting an identity for others (especially those above them in the hierarchy). Others (16%) used them in combination with integration strategies (which were often used with those below). They were used by men in all sizes and kinds of organizations, including private-sector companies, educational institutions, and the government. The men themselves ranged in age from 24 to 64, and two were divorced (see Appendix II).

Avoidance strategies are a sort of bridge between counterfeiting and integrating, both of which involve the affirmative construction of sexual identities (authentic and inauthentic, respectively). Avoidance strategies are an attempt to disintegrate sexuality from work relationships, either by rendering the performer asexual, or by making his sexuality seem irrelevant.

### *Dodging the issue*

For every sexual display, there is a means of avoiding it. For every situation or behavior that communicates something about sexuality, we can identify a corresponding dodge.

The most common of these are *verbal dodges*, which are attempts to avoid the sexual displays that are routinely embedded in conversation. Dave, the credit manager for a Philadelphia manufacturing firm, found himself using this tactic with several of his co-workers. "The worst times are Monday mornings," he explained, "when people start talking about what they did over the weekend. They did this or that with their girlfriend or wife, and they ask me what I did. I just keep things as general, as generic as possible, not mentioning any names. I try not to use 'we.' It's easy to do, but I think that's the most stressful time." Recently, Dave found himself in a particularly tense conversation with Audrey, a woman from personnel:

She had a friend who was gay, very blatantly and openly gay, and I also know this person. And so one day Audrey came back and says "Oh, I didn't know you knew Jeff." And she says, "*How* do you know Jeff?" And luckily Jeff and I lived in the same apartment building at the time -- clearly he didn't want Audrey to know -- so I said, "We live in the same apartment building and there are social functions, that's how I met him."

The initial dodge seemed to end the matter for awhile, but before long Audrey returned to the subject, this time with a question about Dave's roommate, Roger:

Well, I guess Audrey put more and more together, that didn't satisfy her curiosity. I don't know *how* Audrey found out, but last fall we were walking through Reading Terminal and she asked if I was going to my parents house or to Roger's parents' house for Thanksgiving. And I said, "Well, my parents invited Roger, but we're going to his parents' house." My reaction was "Oh God."

As the conversation continued, Dave grew increasingly uncomfortable. Audrey finally asked how long Dave had lived with Roger, which prompted a more explicit dodge. "She started talking about how long she'd been with *her* boyfriend, until I said, 'Audrey, I'm not going to discuss relationships with you.' I just changed the subject."

Tony, an executive with a Philadelphia financial services firm, used a similar dodge. He sensed that a conversation with his parents was moving onto personal subjects, and took evasive action:

I was talking about buying a house, and my father insisted on telling me about two men that he knew -- a salesman at the place where he works -- who bought and rehabilitated a house in Society Hill. And I *knew* what he wanted to talk about; these weren't the only men to buy a townhouse in Center City. My mental reaction was: that's interesting, but I don't want to talk about being gay now, I want to talk about buying this house.

For the time being, he stuck to the subject of real estate, avoiding what he feared would become a conversation about his sexuality.

Other men avoid direct inquiries about their sexuality by steering conversations away from more general sexual themes or topics, often by using calculated evasions. An executive secretary described a typical conversation with some of his co-workers:

They know I live in a trinity, and they ask, "Well, do you have a roommate." And I say, "Yes, I have a roommate and I live in a trinity *thank you very much. Do you?*" Or "Yes, I do live in a trinity -- aren't they wonderful?" But I get off the subject of my roommate right away.

Joel, a Washington consultant in his 50s, described a similar dodge. Because he's part of a church discussion group that focuses on minority issues, he often finds himself engaged in personal conversations with the other members. Given the intimate nature of the group, I asked how he would respond to the question, "Are you gay?" He described two possible dodges:

I might just say, "Well, we're really not talking about our own orientations here." That's one possible response. Another response might be, "I'm

black, I'm a woman, I'm a Muslim, I'm gay, I'm very poor, I am *all* those things that are discriminated against." That's another way to cut the cloth.

Both dodges take the form of a non-answer, a refusal to supply the requested information. In the first case, the dodge denies the relevance of the question while declining to answer it. The second dodge interprets the question in metaphorical, non-sexual terms -- clearly not the spirit in which it was asked -- while refusing to answer it literally.

Darren, a dentist in central New Jersey, often found himself in conversations that required a verbal dodge. Many of his co-workers were young women who enjoyed teasing him, and though Darren usually relished the attention, he sometimes found it intrusive. The office administrator, a woman named Rita, was especially fond of sexual jokes:

She embarrassed me terribly one day; I think she really enjoyed embarrassing me, too. We're in the lounge at lunchtime and a lot of people were around and she said "Oh, Darren, I hope you don't mind, I used your name." I said "What do you mean?" She said "I entered you in the wet jockey short contest at Gatsby's [a local gay bar]," because they were having a bikini contest or buns contest or something like that. "I think you'll win."

In this instance, Darren responded with a humorous evasion:

It just embarrassed me tremendously; there were 15 people around. I said "Rita, I don't know, I'm about ten years past my prime. I don't think I'll be going." Then I said "Oh, *look at the time*. I gotta go." Got out of that room real fast. I try to avoid those homosexual conversations.

Rather than deny or confirm what Rita had insinuated about his sexuality, Darren dodged the question; his evasion drew attention to his age, and away from his sexual orientation.

Sometimes, a more aggressive dodge was required. Tom, a school teacher in New Jersey, found himself in an awkward situation when one of his co-workers became increasingly amorous. After a string of suggestive remarks, she finally asked a direct question about Tom's sexuality. He responded with a reproach:

One day, in front of everybody, Valerie says "I'm practically throwing myself at you and you're not reacting. Are you gay?" I said, "Valerie, what the hell makes you think you're so fucking desirable? I've kicked better out of my bed." She was the only one that's ever come out and asked something like that. That was that.

In this case, Tom used a verbal dodge to change the subject. Like Darren, he redirected the conversation, drawing attention to the other person, and away from himself.

Whether their dodges were humorous or reproachful, the men often found themselves engaged in one-sided conversations. To avoid self-disclosure, they focused the conversation on the other person, with the consequence that they rarely talked about themselves. As Darren explained, "I'm really unfair in that respect. I ask these women about their personal lives because I care about them so much -- I really *do* care about them and want to know that they're happy and that type of thing." But, if one of the women ever asked an explicit question about his sexuality, Darren speculates that he'd try to make a joke of it:

I would simply deny that I had a relationship. I would tell them that I was celibate. That's how I handle it. "I just don't date. No one would date me." I would make a joke out of it. "Oh well, you know, I'm fickle and no one would date me." If she pushed me I'd say "Well, I just never found the right person, and I'm celibate now. I don't date. No time to date. Work too much. Can't afford it."

Justin, a college professor in Washington, used a similar tactic. His speech is controlled and firm, and though he lacks Darren's sense of humor, he is skilled at managing a conversation:

When I say I cut people off, I really *cut people off*. If the conversation was going even remotely going in any directly about me, I'd steer it elsewhere. I'd just put it back on them. So if they were talking about a party of get-together, I'd just ask "Was so-and-so there?" Or I'd follow up on something else they said. So I'd let it go for a few minutes, then I'd say "Well, I've got to get to work." They'd be willing to talk for an hour, but I'd take off.

The result, for Justin, was a series of one-sided relationships with colleagues and students. "I got to know them a lot better than they got to know me, especially the graduate students," he explained. "It strikes me as odd: usually when a relationship develops, it's more even. I'm not sure why they pursued me, especially when it became so unbalanced."

In addition to these verbal dodges, the men often used *situational dodges* to avoid circumstances in which sexual displays might be required. By establishing strict temporal or spatial boundaries, they avoided situations in which such topics

are typically part of the exchange. Rather than dodge the subject in conversation, they tried to preempt such conversations altogether.

Usually, this meant that they avoided social activities with co-workers. An executive secretary in Philadelphia explained that he often wanted to invite his co-workers to his home, but was afraid the intimate setting would invite intrusive questions. Other men avoided company parties and outings, especially those at which dates and spouses -- and thus the subject of dating and marriage -- were part of the evening. A Houston executive in his late 20s described a typical situation:

Marie, our secretary, said "I think you and my daughter should get together." So I try to be unavailable -- truly unavailable -- when there's something coming up, rather than lying about it. . . . It's more lying by omission. When Marie was my secretary, she'd say "Can you come over for dinner?" I'd just say no.

Likewise, Justin, a Washington college professor, tried to limit his social lunches with colleagues, fearing they might encourage unwanted intimacy. "I always keep the boundaries there," he explained. "We'd go out to lunch, for example, but I'd have to be at class *promptly at one*. I always made sure there were conditions to cut it off."

Todd, a financial analyst for a public utility in suburban New Jersey, recalled some of the situations he regularly tried to avoid. When he travelled with co-workers, he often found himself included in evenings out with "the guys."

On business trips they like to go to go-go bars. I make a statement like "That sounds like fun," but I conveniently arrange that I can't go. Or I say "I have to work on this" or I say "No, I'm going to work out and I'll meet you for dinner or something." I try to make it a non-issue.

Because he lives in Manhattan, Todd often found it easy to avoid after-hours socializing with co-workers, most of whom lived in suburban New Jersey. He worries that questions about his sexuality, which were easy to avoid during business hours, would be inevitable on these occasions:

I don't make up any stories, I just avoid it. I limit the opportunities for those questions to come up by not really socializing with the people. The secretary is having a dinner party and her boyfriend works at the company and I overhear her making these dinner plans, inviting some people that I'm friends with. And I thought "Oh god, I hope I'm not invited." She didn't invite me. I limit the opportunities that those questions would come up.

For Todd, situational avoidance had become almost second nature. He drives to work from Manhattan, and can usually protest that he has conflicting plans. "It's not really conscious, it's just so natural at this point. It's reached a real natural point."

As he becomes increasingly skilled in the use of avoidance strategies, Todd imagines the road ahead: "I know this one guy who is much older, who's in a real senior-level position in [the company], and he's rumored to be gay. And I'm sure he *is* gay. But I don't think he's ever let on." The man was something of an enigma, Todd explained, and was rarely seen socializing after work. "Maybe someday I'm going to be in the same position: 50 years old, never married, and there'll be plenty of speculation that I'm gay. But I won't ever acknowledge it."

### *Sensitizing the subject*

Some men managed to avoid sexual displays in a more comprehensive, global fashion. While verbal and situational dodges supplied protection on an ad hoc basis, it was often easier to sensitize the entire subject of sexuality, establishing an atmosphere in which sexual displays *per se* were considered rude, inappropriate, or unwelcome. At work, these men projected a demeanor that discouraged others from prying; they were seen as aloof, intensely private or doggedly professional men -- men who were "strictly business." Rather than employ specific verbal or situational dodges, they preempted the situations that might require them.

Ron, a psychiatrist in a suburban Maryland practice, used this tactic with the men and women who shared his office. In his four years with the practice, not one of these co-workers has shown the slightest curiosity about his personal life. When I asked how that situation had evolved, he confessed that he wasn't certain. "They don't ask, and I'm not sure how I do this exactly, but I've always managed to project that I don't want to hear those questions. And I don't." When office conversations turned to personal matters, Ron's usual tactic was to reply in an evasive manner. "If someone asked, 'Are you dating anyone?' I'd say 'no.' And if you asked what I did over the weekend, I'd either say 'not much,' or 'took it easy,' or something like that. Or if I met John [his lover] for the weekend, I might say, 'Oh, I went to Massachusetts for the weekend, to visit some friends.'" If someone

asked a direct question about his sexuality, Ron thought he would probably attempt a verbal dodge. "I'd probably try to be evasive. I don't know what I would say, but I'm very good at being evasive." Yet such questions never came up, and Ron was at a loss to explain why.

From Ron's laconic manner in our interview, one can imagine that co-workers consider him somewhat distant and reserved, someone who would take exception to questions about his private life. As our interview progressed, he recalled a particularly enlightening conversation with a former co-worker. Ron hadn't seen the man in years, but they struck up a conversation when they crossed paths in a gay bookstore:

At the hospital, people were forever asking him about what he does, and who he does it with, and what his personal life is like. And I told him that no one *ever* asked me those kinds of questions. And he said, "You had a completely different aura about you. You had this aura that you were there to work, and that's it. And though people talked to you a great deal about work, and they felt you were very open about it, there was never any question about talking about anything else."

Ron's personal manner, and his tendency to avoid standard office chatter, seem to ensure distance between himself and his co-workers. He avoids sexual displays by sensitizing the subject, appearing testy and unapproachable on those terms. "I don't know how I do it," he explained, "but I do."

Other men were more self-conscious in their efforts to sensitize the subject. Grey, the marketing manager for a Houston shopping mall, avoided personal inquiries by making them seem rude and old-fashioned. His demeanor was refined and genteel, and he confessed that co-workers sometimes resented his highborn manners. When I asked if his sexual life was ever discussed at work, he seemed ruffled:

Oh god, no, no! That's just not appropriate. I mean, we've *never* talked about that. . . . No one has ever asked me, in six years, "Do you have a girlfriend?" That's such an old way of thinking, people just *don't* any more. I mean, most people, that just doesn't come up. I wouldn't want to be more open about it, because it's just not pertinent. I feel it's just not a part of your -- it doesn't matter. . . . You want to be judged on your accomplishments, not on your relationships.

Around Grey, one can imagine feeling that personal inquiries were impolite; his huffy evasions seem to preclude them at work.

Cultural norms set ceilings on the amount of disclosure or intimacy that is appropriate in different types of relationships (between co-workers, acquaintances, friends, strangers, and so forth). Sometimes, these norms can be used instrumentally, to legitimize nondisclosure. "Individuals may be able to withhold information or exercise 'reserve' when the disclosure would be too embarrassing or painful to reveal" (Derlega and Grzelak, 1979:163). They may emphasize the boundary aspects of their relationship, suggesting that further disclosure would be inappropriate.

Darren, a New Jersey dentist, recalls an explicit appeal to such norms, as part of his effort to use an avoidance strategy. When one of the women in his office asked a direct question about his sexuality, he quickly tried to sensitize the subject:

She was there two or three weeks, and she just walked back there about 8 o'clock in the morning. I had just gotten there, and she walked back and stood at the door of my office with her hands on her hips. And she goes "Are you gay?" And I said, "No Nancy, I'm not. Why do you ask?" She goes, "I heard that you were." And I said "Well, you heard wrong, and I think you're rude for bringing it up." And she said "Oh, ok." Then she left.

In this case, the subject was sensitized through an appeal to etiquette. Darren made direct questions about his (homo)sexuality seem intrusive and rude, and one can imagine that in the future, co-workers will be wary of broaching the issue.

Men who seem distant or aloof find it easiest to keep co-workers at a distance. A public school teacher in New Jersey recalled a specific attempt, on his part, to take on that appearance. When a co-worker tried to fix him up, he let her know that her overture was unwelcome:

She said "You're 37 or 38 years old, and you're still not married," And she said "I know a girl." And I told her "If I want to find somebody I'll find them myself. I really don't need your help." And that just put an end to that. She was a type, like a busybody, you know.

Justin, a college professor in Washington, maintained a distant, formal relationship with students:

After a point, I would just cut myself off, but I had graduate students who were willing to sit in my office all day and talk. I just always made sure that it never went so far that people felt totally comfortable with me. They would sense, in one way or another, that they're not going to get beyond a certain boundary with me.



Likewise, a Philadelphia marketing representative simply stood his ground when others tried to goad him into being more personable. "You'll get a person calling you 'anti-social.' I just say 'yeah.' I think they're unprepared for that." Another time, someone even teased him about his distant manner. "Scott, you're not on this earth," a co-worker told him. "You hover."

To maintain that distance, gay men were often wary of engaging even in one-sided conversations about sexuality. To ensure that sexuality remains a sensitive subject, they curtail their own curiosity about the personal lives of others; asking questions, they feared, would desensitize the subject and invite reciprocal inquiries. A middle manager at a data management company in New York explained that he knows "who's married and who's not, but I don't ask about other relationships, I guess because I don't want them to turn around with the same question for me." There was another gay man in his office who took this approach to an extreme:

He kept his distance from most people. He wouldn't eat lunch with anyone, and wouldn't go out with anyone after work. And he would arrange very formal Christmas dinners. They were only for the people at work, and they couldn't bring their spouses or boyfriends or girlfriends. He was very uptight about his extracurricular activities.

Not surprisingly, his co-workers never felt comfortable crossing the strict boundaries he had established.

A senior executive at Time-Warner found himself in a similar situation. His co-workers never asked him about personal matters, which he assumed was a function of his own inattention to them. "No one ever asked me 'tough questions,' in that sense. I guess a lot of it has to do with how often you ask *other* people questions. I never volunteered any information and I certainly didn't lead conversations in that direction." Though he hadn't consciously adopted this strategy, he recognized the process by which it had evolved:

I think it's part of a protective thing that I guess a lot of gay people do. You don't go out of your way to inquire about other people's personal lives because that invites questions about your own. It becomes a little habitual in terms of keeping to yourself, and going out of your way not to mix business and private.

A Park Ranger in northern California found himself using the same tactic. "I don't know much about other people," he explained. "I don't know if that's because I'm

not open about my personal life so they're not open with me about theirs, or if it's just the way these people are. I suspect it's a little of both."

John, an Episcopalian priest, thought that even his choice of profession was influenced by his use of this strategy. The priesthood seemed to set limits on the disclosures that would be required of him, and as a younger man, he found this attractive:

Part of what appeals to people -- why they go into the ministry -- is that it allows you to be very, very close to people without having them ask *you* any questions. So there's a sort of voyeuristic part of the ministry, and I think that's why it appeals to other gay people to some degree, because I think most gay people are really good at viewing other people's lives, kind of like spies. You've been planted in this heterosexual world and we're always outsiders to a degree. . . . And ministry's exactly the same kind of thing, it's very much like being gay in general, only raising it to another level.

Like doctors, lawyers, therapists, and other professionals who are paid to ask questions, John found it easy to keep the relationship one-sided; the usual rules about reciprocal curiosity don't apply. "I can go into any situation and ask embarrassing personal questions, really participate in people's lives in a way that no other person can as an outsider, as a non-family member, and yet I can be confident they're not going to ask a single thing about me, unless I offer it or give them permission." The nature of his job, and the relationship it prescribes with his clientele, made an avoidance strategy an obvious choice. "The church was an appealing place for me," he explained, "because it was a place that I could hide out."

For many of these men, remaining aloof has become an entire lifestyle. They discourage others from showing an interest in their non-professional lives, often out of habit. Even when asking questions about the sexual lives of their clientele, in the role of therapist or priest, they discouraged any display of reciprocal interest.

### *Distracting the audience*

Sexual identity can also be avoided by interfering with the process by which co-workers draw conclusions about one's sexuality. Rather than avoid the cues themselves, by dodging or preempting them, some men tried to furnish alternative,

*non-sexual* explanations for them. When certain cues and disclosures were unavoidable, they tried to derail the process by which co-workers might draw an unwanted, (homo)sexual conclusion.

Often, this meant that signs of sexual non-conformity were given "cover stories" that explained them away. Traits or behaviors that might signify something about sexual identity were incorporated into alternative identities that precluded a sexual interpretation. Tip, a surgical resident at a large Manhattan hospital, uses his Southern background to help account for his "differentness." Because he often withdraws from the usual socializing and is sometimes mysterious about his personal life, the other residents sometimes tease him about his unusual ways. Still, he thinks that they interpret these traits as signs of his upbringing. "I'm from the South," he explained, "and maybe I'm a little different anyway."

Like Tip, some men were content to be thought of as eccentrics or oddballs, a status that comfortably assimilates many of the traits that might otherwise be coded as "gay." A Wall Street trader thinks that he's simply perceived to be a "different kind of person."

I'm somebody who doesn't like sports, for instance, which is very unusual on the trading floor; *everybody* likes sports. And I would tell people I don't even read the sports page. I don't read it. I have a different sense of humor -- that kind of different.

Similarly, a Philadelphia lawyer suspects that his co-workers see him as someone who simply doesn't fit the model:

There are single people who break the curve, and I think that's the category they probably put me in: you know, eccentric. The model is men take wives and have children. But maybe the model is also that some men just can't get along with women, or live alone -- which is really odd, because while I live alone I wouldn't describe myself as being a loner, or alone. But I think they have that impression of me . . . I think they just say "Well, maybe he's just one of those people who isn't going to settle down until late in his life."

Likewise, Justin thought that his non-conformity was probably read as a sign of iconoclasm. Though he refused to participate in the usual displays of sexuality, he doesn't think his colleagues interpret this in sexual terms. Instead, he thinks they see him as "a very independent, on-my-own person. They'd probably say 'Oh, that's just Justin.'"

A Philadelphia lawyer described a gay co-worker, Brian, who used his humor to stand apart. Though he was effeminate and seemed to fit the gay stereotype, Brian's behavior seemed to invite an alternative explanation. "I doubt that they think he's gay. They probably put him more in the category of being 'eccentric.'" Others were distracted from the evidence that Brian is gay -- young, single, effeminate -- by his sense of humor, his practical jokes, his eccentricity. Co-workers explain his differentness as a function of an unconventional personality, not sexuality.

Some men found it difficult to use this tactic, however, especially when they were otherwise perceived to be "normal." Steve, a Houston accountant, recalled a conversation in which one of his co-workers, a woman named Tamara, seemed puzzled about the fact that he never seemed to date. Several of his co-workers were single, but in Steve's case this seemed especially hard to explain. In particular, Tamara compared Steve to Jay, another man in the office:

Jay is very reserved, while I'm very outgoing. I guess it's harder for them to see me being this way and not dating. I'm outgoing, I'll meet people, but why don't I *date*? So something doesn't add up right there. Jay isn't outgoing so he could have a problem, theoretically, meeting girls.

Tamara's curiosity became especially troubling a few months later, when she and Jay began to date. Suddenly, Steve's singleness had become more conspicuous:

When Tamara wasn't dating anyone and Jay wasn't dating anyone, it was cool; none of us was dating, so they really didn't pursue it. If they're not dating, how can they accuse me of not dating? But now that they're dating each other, I'm odd man out.

Before long, Tamara's questions became more insistent: "How come Steve never dates?" "How come Steve never has a girlfriend?" Steve quickly found that his efforts to distract her, by complaining that he "never met anyone" or "didn't have time to date," were an ineffective cover.

Sometimes, gay men use more concrete identities to forestall sexual interpretations of their non-conformity. Miguel, who grew up in Puerto Rico, used his status as a medical student and temporary U.S. resident to keep his family at bay:

When I went to medical school [in Puerto Rico], it gave me four years more to have an excuse not to have a girlfriend. Then I moved here [to

Philadelphia], which gives me another excuse, because my mother doesn't want me to get married here. She thinks I'm going back to Puerto Rico.

Similarly, a claims negotiator for a Pennsylvania insurance company used his student status as a cover story. "It's very easy to explain my lack of a spouse because I'm in law school -- everybody knows that. And so I just don't have time. That's what I say; that's what they assume." When pressured to participate in after-hours socializing, he invoked a second, distracting identity. "It's very easy for me to explain my not going out, because I'm just a very conservative person. And if I were straight, I probably wouldn't go to a bar anyway. So it's easy to explain that away, too."<sup>2</sup>

Other men cultivated a conspicuous political reputation, as a liberal or feminist, to avoid the more damning reputation of a homosexual. Scott, a Philadelphia marketing representative, is known in his office as someone who often speaks on behalf of gay people. When a co-worker asked why he cared so much about homophobia, he responded with a distraction maneuver:

He asked how I knew so much about the subject, and I said "I live in Center City, I combat it all the time, I'm with it." Plus he knows I go to New York, and he even confided in me that he's been in mixed crowds and it didn't bother him, because it didn't impose on him.

With this move, Scott effected the identity of a liberal or urbanite, sidestepping the identity of a gay man. He explaining his gay interests as a function of an alternative, nonsexual identity.

In this way, gay professionals distracted their co-workers, diverting their attention from sexual questions or conclusions. Whether their alternate identity was temporary or lasting, formal or informal -- as law student or liberal, foreign resident or feminist -- it supplied a nonsexual cover. As an advertising executive explained, "My views about abortion, civil rights, and homophobia are all well known. I haven't made a secret about any of them. What *is* a secret, though, is the reason I probably hold those views. But, when push comes to shove, I'd insist that I'm an educated liberal, not a queer."

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<sup>2</sup> In *The Gay Report*, Karla Jay and Allen Young describe a gay man whose physical handicap seems to preclude a homosexual identity (or a heterosexual one, for that matter). "I have muscular dystrophy," he notes, "and am disabled, so people don't expect me to be anything sexually" (p. 140).

In this way, avoidance strategies take the form of a campaign to desexualize one's identity at work. Sexual conversations and situations are dodged, sexual curiosity is discouraged, and sexual interpretations of behavior are made to seem unnecessary or unlikely. To his co-workers, the avoider is an enigma, someone whose sexuality is a bit of a mystery (or at the very least, a touchy subject). Most of these men, when asked, will admit that their co-workers "don't know very much" about them, and they'd like to keep it that way. As long as their co-workers are willing to be brushed off, politely silenced, or distracted, these men seem content to avoid the issue.

### **Consequences**

Alloofness is both an ingredient and consequence of most efforts to avoid a sexual identity. By ensuring that he is enigmatic or unapproachable, the avoider sets himself apart from the usual flow of social intercourse. He avoids unwanted social contact, sometimes by avoiding contact altogether.

Men who counterfeit an identity sometimes complain that their social encounters are out of sync with their sense of themselves; by design, a fabricated identity ensures that one will be treated as if he were "someone else." Avoidance strategies, on the other hand, can deny gay men even this sort of misplaced social acknowledgement. Rather than give them inaccurate or unwanted social feedback, co-workers often withheld it altogether. Because he is denied any kind of meaningful social contact, the avoider often feels detached, unseen, and unsure of his place in the organization.

### *Social withdrawal*

When asked to describe "the biggest disadvantage" of avoiding sexual self-disclosure, gay men consistently point to the boundaries it places on their social involvement with co-workers. "The disadvantage is that I have to exclude certain people from my life," a Houston lawyer said. "I might be more social, I might try to encourage people to go have drinks, except that I don't want to get too close to people. That's a disadvantage, because I think you do miss out on some things." Miguel expressed a similar frustration. "There are so many people in the hospital

who are really, really nice," he told me. "And I'm sure if I didn't have this concern about being gay, I would have excellent relationships with these people. So it's something that's getting lost."

One of the things the men missed was a sense that others understood or appreciated their lives. Milton, a Washington lawyer known for his efforts on behalf of African-Americans and people with AIDS, found this the most distressing part of his situation. He explained that "in general, I don't think I would like it if people came to me every day to ask me questions about who I spend time with, what I do, who my friends are. I think I would like to maintain some level of privacy." Still, he sometimes felt that co-workers hardly noticed the circumstances of his life, especially the losses he's experienced as a result of AIDS:

There are times when I wish people would come to me and say "How are you doing?" and "How does it feel to lose so many friends at a young age?" "How has all this affected you on a personal level?" And people never do. I do wish sometimes that people would ask. I wish they would ask me, sometimes, "What is it like to be a successful gay, black man? What are the challenges, what are the difficulties, what are the rewards?" I do wish they would, but they don't.

Like Milton, many of the men felt that the important experiences in their lives, whether positive or negative, were unknown in the workplace. Derek, the vice president of a Houston employment agency, made a similar point:

I can't imagine what it would be like to be able to show affection -- or allow anybody to think that you're capable of possessing affection -- as they do. A wife stopping by, and everybody wanting to meet her. Discussion about what their wives did the night before. Admitting that you had a fight, and having people care, or offer their token advice. It must be *bliss*, I can't comprehend it. It must be absolutely marvelous to let somebody at work know that you love somebody. To me it's only a concept.

After five years with the company, Derek had no trouble using an avoidance strategy. "It's no big deal because I've always had to do it," he explained, "but it's a little numbing." His chief complaint was the sense of social dislocation he often felt. "Imagine the thrill of being able to show public affection, the way other people are. To let somebody know that you're sitting next to somebody you happen to love, rather than sitting next to somebody that you happened to watch the football game with that afternoon."

Derek recalled one situation in which his own silence became almost unbearable. Through his friendship with a gay employee in New York, Derek had learned something troubling about another employee named Robert. But when he was questioned by others in the New York office, he was forced to feign ignorance. As he told the story, Derek became visibly upset, and had to pause at several points:

Unfortunately, I know of a situation which is close to me, an employee in New York who has AIDS. Robert's going to be an issue, and I don't know how I'm going to deal with it. They don't know that, though they *should* have known it. They live in New York, and he's a 26-year-old single male who's in the hospital, ill. Single males don't get ill . . . I mean, didn't.

Yet when the other managers were discussing Robert, Derek found himself hamstrung by the implications it might have for his own sexual identity:

I'm so ashamed . . . that when I got a call, when I heard this, the first thing I thought about was not that this very charming, lovely, adorable, almost little brother-son to me, had this disease. The first thing I thought about was *me*. Not that I was ill, but that my career might suffer. And I was so ashamed . . . but for a day I was calculating how I would deal with this. It's demeaning when I'm sitting in the room, and we talk about the medical expenses going up, not the fact that we've got this kid with AIDS: "We've got to be more careful about the way we hire." "We've got to be sure that we're not going to be hiring any homosexuals in here."

In these painful meetings, Derek felt muzzled and paralyzed, as if he had lost his voice. He felt unable to explain the situation or acknowledge his feelings about it, because to do so might risk his own efforts to use an avoidance strategy. In the coming months, Derek knew that he had some tough choices to make. "People will be asking 'Wasn't this your friend, Derek?' It's going to be very tough."

In fact, personal problems or crises were most often cited as examples of the experiences men wanted to share with co-workers. "Most heterosexuals who are having family problems or kid problems or money problems or *anything* can pretty much talk to someone about it," a Houston manager explained, "or even just say 'I'm having a shitty day.' Just saying that much is enough." Another explained, "I don't get to share my personal life in the same way that heterosexual workers do, all the little day-to-day things. You know, 'I went out on a date with my girlfriend', or 'I've been dating the same person for two years and she's important to me', or 'I've had a fight with Frank, and today's a bitchy day for me'." Larry, a



Washington lawyer, recalls the end of his relationship with a lover of many years. "In the office, I toughed it out," he recalls. "I don't think I ever said to anyone 'my most important relationship has broken up, by the way.' So I did the usual thing I do in those kinds of situations: bifurcate it, split it up, get my support over here where I knew I was safe, and pretend that everything was fine at the office. I look back now at how awful it was to not have the kind of support everyone else would have gotten in the workplace."

Not surprisingly, the invisibility of lovers and friends was a source of particular disappointment. Because their most meaningful relationships were often unknown at work, the men were denied the support or affirmation of co-workers. Chris, a New York consultant, recalled his "divorce" from a lover of many years. The two men worked for the same firm, but had been afraid to reveal their relationship to the other people in the office. "I was cautious about what I would talk about," he explained. "I think if I had been straight I would have gone to my employer and said 'My wife and I are getting a divorce and it's a tough time for me.' But I didn't do that. Here's one of the most traumatic things that can happen to you -- the end of a relationship." Years later, Chris looks back at that time with a sense of sadness. "Divorces among straight people are so public," he says "Gays don't have that."

Not surprisingly, the avoidance of such topics frequently stunted the growth of friendships in the workplace. Roger, a Washington lawyer, recalls his early attempts to be friendly with some of the other lawyers in the Department of Labor. "There's a straight clique of male lawyers who go to lunch a lot, and one of the favorite topics of conversation in that group is women. When I first came aboard I went to lunch with them a lot, just to try to see if I could fit in. I would just talk about other things." Before long, however, Roger began to feel out of place. A Philadelphia medical resident had a similar problem with company parties. "I can't interact socially with them that much," Miguel explained, "because they'll ask me 'Where's your girlfriend?' If we have 10 parties in a year, I'll select which one I'll go to. I can't go to all of them, because I can't justify showing up alone at all of them." Both men felt that they had missed out.

Tip described a friendship that fell apart when he refused to reveal that he is gay. He and Joe were both surgical residents, and had become close friends over the years. "Joe was one of my best friends," Tip recalls. "Actually, I took him hunting with me a few times, and he met my family." The problems began when Joe and his wife tried to arrange a date for Tip:

He and his wife kept trying to set me up. The last time we spoke was about six months ago and on the phone, we actually had a direct confrontation. He came out and said "Tip, whats going on? I've been trying to set you up with this girl that works with my wife." I said "No, Joe, I don't like being set up. If I don't like her, then it's going to hurt your wife's feelings." I had used that excuse before, and he wouldn't let it go this time. He said "Tip, I'm doing you a favor. All you have to do is show up and drop your pants. That's all you've got to do." And I'm thinking that's exactly what I *don't* want to do. And he says "What is this, are you gay or something?" That's what he asked me. I said, "Joe, forget it. Look, the girl's already pissed because you've been trying and she's already asked your wife why I wouldn't I want to go out with her, so it's already doomed and I haven't even met her."

After this confrontation, Tip and Joe quickly drifted apart. Tip felt unable to reveal his sexuality, but acknowledges that "the way I'm doing this is costly. It's caused me to lose two friends because I didn't socialize with them. I didn't produce a date; I avoided it. It caused me to lose a friend, and Joe was a good friend." Still, Tip fears for his job, and feels that these friendships are a sacrifice he has to make. "People aren't happy knowing you without knowing something about your social life," Tip explains. "If I had it do over again I probably wouldn't say a word, I'd rather not know a lot of the people that I know now, because it's like starting a friendship and only being able to carry it out half way. It would have been better if I had just done my work, and gone to the library or something."

For some men, the isolation became the most negative aspect of the job. Justin, a college professor in Washington, was perhaps the most extreme example of this. "I just lumped everything at the university into this one category: 'I'm just going to keep it over there. It's just your job.' I never let myself get attached to people or develop any feelings -- though they were trying. I just wouldn't let it happen, ever." To avoid these personal entanglements, Justin placed strict limits on the social time he spent with students and the other faculty. "It was fairly

extreme," he recalls. "I would avoid all social invitations, I would even not get into conversations in the hall with people, because I didn't want to get into the situation where I even knew someone well enough that they would say 'Oh, how was your weekend. What did you do?' I didn't even want those things to come up. Because I didn't want to lie either, I didn't want to get into lying. I was trying to avoid the double life that lots of people have."

Justin had learned, three years earlier, that he had been exposed to HIV. In the winter of 1989, fatigued and afraid that he wouldn't be able to carry his spring teaching load, Justin decided to go on disability. The formal procedure was quick and painless, but for Justin it pointed out how distant he was from the rest of the faculty. "That's probably when the isolation hurt me most," he recalls. "Looking back on it, I think that if I'd have been friendlier with people, none of that could have hurt -- the bonding and contacts with people, feeling more involved. So, for instance, when I went on disability, I miss nothing. I just never was that involved there." Since leaving the university, Justin does some consulting work out of his home, and has been in generally good health. "I still go over to school now and then. Just as finals were going on, I ran into one of the faculty, and he said, 'Oh, how's your grading going on finals?'" Justin paused while telling this story, and shrugged his shoulders. "And that was probably -- in all the years I was there -- the toughest question I've ever had. I put me on the spot, since I would have to acknowledge my situation. I made one of my usual, neutral comments: 'Well, this is a busy time of the year -- how are yours going?' I just put it back on him. So he didn't even know I was on disability -- it's a full year I've been gone. That's how invisible I was. He hadn't seen me for a year, and didn't think anything of it."

In most organizations, one's work performance is inseparable from one's participation in the social life of the office. Most jobs require one to manage a network of relationships -- clients, peers, bosses, suppliers, support staff, and the like -- and place a premium on the individual's ability to develop these relationships. Whether or not the organization formally acknowledges it, professionals are routinely rewarded, directly or indirectly, for their social competence.

By withdrawing from the social life of the office, gay professional sometimes compromise their ability to function effectively. Especially in organizations that emphasized social interaction, some of the men feared that this would have negative consequences for their careers. A San Francisco architect found himself unable to socialize with the others in his office, which he described as small, friendly, and "family-oriented." He worried that his restraint might be breeding resentment. "I think that's something that probably bothers them," he says. "I'm not warm, friendly, slap each other on the backs, go out for a couple of beers and chit-chat. I ask a question, get an answer, and go on and do my job. Get in, get out. So I'm not real warm and friendly around them, which I think bothers them."

A Houston man in his late 20s expected this to be a problem as he moved ahead in his career. At the time of our interview, Brent was the supervisor of records management in a large Houston company. His personal demeanor was reserved and formal, and he scrupulously avoided all social involvement with co-workers, skipping even the usual lunches and cocktail hours. While this "strictly business" manner seemed to serve him well in his present position, he worried that it would ultimately limit his mobility within the company. "It's an entrepreneurial, good old boy type company, and I don't fit into that category -- one that's going to do deals over drinks and entertain Arabs, or that sort of thing. I'm talking about the company, the big picture. I'm not the good old boy that you would need to be to go all the way to the top. Within my group, and the level that I'm at and the next level, I'll be okay, but beyond that, when we get to senior senior executive management, I won't." I asked Brent if this was a function of the people who worked at the upper levels, or the nature of the work itself. "As I see the nature of that type of work, there's a lot of interaction with straight people. I can do it in a very serious 'business' sort of way without any problems, but a lot of deals are done in a social environment. That's the nature of the job and the type of people that you have to interact with." In a few years, Brent expects he'll be looking for a new job.

Some men felt they had already bumped into the "glass ceiling" imposed by their social withdrawal. Greg, a Philadelphia architect, felt that this accounted in part for his inability to "fit in" with the others in his construction company.

Though his co-workers were generally a tight-knit group, Greg had been careful to reveal almost nothing about his own personal life. "I think that's the problem when you withhold these kinds of very personal feelings in your relationships with people. It's a great handicap, I think. People tend to think that you're uninteresting, that you don't have a personal life." Greg admits that he didn't like most of his co-workers, which only encouraged his reluctance to become part of the office social environment. Still, he wonders if his aloofness -- his hesitation to discuss even the most mundane aspects of his life outside the office -- was one of the reasons he was fired, shortly before our interview. "I didn't associate with these people very much, except at the office. I was kind of a loner there."

Not all of the men felt they were missing out on the social opportunities in the workplace, however. Some had little desire to spend more time with co-workers they considered uninteresting. Some considered themselves anti-social or private "by nature", and saw no reason to force themselves to change. Some felt it was sufficient to build a small, intimate network of contacts, keeping the rest of office at arm's length.

Mitch, a New York estates lawyer, explained that he preferred to focus his attentions on a small number of co-workers with whom he had become especially close. "There's a core group of people with whom I feel I can discuss what's going on in my life," Mitch explained. "The people with whom I deal most frequently, including my secretary and the other people in my department, know what my social situation is. So if something is going on in my life that's impacting the way I'm working, then it's fine." While a select group of his associates know that Mitch is gay, he prefers to avoid the issue with most of the others. "If I felt there was nobody at work that I could walk into their office and talk to, that would be a problem. But that's not the case. And I don't feel that I need to find support in my work, at the workplace."

A Washington lawyer echoed this sentiment. Even if he were to be more open about his sexuality, Roger suspects that he would quickly limit his contact to the same small number of people. I asked him to imagine a situation in which he

suddenly came out to all of his co-workers -- by publishing his memoirs, for example. Would his relationship with co-workers be any different?

There would be certain people among that group, that large group of people, that I would select as the friends with whom I was going to be intimate. My experience is that most people have maybe five or six very close friends, but no more. A lot of people *know* a lot of people who know a lot about them, but there's only so much intimacy that you need or can develop in the world. And that just seems to keep happening. So even if I had a workplace like you've described, I'd still gravitate toward the people I trusted as friends, and those would be the ones that I'd be intimate with on a daily basis.

Several of the men made some version of this argument, in their efforts to rationalize their social withdrawal. "As a human matter, I think you just need a certain amount of intimacy, a certain number of friends," Roger explained. "I know I have to make a certain amount of contact in order to feel like I'm human, to feel that I'm connecting up with the rest of the race, and that I'm OK with myself." Though he doesn't want to come out at work -- the hypothetical memoir left him visibly shaken -- Roger already feels he's met his quota of intimacy.

Some of the men explained that it was just their "nature" to be private, and didn't welcome any further intrusions from co-workers. "It doesn't bother me that people don't know that I'm gay," a New York manager insisted, complaining that he's eager to avoid most after-hours socializing. "There's not anything that elaborate that I'd like to take my boyfriend to -- I don't want to go to the football games myself." Duane, the Houston president of an oil exploration company, felt the same way. "I don't need to be socializing more with people at work. I need to have balance anyway. It's just like I don't particularly need for my parents to know more of the details of my private life than they know; it's *mine*. Privacy has a function, it seems to me." For Duane, coming out seemed to promise a string of unwanted discussions about a situation that he considered too personal for the office. "That may seem a little defensive, but I feel like I've got an equilibrium that I'm comfortable with."

### *Social ambiguity*

When one avoids the subject of one's sexuality, it's often difficult to know what others assume it to be. Men who carefully avoided direct references to their sexuality often found themselves awash in ambiguous situations, wondering if -- but never knowing for sure -- their sexuality was being addressed indirectly. The coded, oblique nature of many encounters left the avoider at a loss, unable to make sense of what was happening around him.

The difficulty derives from our need to make sense of the environment, and to understand the behavior of those around us. As "attribution theorists" have noted, we tend to interpret behavior in terms of its origins or causes, and routinely make assumptions about the motives and knowledge-states of others (see Heider, 1958). These attributions are the ground on which we make base our understanding of others, and on which we make decisions about how to respond. An avoidance strategy derails this process by depriving the actor of key information about others. By denying himself the opportunity to communicate his understanding of the situation -- and to have his understanding confirmed or disconfirmed by those around him -- the avoider ensures a state of social ambiguity.

This problem was most apparent in the comments gay men make about the other men and women in the office. When asked what co-workers knew about his sexuality, the avoider was often at a loss. A psychiatrist in suburban Maryland gave a typical reply:

I don't know what they think. . . . Even when everybody else is in couples, I'm usually there by myself. For the most part, it's not that friends don't see me out with a woman, it's that they don't see me out with *anybody*. So I don't think they quite know what to think. They see me do everything by myself, so I don't know what they think. I suspect it's crossed their minds, but it's not like they see me out with men all the time.

Jim, a Philadelphia consultant, found himself in a similar situation:

I know the scoop on most everyone there, so you might think that they know the scoop on me. But one's not sure. They may know that I'm not in a relationship with a woman, except that I don't talk about it at work. Of course, maybe they ask other people, "Oh what's Jim doing?" But I don't know that for sure.

Both men confessed that they had insufficient evidence to second-guess their co-workers. Even when they thought about it for several moments, the men often

failed to recall a single incident or crystallizing moment in which a boss or co-worker had shown their hand.

Some of the men found this especially puzzling, given the abundance of evidence they had made available. They found it almost inconceivable that co-workers hadn't noticed -- it's so *obvious*, they said. Yet co-workers had done nothing to suggest they had noticed, which made it impossible to say for sure. The marketing manager of a Houston mall felt this way about his family, when asked if they know about his sexuality:

Although I'm certain that they do . . . I'm certain that they all do. They've got to be really dumb if they don't. I'm certain my brother and sister know because they have friends -- 25 years in Dallas, I knew everyone in the entire city, and people just talk, people blab -- so if you lead an open lifestyle, word gets back. We all have a lot of mutual friends. They've never been bothered by it enough to ask me about it, so apparently it's no big deal. I would think . . . I would *hope* that they knew about it, but I've never said "Hey, we need to talk."

Some of the men were puzzled by the apparent non-response of co-workers. A school teacher in New Jersey gave a similar answer when asked about Fran, one of the other teachers:

I would assume they know. . . . It's strange. I've been with my lover now for going on 12 years and people, they just accept the fact that he's a roommate. No one has ever questioned it. People in this school have never questioned it. People like my principal or someone will call the house and he'll answer the phone. And they just don't react to it. So, my feeling is that they have to know. You can't be 40 years old and not married and still be straight. Most of them know, I would imagine. It's never been talked about. Nothing's ever -- nothing's in the open.

Joel cited his involvement in gay and AIDS activism, but didn't know how his business partners might have interpreted these activities. I asked him to imagine a situation in which someone asked his co-workers "What do you know about Joel's sexuality?" "I don't know what they'd say," Joel began. "They might say 'We don't know, but he does support all these gay causes.' And they might say, 'I notice that he has his friendliest conversations with men, as opposed to women.'" Joel also thought that they might recall the lengthy letter he wrote to the Bishop in San Francisco, supporting the ordination of lesbian and gay priests. Still, he had no way of knowing if they recalled, or had even noticed, any of these things.



These ambiguities were most glaring when the men tried to make sense of their co-workers' behavior. They avoided explicit discussions of their own sexuality, but found themselves in situations in which they thought it had been implied or insinuated. This sort of situation was typical for Chuck, a Wall Street trader, who assured me that the other traders know he's gay. When I asked him to describe a conversation in which that had been made clear, he thought for a moment:

I think it's even more subtle than that. There's a good friend of mine there, and whenever the subject of dating girls comes up -- he's always talking about the girls he's after, or I can just tell when everybody would make a joking reference to say that I should be interested in this girl, there are just knowing nods, knowing looks; it's just generally understood and it's not a problem. As far as them knowing, that's a big difference. I guess if I went in and said "I definitely am gay, just wanted you all to know that," perhaps the feeling would be different.

A New Jersey dentist described a similar kind of tacit, but unverifiable, understanding:

After a couple of years in this job, people assumed I was gay because my lover called me every day, and I never dated women -- you know, all the signs were there. And I even had a couple of people ask me if I was gay. So they assumed I was, and then I showed up [to a company party] with this woman. I don't know if the looks implied "We know you're gay, why are you bothering with this", or "We thought we had you all figured out and now we're not sure what your preference is." I just felt it was uncomfortable, so I stopped it. I wasn't sure.

Neither of the men knows quite where he stands with co-workers, and the non-verbal evidence seems sketchy at best.

Sometimes these ambiguities led to moments of misunderstanding or paranoid confusion. The credit manager for a Philadelphia energy company recalled a situation in which he felt certain that others were talking about his sexuality, a fear no doubt exacerbated by his own reluctance to address the issue:

One of the guys in my company was getting married. I'm single and so is one other guy, but everyone else is married. So the controller said, "Well, Mike, it looks like you're the only one who's single now." I was kind of outside the office when I heard this, and Michael said "No, Dave is." And somebody said something and everyone laughed. I didn't hear what was said; I'm kind of glad I didn't. I walked into the room two minutes later.

Though he can't be sure, Dave feels certain that the comment was about his sexuality. Grey, the marketing manager for a Houston mall, recalled an even more

elaborate misunderstanding. Several years ago, his mall was in the process of redesigning its logo:

We had this sample "G", a big "G" for the ice rink, and it was just a sign, a prototype of the letter. And so I took it and put on my door. This girl who I know just walked by and said "What does the 'G' stand for? Oh, *Grey*?" And later that day, that same day -- I had just put it up -- and my friend Scott, who's a graphic designer, had an appointment with me, and said "God, what's that 'G' on your door?" And I go "Well, it's for *Grey*," and he goes "God, that's so funny -- I couldn't figure out what it was for. I thought maybe . . . you know what some people might think." And I thought "Oh my god, how funny!" Don't you know they're all walking by going "Well, it says G for gay." I ripped it down and put it in my drawer, and then I thought back to the way that woman had asked "What does that stand for?" And I thought, "Hmmm, a lot of times I don't get these puns. I can be real creative, but I can also be kind of dense."

Like Chuck, Grey admitted that the incident wouldn't have bothered him if his own sexuality were clearly established at work.

The ambiguity was most acute when homosexuality was -- or seemed to be -- the subject at hand. When gay subjects of people were being discussed, the men often wondered if the conversation was being held for their benefit, or in what ways it was being censored. Dan, the director of a psychiatric clinic in Houston, recalled a puzzling incident in which one of the local school administrators had asked him for help. The woman had called Dan aside and told him, "off the record" that she had a friend who had recently learned that he was infected with HIV. She wanted to be sure that her friend was cared for, and asked Dan to recommend a good doctor. Dan's first reaction was to wonder "'Why is she asking *me* all this?' I was getting real paranoid but I kept cool, and said 'Well, this is not my area, but I'll find out for you.' I honestly didn't know much about that, so I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to find out." Looking back, he isn't sure how to interpret the incident. "In a sense I think she was trying to tell me something about herself. You know, 'Hey we're all in this together, even though we're not talking about it.'"

Many of the men pointed to exchanges like these, which they assume were intended to convey understanding or support for their sexuality without explicitly raising the issue. Glen, the general counsel for a large Houston firm, recalled an incident in which he believed the company president made such a gesture:

About a year ago, we were having sort of a summit conference on an acquisition that we were considering, and it was late in the day. There were four or five of us in Bob's [the president's] office. We had all these New York Investment bankers on the phone, and we hung up from that. Something was said about "gay," and Bob said something like "Well of course that has a different meaning now than it did then." I don't even remember how the word came up. And there was just the slightest hesitation or embarrassment on his part and maybe someone else's. I just sensed something in the room -- that may have been coming from me. But I sensed the slightest recognition and recovery from it, that maybe they shouldn't have said that.

The incident itself was unimportant, but it underscored Glen's uncertainty about his reputation in the company. Jeff, a Philadelphia financial analyst, recalled a similar incident involving two of his co-workers:

Very shortly after I started working there, [a co-worker] tried to set up a date between me and his sister-in-law, and I expressed no interest whatsoever. A few months later, Chuck and I were just talking with Jack, and they talked about somebody Chuck had hired who didn't just work out. And Chuck said, "Yeah, he and the two homosexuals are the only ones who didn't work." And Jack said, "Well the problem wasn't that they were homosexual -- that's okay -- the problem was that they were stupid." And I felt like that was a directed comment, though I may have been wrong.

Because Jeff has never discussed his sexuality in a direct fashion, he's unsure of his ability to interpret oblique comments like these.

Many of the men pointed to specific situations that were difficult to interpret, given their inability to make judgments about co-workers' beliefs or intentions. Often this exacerbated their attempts to judge their own success in the workplace, even to plan their careers. Kirk, a Philadelphia doctor, ran into this dilemma while interviewing for a teaching position at a Seattle hospital. He felt confident that his sexuality wouldn't be a problem at the hospital, but was unable to get a more definitive answer. "I certainly wouldn't have been coy about it, had they asked me. I just felt uncomfortable bringing it up in an interview with people whom I was meeting for the first time." He ultimately took a job in Philadelphia, and has since been open with the staff about his sexuality. He knew, for example, that he would ultimately be invited to social functions with the staff, and wanted to assess "how comfortable I would be" bringing his lover Jeffrey. Still, he felt hamstrung during the interview process, and regrets that he couldn't have been more open. "It

wasn't the sort of thing I brought up in job interviews, though I wanted to get a handle on what their attitude would be."

The inability to gather such information has become a serious problem for Bill, a California park ranger. Bill is 31, handsome, and lives about an hour north of the Golden Gate Bridge. As the District Naturalist, he hosts guests through the park, conducts nature walks and educational programs, and runs the visitor center. Though he works with a small, intimate group of park employees, he manages to avoid the subject of his own sexuality. He isn't sure, in fact, what the staff assumes:

I'm sure it's crossed all of their minds, but I really don't have a good handle on how other people think in that regard, or whether they do form concrete conclusions, or whether they just leave it unresolved. I can't think of anything that I've done that would give them unapproachable evidence that I am gay, or anything to the contrary either.

Frequently, Bill finds himself in situations that are difficult to interpret. "Some of the women joke with me, and flirt," he explains, though he thinks the sexual banter may be no more than a joke. "They go further with me than they would with other men, because they know that it's not serious. That's the impression I get."

When I asked about his boss, he felt more certain:

I'm sure there's no doubt in my boss' mind, based on what he says about other people. He speculates about other people's personal lives, and even sort of talks to me sometimes. But he's almost surgically carefully not to bring up anything about me personally -- which is kind of interesting -- so I'm sure he avoids that because he's sensitive to the fact that I'm gay.

On the whole, Bill thinks that his sexuality is "not a problem," and manages to avoid the subject with his co-workers.

Bill realizes, however, that this has made it difficult for him to plan his career. He knows that in the long run, if he continues to work for the park service, it will be virtually impossible to use an avoidance strategy:

The biggest dilemma for me is that most national parks are in real remote areas that I wouldn't want to work in. And my boyfriend sells real estate in Southern Marin, grew up there, his whole family and all his business connections are there. So I don't know what's going to happen when I get to the point where I can't go any further in my career advancement. He's not going to want to follow me to Montana or something. So unless I can come out of the closet, it wouldn't work anyway. You're living in Yellowstone or one of these places where the Park Service is the whole

community, and there's no way to screening of your private life anymore. Everyone knows what everyone else is doing. There wouldn't be any hiding anymore; it would definitely be out in the open.

Bill knows that he will eventually be forced to choose between his career ambitions and his desire to avert a direct acknowledgement of his sexuality. But given his current attempts to avoid the subject, he finds it difficult to judge the possible consequences of such a strategy change:

I suppose if I were out, I could better judge the long-term effects that it might have on my career. I could discuss it openly with anybody who I thought could help, like my boss. You know, "What's it going to be like for me in the park service, being gay and being open about it?"

At the time of our interview, he remained unsure about what the future might hold.

I noted above that most organizations are redolent in sexuality, that sexual texts and subtexts find their way into countless interpersonal situations. In light of the foregoing, this statement must now be qualified. In fact, sexuality often *can* be kept out of the office, personal topics can be avoided in the workplace, and professional acquaintances can be kept in the dark about one's "personal business." As my participants taught me, the realms *can* be separated, the secrets kept. But only at a price.

Because avoidance strategies depend heavily on the complicity of the audience, however, it is often difficult to assess their success. Has the avoider made his sexuality seem irrelevant and unimportant in the workplace? Do others think of him in asexual terms? Or do co-workers know that he's gay, even as they politely dance around the subject? Few of the men could say for sure.

Often, the answer was less important than the fact that the question usually went unasked. Men who used avoidance strategies were often comfortable with the idea that co-workers might know about their sexuality. In many cases, especially among those who also used integration strategies, it mattered only that they weren't forced explicitly, unambiguously to address the issue. The success of their strategy lay not in the conclusions their co-workers might or might not draw, but in the freedom it gave them from dwelling on a sensitive subject. As one

executive explained, an avoidance strategy means that he "just won't have to think about it."

But by endeavoring not to think or do anything about it, the avoider assumes a passive role in the construction of his identity. He relinquishes control of the symbolic exchange by claiming to abstain from it. Others are permitted to draw their conclusions in an informational vacuum. Whatever prejudice, ignorance, or approval they may harbor, they are given no invitation to express it.

The result is a spiral of silence on the subject of homosexuality.<sup>3</sup> In many organizations, there seemed to be no forum for the discussion of gay lives, organizations, or culture; no one talked about homosexuality, which only seemed to reinforce its status as a topic that was off-limits. For example, I asked all of the men if homosexual topics or people were ever discussed at work. Most admitted that with the possible exception of AIDS, homosexuality just wasn't discussed at work. They weren't sure what others thought about the subject because no one had ever raised the issue.<sup>4</sup>

It is much easier to capitulate to the spiral than to break it. Russ, a Philadelphia insurance executive, found himself in a typical situation. When I asked him what his co-workers thought about homosexuality, he confessed that he wasn't sure:

Maybe I'm not giving these people a lot of credit. I just assume that they don't have any contact with the gay world -- but here one of them had a stepbrother die of AIDS. I mean, they *may* all have sons or daughters who are gay, I just don't know. But my perception is that they don't have any contact at all with the gay community, that they don't even think about it.

Because he uses an avoidance strategy, Russ may never know his co-workers' opinions about the subject. The spiral perpetuates itself; as the silence becomes more conspicuous, the penalties for breaking it seem only to increase.

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<sup>3</sup> The term is Noelle-Neumann's (1974). See also Hodges & Hutter (1974) on the subject of social withdrawal and ambiguity.

<sup>4</sup> The situation also encourages somewhat circular reasoning about the level of tolerance in one's organization. Gary, a director of tax administration for a utility, gave this explanation of his reasons for believing that co-workers don't know he's gay. "I think that some would feel uncomfortable if they knew," he explained, "and I don't sense that discomfort. So I assume they don't know." The circularity of Gary's argument is facilitated by the fact that no one, at work, actually talks about the issue.

## CHAPTER SIX

### INTEGRATING

"Coming out" is often made to seem like an endpoint, a destination at which the luckiest of travelers ultimately, exhaustedly, arrive. The burdens one has shouldered, the various dodges and deceptions that were required along the way, can now be set aside. "Some day I'll come out," one man told me, "and all this nonsense will be behind me. It just may take me awhile to get there." Even if they never expect to reach that point themselves, gay professionals often seem to believe that "coming out" would relieve the need to be self-conscious in the management of sexual identity.

Yet there are at least as many ways of claiming and shaping a gay identity as there are of trying to evade one. The gay man who reveals his homosexuality must monitor not only his co-workers' awareness of it, but their means of comprehending it and responding to it as well. His responsibilities shift from the management of visibility to the management of consequences.<sup>1</sup>

Almost half of my 70 participants used integration strategies in the workplace (see Figure 6.1).<sup>2</sup> A third (30%) of the men used integration strategies exclusively, making their sexuality known across the board, to bosses, peers, clients, and others. A smaller group (16%) segregated their audiences, using an integration strategy with some while avoiding with others. As a group, men using integration strategies ranged in age from 22 to 61, and tended to be slightly older than those using other strategies. Most (78%) worked for companies, while a few worked for not-for-profit (6%) or educational institutions (6%). Three (9%) were self-employed.

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<sup>1</sup> Goffman (1963) makes an analogous distinction between the discreditable and the discredited. The discreditable must manage "information about the failing," while the discredited, whose secret has been revealed, manages the "tension generated during social contacts" (p. 42).

<sup>2</sup> Contrast this figure to the 38% of Out/Look readers who claimed they were "out" to all of their co-workers (Fall, 1990:86).

## The basic moves

Integration strategies involve the expression of an authentic sexuality -- the one an individual "really believes" -- and the men who use them are known by co-workers to be gay. In most cases, they could pinpoint the encounter in which an integration strategy was first used. Because heterosexuality is presumed in most organizations, a gay professional must "come out" if he wants co-workers to realize that the expected, heterosexual model doesn't apply. Consequently, integration strategies begin with some form of self-disclosure.<sup>3</sup>

There are countless ways of "coming out," and the form of the disclosure serves to "frame" the identity for a particular audience. When coming out to family and friends, for example, lesbians and gay men typically position their disclosure as part of a larger effort to bring family members together, to share more of their lives, or to be more honest. A New York advertising executive described the way he lead up to his revelation:

I told my parents that I wanted us to be closer, that I sensed this wall between us. "I'm an adult," I told them, "and we need to move on to the next phase of our relationship." That's when I dropped the bomb. "And part of being closer means talking about my private life in a way that we haven't before, in a more honest and intimate way." Then I told them.

By the time he disclosed his homosexuality, he had already established the terms of the discourse. Self-disclosure was placed in the context of "intimacy" or "family," rather than sexuality per se. Other men preceded their disclosure with a talk about honesty, or about the need for financial assistance with medical bills (due to HIV illness), framing the disclosure as a matter of ethics and integrity or compassion and parental nurturance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I should emphasize that I don't use the word "integrate" in the psychological sense of an "integrated person" (See Adam, 1978:89-93, on "escaping identity"). I use the term to describe a *social* identity that incorporates and acknowledges a gay person's psychic or subjective sense of his or her own sexuality.

<sup>4</sup> Glen, the general counsel for a large Houston company, was clear about the different interpretations each of these "frames" would invite. I asked him to imagine a hypothetical situation, on in which his memoirs had just been published, so that "your co-workers would all know, all at once, that you're gay." He explained that the disclosure itself would be one thing, but that this particular *means* of disclosure would add "another dimension." By actively making a declaration about his sexuality, Glen felt his co-workers would perceive him as being "political" or "aggressive." "If they just learned for sure that I was gay because their brother-in-law told them or something, I don't think there would be much difference. They'd say "Oh yeah, we knew that



With no exceptions, the men used one of these "frames" when revealing their sexuality to co-workers. "You can't just *say it*," one man told me, explaining his inability "to find any good reason to come out at work. I just can't find any need for it." Indeed, the idea of disclosing one's sexuality without some sort of framing device is considered absurd. As Weston (1991) observed, "the idea of going up to someone and bluntly stating, 'Hi, I'm gay,' without further elaboration elicits laughter from a lesbian or gay audience" (p. 67). To come out in the "right way," one must supply a reason or justification, and this provides the context for the disclosure.<sup>5</sup>

By framing and controlling these disclosures, the men tried to establish the terms in which their new identity would be interpreted, thus launching the particular integration strategy they planned to use. Perhaps this is why Carter, the sales manager for a Houston hotel, was upset when a co-worker robbed him of the opportunity. He recalled a particular situation in which a female client had expressed a romantic interest in him. She asked another woman in Carter's office if he were available, and was told "not to waste your time with Carter. He's gay." Carter wasn't upset that the woman knew about his sexuality, but was furious that he hadn't been permitted to handle the disclosure in a more professional way. "I get mad about that sometimes," he explained. "I mean, *I* should be the one to tell them. Other people in the office think I'm real open about it, so they don't think there's a problem with saying something. It's hard for me to make them

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already" or "I always kind of presumed that, he's kind of an aloof jerk anyway, so it doesn't make any difference" or "He's a nice guy so it doesn't make any difference." But if I *told* them I think the emphasis would be more on the reason for my doing that than the essence of the message. And they wouldn't feel comfortable with that."

<sup>5</sup> In his study of gay fathers, Bozett (1980) found that some sort of "external" event was usually necessary to motivate a personal disclosure. "No matter how much the gay father wants to make known his 'real self,' this desire alone is usually insufficient to provoke direct disclosure. In most instances he needs an external, social condition to serve as a motivating force and as a vehicle for his disclosure. In this way disclosure of the gay identity becomes part of a larger topic, rather than being the topic itself" (p. 176). Only one of Bozett's 18 participants disclosed to his child directly, without being prompted by an external event (and even then it was under circumstances that ensured the child didn't hear him). The conditions that most commonly served as a vehicle for disclosure were the parents' divorce and the development of a committed relationship with another man. "Had these social events not occurred, the fathers would not have disclosed, or at least they would not have disclosed when they did" (p. 176-7).

understand that I'd like to be in control." He wanted his client to regard him as a professional, not as a romantic object, and preferred to frame his disclosure in that way.

### *Minimizing the impact*

Some men allow co-workers to know they're gay, but make a concerted effort to downplay the evidence or visibility of that identity. Their sexuality ceases to be a secret, though expressions of it remain muted, oblique or infrequent.

Efforts to limit visibility are common among those managing some sort of social stigma, as they accustom themselves to potentially hostile environments. Sarason (1973) pointed out that minorities, fearing visibility and the potential for retaliation, may try to contain recognition of their presence, as did Jews at Yale for many years. In her study of professional women, Kanter (1977) observed a similar strategy among women who tried to become "socially invisible" by leaving as few signs as possible of their presence:

This strategy characterizes women who try to minimize their sexual attributes so as to blend unnoticeably into the predominant male culture, perhaps by adopting "mannish dress," as in reports by other investigators. Or it can include avoidance of public events and occasions for performance -- staying away from meetings, working at home rather than in the office, keeping silent at meetings. Several of the saleswomen deliberately took such a "low profile," unlike male peers who tended to seize every opportunity to make themselves noticed (p. 220).

Like gay men using a minimizing strategy, these women weren't trying to disguise their gender *per se*, but were trying to minimize its visibility, and the "unusualness" it bestowed on them in male-dominated environments.

Among gay men, efforts to minimize visibility often begin with self-disclosure. To lessen the impact of a personal revelation, the men frequently "came out" in indirect or oblique means. Co-workers were often allowed to stumble onto non-verbal or situational evidence, for example, or to decode some subtlety in a verbal message, but were denied more concrete, verbal cues. A New York lawyer described his relationship with his secretary, and the reasons he's certain "she knows":

I assume that she must know my deal because of the demography of my phone calls. So overwhelmingly male, so overwhelmingly cute and perky

and *that age* -- all with weird names, as she puts it, like Trevor and Thad and Trey. She says "Don't you have any friends with real names?"

Similarly, a Philadelphia lawyer felt certain that his secretary considers him gay:

My secretary knows I'm gay, because she takes all my phone calls from all my male friends and talks to them -- and *knows* some of them because they have business relationships with [the company]. She knows I'm gay. We talk about restaurants and I'm her "cultural coordinator." I don't think I'd even have to tell her I'm gay. I don't think she'd be surprised at all.

Yet neither he nor his secretary have ever used the word "gay." They seem to understand one another, but their tacit bargain was achieved through indirect means. "But I'm certain she knows," he explained. "We talk about so many things, like the occurrence of AIDS among professional men, because she read an article on it."

Some men assume that their sexual identity is conveyed by their mere status as unmarried, middle-aged men. A legal researcher at a large Philadelphia company explained that he occasionally talks about his work as a "buddy" at Action AIDS, a direct service organization. Other than that, however, he tends to avoid personal conversations:

All I can say is that anyone who's a 41-year-old man, who's never been married, and who's never talked about a social life with women, has got to be an anomaly. And the only explanation is that he's gay -- or that he has an old war wound. Or is asexual.

Similarly, a New York airline executive assumes that his co-workers have him figured out:

I walk around with the assumption that people think I'm gay. I'm 55 years old and single and living in New York and go to Lincoln Center twice a week. Given what I like to do, what interests me -- and everyone who knows me knows -- I assume they just have to put two and two together. They have to be *stupid* if they haven't figured it out.

By being forthright about the details of his social schedule, he assumes that co-workers will deduce that he's gay. Yet he avoids more direct disclosures, and routinely avoids conversations about his personal life.

While using this strategy, gay men often find themselves in situations in which an unspoken understanding is thought to exist. Allusions and oblique signs of acknowledgement take the place of explicit conversations. Mitch, a New York estates lawyer, described his relationship with one of the other associates in the

firm. The two men had traveled together and worked closely on a number of important cases, and Mitch assumed that his associate knew he was gay. Until last summer, though, he didn't give it much thought:

He wanted to rent a place in the Hamptons for his wife and daughter, and I said "Well, if you want to rent my house for a week and a half, I'll rent it to you." The only problem was that the house was full of photos of me and Jay [his lover], and other things -- there was no way you could stay in this house and *not* understand that this person was gay and lived here with his lover. He knew that I owned this house with a friend named Jay. So they went out the next day and spent 10 days in the house. When they came back, they couldn't have been more cordial.

Still, Mitch's sexuality was acknowledged only in an oblique and non-verbal way, until Jay and Mitch broke up. At this point, Mitch's strategy shifted. It became obvious that he was upset due to "relationship problems," and "it became obvious that the relationship was with a man." When Mitch finally spoke to his associate, he admitted that the relationship with Jay had ended. In their first explicit conversation about the subject, the associate tried to be supportive, asked questions, shared condolences.

The business manager for a high school in suburban Pennsylvania has a similar understanding with the people in his office. For years, Les has worked with the same office staff, and he feels certain that they perceive Julio, the man with whom he lives, to be his lover:

I'm sure the boss knows where I'm at with Julio, because the first time you go on a vacation with your roommate, fine, but I go someplace with my roommate every year. And I talk too much. If your roommate was 60 there would be much less thought about it. But when your roommate's 36 -- I'm sure that he knows, I'm sure my whole office knows.

However, when I asked Les if he were satisfied with this level of disclosure, he admitted:

No, I'd love to shout it from the treetops. It really is irritating that I have to be careful. But in a way I have -- if I didn't have Julio, I'd probably be more frustrated because no one would know where I'm at. But indirectly, by having a lover and doing things with him, I've stated where I'm at.

Because his lover furnishes a symbol of his sexuality -- one that permits him to "let others know where he's at" without an explicit verbal disclosure -- Les feels that his sexuality is understood at work. Though he'd like to be more direct with co-

workers, he fears that this would be unwelcome. His compromise is an oblique disclosure, and a minimizing strategy.

Like Les, men who use a minimizing strategy are often motivated by the fear that to do otherwise will overstep the boundaries of tolerance in their organization. A Wall Street broker sensed these limits when his boss asked him to dinner, encouraging him to "bring a date." But, because he uses a minimizing strategy at work, he was reluctant to include his lover, John:

I guess if I felt completely comfortable, that everybody knew and didn't have a problem with it, then it would be easier. Recently I went out to dinner with my boss. Normally people bring their wives or girlfriends, and he said "bring a date if you'd like." I thought about bringing John, but I didn't really feel comfortable doing that. . . . I just didn't know how well that would mix and go over. If it were explicit and I spoke with everyone, I would never feel that way.

Likewise, Mitch assured me that while his co-workers are aware of his sexuality, they may not be prepared to deal with an explicit display of it:

It's fine if you're gay, but I don't know that anybody would think it so great if I brought my lover to the firm dinner dance. As long as it doesn't interfere on a day-to-day basis, or make them feel uncomfortable, it's fine.

These comments suggest that the men aren't concerned with sexuality per se, but with the means by which it is displayed to others. Being gay is acceptable, they suggest, while being "openly gay" may encourage resistance. "I'm sure that that's the attitude," Mitch concluded, "except among a few very special people. I'm sure it would create problems if I suddenly started wearing ACT-UP pins."

Craig, a senior executive at American Express, found himself in a similar situation. "I've never spoken to anyone about sexuality, but I assume they all know," he told me. His lover, Roland, frequently calls him at work, and his co-workers know that he lives with another man. "There are people who've called me on the weekends, or at 7 in the morning, and gotten Roland. I assume they at least *suspect*. I don't think it's common for someone my age to have a roommate, or a guest at 7 in the morning." Still, he was reluctant to be more explicit about his relationship with Roland. I asked Craig to imagine a hypothetical situation, one in which all the gay people in his company, including himself, suddenly turned green. If there were any doubts about his sexuality, I explained, they would suddenly be erased:

At first it would be disruptive, the cause for a lot of talk. Sooner or later things would settle down to normal. "See, I told you so," and "Gee, I never would have guessed it about him." It would be interesting to see who else is gay; I have no earthly idea. I think many people are accepting, as long as they're not confronted with it. It's very easy for them that way.

Though Craig feels no need to actively *hide* the extant evidence of his sexuality -- in particular, his live-in relationship with Roland -- he doesn't feel comfortable taking the next step. A more overt disclosure, something akin to a change in skin tone, was a frightening prospect.

Even men who were clearly associated with gay causes or activities sometimes found themselves most comfortable with a minimizing strategy. Ray, who co-founded the lesbian-gay employees' association at a major West Coast clothing manufacturer, describes a similar situation. Though he's openly gay at work and is known for his work with the employee association, he still finds himself reluctant to be more overt:

One thing about [the company] is that while I feel everybody is pretty accepting overall of working with a gay or lesbian person, they don't want to hear anything more about it. It's a more subtle form of discrimination. It's OK to be gay, but don't bring your partner to me, and introduce him to my wife, and have me confront that in my personal life.

Though the company has an aggressive non-discrimination policy, and is subject to city ordinances that protect lesbian and gay people, the social barriers remain. "Nobody's going to come up and ask 'Who's that picture of that man on your bulletin board?' They'll only ask the people who have children and have families and have a conventional relationship. People don't feel comfortable asking 'How is your *partner* doing?' People just don't approach it."

Some men suspect that these "boundaries" are internal, a sign of their own internalized homophobia. George, a senior executive at Continental Airlines, feels that these fears have encouraged him to use a minimizing strategy at work. George's personal manner is kind and solicitous. During our interview he insisted on preparing an elegant snack, refilling my glass every few minutes. "I love being a host," he explained, talking about his days at a flight attendant with American Airlines. "That's probably why I went into the airline business." At work, he explains that he has a "pretty open" relationship with the other executives:

I work with a 22-year-old guy from Eastern, who's your classic stereotype of an Eastern City Manager. . . . he's gruff, macho, unpolished, unrefined, roll the sleeves up. I remember the first time I gave a double entendre to him. I answered the phone at the office very early one morning, and he said "George, it's good to hear your voice." And I said "Yeah, it's better than Anita Bryant with a glass of orange juice." He laughed so hard it wasn't even funny, and since then we've had this sort of subconscious humor, where we'll say and do things that are absolutely hysterical. But we've never come out and confronted the issue.

George feels certain that the rest of the staff considers him gay. His personal manner is flamboyant, and he recognizes that "my voice and walk give me away." He has also learned that his sexuality was discussed long ago by the committee that hired him, and feels that it is acknowledged in a number of subtle and indirect ways. His romantic activities, for example, are recognized by several of the women in his office:

Somebody I had a crush on called the office the other day. The secretary walked up with a message while I was talking to Rosalie and Jenet, and they both were teasing me -- it was a male name, obviously. With those two, it's known, and I know they talk about me when I'm not there. But I've really never used "the word."

Despite these signs of acceptance, George doesn't want to push the issue any further. "The acknowledgement issue is a big step for me," he explained. "It's one thing for it to be understood, but it's another to go into open dialogue." Consequently, George didn't invite anyone to the Christmas party, and doesn't plan to take anyone next year. "It depends," he told me. "If I had an extremely serious relationship I definitely would take him, but if I were just dating somebody casually, I probably wouldn't. I'm not real comfortable having people experience that interaction. It's probably a little bit of self-consciousness when it comes to the work environment."

I asked George how he would respond if someone else used *the word*, explicitly asking him about his sexuality. He shuddered, and explained that he hopes that won't ever happen. "Just imagine," I told him, "that someone asks, 'George, are you gay?'":

It would be very hard to answer, at some level. I would never answer it "no," because I think that it's obvious -- that's one way I'm not nuts, I think it's pretty obvious to people that I'm gay. Another way to answer is -- I've used this response once or twice -- is to say "Well, that's a very interesting

question and I could answer it, but I'm curious why you asked it." You could turn the question back onto the other person, but then you damage so much rapport. Is it worth damaging all that rapport to avoid acknowledging the obvious?

I asked George, finally, why he felt it was necessary to downplay his sexuality at all. If his peers already knew about it, why avoid the subject, or the word?

"Speaking from a purely idealistic perspective," he answered, "I'd love to feel so comfortable that I could say it to anybody, but I don't think that will ever happen. I'm really responding to their fears, and until that changes, I'll have to position it a certain way to be socially acceptable."

Whether these boundaries are the product of internalized fear or the discomfort of others, they placed strict limits on the expression of gay sexuality. Like those using an avoidance strategy, these men were reluctant to say much about their sexuality and steered clear of situations or conversations in which such frankness would be expected. Unlike men using avoidance strategies, however, they weren't afraid that their secret would get out, only that it would become too visible, too conspicuous, too irrefutable. Rather than avoid the issue altogether, they tried to keep it within bounds.

Roy, a senior executive at Time-Warner, began to find these boundaries restrictive. After several years with the company, he had begun to contemplate a change in strategy. "I think virtually everyone has figured it out by now," he explained:

My approach has been to gently send out enough signals over time -- I wasn't terribly outgoing on this issue initially, but as I got to feel comfortable and safe there professionally, I've been sending out more and more signals that I'm gay . . . So at this point I would say the exception is my boss' scatterbrained secretary. I think everybody else has sort of figured it out.

When I asked what sort of signals he meant, he described a recent example:

My colleagues know that I went to Key West a couple of Christmases in a row. I have a share in Fire Island. I vacation in Provincetown. We're all in a small group of offices together, and if you hear my phone calls you know that there are a lot of men calling. Some of them call quite regularly, not a lot of women. That sort of thing. And then this week, I probably did my most "outish" thing yet. I was invited to a screening of the new Quincy Jones movie, so I brought a guy that I've been seeing. It wasn't a major social function; it was more informal. But a lot of my



business colleagues were there and they saw me there with a guy, whose name they may have recognized from phone calls.

Roy thinks that he's sending out "signals" to facilitate a transition. He has used a minimizing strategy for several years, but now finds it limiting. After years of trying to downplay his sexuality, he wants to make a change:

I would just as soon that it got discussed in some sort of an offhand way. I'm looking for an opportunity to sort of make a comment that explicitly put on record the fact that I'm gay, so that everyone will understand that it's perfectly OK to refer to it without feeling like we have to avoid this conversation. There have been a few occasions, not a lot, where we would be in a meeting and someone from outside would make some comment, and I would notice one of my colleagues artfully trying to move the conversation, just trying to avoid an embarrassing train of thought. I would rather that everyone was comfortable enough that it's just not a big deal.

Roy wants to make his sexuality more of a comfortable issue, to dispense with the need for caution and restraint. At the moment, he fears that it's a "sensitive" issue at work, and he wants to desensitize it, to make it more of an everyday matter. He wants, in other words, to use a normalizing strategy.

### *Normalizing the abnormal*

It isn't always easy to "fit in" when co-workers consider you unusual in some way. Men and women who are viewed as exceptions to the norm -- whether the norm is related to sexuality, national origin, race, or job performance -- are set apart for special attention and scrutiny. They become the *gay* engineer, the *foreign* boss, the *black* accountant, the *top-ranked* salesman. Their unusualness ensures that they stand out.

When visible, gay men often find themselves in this situation. "It's difficult to be just 'one of the gang,'" one man told me. "Everyone gets hung up about the fact that you're gay, and that's all they can think about." Another man explained, that "if there were a few more gay people around here, I wouldn't be quite as conspicuous. But for now, I'm like the Lone Ranger." In part, the heightened attention results from the relative scarcity of gay people in most large organizations. Even if we *were* all visible, the numerical distribution of

homosexuals and heterosexuals would probably remain uneven,<sup>6</sup> and as Kanter (1977) has pointed out, "any situation where proportions of significant types of people are highly skewed can produce similar themes and processes" (p. 207). Among these processes is the tendency for those in "the many" to regard those in "the few" as novelties, according them greater attention and scrutiny simply by virtue of their infrequency in the mix (see Kanter and Stein, 1980)

But beyond our status as a numerical minority, gay people stand out because they have come to signify so many of our embattled cultural values. As Weeks (1977) has noted, our "attitudes to homosexuality are inextricably linked to wider questions: of the function of the family, the evolution of gender roles, and of attitudes to sexuality generally" (p. 2). In most white-collar organizations, the presence of an openly lesbian engineer or gay doctor seems to raise "issues" beyond their immediate work performance, ensuring that their behavior will be scrutinized for the transcendent meanings and significance it is thought to carry. In these settings, gay professionals can easily become a symbol of entire discourses, tokens of an entire category of people, and representatives of a debate they may care little about.

Wary of this heightened attention, some gay men adopt a strategy intended to make homosexuality seem more mundane and familiar. To "normalize" a gay identity, they sought to downplay the differences between gay and straight lives, emphasizing instead their many commonalities. Often, this meant that information about an unfamiliar sexuality was presented in ways that made it comprehensible in familiar, heterosexual terms. The initial disclosure, in particular, was an opportunity to define gayness as being "normal".

"Lovers" and "boyfriends" were the categories most often invoked during these disclosures. Kirk, an obstetrician at a large Philadelphia hospital, has lived with his lover, Jeff, for a number of years. He used an avoidance strategy during his first few years at the hospital, but became increasingly dissatisfied with this approach. He wanted to share more of his personal life with his friends on the hospital staff,

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to suggest, of course, that these are the only two available categories, nor even that they are particularly adequate ways of representing whatever sexual diversity exists behind these reductive labels.

but wasn't sure how to accomplish this in a casual, non-dramatic way. An opportunity finally came, at the hospital's Christmas party. "I spoke to the divisional chairman, and told him that I was going to bring someone," Kirk recalls. "He said, 'That's fine, I'd be more worried if you didn't bring someone.'" With the groundwork laid, Kirk invited Jeff to the party:

That was the first time I'd actually mentioned Jeff to anybody. Then I spoke to the department chairman's wife, and told her -- she's just closer to my age -- and she said "Are you bringing anyone?" And I said, "Yes, but you have to ask your husband if he's going to be too nervous." And she said, "Don't worry, he lived in San Francisco, he can deal with it."

As it turned out, Jeff was warmly received. He was introduced as Kirk's "spouse," which gave the other doctors and nurses a framework for making sense of him. "Although I hate myself for saying it," Kirk added, "it helped that Jeffrey doesn't fit any of the stereotypes. If it came to that, it wouldn't have made any difference, but it just wasn't an issue." Several years later, Kirk and Jeff are known as an established couple, an identity that supplies a "normal" interpretation of Kirk's homosexuality. The hospital had another party a few weeks before our interview, and the chairman asked if Kirk would be bringing Jeffrey again. "He couldn't come, because he was on call, but the chairman said 'Well, tell him we're sorry he couldn't make it.'"

Rob, a music instructor at a private school in the Philadelphia suburbs, managed his disclosure in a similar fashion. For 40 years, Rob has lived with Albert, and frequently brings him to performances and recitals. "They've all known Albert for so many years," Rob explains. "They always knew him, because I always brought him to everything." Consequently, for Rob, self-disclosure as a gay person is equivalent to the disclosure of his "marital" status. "Everyone knows, without me having a badge on my chest, that I'm gay. They know that I live with another man and have for 40 years. And that's true of the executive director, too, who knows Albert and likes him very much."

When meeting new people, Rob usually reveals himself through a discussion of Albert. For example, he recalled a situation in which he revealed himself to a fellow instructor:

Last year, there was a young woman who taught violin, and we wanted to do a performance of the Ravel trio. It was obvious to me that she was a

lesbian -- I mean, *good lord* -- and we started to work on the piece. And she said to me, "You'll have to come out to my house, Kathy and I would love to have you." And I said, "Well, you'll have to come out to our house, Albert and I would love to have you." So it was that kind of mutual thing.

In this case, Rob and Kathy disclosed themselves to one another via a conversation about their significant others. Rob packages his gayness in the familiar, expected form of monogamy. "If a teacher came up to me and asked if I were gay, I'd say 'yes, of course.' But it just has never come up."

Other men staged informal, domestic events designed to convey the same message. A claims negotiator for a Philadelphia insurance company recalls a dinner party he threw, designed to reveal the "normalcy" of his home life. He invited four of his co-workers to his home, which he shares with a lover. He gave them a tour of the house, the shared bedroom, and their shared automobile. "Rob and I bought a Jeep, and I used to talk about the fact that it was his idea, that it was too expensive and we can't afford it, and that kind of stuff. I talk like I have a spouse." His peers apparently got the message, and his relationship has become a subject of informal office banter. "Sometimes one of them will make a joke. Rob's a plumber, and maybe they'll say 'Well, you gonna get your pipes cleaned out tonight?' Something like that."

Other men situated their revelations in the context of discussions about political beliefs, civil rights, or work activities, all of which tap into established social models. Al, a Philadelphia attorney, unintentionally revealed his homosexuality when his boss caught him mailing a letter to a gay organization:

I put an envelope with a dues check in my out bin, to Philadelphia Attorneys for Human Rights. PAHR is the gay attorneys group, and my boss noticed it. He's liberal and involved, and he was involved in other human rights organizations. He said, "Tell me about this organization, what is it?" I wasn't going to lie and tell him it was something else. So we talked about it.

Their conversation, in which Al explicitly discussed his sexuality, was framed as a dialogue about civil rights and the role attorneys play in their defense. Likewise, a Philadelphia realtor revealed his sexuality in his initial interview with the company, by mentioning his interest in developing a gay clientele:

When I interviewed with her, I told her that advertising in the *Philadelphia Gay News* was something I was going to think about, and she was

completely open to it. I just suggested that I'd start advertising in the *PGN*. "I'm going to do an ad just for me, promoting myself, as a realtor for [the company]. Hopefully I'll tap into a market there and get some business." I'd sold to several gay men before . . . There's a market out there for me, and I just kind of have to tap into it.

His boss was receptive to the idea, as a marketing tactic, and thus learned about his sexuality through this "professional" route.

AIDS activism is a growing concern for many gay professionals, and supplies a role that many assume will make their sexuality apparent. "Everyone knows that I work for Action AIDS," according to a high school instructor in Philadelphia. "And while that's not really a gay organization, in the eyes of most people it is -- like it or not, AIDS is still a gay men's disease for many, many people. You work with a gay organization, you're a gay man." A Houston lawyer conveyed his interest in AIDS activism in even more personal terms. "I identified myself as being in a vulnerable minority," he explained, recalling a conversation with the CEO of his company. "We were talking about AIDS in another context, and I admitted that it was a personal concern, because I considered myself more susceptible than the average person, because I belong to an affected minority." In all of these examples, the men positioned their sexuality as one aspect of a larger concern with civil rights or AIDS activism.

Some men tapped into more than one of these frameworks. Jerry, a Wall Street trader in his early 30s, recalls several contexts in which his sexuality has become widely known on the trading floor. Several years ago, before anyone knew that he is gay, Jerry took part in a business trip with Kathy, Ed, and several of his co-workers:

On the way to France, Michèle was the steward on the plane, and that's where we met. I invited him back with us and strung him along for the weekend. I came back to my suite and told Kathy, and she said "But you don't know him." Kathy didn't know I was gay at the time; we hadn't talked about it. That next week, I was making fun of Ed for something, and Ed says to everyone there, "You know how when you go in a plane, you try to pick up the stewardess? Well Jerry picked up the steward." Kathy hadn't realized that this was what happened.

Jerry and Michèle became attached, and eventually bought an apartment together in the Wall Street area. Especially at the beginning of their romance, Jerry's

relationship with Michèle was the primary vehicle through which his sexuality was acknowledged and discussed:

I took Michèle out to dinner with a broker and a couple of traders from another firm a long time ago, pretty much near the beginning of our relationship. And then I heard afterwards that the traders from the other firm -- competitors of mine -- were making fun of me for my relationship and my attitude towards Michèle.

The teasing was apparently in good fun, though, and Jerry took it in stride. "They were criticizing me for being googly-eyed," he explained, "for looking at Michèle during the dinner."

Years later, discussions of Jerry's relationship with Michèle seem to have shifted from a "romantic" to a "domestic" framework. This became especially clear in the fall of 1990, when he and Michèle arranged to have a child with a surrogate mother. Suddenly, their incipient "family" became the subject of discussion among the other traders. They expected the baby that February, and found co-workers eager to talk about their role as fathers, the trials of parenthood, the preparations for the baby's arrival. "Two friends came over today," Jerry recalled, "and they both have children, so a lot of talk today was baby talk. In that kind of atmosphere, you can't help but think of us as a couple." As their relationship has evolved, Jerry and Michèle have become a facsimile of a married-couple-with-children, a model that their friends find comfortable and familiar.

In recent years, Jerry has become also become identified with AIDS activism in New York. As co-founder of the AIDS Walk, Jerry's name has become closely associated with the organization, which supplies another framework in which his sexuality is understood and normalized. As he notes:

With the AIDS Walk, my name ends up getting plastered all over the city, because the posters have the names of the major sponsors. So everyone in the world -- you have to live in a cave not to see the AIDS Walk ads. So I do get a lot of people who come up to me and say "I saw your name in the press."

As these various events suggest, Jerry's sexual identity has been normalized by its association with activities that are familiar to non-gay people. Over the years, his sexuality was contextualized, respectively, by romantic, domestic, and political activities that made it seem less remarkable or unusual.

The end of a romance can also furnish an opportunity for gay men to share a familiar experience with their heterosexual peers. Sean, a New York public relations executive, recalls the end of his relationship with a former lover, and several ensuing conversations in which co-workers commiserated with him. "Jay was a major part of my life," Sean recalls, and had been the reason he original came out to his co-workers. When talking about his weekend activities and plans, "Jay automatically cropped up. If I hadn't been dating someone, they probably wouldn't have known I'm gay."

Several months later, when he and Jay broke up, his co-workers took the opportunity to share their own experiences with him. It was a bonding experience, Sean recalls, and gave him an opportunity to talk about private matters in a sympathetic, supportive context. One of the women in his office, for example, seized the opportunity to broach the subject:

She said, "I know you're going through a really tough time right now. This may be completely none of my business, and if it is you can just tell me it's none of my business and I'll forget it, but I was wondering if the reason you're having a tough time right now is that you're breaking up with Jay." And I said, "Yes, that is the reason I'm in so much trouble right now." And she said, "I'm really sorry. Jay's a really nice guy."

The language, gestures, and etiquette of sympathy were familiar to his co-workers, who might otherwise have been reluctant to raise a thorny subject. In retrospect, he looks back on the incident as a positive experience. "I've been given a unique opportunity," Sean recalls. "I have something that other people don't understand, and that I can teach them about. And through my teaching, hopefully, they will gain a more positive image of it, as opposed to getting a negative or stereotypical image of it."

In their efforts to normalize a marginal identity, gay men often found themselves in the role of an instructor, attempting to educate or inform peers about the subject. They emphasized the more familiar, mundane aspects of gay lives, highlighting the ways they parallel non-gay lives. For example, they described their frustration with being single, with buying a car or a house, or with parents and in-laws -- experiences with which their straight co-workers could identify. Differences were smoothed over and downplayed, and disclosures were inserted in a subtle, unobtrusive way. At other times, they found themselves debunking some

of the more absurd myths about homosexual activities. The human resources trainer for a Washington hospital recalls an episode with one of his peers:

My administrative assistant, Diane, asked me "Who's the girl?" She didn't ask the question directly. She said "Patrick, I've been meaning to ask you . . ." We were talking about my ex-boyfriend, and I said "You want to know who's the girl, John or me, right?" And she said "Yeah, how'd you know?" And I said "I get asked that occasionally."

Her question spawned a conversation, which gave Patrick an opportunity to fill a few of the gaps in her understanding. "She had decided, at first, that I was the girl, and then she decided he was the girl because he's much more nurturing. I tried to explain that it's not necessarily that way."<sup>7</sup>

Barry, a New York lawyer, was fond of enlightening his co-workers with carefully-placed comments and rebukes. Shortly after joining a large Manhattan firm, for example, Barry began dating a man named Leonard. When talking about "Len" at work, he routinely found that his associates assumed he was dating a woman named "Lynn." One time, he recalled, "one of the summer associates said 'Well, what's she like?' And one of the other associates said, 'You mean, what's *he* like?'" After a quick "oops," the associate recovered and the conversation moved on. On other occasions, when co-workers asked about his marital status, Barry offered a quick rectification. "I'd say 'We've got to get some things straight here.' And they'd say 'What?' And I'd say, 'Well, I'm not married, but if you know a nice guy, I'd like to be.' Something like that." Even during recruiting lunches, Barry tried to make his identity seem commonplace:

I would take the summer associates out to lunch, and we'd go to Lutèce [an expensive restaurant]. It was a big deal, a three-hour lunch, and they'd always get smashola drunk. . . . And they'd always talk about it, with maybe three exceptions out of a hundred that I took there. They'd say "You know, you're the first gay person I've ever known." And I'd say, "No, I'm not, I'm just the first one you know about."

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<sup>7</sup> In many of the interviews, the men couldn't help but chuckle at the ignorance of their straight peers. As a New York advertising executive recalled, "When one woman heard I was gay, she looked so started, and mumbled something about me not wearing leather. 'It never would have occurred to me,' she says, 'since you don't look the part.' She actually thought gay people wore S and M gear to the mall." A Houston accountant shared a similar story, ending with "It's unbelievable what some straight people think -- and what they don't notice."



By casually inserting these "corrections," Barry hoped to make his disclosures as unobtrusive as possible, even as he made his point. Even when these lessons began to get out of hand, Barry persisted in trying to normalize the situation.

"Some guys would try to be smart," he recalls:

They were trying to say things that would make me say, "That's none of your business." And I would never do that. So they'd ask, "Well, how many people have you slept with?" And I'd just tell them. Anything they would ask, I'd answer straight out, in a totally matter-of-fact way. That shut them up after awhile.

Presumably, they shut up because homosexuality had lost some of its exotic character; it had been normalized by Barry's efforts to make the subject more mundane.

With Barry, these "lessons" often took the form of a joke or upbraiding designed to desensitize the subject. Keith, a Houston records management executive, used a similar tactic with one of his co-workers:

When she first suspected that I was gay, she had found out and I knew that she was questioning it, so I told her a joke. I said, "Do you know what's worse than a black man with a switchblade?" And she said, "I don't know." So I said, "A fag with a chipped tooth." And she kind of stood there for a second, she didn't know what to say. Then she started to laugh, and she told me later, "Keith, you just took me aback, I didn't know what to think then." Then after we started talking and stuff, she told me, "I used to think that all gays were sick, that they were perverts, that they were demented, that they were evil people." And she said, "I'm really glad I got to meet you, because you've helped change my opinion of that. I realize now that when I was growing up and started liking little boys, that you did, too."

Sean described a similar use of humor:

It makes it everyday, it makes it run of the mill. When they see that it's not an issue for me, that I don't have a problem with it, hopefully they don't have a problem with it and it becomes more of an everyday situation for them. They can joke about it and make little asides, jests. I like that, because it means that I'm getting somewhere with them, and they're able to see things in a different way than before. Hopefully, when they have children, that will be passed on.

In some offices, this sort of sexual banter was an important part of the daily routine. "Sometimes we just sit around the lunch table and dish," according to a Philadelphia realtor. "A lot of rude jokes go back and forth, which is par for the course." Some of these jokes were about gay people, which he hoped would make the subject "less of a big deal."

Carter, the sales manager for a large Houston hotel, found that his sense of humor was his primary means of making co-workers comfortable with his sexuality. His office is populated largely by women, with whom he's established a casual, chiding rapport. For example, he describes a typical lunch hour:

We just have a blast. I show them pictures from a trip, with all guys. They critique the different guys, and whoever I'm seeing will come to the office and I'll introduce him around, stuff like that. We go cruise at the mall, and they'll go "Do you think *he* is?" and I'll go "Yeah," or "No." And then they'll go "Do you think they like me or like you?" Stuff like that. It's just a real open thing.

By encouraging others to see his sexuality as a joking matter -- a matter of flirtations, vacations, and fleeting attractions -- Carter has tried to normalize it for his co-workers.

Often, however, Carter's jokes operate on another level; the subtext of these jokes suggests a more complicated strategy. Most of Carter's jests are attuned to traditional stereotypes about gay people, and reinforce his own status as someone who doesn't fit them. By expressing distaste for "effeminate" men and "dykey" women, Carter normalized his own identity by assuring co-workers that he's a "real man," not at all like the men and women he routinely makes fun of. As he explains, "I make fun of being gay sometimes. I'll say, 'Look at those faggots,' or something like that, to get it out in the open." In particular, he recalls a number of office conversations that took place after Houston's gay pride parade in June:

Some of our people, some office people, were on TV dressed up like girls, and the other people in the office thought that was kind of revolting. Laura was saying, "Did you see Charles dressed up like a girl? Isn't that disgusting?" or something like that. Just typical straight people. There's not any real understanding, in a lot of ways, though there's not really any anti-gay sentiment.

Sensing this hostility to effeminate behavior, Carter joins chorus of criticism. "I can't get too nelly around them," he explains, "and I think 90% of the negative comments come from somebody acting like a girl, or being effeminate." For example, he recalls an incident in which his own identity was questioned:

Certain things set them off. I told one of the girls that I was going to swim, and told her about my new Speedo. And three of them immediately said "Carter, don't you wear Speedos. I hate those, they're so queer." And I said "I swim, you gotta swim with them." "Yeah, but it looks so bad."

Carter's efforts to normalize his identity are thus tied to traditional stereotypes about gender-appropriate behavior. He emphasizes his own masculinity, appealing to the familiar and expected, downplaying those behaviors that might be seen as "faggy" or effeminate.

At the same time, Carter resists his co-workers' stereotypical thinking, and tries to expose them to lesbians and gay men whose behavior doesn't match these expectations. When I asked if he would like to see his office change in any way, Carter explained that it would be nice to work with a few more gay people, especially those who would didn't fit the stereotype. "It would be nice to have a cute gay girl so they could also see another aspect of gay life, that there can be a normal looking girl that's not wearing comfortable shoes." In short, Carter uses several different tactics in his efforts to normalize gay identity. By joking about the subject, he makes it part of the office raillery, a subject that co-workers aren't reluctant to acknowledge and discuss. By playing into traditional gender expectations, he assures them that he doesn't fit the expected stereotype, that he's a "normal" man despite his unconventional sexuality. And by trying to expose co-workers by counter-stereotypical lesbians and gay men, he hopes to throw the stereotypes themselves into question. Whatever one thinks of his tactics, Carter's ultimate goal -- like that of all men using a normalizing strategy -- is to make homosexuality the functional equivalent of heterosexuality, to make it "normal" in the eyes of his peers. His efforts to educate and acclimate co-workers were all aimed, ultimately, at the creation of equal opportunity.

This emphasis on equality helps account for the alertness of some gay men to matters of balance and fairness. In their efforts to normalize a gay identity, the men sometimes tried to match their own revelations to the displays made by heterosexual peers. Jack, the VP of human resources for a large Washington company, explained that "after putting up with the frustration, for years, of having my male drinking buddies talk so openly about what was going on sexually -- by god, now that I'm open, I'm going to discuss my life as openly as they discuss their lives." To do that, Jack tried to balance his own revelations against those made by co-workers. "Sometimes drawing that line is very hazy, but I have to be careful that I stop short of deliberately rubbing peoples noses in my sexuality when I don't

have to. It's not an easy line to walk." Drawing the line was easiest, he explained, when he could find analogs in the behavior of his co-workers; if *they* revealed something about their sexual lives, he took the cue and offered a comparable disclosure. A New York consultant used a similar tactic to monitor his own self-disclosure. "Once I know people fairly well, I'll say 'so-and-so and I did this.' They know I have a house in Virginia, and I take friends there; it becomes a part of conversation just like they talk about their husbands or wives."

At times, the desire for balance gave office conversations a mechanical, give-and-take quality. A Vice President at Chase Manhattan Bank recalled a conversation in which his own disclosure was directly motivated by the revelations of his co-worker. While having dinner with one of the bank's summer interns, he decided it was appropriate to raise the issue:

He kept saying "There's something I have to tell you, something real important that I have to tell you. But I'd feel better if you told me something about you first, because I feel that you're kind of holding things in." So I thought, he's a little younger, maybe he's trying to tell me that he's gay and wants me to tell him that I am first. So I did. I said "OK, well, I'm gay." He told me that he thought I was before I said that, but that wasn't what he had to tell me. As it turned out, it was something totally wacko.

In this case, a personal revelation was motivated by an equivalent revelation (or at least the anticipation of one).

Patrick, a human resources trainer for a Washington hospital, was emphatic in his efforts to achieve parity in the discussion of personal issues. In conversations with his co-workers, he tries to match each of their revelations with one of his own. For example, he notes that "people talk about their families and their kids constantly, and I chime in with, 'We did this' and 'That's *my* family,' or I'll mention gay friends who want to adopt, if we're talking about kids." The result, according to Patrick, is a fairly equitable situation:

I think my relationship with people at work is probably much the same as a straight person; where I'm reserved, a lot of people are reserved. . . . I don't really care that much who Diane's date was with, so I don't go into details and say "He's really cute and his name is Mark, and he's five foot six inches." I don't do that. But if Diane says something about her dates, I counter with something about mine. Sometimes when people are telling me a lot about their lives, I think, "Well, it's my turn to talk now."

Thinking back, Patrick recalls a particular episode in which these disclosures were matched one for one:

I remember telling people that John and I broke up. "How was your weekend?" was the question, and I said "John and I broke up." The first time we broke up it was really funny because my boss had just broken up with her girlfriend and my friend Nancy had just broken up with her husband. So that all happened in one meeting.

To normalize his own identity, Patrick thinks that it's important to achieve balance. He achieves this by monitoring the ebb and flow of information between co-workers, ensuring that his own identity receives equal time and attention.

The pursuit of reciprocity sometimes meant that gay co-workers were reigned in, or that special privileges had to be denied. Roland, the creative director for a Manhattan advertising agency, hired a gay assistant several years ago. Today, he fears that their relationship has made it difficult for him to normalize his own identity. In particular, his assistant has grown accustomed to frequent personal disclosures, far beyond those made by others in the office:

I think he takes advantage of the fact that we're both gay, like we're soul sisters or something. I mean, he's very flamboyant in the office, and I personally find that out of character in the office. He's making a lot of conversation about his boyfriend and this and that, and I don't see any need to slap it around in front of everyone's face. But he gets that way, and then he manipulates me; he'll come in crying because something happened last night. And it's like -- I'm *not* his best friend. I don't want him to come in and take advantage of me that way. If you want to talk about it, we can talk about it after work or some other time.

Because other people don't assume the same level of intimacy, Roland is uncomfortable with his assistant's level of disclosure. "No one else comes in complaining about their personal problems," he explains, which makes him reluctant to encourage them from his assistant. His fears that his own efforts to normalize gay identity will be disrupted by a gay co-worker who demands special liberties and allowances.

Normalizing strategies are thus keyed to the attainment of equality; by educating their peers and highlighting the familiar aspects of an unfamiliar identity, gay men attempt to transform exotic identities into more commonplace and acceptable ones. By situating self-disclosure in everyday narrative contexts --

family, romance, civil rights -- they point out connections between marginal and mainstream identities. And by locating sexual displays in familiar contexts, they tried to make them more immediately comprehensible to the audience, and to control the terms of the discourse. Normalizing strategies succeed when they highlight the commonalities that exist between gay and straight lives, showing others a familiar path for thinking about and responding to the former.

### *Dignifying the unusual*

A marginal identity isn't always a lamentable status; one can be unusual in both positive and negative ways. Criminals and the handicapped are thought to be outside the "mainstream," but so are child prodigies, beauty queens, and Nobel Prize winners. Though each is unusual or abnormal, their special status has no inherent consequence or meaning. It must be *assigned* meaning.

For some gay men, this observation makes a normalization strategy seem absurd. "Of course I'm different," a New York advertising executive noted. "My life has been shaped, in a profound way, by my sexuality. I've learned to keep secrets, to be self-conscious about my appearance, to fret about the possibility of exposure. I've learned what it means to feel different in some way, and those experiences changed me. In some ways, I'm not just 'one of the guys.'" The issue, he suggests, is not the mere fact of his difference, but the particular uses that could be made of it. By managing the process by which others made sense of his sexuality, he hoped to make his gayness seem special and attractive. "My sexuality is more positive than negative," according to Sean, a New York public relations executive, "because that's how I've used it. I can see that it could easily be a negative, if you let it be. I personally don't let anything become a negative. I make lemonade."

In this way, dignifying strategies assert control over the terms in which a marginal identity will be understood, and they differ in this respect from other integration strategies. Efforts to minimize or normalize gay identity largely accept the work environment as is; rather than change the existing definitions of normalcy, they downplay a marginal identity (by minimizing evidence of it), or repackage it in the wrappings of a mainstream identity (in an effort to normalize it,

emphasizing the ways in which it resembles the familiar and expected). By contrast, dignifying strategies attempt to *preserve* marginality, while ennobling the particular ways it sets gay people apart from their heterosexual peers.

Sometimes, gay identity was dignified by the special access or insight it was presumed to give its proprietor. In situations that demanded an understanding of gay lives and lifestyles, for example, gay professionals became authority figures, set apart by their superior knowledge of the subject at hand. For example, Sean found that at work his identity gave him a sort of expert status on matters of concern to the gay community. When working on a publicity project for a new AIDS medication, he encouraged co-workers to take advantage of his special expertise. "I was always deferred to in those situations," he explained. "My opinion was always sought, and they pretty well took what I said as gospel." As far as his boss was concerned,

My being gay was a boon for the company, because I knew how to deal with situations that came up on the AIDS drug we were working on, and was able to explain a lot of things they didn't understand. I thought of problems that there was absolutely no way a person who wasn't gay could possibly conceive of, like the ways we might be slighting certain sub-groups.

Likewise, Peter, a Philadelphia realtor, found that his sexuality made him the office expert on gay clients. His boss, a heterosexual woman, trusted his judgment on the choice of advertising and publicity vehicles to reach this market. She agreed to let him run a self-promoting ad in the local gay paper, and was supportive of his interest in serving that particular niche.

Sometimes these skills were associated with homosexuality only indirectly. By virtue of their marginal status, gay people were often assumed to cultivate other, transferable talents that could be put to use in the workplace. As Peter explained, he was also a highly individualistic, creative person, which was useful in his business. "There are a lot of gay people in real estate, especially in residential," he explained. "I guess it's because in homosexuality there tends to be a lot of individuality, and this is a very individualized business." Similarly, a Philadelphia consultant thought that gay people had an edge in his business, a consulting firm that specializes in "competitive intelligence." Often, his line of work required him

to go undercover, turning up competitive information that would benefit his clients:

I think that for what we do, being gay is an advantage. I genuinely believe that in corporate spying -- whether it's called competitive intelligence or whatever -- being sensitive to context, to what is said and how it's being said, is a really important part of the business. Being gay, in this culture, means being sensitive to context.

Not surprisingly, when hiring junior associates, he made an effort to hire other gay people.

John, an Episcopalian priest in Philadelphia, felt that his sexuality was critical to his work. John began his career as the associate pastor at a large, fashionable congregation in the Philadelphia suburbs. Most of the parishioners were married, which seemed to limit the likelihood of a promotion for John. As he recalls, the head pastor even told him that "I can't give you the job because we really need a married man in that job.' And that's as close as he came to saying that he would have been embarrassed to have a gay man. He used the word 'single'. He wouldn't use the word 'gay'."

Several years later, John was invited to interview for a position with a congregation in the downtown area. He met with the vestry, who told him that the congregation was a diverse group of single, elderly, and gay people. They were worried that the church hadn't managed to attract many married couples, and wanted to know how John, as pastor, would tackle that problem. John helped them see that "the common theme in the congregation is 'singleness'." He urged them not to worry about courting married people, to take pride in the fact that they made single people feel at home. As a single gay man, he felt he could "model singleness" for the congregation:

In the interview, I said that in many ways, being gay saved my life. I've always been very positive about being gay once I came out, because I really think it's the best thing that ever could have happened to me. I'm looking at all these white faces in the interview, and I said, "I'm like you. I'm an upper-middle class white kid from the suburbs." I'm male, and there's nothing in my background that would have enabled me to make the connection with the oppression of other people if I weren't gay. It helped me make that sense of the world, to some degree, about the way the world really is.



John's singleness, which had been a handicap in the suburbs, was now used to dignify his identity in the urban congregation. In the new parish, John chose not to hide or downplay his experiences as a marginal person. Rather, he tried to dignify them, demonstrating the ways in which marginality was an asset. He made gay identity a selling point.

In all of these examples, marginality was associated with the special skills or access it seemed to promise. Rather than normalize their identities -- by emphasizing their proximity to, and resemblance of, mainstream identities -- the men drew favorable attention to the differences that do exist.

### *Politicizing a marginal status*

Other men, faced with these inequities, adopted a more confrontational stance. Rather than celebrate the differences between gay and straight identities by demonstrating the specialness of the former, they viewed them as inequities that must be redressed. They scolded co-workers for their displays of prejudice and homophobia, and challenged their assumptions about homosexuality. These were the men who brought lawsuits against the company, and who aligned themselves with local activist groups. Their stories will be familiar to those who read the gay press.

Some men took a confrontational stance from the moment of disclosure, putting co-workers on notice that they wouldn't tolerate ill treatment. Michael, a Philadelphia consultant, found himself in this situation when his involvement with ACT-UP began to attract attention among his clients. A few months before our interview, he was quoted in a *Philadelphia Gay News* article about drug trials in the local community. A few days later, one of Michael's clients seemed to be behaving oddly:

The following Monday I had a meeting with a client who sort-of didn't want to shake my hand, looked at me strangely all through the meeting, obviously having read the article -- though he didn't say anything about it.

Though Michael can't be certain, he assumes that his client saw the article, and has been cautious ever since when speaking about related issues. Chip, a Houston manager, found himself in a similar situation. As his involvement with ACT-UP grew, he felt the need to alert his boss, Kurt:

I was going to be working with ACT-UP, some demonstrations during the Bush campaign. I had some friends who had AIDS, and I felt it was the thing to do. And my boss said, "Well, you gotta do what you gotta do." . . . I figured the worst thing I could do is have someone come up to him and say, "I saw Chip on the news." So I thought our relationship would be better if I told him directly, to circumvent any of that. And it was. I told him "I don't want you to get blindsided by this, but this is what I'm going to do."

Since then, Chip has continued his involvement with ACT-UP, and is seen by many of his co-workers as an activist. "I try and keep the politics to a minimum," he explains, though he doesn't want to keep his beliefs a secret. "This guy put a note on our computer messaging system that said 'Boycott Roseanne Barr.' So I put down 'I boycott companies that support Jesse Helms,' and said that that includes AT&T and R. J. Reynolds and Phillip Morris. That's the closest I've come to getting political, other than my conversation with Kurt about ACT-UP."

Before long, though, Chip found himself in a situation that he felt demanded a more confrontational approach. Shortly after joining the company, Chip had told several of his co-workers that he's HIV positive; he even asked the company nurse if he should get a flu shot, given the status of his immune system. At the same time, Chip was troubled by persistent allergies and eventually began visiting the company nurse for a monthly allergy shot. The procedure ran smoothly at first, but when he came in for the fourth shot, she called him aside:

She pulled me in back, and said "We don't give shots to HIV positive people." And so I said "Well, why not?" and she said "It's company policy." I asked who was responsible for the policy, and she told me. So I thought: "Do I want to bring this up?" We have a major illness non-discrimination policy, but I didn't want to declare myself.

After thinking it over, Chip eventually confronted the man who wrote the major illness policy, asking for an explanation:

He explained that they didn't have a throw down bed, which is something apparently they use for people who are going into shock. I said you can get that whether you're HIV positive or not, when you're dealing with allergy shots. And he said, "The other thing is, there's some risk to the nurse in getting the shot and there's some risk to the patient." And that kind of made sense to me, so I left and I mentioned it to David, my co-worker, when I got back. And he said, "There's no risk to the nurse if she's doing her job right."

After several more visits to the personnel office, Chip finally determined the reasoning behind the company policy. The company's legal consultants "had recommended against it because they didn't think it was advisable to be shooting antigens into somebody who has an immune deficiency. That made sense to me, but it doesn't apply to me because I have a battery of doctors, and I have my immune system counted all the time and it's normal. I'm HIV positive, but asymptomatic." Eventually, the company relented, and agreed to give Chip the monthly allergy shots. But in the process of confronting them on the issue, Chip realized that he had earned a reputation as a somewhat cantankerous, demanding person. Though HIV status doesn't necessarily communicate anything about sexual orientation, Chip assumes that his co-workers "either know, or at least wonder" if he's gay. In either case, though, they know he's not afraid to demand that his rights be respected.

Ray, a financial analyst at a clothing manufacturer in San Francisco, found himself in a similar situation. He was new to the area when he joined the company in 1980:

My previous job was with a real estate investment company that was very conservative, and I didn't share anything there. I was extremely closeted. The minute that I got into [the company] I felt that I didn't need to hide anything and so I never have. In the city I have never had to hide anything, to friends or co-workers or anything.

At first, though, Ray felt it necessary to hold back. He used an avoidance strategy and tried to dodge any discussion of his sexuality. "I don't think I took a real proactive role in enlightening people around my being gay. . . . In the past, I tended to just brush over it, and to not really get into it with people. I wouldn't *deny* it, if people were talking to me about it, but I wasn't an advocate for being gay in the company." Gradually, though, he found himself socializing with gay co-workers, learning to assert his sexuality. "That's the direction I'm heading. I need to acknowledge that every time that I don't say anything, or try to skirt over the issues, I've missed an opportunity to help somebody confront the issue." Today, Ray feels that "my diversity needs to be as present as other people's diversity."

Ray's choice of strategy became an issue, two years ago, when he co-founded the company's lesbian and gay employees association. One of his co-workers, a

woman named Cynthia, had tried to enroll her partner for company benefits, and was turned down. Angered by this incident, she and Ray decided to form an employees' association. The company had organizations for African-American, Hispanic and Asian employees, and tended to look favorably on community activism. By July of 1990, Ray and Cynthia were committed to the project; the only question, for Ray, was how to get started. They considered sending private invitations to co-workers they knew were gay, but quickly decided that this approach would set a bad precedent:

We said, we don't want to start out that way. It would be like this clandestine, secret organization . . . So we put fliers out everywhere. On every bulletin board we had a flier with our names on it saying "Come celebrate our diversity, join us for this special lunchtime meeting where we'll discuss forming a lesbian and gay employee group."

Some sixty people showed up for the first meeting, and the association was an instant success. The national papers got wind of it, and before long Ray was thrust into the national spotlight. Today, he attends conferences and grants interviews on behalf of the company, which has been largely supportive of his status as an in-house activist. The company ultimately granted Ray a "community service leave," which allows him to spend half of his company time on gay-related projects. Today, his sexual identity is entirely public, and highly politicized. As co-head of the company's lesbian and gay organization, he continues to challenge the company on matters of gay visibility and employee benefits.

Ray's company was receptive to his efforts, and seems willing to tolerate a certain level of internal agitation. In this respect, it is unusual. While disagreement and dissent are tolerated in most workplaces, they are often limited to particular, adversarial situations, and kept within certain bounds. Professionals are usually expected to "get along," and are rewarded for being good team players. Consequently, it's unusual to find someone who allows his or her identity to become a matter of contention, and there are often penalties for assuming a confrontational stance. Perhaps this is why politicizing strategies were usually motivated by a breakdown of trust, often following a series of contentious episodes, that prompt the individual to abandon all efforts at accommodation. In

most cases, one can identify a final straw that broke the camel's back -- and in many cases, it involved AIDS.

Consider, for example, the situation faced by Mark, a compensation consultant in New York City. His firm is large and well-known, and has about 5,000 employees. Mark joined the compensation division several years ago, and the atmosphere, as he describes it, is fairly hostile:

The firm is extremely homophobic. I only know of one -- no, I guess two gay principals. . . . I know one of the principals quite well and he concurs with me. He's extremely closeted. He was married when he joined the firm, and got a divorce about three years later. He was very careful to not be too visibly friendly with me inside the firm and said that he thought it the kiss of death, as far as career success, to be out. The whole culture is very much directed toward the family and there're lots of homophobic comments and jokes and gesturing, not only internally but also during client contacts.

Under the circumstances, Mark adopted an avoidance strategy, and concentrated on his work. He was quickly promoted, and received a string of sizeable bonuses.

Early in 1986, the situation grew more complicated. Mark's lover had known for several years that he had been exposed to HIV, and his health had gradually begun to fail. Mark had anticipated this situation, and had warned his boss, Marcia, before agreeing to take the job:

The woman who hired me actually was a friend I'd worked with in another firm. Before I went to work there, I told her "Scott's sick. There may come a time -- and who knows how soon -- when I'll have to direct a lot of time and effort to caring for him. I don't want to take this job if that's going to be a problem." And I was told, "Oh, no, don't worry, we've been friends for years, I know all about it. The head of our area is wonderful, she really understands, she wouldn't care, everything will be fine."

By the time Scott grew ill, however, Marcia faced problems of her own. She was in the middle of a complicated pregnancy and had been ordered to bed for the duration. She was also up for principal that year, which placed a tremendous strain on her staff -- especially Mark. With Marcia home in bed, there were only two senior people remaining. "I guess she decided that it wouldn't look good if I was also out of the office."

As Scott required more and more attention, Mark soon found himself in a bind:

When Scott got really sick, I started asking for time off to take care of him. Marcia kept putting me off, saying, "Can't you just get through this project?" "Finish this proposal and then we'll discuss it." She kept putting the issue off, and I kept working until midnight five days in a row, going home in the middle of the day to take care of Scott.

Eventually, the strain became too much for Mark, and shortly before Scott died, he finally lost his temper:

About a week before Scott died I came into the office at 10 o'clock, after having worked until midnight the night before. On my way home I had dropped a draft of a presentation I was doing for Bristol Meyers with Marcia's doorman so she could review it and give me comments. When I was getting ready to leave for work, Scott had an accident, so I had to change the bed and clean up the bedroom and the bathroom . . . So I got to work at 10, and Marcia had the receptionist call her the minute I came in the door. As soon as I reached my office, the phone was ringing. . . . It was Marcia, and she said "How dare you come prancing into the office at 10 o'clock when you've got a major presentation to do for Bristol Meyers on Friday and it looks like shit." And I explained to her what happened and she said "Well I thought I told you two weeks ago if you couldn't take care of Scott without having it impact your work, you would have to put him in the hospital or hire a nurse." And I told her "I told you that I tried having a nurse at home, and it drove Scott crazy. Until he wants one, I'm not going to force one on him. Being independent is really important to him and the deception of his independence is probably part of what's keeping him alive. And I'm not going to interfere with his denial mechanisms." She said that I had better not come into the office late again. And I said, "What would you want me to do, leave him lying in a bed of shit?"

A few weeks later, Scott died on an airplane, on his way to visit his sister. "I couldn't get the day off from work to take him," Mark recalls. "That's my biggest regret, because I wanted to tell him I loved him, one more time, before he died." For Mark, this episode was the last straw. He was determined not to be taken advantage of again.

About six months later, Mark attended a meeting at the gay community center, and heard Larry Kramer make his legendary speech about the need for direct action. The meeting was the beginning of ACT-UP, and "I got involved quite heavily from the very beginning." Mark led several of the early demonstrations, and helped organize the famous "zap" against Burroughs-Wellcome. At work, he ultimately came out in a political way:

I came out on the Phil Donahue show. I had come out to the head of my unit before that, and some of the other senior people in the unit found out when Scott died. I didn't think many people would see the show, because it's on during the day and people are at work. I never watch TV myself, and didn't think anybody would have taped it.

As it turned out, several of Mark's co-workers were sick that day, and saw the show. The Donahue appearance set off a string of events that encouraged Mark to become more visible as a gay person. Shortly after the show aired, he took part in several other public events that quickly found their way back to the company:

We did a demonstration in front of the White House, and at the Third International AIDS Conference in the summer of '87, and my picture was on the cover of the Week in Review section of the *Sunday Times*. A bunch of people came up to me afterwards and asked "Were you on the *Times*?" After those kind of things happened I started doing a lot of work with homelessness and AIDS, and I kept getting quoted in the paper about this or that. It got to the point where there was no sense trying to hide. Pretty much everybody knew.

Since that time, things have been "strained at best." Mark was placed on probation, and was told he would be fired if he didn't tone down the AIDS activism. "I think they've done a lot to encourage me to quit. They've given me minimal raises, haven't given me bonuses. They put me on probation recently for 'doing too much AIDS work on company time' and were monitoring my phone calls and faxes. I was told that I had better not make any more AIDS calls and receive or send any AIDS faxes on company time, or I'd be fired immediately. A whole bunch of things like that."

Mark continues to work for the company, but has since filed a lawsuit. At the time of our interview, his lawyer had advised him not to discuss the details, at least not yet.

### **Consequences**

Gay professionals who use an integration strategy often speak of the ability "to be themselves" at work. Once his sexuality is known, a gay man can interact with co-workers without worrying that his secret will be exposed, and without fabricating stories to keep it hidden. Whether co-workers treat him positively or negatively, the information he gathers about these relationships will be accurate.

The response is often positive. Men who had been socially withdrawn no longer found it necessary to avoid personal questions and social invitations from peers. Men who had little idea how co-workers felt about them suddenly found it easy to gather information about their place in the organization. And men who had disguised themselves as heterosexuals found that co-workers now asked the right questions, or at least didn't make the wrong assumptions. Many described situations in which their revelation brought a sense of greater comfort, support, and interpersonal effectiveness.<sup>8</sup>

"You can take *OutWeek* to the office," a Philadelphia consultant laughed. "People read the *Philadelphia Gay News* at lunch, talk about the guy who delivers the water: 'Isn't he adorable?' Or the Federal Express guy: 'A real hunk.' Or the substitute Postman: 'Real cute.'" John went even further, and described the freedom he now has to express himself:

In practical terms, that means I talk about myself a lot, there's a lot of self-disclosure, in the congregation and meetings. I cry in public places sometimes. I just feel that my goal is to become more and more *myself* in my job. I'm not just a priest, I'm not just my job. It feels really good."

These comments are typical of men who adopted an integration strategy after years of avoiding or counterfeiting an identity. By coming out, gay men often found a solution to the social invalidation, ambiguity, and withdrawal they had experienced while using other strategies.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, when gay men use an integration strategy, they expose themselves to whatever prejudice, confusion, or apprehension their co-workers may

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<sup>8</sup> In their study of Amazon Car Repair, a lesbian-run business, Weston & Roffel (1984) describe some of the same positive social consequences. As one of their participants observed, "You could go in and when you're sitting around having lunch you could talk about your family, you could talk about your lover, you could talk about what you did last night. It's real nice to get that out and share that." Conversations at work led to friendships that carried over into the evenings and weekends. Women went to flea markets together, carpooled to work, cooked dinner for one another, and attended each other's sporting events. Lovers were treated as members of the extended Amazon "family" and welcomed into the shop during business hours" (p. 203). The degree to which professional and personal lives were entwined at Amazon resembles the managerial rank of many companies, in which wives and children become part of an extended company "family."

<sup>9</sup> From a psychological approach, one can identify similar positive effects of self-disclosure. For example, McDonald (1982) found that a positive gay identity was related to self-disclosure, especially when it involved significant non-gay persons. Similarly, Schmitt & Kurdek (1987) found that self-disclosure was associated with low trait anxiety, low worry and rumination, and low depression.



have about homosexuality. With his disclosure, a gay professional moves from the category of discreditable to discredited, and the consequences will depend largely on the environment in which he works. Integration strategies differ in this respect from all others: counterfeiting and avoiding are attempts to *sidestep* these consequences. By posing as a heterosexual, for example, one can feign membership in the dominant group, potentially escaping whatever penalties are meted out to subordinate groups. Or, by avoiding sexuality altogether, one can at least attempt to make it a non-issue, to downplay its significance and potential consequences. The penalties associated with either approach result less from homophobia than from the mechanics of the strategies themselves -- the energy required, the ethical dilemmas posed, the resulting sense of detachment, and so forth.

Integration strategies, by contrast, place a gay man in direct contact with whatever homophobia exists in his organization. The penalties associated with this choice will depend largely on exogenous factors, and the environment in which he finds himself.

### *Employment discrimination*

Tales of prejudicial hiring, firing and compensation practices turn up in a number of places: anecdotal reports in the gay press, survey research, court documents, autobiographical accounts, and the folklore that circulates through vast urban networks of lesbian and gay professionals. Ask *any* lesbian or gay man if they've experienced some form of workplace discrimination, and they'll tell you a story about homophobic bosses, lost promotions, and missed opportunities -- if not their own story, at least one they heard from an entirely reliable source.

If the abundance of survey research is any guide to the magnitude of our collective fears, employment discrimination is the number one concern of lesbian and gay professionals. Depending on the particular method used, these surveys find that one in three gay men believes he's been the victim of workplace discrimination at some point in his life (see Figure 1.1, in the introduction). And given the self-report method on which these surveys rely, the estimates are probably conservative.

It is safe to say, however, that most gay professionals are unfamiliar with these various surveys and reports. More often, they base their assumptions about the prevalence of workplace discrimination on anecdotal accounts or personal experiences. For example, while a quarter of the men surveyed by the Philadelphia Lesbian and Gay Task Force (1988) felt they had themselves been the victims of discrimination, an astounding 66% anticipated or feared such discrimination in the future. Like most gay men, they had undoubtedly heard about the military's notorious employment policy, or have read about other lesbians or gay men who were denied jobs, promotions, or security clearances. They could probably recall incidents in which gay employees filed suit against their employers, or have read about companies like AT&T or Western Union, who defended themselves against such suits *not* by claiming they hadn't discriminated, but by arguing that it was entirely legal to do so. In any gathering of gay professionals, only a handful can recount incidents in which they were themselves the victims of discrimination, but almost all can recall countless such stories involving friends, acquaintances, and community figures. The men in my sample were no exception.

Some described specific career events, in which they were punished for being frank about their sexuality. Mark, who ultimately sued his company, felt certain that his sexuality was at the heart of his disagreements with his boss and several of the company's senior officers. Working within an environment that he considers "extremely homophobic", Mark knows that he has been pegged as someone who doesn't fit in. His managers have given him no encouragement to stay with the company, no meaningful work responsibilities, and a series of lukewarm performance evaluations. Mark feels certain that these are attempts to harass him, and knows, at the very least, that he will never receive another promotion, raise or bonus.

For others, it was easier to find a new job than contend with the obstacles they encountered in a hostile work environment. Barry, an attorney in his 40s, explained that this was his reason for ultimately leaving a large Manhattan firm. As he describes it, the firm was dominated by a highly visible and vocal group of litigators who made no bones about their homophobia. "The guy who gave me the

job is a really nice man, but he's a friend of Jesse Helms. He's a friend of Strom Thurmond. He backs groups that try to prove that black people are inherently inferior, that kind of stuff." Barry had never been especially secretive about his sexuality, and word ultimately got out that he was gay. The result was a series of bitter conflicts with some of the other attorneys. "They despised me, sight unseen," he recalls. "They despised me for being gay."

At least one of the partners rallied to his defense, circulating a memo that urged tolerance. "It was a half-ass effort," Barry explained, "but it claimed that 'this firm does not discriminate, that we don't want anyone to discriminate.'" The response, from some of the other lawyers, was a thinly-veiled attack. "This was before the civil rights bill was passed," Barry explained, and the partners were well aware of this. A few days after the original memo, one of the litigators responded by circulating a note that explained "it was perfectly permissible to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation." He attached a case "so everyone would know that this was perfectly permissible." Barry's attitude at the time was, "Well, I'm not going to let these fuckers get me down."

In 1986, New York passed an anti-discrimination law that Barry hoped would change the atmosphere in the firm. He was quickly disappointed, however. Barry learned through one of the partners that several of his critics had been warned. "They told these people, after the gay civil rights bill was passed, 'You've got to cut this out, its against the law.'" But the response, according to Barry's source, was "Fuck the law." Meanwhile, the incidents continued. "I know for a fact that there was one partner who used to take candidates out to lunch and say, 'Oh, you're going to have lunch with Barry? You'd better watch your ass on that one.' One of the partners even told a candidate, 'Oh, that fag, everybody hates him. I wish we could get rid of him.'"

As Barry entered his seventh year with the firm, he realized that his chances for partnership were slim. One of the attorneys was frank with Barry, and told him, "Look, they hate you so much, not just for being gay, but for being *openly* gay, that even if they're taking money out of their own pockets and throwing it out the window, they're still going to vote against you.' There comes a point when you can play the good boy and it isn't going to make a damn bit of difference, because

people really won't even vote their pocketbooks." Barry knew that something had to change, and began scouting around for other opportunities. He began by calling Jerry, a former boss who had left the firm several years earlier.

The final blow came in the summer of 1988. Barry had interviewed a candidate and was impressed by his credentials. "The kid wasn't gay," Barry explained, "but he looked as though he could have been. He was very mild mannered, very smart, wanted to go into corporate law. If you were stereotyping, there was a good chance he was gay, but he wasn't." Barry recommended that the firm make an offer, but ran into opposition from some of the other attorneys. While the head of the hiring committee was out of town, one of the litigators bypassed the proper channels and told the candidate that no offer would be made. Barry protested, but found he had little support. While several of the partners admitted that the decision had been a mistake, none would back Barry's efforts to have the candidate reinstated. "That's when I said, 'This firm is going to let this guy get away with what he did -- this macho jerk -- because everyone else was too much of a wimp to stand up to him and say, 'No, this is wrong.' It was the same kind of thing: nobody would stand up for me. That's when I went to Jerry and said 'I'm ready.'" Barry left the firm a few months later.

If instances of actual discrimination were common, however, the fear of *potential* discrimination was constant. While some of the men could describe or document discriminatory hiring, firing, and compensation practices, many more assumed that they undoubtedly exist in subtle, unseen ways. "I can't prove it, and I can't say for sure that I've been the victim of anything," one man acknowledged, "but it's something I constantly worry about." Often, it was the perceived threat of discrimination, not the actual experience of it, that gay professionals found most agonizing.

At the very least, gay professionals were often alert to potential instances of discrimination, wondering when or how they might take place. Rob, a labor relations expert for a public utility in San Francisco, described his concern that he may be penalized for his involvement with the company's lesbian and gay employees association. Though the company has been largely supportive of the

group, Rob knows that he's not privy to his co-workers' actual thoughts on the subject. Last year, the organization lobbied the company to support AB101, the California bill that would have extended workplace protections to lesbian and gay employees.<sup>10</sup> Rob wonders, but isn't sure, what impact this may have had on his career:

When you do that -- as someone with some career aspirations -- it's very nerve wracking. Because you never know what happens when you walk out of the room and they close the door. What do they say? I've seen enough careers ruined by the perception that you're not playing "on the team," as it were. Your reputation is everything, and it has an effect on where you go and what you do. And that, of course, is the \$64 question for me: what impact does this really have? And it's something I'll never know.

Rob doesn't worry that he's at risk of being fired. On the contrary, he knows that his company would be afraid to do something overt. "Coming out to the level that we have, given the exposure we've had, we're golden and untouchable. This corporation is never going to try to go after me on the basis of my sexuality because it's so 'out there' that they'd be afraid of being sued." In this sense, Rob knows that he's lucky. "It's a curious phenomenon," he explains, knowing that your job is protected by something that might, under other circumstances, put it at risk. Still, while he knows he's at little risk of being fired, Rob admits, "that's different than having a warm and fuzzy environment."

Men like Rob may never know if they've been the victims of discrimination, but the pervasive climate of homophobia (whether in their company, or in the culture at large) has encouraged them reach for it as an explanation. The threat of discrimination figures prominently in gay folklore, so that men who have not experienced it firsthand have at least *heard* of such incidents. Even when their stories had the vague, friend-of-a-friend quality of much folklore, the men usually believed them, and cited them when drawing conclusions about the environments in which they worked. This specter of discrimination -- if not the reality -- was an important part of their professional lives.

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<sup>10</sup> The bill was ultimately passed, in the fall of 1991, only to be vetoed by Governor Wilson.

### *Compensation rituals*

Perhaps this is why so many gay men work so hard, and go to such lengths to provide concrete evidence that they're worthy of their jobs. To offset the consequences of a stigmatized identity -- and the potential for it to damage their careers -- gay men often find themselves working longer and harder than their straight colleagues. Their drive to succeed, in professional terms, is driven by the fear that they have failed in some other, more personal way.<sup>11</sup>

Compensation rituals like these are common among inferiorized groups who feel compelled to redeem an identity that they feel is otherwise tainted or spoiled. Adam (1978) gives the example of Jews who tried to "prove" their patriotism by leaping into the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. To compensate for an otherwise stigmatized identity, they became intent upon being "good Germans," "good Frenchmen," and "good Americans" and were outspoken critics of Jews who avoided such conspicuous displays of loyalty (p. 98). Similarly, during the espionage trials of the 1950s, many American Jews were insistent about the Rosenbergs' guilt, "and the necessity of the death sentence to demonstrate that Jews too follow the rules -- only more so." As Adam notes, "The effort to prove one's 'normality' leads to meticulous fulfillment of all other demands of the established social order" (p. 98-99).

In most workplaces, one can identify men and women who use similar tactics to demonstrate their worth as professionals.<sup>12</sup> "Good professionals" are highly

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<sup>11</sup> Harry and DeVall (1978) suggest that this effect may explain the high levels of education observed in several surveys of gay men. "Although it is possible that all of these studies suffer from the same deficiency, namely, an undersampling of less-educated male homosexuals, the fact that these studies were from a variety of time periods and places and used various methods of obtaining respondents suggests that male homosexuals probably are more educated than the general population. If this is true, it implies that male homosexuals may have several assets, in addition to their high educational levels, to offset the multiple discriminations they face in the world of work and achievement" (p. 155).

<sup>12</sup> Chip, a Houston executive, hinted at the concerns that may lie beneath his own somewhat strict work ethic. "Most of my areas of discomfort come from feeling like a shame-based person, in that the stuff I do isn't good enough. All the intellectual stuff tells me otherwise, be it my performance reviews or the comments I get from the people I work with. But for me, hearing things like 'faggot' since sixth grade, all through my upbringing, created a real sense of core shame in me. So no matter how well I do in whatever I'm doing, I still feel basically like a piece of shit. And how I see that manifesting itself in the way I worry that Ron, my new boss, will think I'm a fuck-up."

qualified, work well with others, place the company's interests before their own, and are vigilant guardians of its reputation and assets. Their loyalty and worth to the company can be demonstrated, in other words, through conspicuous displays of initiative, effort, and self-denial. "It's like women who have to fight a little harder to prove themselves in the workplace," a San Francisco architect observed. "I think gay men have to do the same thing."

For gay men, these displays are often self-consciously intended to counterbalance a personal trait that they perceive to be a handicap. Carter, a sales manager for a Houston hotel, explained that this was his reason he took comfort in his long and profitable list of clients. As long as he produced, Carter felt that his job was safe:

I think the driving force is that I have a burden to produce more than the average person. I know I'm vulnerable, being up-front about being gay. So the more I bring to the hotel, the more I do for the hotel and do for my clients, the more I can be myself and not worry about getting shot down or passed over for promotion. My goal would be to lock myself in even better.

With several of the hotel staff, Carter felt that his work performance was the key to continued civility. He described several of the hotel's senior catering managers, "older women I can tell don't really care for my lifestyle. But they depend on me for all their business. I bring a lot of the catering business to them, so it's very civil." The same was true with Carter's boss, with whom Carter sometimes felt at odds. "I did enough for him that he thought I could be of help."

Derek, the VP for a temporary employment agency headquartered in Houston, felt that his sexuality had strongly influenced his professional style. He works long hours and is known for taking the initiative on projects; he even suspects that he is somewhat of "an irritant to senior people because I'm always getting into their soup, and always doing things that they see as ego-threatening." This professional enthusiasm, according to Derek, is a function of a personal life that remains unfulfilling, and which he feels must be kept out of sight:

I don't have anything else to focus my attention on. For example, I've gotten involved in the arts because I had to have some avenue, not because I'm that crazy about them. Other people are all so excited about their kids, and they *talk* about them. They talk about arguments they had with their wives or their husbands, or the great dinner they had with their

wife and husband. . . . I can't do any of that . . . . What I have is my job, and I have the success of my company. And if they want to go home because they have something else -- that's fine, but then I'm going to do that job for you, because it needs to be done and we need to move on. That's very threatening to them, I think.

Because he finds his personal life wanting, and feels unable to share it with the other men and woman in his office, Derek has devoted most of his energies to work. "I'd probably walk out just like the rest of them," he told me, "if I thought I could."

Beneath Derek's efforts to channel his free time is a fear that he has no choice. "I wouldn't have to prove as much, if I were straight," he explained. As it is, Derek runs circles around his co-workers so that "no one will ever be able to say that I don't outperform anybody in that building. And it's not because I have this great desire to do well. I feel I *have* to outperform everybody." I asked why Derek felt he had to outperform, but his response suggests that the answer is obvious. "I can't be just 'okay.' I cannot allow average performance from me. Christ, I'm gay, I have to work harder."

Derek's boss seems to have figured this out. Two years ago, he and Derek took a flight together to Washington, and enjoyed a bottle of wine along the way. Before long, the conversation turned to relationships, and Derek found himself growing uncomfortable. But his boss pushed the issue. "He said something like, 'You've got to stop worrying about yourself, your performance is what I want, I don't care about anything else.' He kept dropping hints, and I said, 'I really don't know what you're talking about.'" His boss tried to make it more explicit:

He explained that he had figured out [that I'm gay] 30 days after I started working for him, and he was *thrilled* about it because he knew I was scared to death -- and that meant I was going to work twice as hard as anybody else would, which meant he got a great deal. He paid for one guy and he got two guys, and that was fine. He thought that was really neat. I told him at the time that I felt I was very uncomfortable in the conversation, I didn't know where the conversation was going, and I would like to talk about something else. And he said, "Well fine, if you don't want to enjoy it that's fine, but it's your problem. It's not my problem if you're uncomfortable, because I'm not uncomfortable."

Derek hasn't raised the issue since, and is uncomfortable with the idea that his boss got "twice what he was paying for" by hiring him. Still, he laughs at the



implications of his boss' suggestion. "Maybe the solution for straight business people is to find single male homosexuals who are hung up about it, hire them into corporate positions, and go back and reap the profit."

The need to compensate is felt most intensely by those who bear more than one form of stigma. Ethnic minorities, in particular, find themselves torn by the competing demands of multiple stigma.<sup>13</sup> Because he speaks with a strong Spanish accent, for example, Miguel worried that he would have to contend with both racism and heterosexism when he came to Philadelphia from Puerto Rico. To avoid at least the latter, he decided to counterfeit a heterosexual identity in the hospital at which he's a resident. "When I went to work in the hospital, and I found the problems I have in terms of the culture and language, I thought, 'I can't put another rock in my way.' I already have enough problems with the language, so I said, 'I can't tell these people I'm gay.'"

Milton, a Washington lawyer, first encountered the notion of compensation in the context of race. He explained that his status as a "double minority," as a gay African-American, only intensified his desire to work hard:

Achieving blacks are taught "You've got to work harder, you've got to be better, you've got to be smarter, you've got to be there earlier, and you've got to stay there later because you will always be perceived as being different. And when you don't know something, people will notice it more; when you *do* know, people will notice it more. Always know more, always work harder."

At work, Milton has compensated by developing a scrupulous work ethic and a heightened attentiveness to his clients. Though some of them already know he is gay, Milton is uncertain how others would respond. "I have to work very hard to keep those clients," he explained. "I have clients that people are always trying to pick off from me. But I have to make sure that my client contact in those companies will always say, 'Milton does such a bang-up job there really is no reason why we should not use him.'"

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<sup>13</sup> The same observation has been made about professional lesbians, who experience what Hall (1989) calls "double jeopardy" as both women and homosexuals.

Under these circumstances, openly gay professionals tend to speak of career success as something that happens *despite* the odds, as an uphill battle. When they describe their future within a particular company, they often speak in tentative terms, downplay their own ambitions as if it were just a bit optimistic to take them too seriously.<sup>14</sup> Often, these were men with advanced degrees, personal charisma, and a long list of concrete achievements -- men whose credentials gave them reason to expect professional success. But these men were openly gay in environments that were often tolerant at best, and for many this had radically limited their sense of the possible.

Compensation rituals are born of our tendency to distinguish personal and professional lives, locations, and activities (as described in chapter 2). By bifurcating the world in this way, we make possible a sort of balancing act, persuading ourselves that concessions in one realm are necessary for achievements in another. Perhaps this is why gay men so often speak of sacrifices and tradeoffs when describing the penalties they might pay for being openly gay at work. "I took a big risk in coming out at work," one man acknowledged. "It may ultimately hurt me, but that was the chance I took." I asked him to be realistic about his prospects with his current employer, a Manhattan advertising agency. How far did he expect to rise within its ranks? "I'm not so sure," he began, pausing for a moment. "I suppose if that were my main concern, I wouldn't have come out in the first place. I'll probably be fine, but who knows?" Though he couldn't identify a particular boss or client who might penalize him for being openly gay, he nurtured a vague expectation of some unseen, unexpected consequence.

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<sup>14</sup> Within professional gay circles, one sometimes senses a reluctance to speak of careers in terms of years or decades -- which may be yet another casualty of the AIDS pandemic. At the very least, among the HIV-infected, the possibility of illness seems to discourage conversations about long, fruitful careers. Among others, there is often the sense that such conversations are inappropriate, perhaps even cruel, given the siege mentality that prevails in the gay community. I recall a recent party at which a young entrepreneur, speaking about his growing software company, stopped himself short. "I feel awkward talking about what I'll be doing in five years," he told me. "Some of these guys won't be around then."

Among men using integration strategies, I encountered a number who were HIV-infected. In some cases, the men shared this information during our initial interview; in others, I learned through subsequent contacts that they were ill. For these men, HIV undoubtedly figured in their calculations about career plans, and can be found, as a recurrent subtext, in their comments about the future.

Compensation rituals build a hedge against such consequences. By amassing a large and profitable client list, gay professionals try to console bosses who might otherwise balk.<sup>15</sup> With extraordinary service, they denied a homophobic client any reason to look elsewhere. Their career achievements, in this context, were more than an effort to stand out in a positive way. In many cases, they were a form of professional prophylaxis, a way to contain the homophobia they feared was lurking just beneath the surface.

### *Tokenism*

The circumstances are rare in which gay professionals -- even when we *are* visible -- are in the majority. In most cases, gay professionals are surrounded by heterosexuals. Clients are usually (assumed to be) heterosexual, and while most gay men know (or know about) other gays in the company, they rarely know more than a few. Some companies had clusters of lesbians and gay men, but they were usually isolated within larger organizations run by straight bosses, peers, and subordinates. Except in firms run by gay people themselves, most organizations reflect the demography of the larger culture, with gay people in the minority.

This skewed gay-to-straight ratio in most organizations (exaggerated by the frequent invisibility of the former) has a profound impact on the way the groups interact. For in addition to the heterosexism they often encounter, gay people must also contend with the fact that they are numerically in the minority. As Kanter (1977) has noted, an individual's status as a member of an uncommon group, as one of *the few*, can influence the interactions he has with those who are more common, *the many*. Similar themes and processes emerge whenever the proportions of significant groups are highly skewed, and in these circumstances it is

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<sup>15</sup> For example, in Dressler's (1985) study of gay teachers, it was those with poor teaching records who were most often disciplined for their sexuality. Those with stronger professional records, even in cases of apparent misconduct, were usually left alone.

rarity and scarcity, rather than sexuality *per se*, that shape the work environment for gay professionals.<sup>16</sup>

Those who are less common can appropriately be called "tokens" because they tend to be treated "as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals" (p. 209). For the lone gay among straights, the foreigner among natives, or the occasional black among many whites, token status brings with it several characteristic predicaments. Among these, according to Kanter, is the tendency for tokens to be judged not only as individuals, but as members of their category. Their behavior accrues "symbolic consequences," and is assumed to illustrate something about others who bear the same social characteristics.

Perhaps this is why gay professionals, when their sexuality is known, are viewed as spokespeople: asked to speak on behalf of all gay people, used to judge gay people as a group, called upon to supply the "gay perspective." For many, this was viewed as an opportunity. Echoing the rhetoric of many gay activists, gay professionals sometimes speak of their responsibility to provide "role models" for other gays, or to enlighten straight peers who have misconceptions about homosexuality. A California Park Ranger, who used an avoidance strategy, explained the tug he sometimes felt to serve as a token:

I guess I only have those kinds of feelings when I read essays or articles about how everyone should come out, so that the world will be a better place. And then I feel kind of guilty sometimes, because it's true. If everyone who's in the closet agreed to come out, at the exact same time on the exact same day, I might hop on the bandwagon. But I don't have the courage to do it independently.

Though he was unwilling to come out at work, his comments reflect a common sentiment. If all gay people were to step forward, as ambassadors to the mainstream, we could quickly dispel the misconceptions of our straight peers.

Other men embraced the opportunity. A Houston executive explained that "if something happens to me, if I become ill or get run over by a truck tomorrow" he would look back with pride to the ways he had helped educate others. His co-

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<sup>16</sup> Much of this discussion, and my own understanding of "tokenism," are drawn from Kanter's (1977) analysis of male-female relationships in a large industrial manufacturing company, in particular her chapter on "Numbers: Minorities and Majorities" (pp. 206-242). See also Kanter & Stein (1980).

workers "think differently about gays today than they did before I encountered them." Similarly, Carter explained that he's had "a good time" exposing co-workers "to my lifestyle, and what we do." When I asked him to describe his ideal job environment, he explained that he'd like to go even further. "It would be nice to have a cute gay girl so they could also see another aspect of gay life: that there can be a normal looking girl that's not wearing comfortable shoes. I'm really enjoying showing them some of my life, and I'd like to -- it would be nice to have somebody show them another side." Like many gay people, he finds himself trying to represent, with his own individual behavior, an entire category of persons.

Some men formalize their token status, volunteering to serve as delegates from the gay community. Sean, a public relations executive in New York, encouraged his peers to use him as a resource, to educate themselves about gay lives and lifestyles. When his firm was working on a new AIDS drug, for example, Sean positioned himself as an expert on the gay community, and encouraged others to consult him for the "gay point of view." In more personal conversations, he invited co-workers to ask questions about his sexuality, and hoped that they would "come to understand gay people" through their interactions with him:

I've been given the unique opportunity, in that I have something that other people don't understand that I can teach them about. And through my teaching, hopefully, they will gain a positive image of it, as opposed to getting a negative image, or stereotypical image of it. I get something out of it, in that I feel good when people turn around or when they realize -- it's just another notch for me every time somebody else deals with it in a positive manner.

Like other tokens, Sean found that others used his individual behavior to make judgments about his entire social category; he was viewed not only as an individual, but as *a gay person*. His response was to seize the opportunity.

Some men had more ambivalent feelings about their token status. Jack, the Vice President of Human Resources at a Washington publishing house, felt that co-workers sometimes regarded him as a symbol, using him in ways that suggest he represents something beyond his own sexuality. Jack fears that their contact may be burdened with a level of unwanted significance:

I sense that a lot of my co-workers like to sort of test out and to some extent show off that they have liberated views in this area, by using me as somebody with whom they can openly talk and joke about sexuality. It

comes up probably more than it should; I have a tendency to bring it up myself more than I should. That activates a tendency on their part to make it more of an issue. My closest friends seem to almost enjoy the opportunity to talk openly about a gay person.

As his comments suggest, Jack suspects that the eagerness to discuss his sexuality is rooted in situations that have little to do with him. Many of his co-workers seem to use him as a sort of trophy, saying "to themselves and to other people that they have a good friend" who is gay. In addition, Jack's predecessor in the position was a gay man, "and everybody knew he was gay, but it was something that you did not discuss." Years later, Jack still senses a reaction. "My immediate co-workers are so relieved they don't have to tiptoe around this issue that there's an overreaction to the openness."

At worst, the attention was considered patronizing. "It's a bit like being under a microscope," according to a Houston executive who explained that he resented this sort of treatment. Russ, a Philadelphia insurance executive, claimed that this was his chief reason for using a different strategy. "An advantage to being closed is that I don't want to explain gay life to all these people. I'm sure many of them would be very inquisitive about gay lifestyles, and I have no interest in dealing with all their questions." Russ wasn't unwilling to talk about his sexuality, but didn't want to be held up as an expert on the subject. For the time being, he continued to use an avoidance strategy. "If they want to come to dinner and see how I live with my spouse, that's fine. But I don't want to sit down and talk about what we do in bed. So one advantage to my situation is that I don't have to do all that *explaining*."

Derek had a similar complaint, and felt that co-workers sometimes regarded him as a sort of novelty item, using him to amuse and gratify themselves. "I'm sure they drive home and think, just like they did in the '60s, 'Isn't it wonderful to have a black friend? Isn't he everybody's favorite negro?' Today, I'm sure they feel almost smugly that 'Isn't this wonderful that we know somebody who's gay? Isn't it wonderful, aren't they wonderful, and aren't they something we didn't think they were?'"

PART THREE  
AUDIENCES AND OPTIONS

*Few men are of one plain, decided color; most are mixed, shaded,  
and blended; and vary as much, from different situations, as  
changeable silks do from different lights.*

-- Lord Chesterfield, *Letters to His Son* (1752)

An identity can be seen as a kind of understanding between an individual and a particular audience. The individual tries to manage what the audience knows or assumes about him, his "performance" guided by a strategy or set of objectives. The audience, for its part, witnesses the display and draws its conclusions. "Being gay", from this perspective, has less to do with sexual acts or desires than with the process by which "gayness" is defined as a role (by the audience), and adopted as an identity (by the individual). An attribute or behavior has no inherent meaning, and signifies nothing out of context. Consequently, as Goffman observes, "an attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself" (p. 3).<sup>1</sup>

This model of identity ultimately draws our attention from the behavior of individuals to their social contexts, and suggests several things about the relationship between audience and performer. First, because identities inhere to social relationships, they are situation-specific. At the very least, this means that one may have multiple identities with multiple audiences or at multiple points in time. One may *be* something in one set of relationships -- a father to one's children, for example, or an engineer to one's boss -- only to become something else in others. As William James observed:

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<sup>1</sup> I should emphasize that I use the term "identity" to mean a label that is assigned or taken on in social settings (as discussed in the introduction). To avoid confusion, this approach must be distinguished from other descendants of the symbolic interactionist tradition that share an emphasis on context. Unlike social psychologists, I'm not concerned with the process by which self-referential attitudes, thoughts or concepts are shaped (e.g. Larson, 1981; Weinberg, 1978). Nor have I tried to describe the socio-historical processes by which social roles are shaped (e.g. Plummer, 1981).

[W]e may practically say that [an individual] has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinions he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers, sears and swaggers like a pirate among his "tough" young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our customers as to the laborers we employ, to our own masters and employers as to our intimate friends (quoted in Goffman, 1959:48-49).

As this comment suggests, when describing an individual's identity, the relevant unit of analysis is often the audience, not the individual.

This model of identity also suggests that the audience's role in the articulation of a particular identity is not strictly receptive. In the second part of this report, I described the performance of identity from the perspective of the performers themselves. In the two chapters that follow, I explore the role of the audience in this joint enterprise. Strategy choices are the product of both situational and personal variables, and a performer's options at any given point are a function of the audience for whom he is performing. His choice of strategy will be based, at least in part, on assumptions about what will or will not work with a particular group. Not all strategies are available with all audiences.

In another sense, the audience also establishes the range of meanings within which a particular sexual identity will be understood. The interpretation of an identity ultimately resides with an audience, such that it would be meaningless to say that one is Muslim, American, or Republican to one for whom such terms signify nothing. One can be "gay" or "straight" only within the interpretive boundaries set by one's audience.

With this in mind, it is possible to speak of strategic repertoires, or clusters of available strategies, and the process by which gay men draw on this repertoire when performing for any particular audience. The process by which they make these decisions, and the implications of these decisions for their careers, are the subject of the next two chapters.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DIFFERENT AUDIENCES, DIFFERENT SELVES

Given that they usually have a choice, it should come as no surprise that gay men often use different strategies with different audiences. They may integrate an identity with the woman in personnel, while avoiding the subject with the boss. They've "come out" to some friends, but talk about girlfriends, football and the weather with others. Perhaps they speak candidly with gay friends at work, while insisting that straight co-workers respect their privacy.

As Adam (1978) notes, such segregations are common among inferiorized groups, and are one means of coping with a hostile world. To deflect the hostility of some audiences while developing relationships in alternative, in-group, or community audiences, the inferiorized develop different strategies for dealing with each, "shifting from one behavior set to another as the occasion demands" (p. 93). It is a rare gay man, in fact, who uses only one of the three basic strategies available to him. More often, he avails himself of an entire *repertoire* of strategies, and finds it fitting to use different ones in different situations.

In the course of their lives, all 70 of my participants had used at least two of the three basic strategies. Most have used all three. At least once in their lives, all had counterfeited an identity, whether it was with parents, neighbors, friends, teachers, or employers. Most had used an avoidance strategy in one situation or another, and all had integrated an identity at some point, if only with other gay friends (or, at the very least, with me).

But because each of the basic strategies reflects a different goal and relies on different tactics, only one can be used with any particular audience. A counterfeit identity languishes when the performer withdraws to the use of avoidance tactics, and crumbles when an integration strategy brings discrediting information to light. Likewise, an attempt to avoid sexual identity ceases the moment a gay man engages in some sort of sexual display, shifting to either a counterfeit or integrated identity. It follows that with any particular audience, one must make a choice: either to counterfeit a heterosexual identity, integrate a homosexual identity, or

avoid one altogether. Because each strategy has the capacity to destabilize the other two, only one can be used with any particular audience.

Men who present themselves in different ways to different people are thus obliged to worry about the drift of information from one person to another. One cannot integrate with one audience while counterfeiting with another *unless* those groups can be kept safely apart; should they come into contact, at least one of the acts may be ruined. Consequently, when gay men use multiple strategies, they take on yet another set of managerial tasks, this time involving the segregation of audiences.<sup>1</sup>

### **A double life**

Gay men who use more than one strategy tend to speak and think in terms of a particular, overriding binarism: those who "know" and those who don't. In the former group are those with whom integration strategies are used, those who have been given some form of concrete evidence that one is gay. All others, whether one counterfeits or avoids an identity with them, fall into the latter category.

The imagined bifurcation seems to reflect several considerations. In part, it reflects the logic of "the closet", the dominant metaphor in which gay activism has framed all discourse about homosexual self-disclosure. It also reflects the relative ease with which gay men often move in either direction between counterfeiting and avoidance strategies, as contrasted to the relative irreversibility of adopting an integration strategy. Both considerations tend to focus attention on "coming out," which marks the transition from one end of the continuum to the other. The world is divided accordingly: one is "out" to some audiences, and "in" or "not yet out" to others. Using Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, we might say that the latter group has been permitted backstage, and has seen the performer in a more

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<sup>1</sup> Foddy & Finighan (1981) define privacy as "the possession by an individual of control over information that would interfere with the acceptance of his claims for an identity within a specified role relationship," and suggest that it will be most important to those who present themselves in different ways to different people (p. 6-8). Privacy, in this conception, is a dynamic aspect of a social situation, and can be achieved through a variety of devices including physical mechanisms (e.g. doors, barriers), verbal and non-verbal behaviors (e.g. turning one's back, frowns, a verbal request to be left alone), appeals to cultural definitions (e.g. privacy 'rights', laws), and appeals to expectations that have been established over time (e.g. etiquette regarding self-disclosure).

revealing light. Some audiences see only the performance; others see mask come off, the props laid to rest.

Historically, "backstage access" was granted exclusively to other gay people, which reflects the legal and social realities of the past century. The gay men who congregated in the fledgling enclaves that grew up in the 1940s were justifiably concerned that their taverns, baths, and public spaces not be identifiable to those outside the community (Adam, 1987; D'Emilio, 1983). Likewise, the present-day emphasis on self-disclosure is notably absent from the rhetoric of the early homophile movement, as gay political organizing was called in the 1950s and 1960s (Cain, 1991). On the contrary, the Mattachine Society, which in 1950 became the first national gay group in the United States, stressed the importance of discretion and the gradual assimilation of homosexuals into the society at large. Even the rather cryptic name of the organization, which refers to medieval court jesters who told the truth to kings while hiding behind masks, was typical of the clandestine nature of the period. In the hostile environment of the times, one can imagine why only other gays were deemed trustworthy members of the secret society.

Today, the tendency to divide audiences along gay-straight lines often has more to do with social networking and the mechanics of self-disguise. In particular, most gay men assume that their sexuality, however they (mis)represent it to non-gays, will be apparent to other gays.<sup>2</sup> As Ponse (1976) notes, in her study of professional lesbians:

[A] gay woman would be more likely than others to spot someone who, like herself, is passing for straight, as she would be aware of the nuances of passing. People who pass are alive to the cues given off by others who are passing. Among these cues is the recognition of others' passing techniques and strategies. The failure to say certain things -- for example, to specify the gender of an individual referred to in a conversation -- to be secretive about one's personal life, to express a lack of interest in males, to never having been married, to have a roommate, and to fail to present a male companion at appropriate times can start the speculative ball rolling on the part of a gay woman that another woman may, indeed, herself be gay. . . . A standard feature of gay lore is that "it takes one to know one" (pp. 319).

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<sup>2</sup> Although, as Ponse (1976) observes, "The veils of anonymity are often as effective with one's own as with those from whom one wishes to hide. Thus, an unintended consequence of secrecy is that it isolates members from one another" (p. 319).

As Ponse suggests, the disguises or dodges that work for straight audiences are often transparent to others who have used them.

Furthermore, given the extended circles in which many lesbians and gays travel, it is reasonable to expect that gay co-workers will ultimately run into (or hear about) one another.<sup>3</sup> Todd supplied a typical example when he recalled the way that he and Gary, both of whom work for a public utility, identified one another. As Todd explains,

I was just moving into this [condominium], and I had a lot of hassle getting this place ready. I had to make a lot of phone calls at work. Later on, Gary told me that he walked by my office one day -- this is more of a joke -- and I had a floor plan of where the furniture was going to go. He said that was his tip off that I was high-potential. I didn't know if he was gay or not, but he kept wondering about me, asking questions like, "What do you do on the weekend?" And I would tell him, "I go to the beach." "What beach?" He got so inquisitive, I sort of caught on that he was gay and was trying to figure out if I was gay or not by how I answered these questions.

I asked Todd if he could recall a particular conversation or encounter in which he had finally revealed himself:

He kept talking about Rehoboth -- this took several months, this didn't just happen quickly -- and then he talked about a particular guest house in Rehoboth. And I knew that the guest house was gay. From that point on I didn't put up the charade that I had played. Or, anytime he would ask something or it came up I would tell him the truth. And I don't know quite *how* we ever talked about it, but I guess we must have. It just came real normal, natural. We got to be pretty decent friends.

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<sup>3</sup> Glen, the general counsel for a large Houston firm, described a not-too-unusual scenario. "My last year in the military, I was captain of a basic training company in Fort Bliss and I dated this guy Bruce, who had just graduated from Yale. He and I dated for a period of months and then Bruce went off to Vietnam and got out of the military and went to Stanford law school. Six or seven years ago the General Counsel was interviewing for a new position. They had identified this guy Jim who they thought would be ideal. He was with a major firm in San Francisco but I hadn't met him, and the General Counsel didn't want to hire him until I had met him. So I flew in and met all of them at the Houston Club. There were about seven people there. Jim was a Stanford graduate, and during lunch I said, 'Jim, I'm not sure when my friend went to Stanford, but you might know him: Bruce Johnston?' Jim literally dropped his fork, and said, 'very much so, we were in class together.' Well, I presumed Jim was gay, but I didn't know and it really didn't make any difference; it certainly wasn't the reason he was being considered. He was very qualified. So I put a call in to Bruce to get a recommendation, and he called me the next morning. It turns out that Jim had already called him about me. Bruce came on the line and said, 'The answer to all questions is 'yes.' He's qualified, and he's gay.' Well, it turns out they were lovers."

This coded exchange, between Todd and Gary, ultimately permitted them to identify one another. After a series of quizzes about gay trivia -- the name of a gay guest house, for example -- they slowly granted one another access to the backstage region.

The tendency for gay men to adopt an integration strategy with other gays is also evident in the confidence with which they speak about the presence or absence of other gays at work.<sup>4</sup> A recent survey of 205 professional journalists found, for example, that gays in the newsroom are almost universally aware of one another. Almost 90% of the respondents assumed that their fellow gay staffers knew about their sexuality, whether or not they had actually spoken about it (Ghiglione *et al.*, 1990).

However these co-workers got backstage, they place the performer in a delicate position. Audiences who know that an individual is gay can make it impossible for him to use a different strategy with some other audience. They possess information that could discredit a counterfeit identity, or destabilize an attempt to avoid sexual identity altogether. For this reason, men who split their audiences are watchful of those who have been granted backstage access. In most cases, they are viewed in one of two ways: as potential collaborators, or as disloyal infiltrators. In either case, they must be managed.

### *Segregating the audiences*

One solution is to keep the audiences apart, ensuring that those permitted backstage will never have direct contact with those on the other side of the proscenium. Sometimes, this means that co-workers are set apart from friends or families. More often, it means that one set of friends -- gay friends -- are kept away from straight friends, work friends, or college friends. Still other men split audiences *within* an organization, integrating with some co-workers while avoiding

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<sup>4</sup> Gay lore has its own terms for this difficult-to-define but undeniable skill. Some call it "gaydar". Others laugh that they can always identify another gay person by "looking him up in the directory." According to a New York public relations consultant, he knew that a co-worker was gay from the man's "persistence, and just an intuitive sense." As Sean explains, "He wasn't looking at me as a buddy; he was looking at me for more than that. The subtle mannerisms that one picks up as a homosexual, the picosecond-length longer in eye contact."

or counterfeiting with others.

The most common scenario is for gay friends to be kept away from non-gay co-workers. As Ponse (1976) observed in her ethnographic account of secrecy in lesbian communities, "Many of the lesbians with whom I spoke elected to handle these tensions by keeping their gay lives and straight friends separate, revealing the gay self only to gay audiences and donning a heterosexual mask for straight friends. Within the community, the segregation of gay and straight friendship worlds was described by lesbians as 'living a double life'" (p. 327). As Justin, a college professor in Washington, explained, "The double life boils down to this: you're out in the gay scene dating other men, but on the job you pretend you're straight, and go along with straight conventions."

When segregation is the solution, the job is made easier by the fact that society is not a single, amorphous mass of people. There is no monolithic "community" in any real sense; there are only networks of smaller groups -- families, neighbors, co-workers, relatives, friends, and so forth -- who are related through various activities, interests, and territories (Mills, 1963). Most work organizations facilitate even further divisions, beginning with the separation of members from non-members. They may distinguish between people of different rank, area of expertise, or physical location in the office. Further informal divisions may emerge as smaller groups arrange themselves by work project, by shared commuting arrangements, by personal characteristics like age or gender, or by their desire to become friends outside the office. Whether they take advantage of these naturally-occurring partitions or try to create ones where they don't yet exist, most gay men are adept at splitting their audiences.

Eric, a Delaware banker, used a number of techniques to keep gay friends away from co-workers, neighbors, and most of all, his wife. His bank is headquartered in Wilmington, about an hour's drive from his home in suburban New Jersey. For Eric, the commute provides a block of time, twice a day, when he isn't accountable to either home or office. His job also requires frequent travel to New York, Philadelphia, and Harrisburg, and over the years these trips have allowed him to build a large network of gay friends. "I have a lot of friends in New York that I've known over the years," he told me, "and I have some friends in Washington and in

Harrisburg, where I go quite frequently." One of these men responded to an ad that Eric placed in the *Philadelphia Gay News* back in 1984. "We still talk to each other every day on the phone," Eric explains. "We became like real close brothers. We talk about our problems, being married and stuff like that. We still talk almost every day."

To stay in contact with his friends, Eric keeps a Post Office box in Wilmington. He has a telephone credit card through that address, and uses it to place long distance calls that won't appear on his home phone bill. When other men want to call him, Eric insists that they either call him at work or wait until Tuesday evenings between 6 and 8, when his wife plays bridge. Eric's wife has never met any of these people, not even as acquaintances. She has never even heard their names. Though he occasionally goes to a gay bar about 25 miles from home, Eric usually prefers to keep his social worlds further apart. "I'm very careful," he explains. "There's a definite geographic distance" between home life and his gay social life, "so it's a comfortable feeling for me. I basically don't go looking for people in the area where I live."

For almost 30 years, these geographic and temporal boundaries have allowed Eric to keep his professional, family, and gay relationships neatly apart. He has no plans to change his approach. At the time of our interview, for example, Eric was contemplating a job with a company located closer to his home, but worried that this would interfere with his plans. "I have a selfish reason for wanting to stay where I am," he explained, "because I'm able to travel to Washington, New York, and get out of the house. The new job would be local, just Southern Jersey. It would limit my travel. I'd be confined, and I don't know if I'd be happy doing that." Eric told me that he would probably turn the job down.

Geoff, a San Francisco architect, used a similar tactic to segregate his audiences. As the construction manager for a small Catholic college in upstage California, he was insistent that the construction crews and college administrators not find out that he's gay. Yet he had a large group of gay friends in the Bay Area, and worried that the groups would someday come into contact. "You're always walking a tightrope between two worlds," he told me. "hoping the two worlds don't collide at some point." I asked Geoff how he kept the worlds apart.

"Basically, I don't have any crossover friends," he told me. "I have two completely separate groups of friends. And I don't talk about them to anybody else." He didn't tell straight friends anything about his gay friends, not even their names. He also maintained strict geographic boundaries. His gay friends all lived in San Francisco, while his co-workers were all "white-bread suburban people."

Geoff recalled one incident in which a crossover friendship began to develop. One of his past boyfriends was friendly with a woman named Susan, who works in Geoff's office. For Geoff, this spelled trouble. He remembers thinking "This is the way the worlds will collide," and took several steps. He avoided Susan, and turned down social invitations that involved her and his former boyfriend. Even so, Geoff feels that the experience was a sign of things to come. He suspects that someday his scheme will collapse, and someone will ask him a pointed question. "I know I'll turn bright red when it happens, and start stuttering, and soup will spill out all over my socks. 'Excuse me, *what?*' But until then . . ." As we shook hands at the door of his suburban home, Geoff told me I should check back with him in a few years, to see what had happened. "And let me know what the name of the book is," he said, "so I can buy it and hide it under my bed."

Other men expressed concern about crossover friendships and their potential to desegregate audiences that they wanted to keep apart. Ralph, a marketing executive with a Houston energy company, worried about the fact that he often socialized with his co-workers, which he thought increased the risk that they might encounter some of his gay friends. The task of juggling these different groups was further complicated by his lover, Jack, who involved Ralph in yet another set of social relationships. Worse yet, Jack didn't find it necessary to segregate his audiences, which made it difficult for Ralph to segregate his. "Jack has a lot of straight friends who know that he's gay," Ralph explained, "which is dangerous if you want to keep it quiet, because if you meet someone that doesn't have any connection with you, who doesn't feel any loyalty to you, you can't trust them."

At least once, the segregation scheme seemed to collapse at a party that Ralph and Jack both attended. One of Ralph's college friends was getting married, and threw a cocktail party a few days before the wedding:

I was in the wedding and I had to be at all these things. I brought this one



girl from work, who I know has a crush on me, and we've done a lot of things away from work. And, she asked me, "Well, how do you know Jack?" I mean, Jack's from Nebraska, five years older than I am. He works for the hospital in the adolescent psychiatric unit -- I mean, how *do* I know someone like this? And I told her that I met him through my friend, this other guy, Scott. And she believed it. But then I find out she's met Jack several times, and she asked him, "So, how do ya'll know each other?" And he made up something else. So, if she remembers what I told her, she had to know that was a lie.

As Ralph realized, he and Jack had never coordinated a cover story to explain their relationship. This had never been a problem before, because Ralph had always been careful to keep Jack away from co-workers. But when the worlds finally met, Ralph worries that he may have been exposed.

Stories like these figure prominently in gay folklore, and take a number of characteristic forms. Like most cautionary tales, they remind gay professionals of the steps that must be taken if the worlds are to be kept apart, the audiences split. Several of the men worried, for example, that by attending public events with gay friends they risked being "spotted" by non-gay co-workers. Miguel, a Philadelphia medical resident, found himself in this situation a few weeks before our interview when he ran into a woman from the hospital. He and his boyfriend were spending a day at the zoo when Miguel spotted one of the chief residents. Looking back, Miguel feels that he panicked. "I think I handled the situation really poorly," he explained, "because I didn't introduce my boyfriend to her. I made a mess. And then we were laughing at how badly I handled the situation -- it was just the first time I met someone, one of my bosses, outside the hospital. I just got nervous, I didn't know what to do. I was really rude." A few weeks later, he was leaving a local gay disco with several of his friends, and ran into some of the other residents. This time, he thought more quickly. "There were five of us, all guys. And I said 'Oh I just came from a party -- a bachelor party'." A few days later, at the hospital, "they asked me 'How was the wedding?' And I said, 'Oh, it was good.'"

Dan, the director of a psychiatric clinic in Houston, found that even inconspicuous dinner dates made him uncomfortable, given the frequency with which he seemed to run into clients. "I'm out on a date or something, and all of a sudden a former client or somebody from the hospital comes up," he told me. "It happens all the time, I can't go out and eat anymore. Just a couple weeks ago,

someone tapped on my shoulder. It was a former client, a mother and father. She gave me a hug, and I shook the husband's hand. We talked a little bit, you know." I asked Dan why this seemed to upset him, or why he felt compromised by these encounters. "I just get real paranoid," he explained. "It's really stupid, I know it is stupid. I know why I'm there, but *they* don't necessarily know. The other guy could just be a friend. It's really interesting though: if I'm out on a date, I'm paranoid. Even if I'm just with a friend, it doesn't make any difference."

Even more risky, according to several of the men, were social engagements at home, which several thought was a way of courting disaster. Matt, a marketing executive with a car manufacturer, explained that because several of his co-workers lived nearby, he was often afraid to have gay friends into his home. "I have to lead a very discreet life," he explained. "Because I'm single, some of the men in the office, especially the younger ones, will drop by unannounced to have a beer or something like that." Though he enjoyed the camaraderie with his co-workers, he felt that the situation imposed "extreme discretion." To keep the worlds from colliding, Matt rarely socialized with gay friends, and was careful to avoid men he considered effeminate or "obviously gay." Nor did he usually patronize gay establishments. "I'm not a bar hopper," he told me, "and I don't spend very much time in those places anyway, cause I'm afraid of somebody seeing my car out front."

Other men wanted to entertain co-workers, but were uncomfortable with the idea of them meeting gay friends. Tom, a New Jersey schoolteacher, explained that he regretted not being able to invite co-workers to his parties. "A lot of times when I have parties I'd love to invite these people over. But you don't because you don't know what the reaction is going to be. Even if you invite them over for dinner, suppose some friends stop by. It's a sticky situation." Scott, a marketing executive for a Philadelphia insurance company, found himself in a similar situation when several co-workers wanted to go to a gay bar. A woman he worked with thought it would be fun to take several of the people in the marketing department out for dinner and dancing. "But of all places," Scott recalls, "she wanted to go to The Raven for dinner. I've never been to The Raven, but I've heard of it, and I thought, 'There is no way I'm going to go. Someone would see me there.'" Scott

knew that The Raven was a gay bar in New Hope, and worried that he might run into gay friends there and be forced to explain how he knew them. "At first I didn't know if The Raven she was talking about was the same Raven I was thinking about, but it turned out to be the same." Fortunately, Scott managed to avoid the whole situation. "There is a god," he explains, looking heavenward. "It was the worst weather that night, and raining, and New hope is a long drive. So it was the perfect excuse."

Geography was often crucial to the segregation of audiences. Long commutes and frequent business trips were one way to divide the world. "I end up with sort of a schizophrenic life because I meet or associate with my gay friends on a separate basis," explained Jason, who divides his time between suburban New Jersey and Washington, D.C. "The two worlds are distinct." A diverse, urban setting was also considered an asset, because it diminished the chance that social circles would overlap. According to a New York advertising executive, "I don't worry too much about the worlds colliding because I live in a city of 10 million people. The world is small, but it's not that small."

In rural or suburban settings, the segregations were harder to maintain. Bill, a California park ranger, felt that this would become a problem at some point in his career. "Most national parks are in real remote areas," he explained, which makes it difficult to disappear into a large, urban social life. Living in Northern California, Bill has managed to keep his social and professional worlds apart, but he worries that the next promotion will send him to a small town in which this won't be possible. "Unless I can come out of the closet, it wouldn't work anyway. You're living in Yellowstone or one of these places where the Park Service is the whole community, and there's no screening of your private life anymore. Everyone knows what everyone else is doing. There wouldn't be any hiding anymore; it would definitely be out in the open."

### *Supporting players*

When others had access to the performer's backstage region, they were sometimes viewed in an entirely different way: not as threats, but as potential supporting players. When gay men integrate an identity with a select group of

friends or co-workers, they often expect that this group can be called upon to help them carry off a different strategy with other audiences.

When audiences collide, for example, backstage players are often in a position to corroborate, rather than discredit, a counterfeit identity. Carter, a marketing executive for a Houston hotel, recalls a situation in which he took a trip with Terry, a Houston lawyer. Though Carter uses an integration strategy at work, Terry counterfeits an identity with the other lawyers in his firm. "Terry is known by all these lawyers everywhere," Carter explains. "Everywhere he goes he sees somebody he knows. We were in Puerto Vallarta and we get on the plane, sitting in first class, and right behind us comes his good friend, a big lawyer, and his wife. And there we are, four guys. Terry has such a hard time, professionally, with that, because his firm is real conservative. He leaned over and said, 'I know this guy, let's butch it up.' So I said, 'Hey, how 'bout those Astros, aren't they playing today?' And the other guy goes, 'Yeah, aren't they playing the Oilers?'" Though a bit fuzzy on their sports trivia, Carter and his friends helped Terry keep the worlds apart. Even so, it made for a stressful end to the vacation. "He's working under pretty stressful circumstances," Carter explained. "That's why he's got all those grey hairs."

Anyone can be a supporting player, of course, provided they have the requisite skill. Goffman (1963) notes, for example, that in addition to the those who share a stigmatizing trait (the "own"), the stigmatized can expect support from "the wise," those who are not similarly stigmatized, but who are accorded a sort of courtesy membership in the group (p. 19-32). As the price of their admission, the "wise" undertake to support the group in its efforts to manage stigma in the eyes of others.

Counterfeiters often enlist female friends, for example, to help them pull off a heterosexual identity at company parties and social events (see Chapter 4). Or they may share confidences with a small group of co-workers, who are then expected to keep their secret from others. Derek, the Vice President of a Houston employment agency, felt he had this sort of relationship with Ruth, a woman in his office. He recalled a situation in which Ruth had tried, though somewhat ineptly, to be supporting player:

There was this one kid, a real cute little blonde, quite the yuppie, quite the chase around women, to me obviously gay. And all the women were crazy about him, and he was playing the game to the hilt. Real good at it, deserves a little medal for that. We were all dining at night in some non-descript place in Atlanta, and he said, "Oh, I really like going to the Pleasant Peasant," which is a chain in Atlanta. And the other guy said, "Oh, God, I wouldn't go there, you know they're gay." And the blonde kid said, "What the fuck do I care if it's gay or not. They're not screwing in my soup."

Bill was so startled by the exchange that he wasn't quite sure how to react. "It took me aback," he explains, "and I just got real quiet." Then he looked over at Ruth, who was clearly upset. "Ruth died a thousand deaths for me," Derek recalls, "and I was more upset by her reaction than the statement against being gay -- I mean, you get used to that."

Apparently, the other man noticed Ruth's reaction. "Afterwards, this kid came up to Ruth and said 'My god, did I say something wrong? Is he gay?'" Ruth tried to cover for Derek, telling the other man, "Oh no, no, no, but Derek has gay friends and he would be offended." For Derek, this set off a chain of complications. "This kid flipped backwards over me for a year, trying to make up, apologizing to the point that I finally said, 'What are you talking about?' Because if I acknowledge it, that would be the same thing as saying, 'Yes I'm gay.' He would call patronizingly, and when I went to Atlanta he made a point of taking me to the Pleasant Peasant." Looking back on the incident, Derek feels that Ruth lacks the skill to be an effective supporting player. "You know, you don't need that kind of an ally," he explained. "That's where the vulnerability lies -- the ones that want to protect you."

Gay audiences, by comparison, were assumed to be more reliable supporting players. In part, this was because other homosexuals were assumed to have the requisite skills and experience, and to appreciate their concern about self-disclosure. Other gays were also assumed to subscribe to the unwritten code of mutually-assured secrecy that has traditionally characterized gay communities.<sup>5</sup> As

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<sup>5</sup> Even today, when lesbian and gay activism is broadly aligned with the other civil rights organizations, one can detect echoes of these sentiments. A recent ad for the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, for example, features a photograph of Governor Pete Wilson, and the copy: "It's happened again. Another so-called 'friend' of the gay and lesbian community has traded integrity for politics, and sacrificed our rights for political

Mohr (in press) has observed:

The presumption that every gay person will keep every other gay person's identity secret from the public is a convention and not merely a rule. Any field anthropologist examining the folkways of the gay community would easily notice that among all the variety in the gay community -- just for starters, divisions of lifestyles between lesbians and gay men -- The Secret is *the* social convention which most centrally defines the community (p. 16).

Though attitudes toward secrecy are in flux (both in and out of the gay community), it is still common to view other gay people as compatriots, and to presume that they can be called upon for support.

Derek recalled an instance in which he felt that a gay man in his office wasn't observing these rules, and his response was to issue a warning. He described a particular conversation with the other man, whom he describes as "the most hung-up Betty Crocker I've ever met." According to Derek:

Everyone at work knows he's gay. One day I went into his office -- he was dropping all these little innuendos, little negative gay comments -- and I walked into his office one day. Positionwise, it behooves him to be nice to me, so he saw this as a superior-subordinate situation. And I went in and slammed the door shut, and said, "Look, you're queer as a three-dollar-bill, so just cut the bullshit. I know you are, you know I am, so stop the games, stop the gay bashing. It's telling everybody in the world that you're gay." Then he went through turning white, passing out, not being able to see me for about a week in absolute terror that I might do something to him. Then he was great.

As Derek describes it, the incident took the form of a scolding from a community elder. In taking this tone with a co-worker, Derek presumes that both are members of a the same society, that both are bound by the same rules. Though the men barely knew each other, their gayness seemed to compel instant access and responsibility to one another.

Brent described a similar situation, in which he felt it necessary to lecture Keith on his tactics for managing identity:

He knew I was gay and I knew he was gay but it was never discussed. One day, he had me read a term paper about a topic that he felt strongly about, and it happened to be about homosexuality. That was the first instance where there was a confirmation that, "I'm gay, you're gay and we both

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expediency. Once again, we've learned. The only people our community can *really* count on to stand by us are lesbian and gay people themselves." (*Advocate*, January 28, 1992).

know it." After that happened, I felt an obligation to discuss the situation. And I basically said "What you do in your own time is your business, but between 8 and 5 it's my business, and we keep that separate. We work for a very redneck company, and don't think otherwise." We just discussed the reality of our situation, that we work for a conservative company and some things are just not appropriate, whether that's personally objectionable to us or not. We're not on our own turf, we're on somebody else's turf.

Since that time, Brent feels that Keith has been relatively compliant, that he hasn't tried to "flaunt" his sexuality or "confirm things" to others in the department. "He understood the seriousness of situation," Brent explains.

But today, when activist rhetoric so wholly endorses visibility (whether it is achieved through the disclosure of one's own sexuality, or through the exposure of someone else's) these rules seem to have broken down. Lesbians and gay men are more visible than ever before, and with visibility has come the recognition that we are diverse, widely scattered, and in disagreement about who our enemies really are.<sup>6</sup> There is no longer the sense that we are a distinct and coherent community, defined in opposition to a foe that can be easily identified.<sup>7</sup> And with the recognition of our own diversity and divisiveness, we seem less likely to presume that other lesbians and gay men share the same goals, concerns, or strategies for managing identity.

Many of the men cited incidents in which the norms about backstage behavior have apparently broken down, in which potential supporting players refused to play the role. For example, a Philadelphia consultant described a situation that made a

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<sup>6</sup> The shift has its roots in the earliest years of gay liberation, and predates the current controversies about self-disclosure and exposure (see Gross, in press). As Ponse observed in 1976, "Over the past several years, with the advent of both gay liberation and the rise of the feminist movement, there has been increasing resentment against the structures of secrecy. An ethos of openness has been developing in certain parts of the gay community" (p. 334.)

<sup>7</sup> This sense of lost solidarity may help explain the nostalgia many gay men feel for an earlier time, when homosexuality was more stigmatizing. Jack, a Washington human resources executive, told me that "as we become more and more visible and more and more open, I sometimes have a little sense of nostalgia, missing that secret society element that ran through the gay world more in the past than today. The more we demonstrate to the world that we're professional people and come from all walks of life, just like straight people, the better off we'll be. But there's part of me that likes the secret society we had ten or fifteen years ago." Similarly, as one of Jay and Young's (1979) respondents noted, one of the attractions of the closet "is the very secrecy of it, the mischief of a secret club, of being what most people are afraid to be . . . I think some of the joy of homosexuality is its deviousness" (p. 160). These comments are also in line with Simmel's observations about the intensity of relationships between secret sharers (Simmel, 1950:360).

gay friend especially nervous:

I had this friend who worked at Rohm & Haas, and there was this guy at work who was trying to hit on him all the time. Finally, he saw him at Woody's [a local gay bar] one day. And that Monday, he called my friend into his office and said, "Jim, I want to introduce you to some people." And he got on the phone and called 5-6 gay men into his office. And Jim said, "I was so embarrassed, because here I am in his office, and it's pretty obvious that some of these guys were gay." And he just didn't feel comfortable.

Because the office had glass walls, Jim felt exposed; his counterfeit identity was thrown into question by his association with other gay men. Furthermore, it surprised him that other gay men, whom he thought of as potential collaborators, had been so careless with (what he presumed were) their secrets, and by association, his own.

Dan, the director of a psychiatric clinic in Houston, finds that he is often called upon to police the behavior of the other gay men at work. Because several of the office staff are quite open about their sexuality, they make it difficult for Dan to be more discreet. Speaking of one of the men, a staff nurse, he notes:

It doesn't bother me that Tony has told people on staff that he is gay. If people want to know and he feels comfortable telling that's fine, but if there is somebody around, like one of our referring psychiatrists or psychologists, or somebody else, we have to put some limits on that.

Dan felt that this was especially true in the lunchroom, where the various groups come together in an informal setting.

That's how it is in the lunchroom, people come in and out. . . . Tony is very outgoing, very talkative, and at the lunch table I've had to redirect the conversation just to cut down the risk, because he just gets too . . . he knows that when I do that, he's going a little bit too far, and he's O.K. with that.

Dan admits that he and Tony don't play by the same rules, which frequently places him in an awkward position. Dan doesn't feel he can count on Tony (who integrates), to help him counterfeit an identity with clients, hospital administrators, or the non-gay members of the clinic staff.

By permitting others backstage, men like Dan have given up a measure of control, and sometimes find themselves unable to regain it. For example, Carter complained that several of his co-workers, both gay and straight, had grown quite blasé about revealing his sexuality to clients. "When I have a good relationship



with a client, and somebody in convention services tells them I'm gay after we've never discussed it . . . I get mad about that sometimes. It kind of destroys -- I mean, *I* should be the one to tell them."

Phil, a New York consultant, described a situation in which a former collaborator had turned sides. "Someone I dated in Raleigh knows someone I used to work with, who's straight." At some point, the former boyfriend had revealed Phil's sexuality. At first, Phil's co-worker didn't believe it:

He was a friend, and just assumed it was a rumor that I would probably not want people to hear, so he went to my best friend and asked her about it, and she called me. That was pretty early in the game, and I thought, "Holy shit." She called and said, "Well, I hear you've been through some major changes." And I said, "Yeah, I got a divorce." And she said, "No, I heard more than that. I heard you were changing your sexual preference." And at that time I said, "Oh really?" I lied to her. Since then we've had conversations, and I think she knows the truth, but my initial response to her was, "That's bullshit. This guy is lying."

Looking back, Phil describes the former boyfriend as a "bitchy queen" who vindictive that he had been rejected. A year later, Phil thinks that there's little chance of reclaiming a counterfeit identity. "It was one of those things that people thought was a joke," he explains, "but after a while, they started to take it seriously."

When potential collaborators defected, the men were often forced to abruptly changed strategies. Roger, an attorney with the Department of Labor, recalled a tense work situation that ultimately forced him to "come out" to his boss, Miriam:

We had to fire Liz, the attorney who was the office mate of another gay man in the department. I was a supervisor, and we had a conduct problem, and it was necessary to fire Liz. So I felt I had to tell Miriam that there might be some repercussions, or some threats against me, in the process of the firing, because I was vulnerable. Liz could have started calling me a "fag" or something like that, and I didn't want Miriam, who was my boss, to be broadsided with something unforeseen. So I came out to her.

Chris, a New York consultant, recalled a similar situation involving a disgruntled former employee. As a consultant to not-for-profits, Chris is often called in to rescue organizations that are in trouble:

I was called in to take over the National Symphony in the Kennedy Center in Washington -- ninety days from bankruptcy and in terrible shape. An old "trick" of mine worked there. I didn't know it. And he was very low down in the hierarchy. I think he was as shocked to see me introduced as

the new president as I was to see him. It turned out that within a couple of months I had to fire almost the whole department, including him. He just went apeshit. "I know about you and I know what to do. I'll tell." It was real nasty. I told him, "Go right ahead." And he actually did try to get an appointment with the Chairman of the Board, who wouldn't even see him, and that was sort of the end of it.

In the meantime, Chris had already changed his strategy. He called the chairman, and warned him that he might be hearing from a disgruntled former employee. "I called and warned him that he was going to get a phone call, and told him what it would be about. He thanked me for telling him and said he would take care of it, and that was the end of it."

To avoid compromising situations like these, some men were wary of developing relationships with other gay men in the office. Craig, a senior executive at a bank in New York, explained that for this reason he preferred to remain oblivious to the sexuality of his subordinates. "I prefer not to know if someone I hire is gay," he explains. "In general I would prefer not to know; I wouldn't have to cope with it being a factor. It would make my decision a lot easier." Similarly, Steve ran into another auditor from his company at a local gay bar, which obviously made his co-worker uncomfortable. "At first I thought, 'Ohmygod, ohmygod', but then I thought, 'What the hell', and went up to him and said, 'Aren't you an auditor at United Savings?' And he said, 'Yeah', and I said 'I thought I'd seen you up there.' He was kind of cold and he backed off so I didn't pursue it at all. And I've seen him twice in the office since then and he's ignored me. I can deal with that."

Terry, a Houston lawyer, explained that his fear of exposure made him uncomfortable hiring or working with other gay people. "It raises some concerns," he explains, "especially if this person is 'out'. It's hard to tell, during the interview process, if a person would be a bitchy mean queen if it doesn't work out. That would be a concern. Let's say I hired somebody as an associate, he knew about me, and professionally it didn't work out. If I had to let him go, would he feel compelled to get back at me? His way of getting back might be to tell everybody [about me]. That would be a concern." In Terry's opinion, the main risk with gay

co-workers was "confidentiality," which he didn't feel he could take for granted.<sup>8</sup>

A solution to this problem, for some gay men, was to keep other gays out of the office; it's easiest to prevent backstage access when no one is seeking or expecting it. Clay, an executive secretary in Philadelphia, explained that this was his reason for blocking the hiring of another gay secretary. Clay's boss was looking for a temporary secretary, and his top candidate was a man that Clay knew was gay. "I know him, and he's seen me out," Clay explained. "Well, I put the hook on him: 'Anthony, we don't want Anthony.' I just mentioned, 'I hear Anthony gets here late, and lies a lot on the job,' because he'd worked here before. And my boss went along." Clay didn't really know Anthony, and had never had any contact with him at the office; he just knew that Anthony was gay. "I just didn't want him around," Clay explained. "It would make me uncomfortable. I just didn't like him. I don't care how good he is, I didn't like him, especially since he was gay. I mean, I know there are gay guys here. There are lawyers who are gay, I *know* they're gay, but I stay away from them at work, too."

Matt used a similar maneuver to keep a gay candidate from being hired into his district. "There was a trainee in the regional office that they were thinking about moving to Houston, to put in our office. I'd never met the guy." Still, Matt had heard, through other people in the company, that the man was gay. "Management wasn't aware that he had gone through a training program with a bunch of people who work for me. He had publicly told his peers that he was gay. A couple of them told me and my field operations manager that story when they heard he might be coming to Houston. Whether it was true or not I don't know, but I stopped it and got somebody else. Because if he indeed was openly gay and came to work for us, regardless of how good of a performer he was, the boss would have just absolutely destroyed him." Matt further confessed that it made him

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<sup>8</sup> Chris, a New York consultant, described a situation involving several gay co-workers, including his lover, Warren. "I have a lot of problems with closeted gay workers, because *they* have a lot of problems with openly gay men in the work environment. They're very standoffish, like, 'I don't want to associate with you because somehow by my proximity you'll give me away.' The worst experience that I had was with a fellow partner at Peat Marwick who is gay. We had mutual friends in common, and he ran for the hills any time Warren and I came around. I mean, just out of sheer fear that we would be associated. And my lover Warren wasn't very comfortable with being gay, so he'd run the other way and leave me in the middle."

uncomfortable to have another gay man in the office, especially someone who was using a different strategy.

As these examples suggest, at either end of the strategy continuum, there is condemnation of those at the other end. Among those who are more secretive about their sexuality, this criticism usually stems from the perception that their less secretive peers put them at risk. In the first major ethnography of the gay community, for example, Leznoff and Westley (1956) interviewed 60 gay Canadians, whom they categorized as either "secret" or "overt." The former group feared public exposure, and therefore refused to associate with the latter, for whom exposure was far less of a concern. As one of the "secret" homosexuals explained:

If someone who is gay wanted to be spiteful they could say something in the wrong quarter. Nobody who cared about himself would say anything. The trouble is that some don't care. I make it a rule to avoid anybody who is perfectly open about himself. It's easy not to become friendly with those people but it's hard to avoid them entirely. You certainly don't want to snub them because that might make them antagonistic. You just don't call them or see them at social gatherings. But you do meet them at bars and that's where you can be introduced to them. If they remember you and continue to say hello to you on the street, you have to acknowledge them or they might feel that you are trying to snub them.

The result, according to Leznoff and Westley, was a sort of "reciprocal hostility" between members of the secret and overt groups. For the secret group, intent upon maintaining secrecy, the distance was considered a necessary protective measure. Put another way, gays who use different strategies can't be trusted as supporting players.

Perhaps this is why men who counterfeit identities sometimes regard those who don't as defectors, as scofflaws who put the whole group in some kind of danger.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Steve, a Houston accountant, teased a gay co-worker by threatening to defect. "I met him through a mutual friend who said, 'This is a friend of mine, Glen.' So Glen and I were standing there making small talk and he said 'Where do you work?', and I said 'United Savings'. He got this big smile on his face." The two men became friends, and sometimes ran into one another in the office. As it turned out, Glen had appeared in a local gay magazine, *Sweat*. "His picture was in one of the gay publications," Steve recalls. "One time we were riding the elevator together, and this lady was in it with him. Glen is a very nice looking man, very macho, and I looked at him and said 'So, have you done any more modeling lately?' And he said, 'I'm going to *kill* you!'"

The notion that gay people should be a coherent community, bound by shared rules about self-disclosure, fuels the belief that some gay men have abandoned a responsibility of some sort. John, a Philadelphia priest, recalls the reception he got when he ran into one of his parishioners in a gay tavern:

The first week I was here, I went up to the Venture Inn for dinner and two members of the parish were there. And one of them said to me, "I don't think it's really very good that you're here." And I said, "Why, is the food that bad?" And I remember going home and calling one of my friends and saying "This may be a real mistake."

Even more negative was the response from other gay clergy, especially those who were determined to remain in the closet. As he became increasingly visible, John quickly found that others avoided him at conferences. He also feels that he's excluded from the cocktail-party circuit of gay clergy. "I don't want to divide my life up the way those men do," he told me. "I can't explain the feeling I have of being in a breathless room of gay men, all of whom are intent on not being out anywhere else."

Counterfeiters sometimes speak as if they had been betrayed by men who are more open, especially when describing "those activists" whom they imagine to have started "all that 'outing' business." In some cases, the men even expressed scorn for the interviewers, whose matter-of-fact questions seemed to endorse self-disclosure. At the end of our meeting with Clay, for example, he and I exchanged the following remarks. "If you're trying to make me "come out" at Smithkline, you're not gonna get it," he told me, "because that's how I felt." "Do you feel that's something we want you to do?" "Yes, I think you would have liked me to be 'out' at work," he replied. Another man asked, as we finished the interview, if *The Corporate Closet* would be published under a pseudonym. When I assured him that it wouldn't, he seemed annoyed. "I've never understood people who make sexuality their whole lives," he told me.

Even when openly gay co-workers respect the privacy of their more secretive co-workers, they are a subject of concern. An openly gay co-worker changes the sexual culture of the workplace. Even if he doesn't directly implicate gay peers (or through association, draw attention to them), he nonetheless creates an *environment* in which heterosexuality can no longer be taken for granted. Perhaps

gay news items will now filter into discussion. Information on gay lifestyles will enter the currency of office lore, and co-workers may occasionally think to seek the "gay angle" on a political or moral question. Other gay people, his friends or lovers, will gradually become part of the social landscape. For all these reasons, the presumption of heterosexuality is thrown into doubt, the spiral of silence broken. The gay person who wishes to hide may now find it more difficult, as avoidance strategies that relied on the ignorance or indifference of co-workers become unavailable.

Carter suspects that this is why one of his co-workers seems so hostile toward him. The reservation manager at the hotel, a man in his 50s, has always kept his distance from Carter, who uses an integration strategy with the rest of the hotel staff. Carter thinks that "he resents me for being happy and gay, decent looking, running around the world having fun. So I think he's resentful that he can't be more open about it. I'm having fun with it and he's not. He's envious and tries to pull me down." Even so, Carter observes the unwritten rule about secrecy. When other people ask him if the reservation manager is gay, Carter tells them, "You'd have to ask him." It's just my standard answer for anybody. It's too fresh in my memory, being afraid that people would find out about me. So I'm not going to burn anybody."

### **Strategic repertoires**

As long as audiences can be segregated, gay men will find it possible to use more than one strategy at any particular point in time; at least in theory, they might simultaneously use all three. At the time of our meeting, for example, many of the men were using two of the three basic strategies, each with a different audience. Several points can be made, however, about the combinations in which these strategies occurred (see Figure 7.1).

Virtually all of the men segregated audiences according to one scheme or another. Many distinguished parents from friends, using a different strategy with each. Others distinguished different sets of friends. With the exception of a few men who used integration strategies across the board -- in all of their social relationships -- my participants were all using more than one strategy.

But only a fraction of them used more than one strategy *at work*. Even as they split audiences along other lines (gay vs. non-gay, social vs. professional, parents vs. friends, and so forth), most (74%) used the same strategy with all of their co-workers. Furthermore, the 18 men (26%) who did use more than one strategy at work tended to use only a limited range of them. Significantly, only two of the four possible strategy combinations were found; none of the men used both counterfeiting and integrating, nor were any using all three strategies simultaneously. Seven of the men (10%) used both counterfeiting and avoidance strategies, while eleven (16%) used both avoidance and integration.

STRATEGY COMBINATIONS					
COUNTERFEIT	COUNTERFEIT /AVOID	AVOID	INTEG /AVOID	INTEG	TOTAL
8 (11%)	7 (10%)	23 (33%)	11 (16%)	21 (30%)	70 (100%)

FIGURE 7.1

One can imagine several reasons for the relatively narrow range of these repertoires. The first is logistic. The difficulties of segregating audiences are exacerbated when the range is wider; there is more potential for discrediting information to cross audience boundaries, and thus a greater opportunity for one strategy to disrupt the use of another. However, a more substantial explanation takes into account the reasons one chooses a particular strategy in the first place. As I argue in the next chapter, one can identify both personal and situational variables that encourage the choice of a particular strategy. Though situational variables may vary widely from one audience to the next, personal variables are relatively stable across an individual's entire repertoire. Consequently, the same individual preferences or competencies that encourage the selection of a strategy in one setting will militate against the selection of a radically different one in some other setting. For example, as Ponse (1976) observed, lesbians who maintained different degrees of secrecy with different groups found it unsettling to make the transition from one group to another, especially when the range was widest. Women who were activists in one context, while maintaining secrecy in another

were troubled by feelings of disloyalty. "Being secretive among one's friends and at the same time an activist in the gay community was experienced as dissonant by these women" (p. 328).

The result is a tendency to favor and become skilled in the use of a relatively narrow range of strategies, even when one's audiences seem to permit the use of a wider range. As personal preferences solidify and strategy competences emerge, the men often found it annoying to dramatically shift gears from one setting to another. They spoke of the hassles and anxieties that came with the segregation of audiences, the sense of dis-integration that often resulted from the use of multiple strategies. Most spoke fondly of a time (imagined or anticipated) in which such transitions would be unnecessary.

Harry, the director of development for an AIDS service organization, used precisely this language when speaking of his work situation, which made it possible to integrate an identity both in and out of the workplace. "I feel so much better about this job because I feel much more integrated," he explained. In prior jobs, as in his marriage, Harry had used a hodgepodge of strategies, and found it necessary to adapt himself to a wide range of situations. Years later, after a series of job changes and a divorce, he is "out" to friends, co-workers, and clients. Even more recently, he joined a church in which gay lifestyles are affirmed, and revealed himself to the congregation. "Here I have my spiritual life, my work life, and my social life and all these things are totally integrated."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

Each strategy brings with it a series of trade-offs: between the penalties it accrues, the risks involved, and the payoffs promised. In deciding to counterfeit a sexual identity, for example, a gay man accepts a certain set of problems -- a measure of social anxiety, stunted social relationships, perhaps even a bad conscience -- in order to avoid a different set of problems, those that might come with public recognition of his sexuality. Likewise, an avoidance strategy protects the gay professional from social situations that might expose or discredit him, even as it denies him social opportunities he might enjoy. The integrator, finally, pays for his candor by exposing himself to prejudice, intensified work pressures, and the double-edged sword of tokenism.

The decisions are complicated ones, and few are a source of greater concern. In his survey of English chairpersons, for example, Crew (1978) found that his respondents agonized over their choice of strategy and its potential consequences:

An inordinate amount of professional energy is required to make the vital estimates. How much dare I be open? Does my professor, my chairperson, or my dean know? Would s/he care? Would I be safer in another kind of college, another area, another discipline . . . ? Dare I risk being seen with other gay persons? Dare I risk being discovered by nongay persons? If I declare openly, will my sexuality then become exaggerated into the most important fact about me? Dare I share my professional insights that have come to me specifically through my minority sexual orientation . . . ? The law of the jungle requires us to know as precisely as possible when the homophobic tiger hides behind the rock and whether s/he is awake or hungry (p. 38).

With these scattered questions, the gay professional assembles information about his environment and appraises his options. Whether the choice of strategy is conscious or not, revocable or not, consequential or not, *all* gay professionals are called upon to make it.

A number of researchers have explored the relationship between self-disclosure and the situational variables that seem to influence it. Psychologists interested in self-disclosure have identified a number of factors that seem to encourage self-

disclosure, such as the consumption of alcohol, physical aspects of the environment (like comfortable furniture, a rug, soft lighting, and pictures on the wall), disclosures from other people, and the physical attractiveness of the one to whom one discloses (Archer, 1979:41-56). Others have looked specifically at lesbian and gay professionals, and the factors that encourage self-disclosure to co-workers, friends, and family. In her survey of 228 lesbians, for example, Schneider (1986) identified risk variables (income level, working with children) and socioemotional climate variables (gender structure and human service orientation) that were associated with the women's sociability and self-disclosure at work.

A much earlier report, by Leznoff and Westley (1956), reported a similar link between work environment and self-disclosure. In the first major ethnography of gay men, they interviewed 60 gay men in a large Canadian city, and distinguish between "secret" and "overt" homosexuals, each of whom used a different means of evading social stigma. "Secret" homosexuals limited their involvement in the gay community and were careful to conceal their sexuality in non-gay settings. "Overt" homosexuals, by contrast, were immersed in gay activities, had limited contact with non-gay social networks, and made little or no effort to conceal their sexuality. Not surprisingly, the "overt" group drew its members "from persons of low socioeconomic status who have jobs where concealment is not a prerequisite" (p. 262). Most were employed either as artists and beauticians, occupations that had "traditionally accepted homosexual linkages in the popular image," or as waiters and service people, fields that "are of such low rank as to permit homosexuals to function on the job." Of the 13 men with professional jobs, all fell into the category of "secret" homosexual. Though the authors were unable to specify the direction of influence, they observed that there is "a rough relationship between form of evasion and occupation" (p. 260).

Other researchers have emphasized personal characteristics that constrain an individual's preference for one strategy over another. As Lee (1977) has observed, "the psychological tendency is to seek motivation 'in' the individual," in the form of drives, needs or wishes (p. 71). Psychologists have looked, for example, at demographic and psychic traits that seem to encourage self-disclosure. Though no categorical portrait of the discloser emerges from these reports, characteristics like

age, nationality, birth order, and social class were found to influence self-disclosure under certain circumstances (see Archer, 1979).<sup>1</sup> Likewise, the various models of gay identity formation have emphasized self-labeling, role commitment, and affiliation with other gay people as factors that encourage gay men to "come out."

As these different perspectives suggest, when we ask why a particular strategy is used, we're really asking a pair of questions: what sort of *person* selects a particular strategy? And what *circumstances* or situational factors encourage the selection of a particular strategy? The choice, ultimately, involves an interplay between these different considerations. Below, I've tried to describe some of the factors that guide these choices. The list is by no means complete, but it does reflect the considerations most often volunteered by the men themselves.

One must resist the temptation, however, to assume that strategic choices are unfailingly rational, self-conscious, and deliberate. There is a tension, in any report on the causes or determinants of behavior, between two opposing views of the human individual; one characterizes us as conscious and rational thinkers, while another locates our decisions in the murky underworld of the unconscious. As McCall (1978) notes in his classic study of behavioral decisionmaking:

At times these processes display surprising degrees of rationality, but rationality must not be confused with deliberation or a high degree of self-awareness. For much of men's behavior evinces a great deal of system and strategic effectiveness, often apparently without the intervention of deliberate or conscious calculation (p. 4).

It follows that when I speak of identity management and goal-oriented behavior, I don't mean to suggest that such decisions are conscious. Even when the men themselves outlined clear, specific reasons for their choice of strategy, these post

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<sup>1</sup> Archer (1979) gave this characterization of existing personality research on self-disclosure: "No categorical picture of the high discloser emerges from the personality research. But, if a colleague burst into my office and demanded one, my statement, made under duress, would be: Taking stock, it appears that intimate disclosers are likely to be women, or at least persons who possess feminine psychological characteristics. They are usually not first-born children. Little can be said about their age or social class without taking into account the person to whom they are disclosing, but high disclosers are perhaps more likely to be from the United States than from some other nations. The data support no generalization about religious background. Among American samples studied, perhaps it is fair to say that disclosers are more likely to be from the white majority than some minority race" (p. 38).

hoc justifications should not be mistaken for the choosing itself. In many cases, "decisions" about identity management are not experienced as such.

### **Assessing the situation**

The first of these might be called situational factors, in that they are relatively independent of the gay professional himself. Situational factors include the behavior and attitudes of peers, the physical design of the workplace, the sexual culture of the organization, and the nature of the larger industry of which it is part.

#### *Attitudes toward homosexuality*

In selecting a strategy, gay professionals routinely make assessments of their co-workers' beliefs about homosexuality. They observe the behavior or comments of others, and in most cases can recall specific anecdotes that seemed to illustrate the prevailing climate of opinion. Others have only vague impressions. But whatever words the men used to describe their environment -- homophobic, prejudiced, conservative, enlightened, tolerant, and so forth -- all had formulated some kind of assessment, and were quick to volunteer it when asked to explain their choice of strategy. In making these assessments, the men used several categories of evidence.

Men using integration strategies spoke with the greatest confidence about their co-workers' attitudes toward homosexuality. Because their own sexuality was known, they spoke from first-hand experience about their co-workers' response to it. Some were convinced that they had been fired from prior jobs for "coming out". Others, like Mark and Barry, submitted to constant personal harassment (as I described in Chapter 6). Mark and Rodney ultimately sued their employers for mistreatment they believed was related to sexual orientation; Barry simply resigned. These men were painfully aware of their co-workers' attitudes toward homosexuality.

Darren, a New Jersey dentist, described a particularly bad experience that had left its mark. When he was in dental school, Darren and his lover had become friendly with Rick and Renee, two classmates who were engaged. "They were just

wonderful, wonderful people. We mixed socially a couple of times a week." As their friendship developed, Darren felt he could safely move from an avoidance strategy to integration:

I guess they just really were very very naive; they didn't know we were lovers. One night we were out at a club, dancing. Renee worked at that time with a guy who was very flamboyant, and she was talking about him being gay. Somehow she brought up the fact that I lived with another man, and maybe we were gay. And I said, "What's so outrageous about that?" She was laughing like it was crazy, a joke. I said, "Why is that a joke?" And she goes "Well what do you mean?" And I said, "Well, we *are* gay. We've been lovers for four years."

Darren didn't think much of the incident until the next day, when he got a clearer picture of Rick and Renee's stance on homosexuality:

The next day Renee called me up and said, "I need to talk to you. Do you mind if I come over tomorrow?" And I said, "Fine." She came over and she goes "I don't want to talk to Ron, just you, so would you please come out to my car and speak with me?" I said, "O.K." I didn't know what it was about. So I walked out to the car and I got in and she left the motor running. And she said "Well . . ." and she didn't look me in the face. She says "Well, I just wanted you to know that Rick and I have talked it over and we've decided -- and this is not a hundred percent because of what you told me last night, although that does have something to do with it. We have just decided that we can't see you or Ron anymore. We can't be your friends anymore."

Almost ten years later, Darren is still troubled when he recalls the incident. "It was like being hit in the face with a sledgehammer, because this was the first person I had ever come out to, because I thought she would be the most accepting. So I tried to discuss it with her and she says, 'I really don't want to discuss it. Would you please get out of the car?' And I said, 'Okay, Renee.' It was a crushing emotional blow to me." Though Rick and Renee tried to apologize a few months later, Darren felt it was too late. Even today, he doesn't think he'll ever be comfortable using an integration strategy at work. "When you stick your finger in the fire," he explained, "you don't put it back in again."

Others had used integration strategies to more positive effect, and could describe relationships that had become more meaningful, doors that had opened, or silences that seemed to convey tacit acceptance. Milton felt that by using an integration strategy he had tapped into a vast network of support in the Washington area. He recalled speaking with a friend, the former president of

Action AIDS, about his work with Whitman-Walker, a local AIDS service organization:

He turned to me and said, "You were president of Whitman-Walker?" and I said, "Yes." He said, "Has it closed any doors to you as a result of that?" I said, "Just the opposite," and he said, "absolutely." We both agreed. I got on the Arena Theater board because of it. I got on the Leadership Washington council because of it. I give speeches all over town because of it. I've been invited to the church of the President of the United States to give a sermon on the second Sunday in February because of it. It hasn't closed anything. It's only opened up opportunities for me, the kind of opportunities that I love. In terms of my law practice, it hasn't shut any doors but I think it hasn't opened that many. Wait, not true. The [public utility] account -- the guy is openly gay and I don't think that would have come about if I hadn't been open about who I am.

Similarly, Jack, the VP of Human Resources for a Washington publishing house, described a personal experience that seemed to epitomize his organization. Jack first adopted an integration strategy almost ten years ago, shortly after his divorce. Several years later, he took his disclosure a step further (as the emphasis shifted from minimizing to normalizing):

At our annual retreat for our managing editors we had some workshops on different aspects of our corporate culture, and I was asked to lead one on corporate culture as it pertained to individual lifestyles. I was able to comfortably open that workshop by saying, "As most of you know I'm an openly gay recovering alcoholic that has just been named Vice President of Human Resources." I think that sums up our culture. There aren't many organizations in which you could feel that comfortable doing that. But you can at this company.

In both cases, because the men were known to be gay, they spoke with confidence about their organizations' stance toward homosexuality, or at least about their own encounters with it.

Men who counterfeit or avoid sexual identities are forced to rely on less direct evidence of their co-workers' attitudes. Because they had not disclosed their own sexuality, they based their assessments instead on the treatment *other* gay people had received. For example, many found themselves in situations in which co-workers expressed an opinion about some third party, another co-worker or client, who wasn't present. Tom, an elementary school teacher, recalled the way his students treat the school's librarian. "He's real obvious," Tom explains. "The kids mimic him, and everybody knows who he is." Dave, the credit manager for an

energy company in Philadelphia, described the way his peers mock the copier repairman. "He's a real flamer. He comes in and everybody talks about how 'flowing and diaphanous' he is. When he asks people for something, they say, 'honey, it's over there, honey', as a joke."

The men were especially sensitive to the attitudes of those above them in the chain of command, whether they were customers or bosses. A New York consultant, Nick, recalled a former boss who had encountered some problems in the office:

He had a problem managing people; he was a little bit effeminate and people would always say things, and didn't always take him seriously, especially on the customer side. He couldn't go out and do much with them. I remember this one lady, she was just vicious. She'd come in and say things about him, "Oh, I saw him and his *boyfriend* down in the Village over the weekend." Those type things. People respected him to his face, but they did say things behind his back.

Likewise, Andy, a Houston lawyer, described the way some of the senior partners treat a lawyer who is known to be gay:

It's a limiting factor because some people choose not to work with him, either clients or other attorneys, for that reason. Fortunately, there are clients who know [he's gay] and work with him and have no problem with it. And there's a significant number of attorneys who work with him and have no problem with it, and so on balance it works out fine. But I'm privy to criticisms and comments from time to time.

Both Nick and Andy, having witnessed the lukewarm reception given other gay people, described their environments in somewhat negative terms. Both used avoidance strategies.

Such instances were especially common in personnel departments and interview situations, in which people were explicitly called upon to evaluate others. Todd, a benefits manager for a public utility, felt that while his peers in human resources were somewhat tolerant, other departments in the company preferred not to hire gay applicants:

I don't doubt that outside of human resources that someone would be ruled out as a possible candidate if he was known to be gay. I mean, I'm sure of that. Once it got to the departments and the managers that a guy was suspected to be gay -- unless there was something really unique about him, or they needed his expertise, or he was real good technically, or it was a really hard position to fill -- other things being equal, they would never give the job to the gay person.

Likewise, George, a Houston airline executive, describes his environment in management as a supportive one, but knows that his situation isn't typical of the larger company. He recalled a number of instances in which in-flight recruiters discriminated against gay applicants:

In-flight is so gay -- male flight attendants are like hairdressers in a way. Everybody *knows* that and perceives that, so there's a fear in management. [My airline] actively discriminates against gays in the recruiting process right now. I know it for a fact. They'll terminate them in training for that. It becomes real obvious.

Though he ultimately rose into management, George began his career as a flight attendant, and recalls the process by which some of the other recruits in his class were eliminated. I asked him how he felt about his company's informal policy, and the implications it might have for him:

I don't think they care if someone's gay or not. They care about how effeminate you are. It's like they really don't care what you do, but if you're a flamer . . . I mean I'm not butch, but if you really were a flamer, they'd have you out of there in a heartbeat. It varies by airline, too. I was hired out of New York with [another airline] and ended up becoming good friends with a female recruiter who hired me. She said that the head guy in Chicago called her and said, "Stop sending all these queers to me." She told me that. So I know it was going on at [that airline].

George's response was to use an integration strategy, but to minimize his visibility in a number of ways. Like Todd, he feels that his department is something of an oasis, and knows that his mobility outside it may be limited.

Paul, an airline executive in New York, gave a more positive assessment of his industry, and could recall at least two incidents in which management had been supportive of a gay employee. The first incident took place in 1973, when a telephone sales agent balked about working for a gay supervisor. When his initial protests went unheard, the man ultimately complained to management that his supervisor had propositioned him at work, a charge that Paul found difficult to believe. After several more protests, the "troublemaker" was ultimately fired. More recently, when a sales agent made a similar complaint about a gay supervisor, the company told him that if he couldn't be a team player, he would have to be fired.

Conversations about AIDS were another forum in which homophobia was often expressed. Many of the men recalled conversations in which co-workers



spoke disparagingly of gay people as the "cause of the AIDS epidemic." Some were even more direct, couching their homophobia in remarks about their own fear of exposure. Tip, a New York surgical resident, recalled the treatment gay patients sometimes received in a large Manhattan hospital. "If you're gay," he explained, the other surgeons "just assume you're HIV-positive. The comments are always negative, and they're always about how they would rather not operate on any person who's gay." Tip gave an example that he considered typical:

If a man comes in for a procedure, unless he's real butch someone almost always brings up AIDS. A man came in for liposuction -- just an average, normal looking guy -- but he brought this girl with him, and she was a burlesque dancer. She was having [breast] implants. I figured he was gay, but no one else did, so they didn't really trouble him. Any other male patients, they always ask their sexuality and if they know you're homosexual there's a possibility that they won't do the surgery.

Another time, when the surgeons suspected that a particular patient was gay, they simply refused to operate:

A black boy came in as a patient, and he had a nasal deformity. He was gay, a little effeminate. I would have done it. I would have been happy to do the surgery. The chief resident and one of the other residents said -- they talked about it in the hallway, walking by after clinic -- and one of them said, "Hell no, we're not going to do that surgery. He's a flamer. I mean, why expose ourselves to that?"

Not surprisingly, Tip considers his environment hostile.

Mark, a compensation consultant, recalled a memorable incident in which his company took an anti-gay stance. Mark's company specializes in the design of compensation and benefits packages, and many of his clients had expressed concern about rising healthcare costs, especially those resulting from AIDS. Several were looking for ways to limit their coverage of AIDS-related illnesses, which prompted a memo that circulated via the firm's electronic mail system:

There was a flyer saying that [the firm] had put together an addendum of benefits plan language to minimize costs for prescription drugs or disability or alternate treatment modes or home health care. There was a whole laundry list of ways to exclude AIDS. And the note said, "If you want a copy of any of this, here's the access code for the information retrieval system." How much more blatant could you be?

For Mark, whose own lover died of AIDS, the company's stance was unconscionable. It was one of several incidents that fueled his sense of outrage, and ultimately prompted him to sue.

Sometimes the men observed the treatment of other gay co-workers through second-hand accounts that had become part of the company folklore. Though they had not directly witnessed harassment or discrimination, for example, many of the men had heard what Goffman (1963) calls "atrocious stories and exemplary moral tales," illustrating "extreme mistreatment by normals" (p. 25). Keith recalled something he heard about the company's hiring policies. "Supposedly, there's a hidden law, or hidden rule, that if you come in for an interview with an earring, and you're a man, your application is automatically thrown away." I asked Keith how he had learned about this secret hiring policy, and he thought for a moment. "My boss told me that," he answered.

Randy, a Wall Street broker, recalls a similar warning from one of his co-workers. Shortly after she joined the firm, "a woman I was close to called me up one day, and said, 'You know, I wouldn't be telling people that you're gay. You don't know who you work with, you don't know some of these guys as well as I've gotten to know them. They'll use this against you.' I took the warning to heart." Justin, a college professor in Washington, recalls similar advice he was given by other faculty members:

I started to go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and I ran into other faculty, including a few from [my university], and I talked to them about it. I told them I'd just moved here, and so forth. And they said "Well, the upper administration is fairly conservative, and we know this person who got hurt, and that person who got hurt." Outwardly no one would ever say anything, they'd be quite liberal, but privately they'd say "We really think this could hurt you."

Based on these warnings, Justin worried that an integration strategy would damage his chances at tenure. "So I made a decision that at least until tenure came around I was going to be really quiet. I'd do my work there, do my teaching, work on my alcoholism, get involved in some gay organizations, but just have as minimal involvement in the job as possible. And I thought that would protect me, in the sense that if nobody knew it couldn't be held against me." Though Justin never

witnessed any first-hand discrimination against gay people, he retained the belief that his organization was homophobic.

Other men described comments, jokes or anecdotes that seemed to telegraph their co-workers' opinions about homosexuality. Geoff, a San Francisco architect, explained that homophobic comments were standard on most construction sites. "In my business, homosexuals are something that you put underneath a slab. That's a generalization, but most of these guys are very redneck, macho. They're not bad people, but they have very distinct views about how the world should operate. I make an effort to sort of go along with them." Rodney, a Wall Street trader, made the trading floor sound like a construction site. "There's a locker room mentality on the trading floor. Infantile, high school, locker room banter. Tons of anti-gay jokes, and AIDS jokes." Rodney remembered one man in particular, another trader who lashed out at a gay colleague. "I remember him making a remark one time about one of the top traders in the bond market. He was talking about his bizarre it was, like, 'This guy's a fucking faggot, and he's still trading.'" The frequent comments set the tone in Rodney's company, and discouraged him from abandoning his counterfeit identity. "This guy's level of homophobia was enough to keep us all in the closet," he explained.

Tip felt that he had "lost count" of the homophobic remarks he had heard over the years from Dr. Thomas, the head of surgery. "He's an ultra conservative Republican type who thinks that I share the exact same goals that he has," according to Tip. "I grew up with someone, my father, who is just like him." Tip remembered a particular conversation with Dr. Thomas:

He had a sailing trip recently where they were fogged in and had to take port in Provincetown. You'd have thought he had ended up in Saudi Arabia, the way he described it. "Jesus, he said, you couldn't believe it. All these bullish looking girls walking around together, very unattractive group of people," he said. "Strange men holding hands, a disgusting display." He was saying this on the elevator to two other professors. "This is where our country is headed, can you believe this."

The incident stood out, for Tip, because it seemed so typical of Dr. Thomas. "Having heard his ideas and opinions about gay people before, I think he would lump me into that group and think I was trash."

While explicit displays of prejudice are easier to interpret and remember, they are usually outnumbered by other, more subtle displays. In many organizations, gay men are forced to base their assessments on more oblique evidence. Brent, a records management executive with a Houston company, based his judgment on characteristics of the situation that had little to do with homosexuality:

It's not a topic that's openly discussed. I think we've got the full spectrum of people. We have some people who are very very conservative about their views toward sexuality and think it's only appropriate in marriage, and we've got single younger people who are comfortable with being very open about sexuality and quite liberal about it outside of marriage.

In particular, he felt that his boss was part of the latter group. "I think my boss is very liberal when it comes to sexuality," he explained. "She's divorced and has a boyfriend at the moment. I think the boyfriend was in the picture before the divorce happened. My perception of her is that she's very liberal and open about sex. I asked Brent to explain why this made him think his boss was liberal, and he volunteered several biographical facts:

Her children are not mainstream children in my opinion. They've been raised to make their own calls and make their own decisions. Whatever was appropriate, in their opinion, they got away with. Her daughters didn't subscribe to a lot of the things women subscribe to as far as shaving their legs and underarms, that sort of thing. I just see her as very liberal and open . . . She's not hung up on what people think about her or care about her. She's not a person who gets embarrassed easily at all.

For Brent, his boss' unconventionality implied tacit acceptance of his sexual orientation.

Other men based their assessments on the general atmosphere in the company, citing the ages, religious beliefs, or personal backgrounds of co-workers. Grey, the marketing manager for a Houston mall, described his company as "a very conservative, navy suit, white shirt, real estate developer." To him, this portrait included conservative sexual values. Dave, the credit manager for a Philadelphia energy company, gave me a similar description. "It's a very old company, with a lot of Southerners. They didn't even want to hire black people." Though homosexuality was never mentioned at work, he assumes that their unspoken attitudes are negative. "I can't imagine any of the executives appreciating the fact that they have a gay employee. I'm sure AIDS would probably come up. I'm sure

people would probably be worried that 'Oh my god, he's a gay man.' Who knows what people would do." In this way, beliefs about non-traditional heterosexuality or about other minorities were sometimes cited as evidence of opinions about homosexuality. "There are five or six men who are cheating on their wives, or wives who are cheating on the husbands," according to Derek, who saw this as evidence of a progressive sexual atmosphere at work. "I don't want to say we're *loose*," he explained, "but people just do their own thing and feel free to discuss it."

Tom, an elementary school teacher, felt that his profession was by nature somewhat homophobic. One of the more persistent myths about gay people is that our sexual orientation is the result of early exposure to other homosexuals who "recruit" from the ranks of the young. In religious, medical, and psychological discourse, too, homosexuality has been conflated with other kinds of transgressive sexuality, notably pedophilia. The result is widespread anxiety about homosexuals who work with children. Most gay people have heard or read about the periodic grass-roots campaigns to sequester homosexuals from children (who are usually depicted as asexual, defenseless, and impressionable victims); the most famous is Anita Bryant's successful campaign, in 1977, to repeal a non-discrimination ordinance in Dade County. For men working with children, these concerns are real. Tom cited them as one of his reasons for using an avoidance strategy:

In the position I'm in, with kids, you have to worry about it. We've had male teachers who have been accused of molesting the little girls, so you hesitate even putting your arm around a little girl and giving her a hug. And being gay, you have to be twice as careful because you have to watch out for little boys, too. So if a kid does something good, you think twice about giving him a hug and saying, "You did a good job." Because it could be misinterpreted. In that respect, being gay is like a double-edged sword. You have to be careful with both boys *and* girls. You don't know whether they know you're gay, whether they think you're straight, so it's difficult in that respect.

Though he wasn't aware of any specific incident in which he had been the victim of prejudice, Tom felt his sexuality would be unwelcome at work. Likewise, though he heard an occasional comment from his students (usually about the school librarian), he had no concrete evidence that the other teachers or administrators were homophobic. But for Tom, the prevailing myths about

homosexuality and children were evidence enough that his environment was hostile.

As Tom's case suggests, when gay men find little or no concrete evidence of co-workers' attitudes, they tend to fall back on beliefs they formed in their experiences outside the workplace. When asked to explain their of a particular strategy at work, for example, many spoke of childhood or family experiences that had shaped their understanding of the world. Often, they seemed to have imported these beliefs, which were usually negative, into their relationships with co-workers. Derek, a Houston executive, explained that this was his reason for wanting to "pull back" from work relationships that were becoming too close. Though he's experienced no discrimination at work and feels that his co-workers are reasonably tolerant, Derek is reluctant to trust this assessment:

I'm starting to relax, and I'm going to get happy if I relax, but I could lose it all, too. And I've worked too hard to lose it. I'm happy for the first time I can remember, and I'm not comfortable with that. You know, you're just too vulnerable. When you're most vulnerable, you don't *think* you are. I'm so comfortable now, so much happier now, that I keep thinking, "You're on borrowed time, darling."

At the very least, Derek's paranoia speaks to the pervasive climate of intolerance outside professional organizations. Unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, men like Derek have no reason to doubt that conditions within the organization, as elsewhere, are unfavorable.

There is a tendency, in short, simply to *presume* that co-workers hold prejudicial views of homosexuality. In the absence of specific evidence about sexual attitudes, the men took for granted that there was a reason to be cautious. Jim, a Philadelphia software executive, thought that this explained his use of an avoidance strategy, even though he has never experienced any overt homophobia at work. "If I were going for a job interview," he told me, "I probably wouldn't say, 'By the way, I'm gay,' because of the perception that it could result in my not getting the job. Remember, that's after years of having is beat into me that people will react negatively. I've never had a negative experience, personally. Every single one has been positive. I mean, you might say that I should have learned by now, but I still have the perception that it's negative."

I asked the men several questions to elicit these assessments of workplace attitudes, and found that their answers were highly correlated with their choice of strategy (see Figure 8.1). Often, the men were explicit about the link. Men who had witnessed explicit acts of discrimination, for example, were quick to cite these as justification for their decision to avoid or counterfeit an identity. Those who had witnessed frequent and specific instances of homophobia (13 men, or 19% of the sample) were most likely to counterfeit (46%), avoid (23%), or use some combination of the two (8%); only 3 of these men (23%) used an integration strategy. By contrast, men who witnessed only occasional displays of homophobia (24 men, or 34% of the sample) were clustered toward the right of the continuum. These men tended to use avoidance (33%) or integration (33%) strategies, sometimes in combination (17%), while only a handful used a counterfeiting strategy. The same pattern can be found among those who witnessed no displays of homophobia in the workplace (33 men, or 47% of the sample). Among these men, all but a few used avoidance (36%), integration (30%), or some combination of these strategies (21%).<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of each interview, I asked each of the men to describe what would happen if they "came out" at work. What would change, if anything? How would certain key people -- bosses, clients, peers -- respond to the disclosure? Finally, I asked each of the men to imagine a hypothetical situation. "Imagine that all of the gay people turned green tomorrow, so that your co-workers would know, without a doubt, that you're gay/bisexual." The so-called "green question" drew some nervous replies, especially among those using counterfeiting strategies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These findings can be contrasted with those reported by the American Society of News Editors, in its survey of 205 professional journalists (Ghiglione *et al.*, 1990). In the 12 months preceding the survey, 81% of the respondents had heard derogatory comments about gays or lesbians in general, and nearly half heard them directed at other gay and lesbian employees (p. 11). A fifth of the respondents didn't believe that their newsrooms were a good environment for gays.

<sup>3</sup> Not to mention a few gasps about other possible ramifications. One man confessed, after the interview, that "I'm probably going to have a nightmare about turning green." Another feared that his co-workers "would probably think it was Kaposi's sarcoma." A Wall Street broker laughed that "They'd probably say 'Oooh, he turned green. It's probably all that money.'" Another group seemed most upset by the prospect of a color-coordination nightmare. "Exactly what *shade* of green?" one man asked. "Are we talking chartreuse or hunter or lime?"

## PERCEIVED HOMOPHOBIA

	STRATEGY USED					TOTAL
	COUNTER	COUNTER/ AVOID	AVOID	AVOID/ INTEG	INTEG	
<b>Homophobic incidents or comments at work</b>						
Often	6 (46%)	1 (8%)	3 (23%)		3 (23%)	13 (100%)
Sometimes	1 (4%)	3 (13%)	8 (33%)	4 (17%)	8 (33%)	24
Never	1 (3%)	3 (9%)	12 (36%)	7 (21%)	10 (30%)	33
<b>Expected consequences of having sexuality revealed</b>						
Fired	1 (25%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)			4 (100%)
Harassed	3 (50%)		3 (50%)			6
Embarrassed	4 (20%)	2 (10%)	9 (45%)	5 (25%)		20
None		4 (10%)	9 (23%)	6 (15%)	21 (53%)	40
	n (row %)					

FIGURE 8.1

A small number of the men felt they would be fired (4 men, or 6%), all of whom used some combination of counterfeiting and avoidance strategies. Men who feared that they would be harassed (6 men, or 9%) were similarly clustered toward the left of the continuum. By contrast, most of the men expected less severe consequences, and tended to use a different range of strategies. Those who worried only that they would be embarrassed or made uncomfortable by public exposure (20 men, or 29%) were clustered toward the center of the continuum. Most used an avoidance strategy (45%), either in combination with integration (25%) or counterfeiting (10%); a few of these men used a counterfeiting strategy under all circumstances (20%). Finally, those who expected no consequences at all (40 men, or 57%) were overwhelming users of integration (53%), avoidance (23%), or some combination of these strategies (15%).

In this way, homophobic environments (or at least environments in which there was concrete evidence of homophobia) tend to push men toward either extreme on the strategy continuum. Some men respond to overt hostility by counterfeiting a heterosexual identity, exempting themselves from personal attacks. Others use integration strategies, but find that they are forced to "come out" in confrontational ways. Under the circumstances, strategies that lie between these extremes -- efforts to normalize, minimize, or dignify a gay identity, or to avoid a



sexual identity altogether -- are largely unavailable. Because the prevailing climate makes it impossible to take a more central position on the continuum, the men were forced to accept either invisibility or conflict. By contrast, environments in which the sexual culture is more tolerant (or at least less manifestly hostile), seem to facilitate avoidance and integration.

The relationship between an individual's strategy choice and his assessment of co-workers' attitudes towards homosexuality is complex and multi-directional. Some of the men felt that their situations had forced them to adopt a particular strategy. Others, especially those using integration strategies, claim that they chose a particular company or industry precisely because it would permit them to behave as they wanted.

Among the first group, several men described situations in which a homophobic boss or co-worker had, in effect, imposed a particular strategy. Matt, a Houston executive with a national car manufacturer, felt that his boss had given him little choice. His boss, a man whom Matt described as the "last of a dying breed," was given to frequent displays of prejudice against a number of ethnic and racial groups, and was known in the office for his "truck driver mentality." According to Matt, "He's the most overbearing person I've ever met in my life, in terms of being a pound-on-the-table-and-scream manager." If his sexuality were known, Matt feels certain he would be hounded out of the company, and his solution is to counterfeit an identity. During our meeting, Matt's fear of his boss was almost palpable. To protect himself, he declined even to give his boss' actual name, insisting that we use a nickname instead. "Let's just call him Atilla."

Matt told me that he would rather use an avoidance strategy at work, but feels that his situation makes that impossible. At 40, after 15 years with the company, he wishes he had built his career in a more hospitable environment or industry. He speaks with particular regret about the decision early in his career not to take an offer with Delta airlines. "I accepted this position because I perceived that it would have more responsibility, and it paid a little more. If I could turn the clock back, knowing what I know today, I would accept the other job."

Terry, a lawyer with a small Houston firm, found himself in a similar situation. The firm's senior partner, a man in his 60s, was vocal about his distaste for several minority groups. "He had trouble accepting equal rights for blacks," Terry explains. "It took him a long time to get there." His views on homosexuality are also well known:

Occasionally he makes derogatory comments about homosexuals. He said something not too long ago when Bush signed that bill and several homosexuals came to the signing. He made a derogatory comment about that. He likes Bush very much, but he said "I like him, but it really made me mad the other day when he had all those queers up to the White House." He's ignorant, that's all. He's ignorant about black; he's ignorant about gays. . . . He just may be too old of a dog to teach new tricks.

Because Terry is entirely dependent on the senior partner for work, he felt safest counterfeiting a heterosexual identity at work. "He's the monarch," Terry concludes, "and he could fire me at will."

Other men claimed that their desire to use a particular strategy had preceded their search for a work environment in which this would be possible. Gary, the tax administrator for a Philadelphia utility, explained that this was his reason for turning down a job in which he might have found it difficult to use an avoidance strategy:

I remember one interview, before I took this job. I was going in for my initial interview and somebody else had just come out of the office. I overheard the interviewer tell the secretary, "Well, go find out why this guy's single." He just said this to the secretary in front of me. And I went through the whole interview with this constantly on my mind. The interview went well, and I got the offer, but I thought, "I don't want to work for this guy. If that's such an issue, I don't want to work for him."

Chris, on the other hand, felt strongly about using an integration strategy, and explained that he wouldn't think of working for an organization in which this wasn't possible. "I choose to live where my being gay is not a daily issue," he told me. "In the back of my mind it was probably a factor in my choice of careers, too."

As these examples suggest, the relationship between strategy choice and workplace attitudes toward homosexuality is complex, and most certainly takes the form of a multi-directional loop. In some cases, situation factors seem to delimit the range of possible strategies; positive or negative attitudes favor certain strategies over others, as men accommodate their self-presentation to the

environment. At the same time, the desire to use a particular strategy led other men to work situations that accommodate their preferences. In these cases, strategy choice seemed to precede the choice of organization or industry.

### *Intrusiveness*

Every organization establishes some kind of boundaries between work and non-work, business and leisure, the personal and the professional. In some settings, work relationships are expected to extend well beyond the office: to dinners with clients, opera nights with the boss and his wife, or ski trips with others in the department. Social activities flow seamlessly into work activities as wives, roommates and girlfriends find themselves drawn into the company's extended family. In such settings, when professional relationships intrude upon non-professional ones, sexuality is very much on display. Working within them, gay professionals find that only certain strategies are available to them.

In other settings, the boundaries are stricter, and self-disclosure is more limited. Interpersonal contact may be limited by work that requires more time spent on the road, with clients, or alone. After-hours socializing is rare, as are personal conversations during regular hours. When asked, the men in these organizations confess that they "don't really know much" about their co-workers. Sexual displays are less common, which encourages the use of strategies that capitalize on this fact.

Organizations vary widely in their level of "intrusiveness." In organizations characterized by sexual banter and intimate discussions, high levels of self-disclosure are often expected. For example, about half of the men in my sample (49%) felt that co-workers talked or joked about sex frequently, and found that these environments made it difficult to be secretive about their own lives. When co-workers spoke freely about themselves, it was often expected that the men would make corresponding disclosures about themselves. This so-called

"reciprocity effect" tends to draw the non-discloser in, as he or she feels pressured to respond to the questions and revelations of peers (see Chelune *et al.*, 1979).<sup>4</sup>

Other organizations make self-disclosure seem inappropriate, unusual, or irrelevant. Personal questions were rare, and the men felt little pressure to reveal anything about themselves. Tom, a New Jersey schoolteacher, felt that he worked in this sort of environment. "It's strange," he told me. "I've been with my lover now for going on twelve years, and people just accept the fact that he's a roommate. No one has ever questioned it. People like my principal will call the house and he'll answer the phone. And they just don't react to it." Glen, the general counsel for a Houston firm, felt that his firm was similar in this respect. "I've always recognized that [this company] was different," he told me. "That was one reason I chose it. It was apparent to me in the beginning, even before I accepted the position. Everything about it would indicate that it would be a kind of nosy, busybody, very traditional environment, but it's not."

Sometimes these norms were inscribed in an informal code of office etiquette regarding personal questions. Arthur, a New York attorney, felt that his profession tended to impose some boundaries on the level of intrusiveness. "I think law is one of the more fortunate, white-glovey professions in that respect," he explained. "If it were necessary for me to do a whole lot of socializing -- like playing golf or bridge with the 'old man' and his wife -- if I were in that kind of place, if I were always required to have a perky little Buffy by my side, it would be harder. In the early days I had to do that. I'm speaking from a position where I'm older. I can call my own shots now."

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<sup>4</sup> Derek, a Houston executive, found that the reciprocity effect sometimes worked in the opposite direction. Though he uses an avoidance strategy, he suspects that some of his co-workers may know that he's gay. Derek thinks that this has prompted them to reveal things about themselves: "When people feel that you've got this great big 'X', and yet you're still able to function and you've got clout in the company, that they're willing to show you their vulnerabilities. A couple of the people in the company who are hopelessly straight, but reasonably tolerant -- if they've had any male dysfunction or concern, they'll ankle around to my office and want to discuss it, like I'm their local doctor, or I might understand these male things better than they do. It's kind of funny, but they're *very serious*; it's a big deal to them. . . . I'm amazed that people share information with me that they wouldn't tell anybody. I don't think it's just a personality thing; maybe it is, but it's more like "You've got a lot of things wrong in your life, and so I do, so let me tell you about it." So in that sense, people say a lot of things to me that they won't say to anybody. . . . I get the feeling they think 'it doesn't matter with you, since it's *different* with you.'"

A Washington lawyer, Larry, found himself in a similar situation. Though he lived with another man for almost ten years, he found that the other lawyers, all of whom knew his lover, were reluctant to tread on his personal turf. When he got an occasional question that seemed somewhat intrusive, he explained, "I didn't bite. I'd deflect, I'd make a joke, I'd be vague. People usually wouldn't press and say 'So, are you living with a guy and he's your lover?' They'd come at it more indirectly, and you can always deflect those questions."

Keith, a records management clerk in Houston, recalled an instance in which a co-worker warned him that he had stepped beyond the limits his environment placed on personal intrusions. Keith recalled a lunch hour he spent in his boss' office, in full view of the others. At least one of his co-workers, a woman named Billie, thought this was odd. "Billie made a comment to me later. 'Looks like you have a new friend,' or something like that. I told Brent later, 'I guess I won't be talking to you very much'." I asked Keith what he thought Billie's comment had meant, and he explained that it sounded like a sort of warning. "She meant that she was watching, and she was very curious about what we were talking about." As a result, Keith is self-conscious about his conversations with Brent, and feels somewhat reluctant to be seen socializing with him.

Other times, a low level of intrusiveness was reflected in more concrete ways, like the absence of company parties or social obligations with clients. About a third of my participants (30%) worked for organizations with frequent social obligations, whether they were formal parties, client events, or informal social get-togethers (see Figure 8.2). Another third (34%) described less frequent social obligations, while the remainder (36%) had few or none at all. When social obligations were limited, self-disclosure was often easier to avoid.

Roger, a lawyer with the Department of Labor, finds that the other attorneys in his office rarely spent time together outside of work. Though some are married, Roger has never met their wives or husbands. The department has a softball team and an annual holiday party, but there is little pressure to take part in either. "That's one of the things that's good about working for the Federal Government, as a gay person," he explained. "You don't have to belong to the social clubs or bring in clients. You don't have to expose your private life to members of the firm

on a social basis in order to succeed at the organization." For Roger, this made an avoidance strategy an obvious choice. "People in the government don't have to socialize one bit, and usually don't."

Other structural characteristics, like the organization's size, can also discourage intrusiveness. Larger organizations promise a degree of anonymity and mobility that tend to discourage intimate social ties. (At the same time, they offer a larger pool of potential friends, and lower the relative importance of any one relationship that has become a source of trouble). Barry, a New York lawyer, explained that this was one of the first things he noticed when he moved from a small firm to a much larger one:

One of the reasons I left [the other firm] was because I had too many people that I was extremely close to. I wanted to go to a more anonymous type of firm, or a bigger firm where it's friendly, it's nice, but there aren't the same kind of heated relationships that there are in the other firm. There's a big difference between a law firm that has 300 people in it and one that has 70, 80, 90 people in it. I knew every single solitary person including the people in the mail room at the old one, and they all knew me. I don't even know all the lawyers down the hall from me at [the new firm]. That's actually one thing that I like about it. That's one of the reasons I came here, one of many.

As Barry suggests, smaller organizations are often more intrusive, and seem to encourage a greater degree of self-disclosure. Schneider (1986) observed a similar effect in her study of professional lesbians. In interviews with 228 women, she found that larger workplaces were less conducive than smaller ones to self-disclosure (though size of department had an opposite, non-significant effect). Though large and small organizations differ in a number of other respects, Schneider proposes that intimacy may be the intervening variable, and concludes that "the size of the organization may diminish the opportunity for the development of intimacy leading to disclosure" (p. 471).

The physical design of the workplace can also influence the level of intrusiveness. Some offices were designed to be open and communal, with rooms that have no doors and desks that have no walls. Carl, a San Francisco realtor, gave me a tour of his company's office, a large open room with long rows of desks, bordered by some smaller offices with glass walls. "This isn't a place where you can easily keep secrets," he explained, pointing to the telephones on each desk.

Similarly, from doctors I often heard about the late hours and confined space of the operating room. Kirk, a Philadelphia obstetrician, explained:

People who work together in a constant workplace -- a confined environment, an office for example -- it's second nature for them to talk about their private lives, to know about each other's private lives. I think sexuality enters into that if someone wants to be included in the general give and take of what goes on around the water cooler. I think that eventually it becomes unavoidable.

Similarly, traders and stock brokers often described large, unpartitioned workspaces, and the constant interaction they facilitated. "You hear everyone else's phone calls," according to one, "and you don't have much privacy."<sup>5</sup>

<b>INTRUSIVENESS</b>						
	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>					<b>TOTAL</b>
	<b>COUNTER</b>	<b>COUNTER/ AVOID</b>	<b>AVOID</b>	<b>AVOID/ INTEG</b>	<b>INTEG</b>	
<b>Social obligations at work</b>						
Often	3 (14%)	4 (19%)	3 (14%)	4 (19%)	7 (33%)	21 (100%)
Sometimes	3 (13%)	2 (8%)	5 (21%)	5 (21%)	9 (38%)	24
Rarely/never	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	15 (60%)	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	25
<b>'How often do people at work talk or joke about sex?'</b>						
"Often"	6 (18%)	4 (12%)	3 (9%)	4 (12%)	17 (50%)	34 (100%)
"Not too often"	2 (6%)	3 (8%)	20 (56%)	7 (19%)	4 (11%)	36
<b>Number of people in office</b>						
25 or fewer	3 (9%)	6 (19%)	10 (31%)	7 (22%)	6 (19%)	32 (100%)
More than 25	5 (19%)	1 (3%)	13 (34%)	4 (11%)	15 (39%)	38
	n (row %)					

FIGURE 8.2

An organization's level of intrusiveness has important implications for strategy choice (see Figure 8.2). When organizations are highly intrusive, for example, gay men find it difficult to use strategies that rely on the non-intrusiveness of others. For example, men who described frequent social obligations with clients or co-workers were evenly distributed across the range of strategies (with the greatest concentration toward the right of the continuum). As social obligations became

<sup>5</sup> Bozett (1980) made a similar point in his study of self-disclosure among gay fathers. When fathers spent more time with their children, the frequency of contact made self-disclosure more difficult to avoid.

less frequent, the men tended to cluster more strongly toward the center of the continuum (with 60% using avoidance strategies exclusively).

The same pattern emerges with respect to sexual self-disclosure or banter. When co-workers talked or joked frequently about sex, gay men found it easiest to use only integration (50%) or counterfeiting (18%) strategies. But when sexual topics were uncommon, only a few of the men could be found at these two ends of the continuum (6% and 11%, respectively). Instead, more than half of this group (56%) used only avoidance strategies, while another quarter (27%) used them in combination with one of the other two strategies.

One can easily understand why intrusive organizations seem to elicit strategies on either end of the strategy continuum. Like overt expressions of homophobia, relaxed or frequent communications about sexuality tend to expose the avoider, forcing him to take a more active role in the construction of his identity. Intrusive questions or situations also precipitate a shift in control, from the performer to his audience. Dave, a Philadelphia executive, recalled a situation in which he felt a woman in his office had usurped his control of the situation by asking about his lover. "Audrey always asks, 'How's Roger,' and in a sense it bothers me," he explained. "I'm kind of uptight when somebody else brings up the matter because you lose control. I don't mind when *I* bring it up, because I'm in control of the situation, but it's different when somebody approaches me."

When audiences become intrusive, gay men are often forced to abandon their avoidance strategies. Milton, a Washington lawyer, described a scenario in which he was forced to abandon an avoidance strategy. Early in his career, he responded to an unexpected, intrusive question with the quick adoption of a counterfeit identity:

My boss came into my office, it was late at night and he was talking to me, and as he turned to walk away, he said ". . . and get married." I knew what that meant. There was a time when I worked in the U.S. Senate and I was sitting in the back of a limousine with a Senator, the Chairman of the Committee for which I worked. He was clearly trying to get at what my sexuality was. He said "Are you married? Have you ever been married? Is there anyone special in your life?" Scared the dickens out of me, first because I thought he was coming on to me, and secondly because I just wasn't prepared for it. So I lied. I said, "I'm not married, never have been, but yes, there is someone special in my life . . . and she's wonderful."



In this situation, Milton was forced to drop a strategy that relied heavily on the non-intrusiveness of others; as the exchange became more intrusive, the strategy ceased to be available. As a Houston executive explained, "I try to be as vague as possible, but if I need to lie, I'll lie."

Other men responded by shifting in the other direction, toward openness. Carter recalls his response when the environment became increasingly intrusive. A female co-worker forced the shift by asking Carter a direct question:

She came in one time and shut the door and she said, "I just thought I'd ask you, are you gay?" And I turned beet red and everything, because I had never really discussed it with peers before, and I said, "Yeah." And she said, "Well, I just don't believe it. I heard this and can't believe you're gay. You don't act like it, blah blah blah. So I said, "Does Mark [her boyfriend] act like a black person?" So she and I started talking about it openly, then another person would get brought in, and finally it was just all out.

By asking a direct question about Carter's relationships, and volunteering information about her own, the woman precipitated a shift in his strategy.

Men who hadn't actually encountered such questions were often unsure which way they would jump. Even when their preference was to use an integration strategy, they sometimes confessed that it would depend on the circumstances, and the nature of the intrusion. Nick, a New York consultant, explained that he has "often thought what I'd say if someone asked me, but no one has. I'd like to think I'd be honest, but I doubt I would be. It would depend on how I was asked. If they asked in a degrading way -- 'Are you gay *or what*?' -- I'd probably tend to say, 'No.' But if they asked in a more positive way, I'd probably say, 'Yeah, why do you ask?' or something like that." Howard, a labor relations executive for a San Francisco utility, explained that, "My general rule is that if I don't really know who you are, and don't really know where you're coming from, I keep the conversation fairly oblique.

In less intrusive organizations, the absence of such questions promotes the use of strategies toward the center of the continuum; when sexual displays are infrequent, avoidance strategies become the obvious choice. "I wouldn't mind being out to a handful of people, including my boss," according to Tony, who works for a Philadelphia investment firm. "But even if I *were* out, he wouldn't ask

me about my personal life. That's the thing about him." Tony's boss keeps has a hands-off attitude with his staff, and doesn't like to socialize with them. For Tony, this seemed virtually to force an avoidance strategy. Jeff, a financial analyst with a small Philadelphia investment firm, found himself in a similar situation. He explained that he sometimes thought about "coming out" to his boss, Jack, but felt that his environment made such disclosures seem inappropriate:

His whole attitude toward work is that he really keeps his private life private -- to a greater extent than most people I've worked with -- and I feel certain that he feels it's irrelevant, and I feel like I'd be making too big a deal. I'd like not to have to worry about it, but on the other hand, I think to *say* it would sound as if it was a bigger deal, that I'm bringing my private life into the office to a degree . . . and I don't think it would make any different in the way he operates anyway. So I don't see the point in doing it.

He explained that in the long run, if he stayed with the firm, he might contemplate having a long talk with Jack. "But it's not like previous jobs, where I had annual office dinner dances, where everybody was expected to bring a date and everything. I don't run into those situations. On the other hand, if I go to work for another company where there is a lot more social activity, then it might make a little more sense. There may eventually come a time when it makes more sense to say, 'Look, you guys go out and do all these things with your wives or dates, and here's the reason I don't.'" But until he finds himself in that sort of environment, Jeff plans to use an avoidance strategy.

In environments like these, there was often little incentive or opportunity to use strategies toward either end of the continuum. There was rarely a reason to actively counterfeit an identity, nor was there any incentive to politicize or dignify one's gayness. Co-workers sought or supplied little concrete information about sexual attitudes, which made the atmosphere conducive to ambiguity. It was only when peers seemed to traffic in opinions about sexuality that gay men were pressed to take an unambiguous stance.

Describing his work environment, Randy felt that it was usually easiest to accommodate the prevailing climate of professional indifference. Several of Randy's co-workers know that he is gay, and he admits that "it would be nice" to make that a larger part of their interaction. But his environment, a large Wall

Street investment bank, didn't seem to encourage such exchanges. "Even when I've been out with the guys who know I'm gay, they don't ask anything about who I'm seeing. It would be nice to have people ask about your relationships, 'Are you happy?' and all of that." Still, he doesn't consider this likely, given the environment. "People don't talk like that anyway," he explains. "Even the straight guys, among themselves, they never ask 'Gee, how's it *really* going with Joe and the new kid? Are you guys really happy? It's really tough, isn't it?' People just don't have conversations like that. This is a business of strength, and while it would be nice to see that, it's just not part of the business."

For the time being, Randy is content to use an avoidance strategy, and feels unable to share his personal life with most of his colleagues. "I chalk it up to the fact that work relationships aren't like that *anyway*, whether you're straight, gay, whatever. That's just professional environments in general."

### *Vulnerability*

Strategy choice is also influenced by one's perceived economic vulnerability. Some men feel that their jobs are relatively secure, that their performance records or client relationships make them difficult to fire, or that another job would be relatively easy to find. Others feel that they have few protections, performance that is difficult to measure or document, or careers in which mobility is limited and jobs are scarce. The perception that one is vulnerable discourages risk-taking, and encourages the use of more conservative strategies.

Few men know how vulnerable they really are, however. Until they are forced to contest an unfair dismissal or lost opportunity, gay professionals don't usually know what sort of protection they can expect from clients, co-workers or company policy. Fewer still are willing to challenge their employers, and to accept a free fall into an untested legal safety net. But these uncertainties notwithstanding, all make assumptions about their vulnerability, and use these assessments when deciding which strategy to use.

Among the most obvious indicators of vulnerability is the degree of latitude one's boss or client has in the hiring and firing of subordinates. Not surprisingly, men who are dependent on a powerful, independent boss tend to give high

estimates of their vulnerability. Tip, a surgical resident, felt that this was an important source of his discomfort at work. He explained that in most residency programs the surgeons come up for renewal at the end of each year, and the "pyramid" structure of these programs ensures that some will be eliminated. Sometimes the dismissals are the result of measurable performance deficits, but Tip claimed to know several surgeons who were dismissed due to "personality differences" with the other staff. "In your third year of general surgery they could bump you and say, 'You're not coming back next year'," he explained, "and then you're left after all these years with no job. And you can't work, unless you can find a residency program that will take you to finish."

Tip's program doesn't use the pyramid formula, however, which he initially hoped would afford him some measure of security. "That was one of the reasons I chose [this hospital], because I knew I would be accepted from start to finish." Three years into the program, however, Tip has never felt more vulnerable. "Even now they could get rid of me," he explained. Tip has come to view his profession as a tightly-knit community, and realizes that his boss, Dr. Thomas, is one of its most visible members. "The network is strong. The head of surgery, Dr. Thomas, is the head of the society for the whole country for plastic surgery. He knows everyone. To be mobile at all in plastic surgery requires that Dr. Thomas give me his approval. At least for another year and a half." Worse yet, Dr. Thomas has a reputation for bullying the other doctors. Shortly after Tip joined the program, for example, he learned about another doctor who had been forced to leave. "The chief resident was gay," Tip recalls, "and he picked up that I was gay. He warned me, when I first came to the department five years ago, to be very careful. He told me about a woman named Mary, that she was lesbian, and that Dr. Thomas, bigot that he is, made her life so miserable she chose to do her residency elsewhere. And she left."

For Tip, the solution was to counterfeit an identity. "I wouldn't want to set myself up to be eliminated," he explained, "and being gay would be a very big reason to be eliminated. I thought general surgery would be a little bit more progressive up North. That's one of the main reasons I came to New York. But

it's not. They're good old boys." At least until he finishes the residency program, Tip plans to disguise his sexuality.

A Philadelphia medical resident expressed strikingly similar concerns. Though none of his co-workers seemed especially prejudiced, Miguel worried that he needed to be careful. "I can't tell them I'm gay," he explained, "because I'm not free yet. Like, if I'm going to infectious diseases, I still depend on the people in that area -- we call it a fellowship -- I depend on those people. I don't know if they'll be able to take someone who's an open gay, I don't know what their mentality is." He hopes that the situation will change as he becomes more independent, but for now he continues to counterfeit an identity. "Once I have my fellowship and my private practice, I won't care at all. The first person who will know will be my secretary. But at this point I cannot take that chance."

Men who worked directly with clients or customers would appear to have a more stable economic footing. When their dependence was dispersed across a number of individuals outside their own organization, some men took comfort in the idea that no one person was responsible for their livelihood. Michael, a Philadelphia consultant, explained that this was one of the reasons he felt comfortable using an integration strategy. "The risk levels are not high because no one client is all that important. If someone doesn't like the mouthwash that I use, or the fact that I'm gay, it doesn't much matter to the business."

A notable exception was a man who feared that clients would desert him *en masse* if they learned that he is gay. Darren, a New Jersey dentist, felt certain that the current hysteria about AIDS would drive his clients away. At the time of our interview, in the Summer of 1990, Kimberly Bergalis and her cynical handlers were commanding headlines with the news about a Florida dentist who exposed several of his patients to HIV. In Darren's clinic, conversations about the risk of transmission had become unavoidable. He recalled a situation that took place several years earlier, when the office staff learned that one of his patients had AIDS. "He had done some kind of walk for AIDS or something. The other dentists found out about it, and they just went hysterical. They wanted to find out if he had an appointment, to make sure that everyone knew that this person could not be handled in our office." Four years later, the office policy hasn't changed,

and Darren's co-workers continue to worry that "if any of our patients found out that there were AIDS patients here, we would go out of business."

Though Darren considered these concerns irrational, he was careful to withhold information about his sexuality from patients:

It's very important in my field, because I'm absolutely convinced that if my patients knew that I was gay they would not come to me. There's no question in my mind, I've spoken to many of them about it. People are terribly afraid of contracting AIDS from homosexuals, especially an environment where there has been a historical precedent for the transfer of disease, in the case of hepatitis.

Darren's sense of vulnerability lay in his assumption that his clients were capable of acting as a group, much in the way that a single, powerful employer might fire a subordinate. I asked Darren if the other dentists would try to protect him, and he shook his head. "I think I'd lose my job," he explained. "I think that the people who are in control of my job would, regretfully, try to find a way to get rid of me. 'We really like him,' they'd say. 'But, it's a business decision and we have to get rid of him'."

Perceived vulnerability also varies with the degree to which one's job performance is defined in concrete, measurable terms. In occupations that depend heavily on trust, reputation, or other intangible qualities, gay men tend to assume that they are more vulnerable. Other occupations make use of more reliable credentialing processes or measures of success, which make job effectiveness easier to document (Escoffier, 1975). When performance could be measured in sales figures, for example, the men seemed to think their jobs were relatively safe. Several explained that even if they were fired, their strong sales records would enable them to find work. Similarly, a Wall Street trader explained that "On Wall Street, especially as a trader, if you make money for the firm you can be a serial killer and it wouldn't matter to most of the firms. If you can make money in this business, it doesn't matter what you do with your personal life, or what color you are or what your sexual preference is. That's the bottom line on Wall Street."

Several of the attorneys felt that their client relationships protected them from the whims of the other partners. Andy, a Houston lawyer, explained that one of his firm's senior partners was having a good year, which made it easier for him to be openly gay. "When his practice wasn't as good as it is now, I'm sure he was

much more worried," according to Andy. "It's fortunate that his practice has gone well, so he can afford to be open." Milton, a Washington lawyer, felt the same way about his client relationships, but contrasted his own situation to that of another lawyer, a lesbian who worked in his firm:

The thing that protects me, that doesn't protect her, is that I have my own client base. I have a highly portable piece of the practice here. I can always pick up and go someplace else. And I have clients that pay on time and pay well. So they're not going to fuck with me. So I have a certain amount of independence in that regard, and there is very little that they can do about it. They may try to fuck with me in some other ways, but they haven't tried so far.

Even so, Milton felt that other factors that made him somewhat vulnerable.

"Nonetheless, it is risky for me," he explained. "My skin is black. We always say in black America that if white America gets a cold, black America gets pneumonia. It is riskier for me than it is for a white fellow in the same position."

The men also felt more secure when they had unique skills, or felt that their work was especially vital to the company. Chip, who supervises the software systems at a Houston company, felt that his unusual combination of talents, and his familiarity with the company's computer system, gave him some measure of job security. "I have more latitude because of what I do than some other people," he explained. "It seems to me that people whose jobs are more important are more comfortable about being gay because they feel more indispensable to the company and therefore less likely to be fired for it."

Mobility within an industry -- in particular, the ease with which one can find other work -- also encourages a sense of security. Occupations characterized by high turnover and transferable skills tend to broaden one's options for the future. Being fired is less of a concern, for example, when the industry is too large and disjointed for the job pool to be poisoned by a former boss. Likewise, when the field was characterized by low entry or exit barriers, the men sometimes felt that they could always pick up and move into some other, related field. For example, George explained that his years as a flight attendant gave him some security for the future. "You know, you can always be a flight attendant, work eight days a month, make \$40,000 a year, and then start a business on the side." Barry, a New York lawyer, felt that he could always return to a career he had abandoned several

years before. "If worst comes to worst, I don't need rejection," he explained. Because he was a member of the projectionists union, Barry feels he can always find another job. "I'll go back and make \$40 an hour projecting movies."

Not all men felt they had the same degree of mobility, however. In recent years, the AIDS epidemic has seriously limited some men's ability or willingness to leave a steady job, given the dire penalties of being unemployed and without health insurance. Because private insurance has become virtually impossible to obtain without a blood test, men who are HIV-infected find themselves manacled to their companies and insurance policies. Those who don't know their status, or who fear a blood test, worry that a career move would force them to confront some frightening realities. George explained the quandary that limited his mobility, at least for the time being:

I have not had an AIDS test yet, and I need to do that. I don't feel that I've got a reason to be concerned, but I'm not deluding myself. I can count on one hand the number of times I've really done "the big one", but there is still some doubt there. I've been very sexual with a lot of people. . . I need to find out if I'm positive or not, because if I have a chance of coming down with AIDS I'd be worried about getting past somebody's blood test in a pre-employment screening. That would keep me at [this company] in a second.

Like many men, George doubts he'll contemplate a career move, and its attendant complications, until he's forced. Under the circumstances, he'd rather stay where he is.

Significantly, only a few of the men cited laws or company policies when assessing their vulnerability. Lesbians and gay men still have no protection from employment discrimination at the federal level, but some 80 cities and counties have added sexual orientation to the list of protected categories, and five states have enacted laws that prohibit discrimination by private employers on the basis of sexual orientation.<sup>6</sup> Though they have become a rallying point for activists concerned with workplace discrimination, formal protections seemed to have little impact on the men's sense of security.

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<sup>6</sup> Information on workplace protections is collected by both the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in Washington D.C., and Lambda, an education and legal advocacy organization based in New York.



In many cases, the men were uninformed about state, local, or company policies, which suggests they are not often the basis for decisions about self-disclosure. More than a quarter of my participants (27%) were "not sure" if their employers had an explicit policy on sexual orientation. At least as many were uninformed about local or state protections (which varied from one interview site to the next). Similarly, a recent survey of 205 professional journalists, conducted by the American Society of News Editors, found that 41% did not know if their paper's health insurance plan covered AIDS-related illnesses. Nearly 40% of those in newsrooms with union contracts did not know if that contract prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. And 35% did not know if their paper had a non-discrimination clause affecting lesbians and gay men (Ghiglione *et al.*, 1990).<sup>7</sup>

Among those who were aware of a company policy or law (73% of my participants), there was rarely any expectation that its function was more than symbolic. Perhaps this is because most gay men realize just how difficult such policies are to enforce. Mark, a compensation consultant, described an in-house survey of his own clients that revealed widespread, though illegal, discrimination. "The formal policy is that you don't discriminate," he explained, "but it's informally known that if you suspect someone may be gay, you should overlook hiring them." Likewise, Darren confirmed that his dental clinic often refused to treat patients with HIV. He thought that the policy was probably illegal, but assured me that there was little way to enforce the law.

Harry learned this lesson the hard way when he was dismissed from a fundraising job at a national charity. "One day, my boss just called me in the office and said 'You have not raised enough money and you have your choice: either resign or be fired.'" Harry knew that his contract required his employer to give him notice, and refused to resign. He also knew that his boss was vocally anti-gay,

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<sup>7</sup> In an article about lesbian and gay police officers, Petrow (1991) assigns greater weight to legal protections. Overall, his respondents said that "the degree to which gay officers can be out on the job depends largely on the local political climate and the existence of sexual-orientation nondiscrimination policies, the attitudes of the police department chiefs, and the level of activism within the local gay community" (p. 38). His emphasis on formal policies may reflect an unexamined assumption, but may also reflect the different nature of a more law-conscious and litigious group.

and felt that this had influenced her decision to fire him. I asked Harry if she had ever said anything to that effect. "She wouldn't dare," he assured me, "because it's in the personnel policies that she couldn't discriminate on sexual preference." Harry reminded me that the District of Columbia also has a strong civil rights law, which he thought strengthened his case. "I went to an attorney and we went through everything and found that they had not followed procedures. Everything was completely wrong, and they were vulnerable to a suit."

Harry was quickly advised, however, that a suit would be expensive and fruitless. "They got a bunch of lawyers together and were just going to paper us to death." Overwhelmed by the potential cost, Harry backed down. "I couldn't afford to take them to court. My attorney said it would cost \$500 per hour, we'd probably spend \$50,000, and we'd be lucky if we got \$100,000. So I've had to eat that experience."

Though New York has enacted legislation that prohibits discrimination, Tip was similarly skeptical about the protection it might give him. Given the subtle ways in which discrimination operates, he felt certain that the chief of surgery, Dr. Thomas, would find a way around the law. "It would not be ever *said*," he explained. "It would be a very underhanded thing. I'd like to think that they couldn't get away with, but they could." I asked Tip how his boss could disguise the fact that he had been fired for being gay. "They could cite any incident," he told me. "They could pull scores from tests -- every year we have to take a test on improvement of skills. They could say you're not performing well enough and you will not be re-enlisted. The three professors could act in concert, or Dr. Thomas could do it alone. And it wouldn't even be disputed, not at all, unless I chose to fight it. Even if you fought it you wouldn't win. There's no way to win."

The lack of faith in these policies points, ultimately, to the fact that professional rapport is highly subjective and impossible to legislate. Even in organizations with aggressive non-discrimination policies, gay men are often reluctant to take the risk. For example, a survey of 437 Philadelphians found that 66% of the men (and 83% of the women) feared employment discrimination despite the legal protections provided by the local Fair Practices Act (Gross, 1988).

The same conclusion was drawn by a marketing executive at Lotus. Though his company recently gained attention as the first large private-sector company to institute a benefits policy for the domestic partners of lesbian and gay employees, he was reluctant to reveal his sexuality to co-workers. "I'm still concerned that it could become an issue in very subjective, touchy-feely ways. It could hurt me for a promotion or raise, so I'm still handling that on a one-to-one basis. I have to gauge their reactions before I make any blanket announcements."

Estimates about vulnerability figure prominently in gay men's decisions about which strategy to use (see Figure 8.3). For example, men who thought they could be easily fired were far more likely to counterfeit an identity than those who thought they were less vulnerable. Men who considered themselves most vulnerable (21 men, or 30% of the sample) tended to use counterfeiting (24%) and avoidance (33%), or some combination of these two strategies (14%). By contrast, men who thought they were only moderately vulnerable (19% of the sample) tended to favor avoidance (31%), or both avoidance and integration (31%). And men who thought they would be relatively difficult to fire (51% of the sample) were clustered toward the right of the continuum, using integration (44%), avoidance (33%), or some combination of these two strategies (11%).

Not surprisingly, dependence on a particular employer or client had a similar effect. The six men who were self-employed, and thus presumably least vulnerable, were evenly divided between those who avoided (3) and those who integrated (3); none of these men found it necessary to counterfeit. A similar effect can be found when one compares men who work primarily with clients to those who spend most of their time with people in their own organizations. Working primarily with co-workers, gay men preferred avoidance strategies (41%), sometimes in combination with counterfeiting (9%) or integration (15%). By contrast, men who spent their time with clients, customers, or other people outside the organization were more likely to integrate (39%, compared to 21% of the first group). On the other hand, they were less likely to counterfeit (8% versus 15%), or avoid (25% versus 41%).

The same pattern emerged with respect to non-discrimination policies. When the men thought they were protected by a company policy, they were more likely

	STRATEGY USED					TOTAL
	COUNTER COUNTER/ AVOID	AVOID	AVOID/ INTEG	INTEG		
<b>Vulnerability to being fired</b>						
High	5 (24%)	3 (14%)	7 (33%)	3 (14%)	3 (14%)	21 (100%)
Moderate	2 (15%)	1 (8%)	4 (31%)	4 (31%)	2 (15%)	13
Low	1 (3%)	3 (8%)	12 (33%)	4 (11%)	16 (44%)	36
<b>*With whom do you spend most of your time?*</b>						
Co-workers	5 (15%)	3 (9%)	14 (41%)	5 (15%)	7 (21%)	34 (100%)
Clients/customers	3 (8%)	4 (11%)	9 (25%)	6 (17%)	14 (39%)	36
<b>*Does your employer have a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation?*</b>						
"Yes"	3 (13%)	2 (9%)	5 (22%)	4 (17%)	9 (39%)	23 (100%)
"No"	4 (14%)	5 (18%)	11 (39%)	4 (14%)	4 (14%)	28
"Not sure"	1 (5%)		7 (37%)	3 (16%)	8 (42%)	19
	n (row %)					

FIGURE 8.3

to integrate (39%) than when they thought the company had no such policy (14%). Only a handful of the first group used a counterfeiting strategy, whether alone (13%) or in combination with avoidance (9%). By contrast, when no company policy was in place, the men were clustered toward the center of the continuum, using avoidance (39%), often in combination with counterfeiting (18%) or integration (14%). Most significantly, when the men said they "weren't sure," they tended overwhelmingly to avoid (37%), integrate (42%), or both (16%). Given these men's preference for strategies toward the right of the continuum, the ignorance of company policy may be a function of indifference, the absence of any compelling reason to find out.

These findings are consistent with other reports that have identified a relationship between perceived job security and level of self-disclosure. In her study of 228 professional lesbians, for example, Schneider (1978) found that women who had been fired from a previous job after revealing their lesbianism were 50% less likely to "come out" in subsequent jobs (p. 481). Similarly, Bell and Weinberg's (1978) respondents exercised considerable discretion in disclosing their sexuality to co-workers, and most appeared reluctant to "come out" at work for

one of two reasons: fear of endangering job credibility or effectiveness, or fear of job or income loss.

In this way, estimates about economic vulnerability have a strong influence on decisions about how or when to reveal one's sexuality. Men who felt most vulnerable tended to adopt strategies that they perceived to be less risky, especially when their skills were specific to a small, well-defined industry, when their geographic mobility was limited, or when a particular boss had the power to hire or fire at will.

Others could point to no particular reason for their sense of vulnerability, but seemed, nonetheless, to feel insecure. Al, a Philadelphia lawyer, attributed his fear to the gloomy economic climate in his firm. "I guess I'm concerned about the economic situation and the fact that it makes it a lot easier for people to come up with excuses to get rid of people, or to not hire people." Andy, a Houston lawyer, gave a similar explanation of his decision to use an avoidance strategy. Though he made partner several years ago, and knows of other gay men who have done well at the firm, he fears for his job. "The only reason I would not be open with my partners is fear of my job and career," he explained. "If I were more confident about my job, less expendable, or if there were more openings in the field, I might feel differently. But there are a lot of attorneys out of work. Absent that, I would like to be more open." I asked him how he will feel as the economy turns around, or as his client list grows and becomes more stable. "Two things would push me toward openness," he answered. "Financial security, and the desire to reveal a relationship, when I have one."

Others men pointed to concrete evidence of their job security, and thought that this had encouraged them to "come out" at work. Sometimes they knew that their value to a particular company was clearly documented in sales figures, loyal co-workers, or profitable lists of clients. Some explained that they had no single "boss", and could only be fired after a formal hearing, with the approval of a committee, or with some concrete work-related cause. Others knew it would be easy to find comparable work someplace else. However they assessed the risks, these men found them worth taking.

Chris, a New York consultant who runs his own business, felt that his financial independence had strongly influenced his decision to be openly gay at work. Chris specializes in the management of not-for-profit companies, and he's often brought in to restructure or rescue a company that's in trouble. All of his clients know that he's gay. "I'm usually the boss at these places," he explained, "so at least to my face, they can't appear to dislike it. I may be insulated for that reason." Thinking back, he recalled a few instances in which a co-worker had responded negatively, but never in a way that put him at risk. "I've never had to be concerned about what my boss would think," he told me, "because either I was my boss, or I didn't care because I had some latitude. If I had to get that paycheck to eat the next week, it might have been very different."

### *Social models*

Gay professionals often have the sense that they don't know, quite literally, how to behave at work. There is little consensus on when or how to "come out", no book of etiquette on self-disclosure. Few gay professionals feel they have a gay role model (given that public figures are usually known for being either professional *or* gay). The few exceptions are politicians who have been disgraced or corporate hypocrites who have been "outed."<sup>1</sup>

All of this changes when role models are available. When there is another lesbian or gay man on the landscape, one can observe their use of a particular strategy, and learn from their experiences with it. In choosing their own strategies, gay professionals often say that they were influenced by the behavior of other gay people in their workplace.<sup>8</sup>

When they counterfeit an identity, for example, gay men tend to draw their peers toward that same strategy. By effecting a disguise, they imply an unfavorable assessment of the environment, or a high estimate of the risks. Consequently, when my participants knew that gay peers were closeted, they tended to assume

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<sup>8</sup> As Lynch (1987) points out, the various stage models of gay identity (Troiden, 1979; Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982) have given only limited acknowledgement to the influential role played by gay mentors and peers. "What has not been brought out fully in some other coming out studies is the role of guide, teacher, or 'helping hand' in either the signification stage, coming-out stage, or both" (p. 23).

that the environment was hostile, that such a strategy was *necessary*. Likewise, a co-worker who uses an avoidance strategy signals that it is possible or preferable to present oneself in such terms. The invisibility of these men perpetuates the spiral of silence in such organizations, which makes it difficult for peers to be more open.

Conversely, when co-workers used an integration strategy, they seemed to encourage its use by others, and made it relatively easy for peers to gather information about how such an approach would be received in the organization. Andy, a Houston lawyer, knew of at least two gay partners in his firm. "One of them is quite open," he told me, which didn't seem to have hurt his career. He was well-respected within the firm, and had a stable and profitable list of clients. More recently, when the man's lover was diagnosed with AIDS, the other partners had been supportive. For Andy, this seemed to speak volumes about the firm, and his future in it. "It blazes a trail," he thought. "It sets an example with other people. It means that the people I'd be looking to for acceptance have already had to deal with it once. They already have a policy. In that sense, it will make it easier for me." Chip, a Houston manager, took similar comfort in the visibility of a gay manager. "It's very reassuring to me that one of the highest people in our company, a Vice President, has had his lover come up to the office to show him sheets and towels, to ask if those were the colors he'd like, that kind of stuff. Everyone else knows that he's gay. They know and he's still there."

Especially when gay co-workers used an integration strategy with success, the men were drawn to that same strategy. By supplying a model of *how* the strategy might be used (and by framing self-disclosure as a necessary or desirable act), gay peers tended to foster an environment in which others integrated an identity. Often, it was a single individual who set an example. Ray described the impact a particular gay peer had on his decision to "come out" when he started work at large clothing manufacturer in San Francisco. At his previous job, Ray had been careful not to reveal anything about his sexuality, but that changed at the new job. "My first day at the company, I was trained by a gay man who was extremely open about his sexuality. Carl, who taught me my job, was pretty open about things, and just kind of got right into the subject. It was obvious that I was in a different

environment." Ray began to using an integration strategy with some of the other people in his division, many of whom were gay themselves. "It was quite a group of girls," he laughs, "and it was really a lot of fun, people being very gossipy, socializing, and so forth. You just went on breaks with people, chatted with people." The circle gradually expanded, until Ray found that he was using an integration strategy with all of his peers, his boss, and the managers above him.

A few years later, a position became available in the menswear division, and Ray jumped at it. The man who currently held it was being promoted, which Ray took as a positive sign. "I felt a little more inclined to try for the job," he explained, "because the man who held the position before me was gay. It was definitely a job I wanted, and there was also the hope that the hiring manager wouldn't have any issues, since there had been a gay man in the position before me. It helped that there were some gay footsteps to follow."

Seven years later, Ray is highly visible within the organization, and hopes he is leaving his own footsteps. In 1989, he co-founded the company's lesbian and gay employees organization, and has been visible as a spokesperson for domestic partner benefits. When the company introduced an employee development program called "Aspirations and Diversity," Ray saw to it that sexual orientation was discussed along with race, gender, and national origin. "There will be a segment on 'silent minorities', about coming to grips with stereotypes about gays and lesbians," he told me. At the time of our interview, the company had also granted Ray a "community service leave," which allows him to spend fifty percent of his time working with local AIDS organizations. A few months before we met, he was singled out at the company's Christmas party, and commended on his work. "I felt pretty proud," he told me. Ray thinks that his company has changed dramatically in the past few years, and considers it vital that other gay people be visible within it. He feels that his own development in this direction began with Carl, who trained him 11 years ago. "The minute that I got here, I knew immediately that I didn't need to hide anything. And I never have."

As these examples suggest, strategies in any work setting tend to gravitate together. In part, this is because different co-workers, working independently in the same environment, will draw similar conclusions about their economic



vulnerability, about prevailing attitudes toward homosexuality, and about the intrusiveness of peers. But gay co-workers also seem to influence one another in a more direct fashion. All but a few of my participants knew of at least one other lesbian or gay person in the company, and had usually spoken to these people outside the workplace. In most cases, they had talked about work, about co-workers, and about the atmosphere for gay people.

In an important sense, gay professionals also find that relationships outside the workplace can become models for those within. The success of a particular strategy with friends, parents, or other meaningful people can encourage its use with bosses and co-workers. Conversely, a strategy that has failed in another setting may be avoided at work.

Men who split their audiences often found that non-work friends influenced their choice of workplace strategy. For example, in his study of 24 gay Canadians, Lee (1977) found that involvement in a gay liberation organization became an important precursor of self-disclosure. "At some point in this involvement, the individual found himself in a situation where the group was an important *reference group* for the standards (ethical, moral, political) by which the individual, self-reflexively, assessed his own actions. For each individual, at the point of deciding to go public, the gay liberation movement (in the form, usually, of a specific group, and sometimes a single individual) became a *more important* reference for behavior than the collegial, professional, or commercial group of which he was part" (p. 73; emphasis his). Especially when gay friends used integration strategies at work, they supplied an example and a definition of the situation that encouraged its adoption by friends.

Parents are another group who influence the choice of workplace strategy. Relationships with bosses, in particular, are often modeled on relationships with mothers and fathers (see Figure 7.4). For example, all of the men who counterfeit an identity with parents used that same strategy with at least some of their co-workers (20% also used avoidance). Likewise, men who avoided sexuality with parents tended to do the same in the workplace (56%), sometimes in combination with counterfeiting (19%) or integration (11%). And men who used an

## SOCIAL MODELS

	STRATEGY USED					TOTAL
	COUNTER	COUNTER/ AVOID	AVOID	AVOID/ INTEG	INTEG	
<b>Strategy used with parents</b>						
Counterfeit	4 (80%)	1 (20%)				5 (100%)
Avoid	2 (7%)	5 (19%)	15 (56%)	3 (11%)	2 (7%)	27
Integrate		1 (3%)	7 (20%)	8 (23%)	19 (54%)	35
(Deceased)	2 (67%)		1 (33%)			3
	n (row %)					

FIGURE 8.4

integration strategy at work were usually using the same strategy with parents, sometimes exclusively (54%), sometimes in addition to avoidance (23%).

Significantly, only one of the men spanned the entire continuum, integrating with parents, while counterfeiting and avoiding at work.

There are several possible explanations for the men's tendency to use the same strategy with both parents and co-workers. In part, the pattern reflects the complications involved in splitting audiences, even when those audiences are somewhat distinct. (In most cases, the men's parents lived in another city, or travelled in distinct social circles; only a few of the men worried that information from work would somehow reach mom and dad). Also, parents are often more significant than most audiences, and self-disclosure to parents is often a sign of greater self-acceptance, which in turn encourages disclosure to others (see Troiden, 1988). Finally, one can imagine that familiarity and comfort with a particular strategy in a non-work setting would encourage its use in the workplace. Having practiced it at home, the men were often ready to take it to work.

Todd, a human resources executive with a public utility in New Jersey, explained that this was at least part of his reason for using an avoidance strategy at work. He didn't consider it "even an option" to reveal his sexuality at work, though he thought his co-workers were reasonably tolerant. "Unfortunately, it would not fit very well to let them know that I'm gay," he told me. "Not in my environment. I have plenty of friends who work in New York in advertising, retail, public relations, where being gay is no big deal. Unfortunately, where I am it

would be so atypical -- they wouldn't know how to react to it." With no gay role models at work, and no experience with self-disclosure at home, Todd has no plans to change strategies. "I haven't even told my parents," he concluded. "If I haven't told my parents I'm not about to tell my employer."

The situational variables I've described in this chapter establish a range of strategic possibilities. In any given workplace, a gay man draws conclusions about his co-workers' attitudes toward homosexuality, the intrusiveness of their interactions in him, his own economic vulnerability, and the behavior of other lesbians and gay men who serve as models for his own behavior. In combination, these factors establish a range of options, favoring some strategies while making others unavailable.

The range is further narrowed, however, by the personal needs and competencies of the men themselves. In the preceding sections, I've tried to describe some of the situational factors that constraint strategy choice, but to complete the portrait we must turn from situations to the individuals who navigate them. Not all strategies are available in all situations, but nor are all performers capable of the full range.

In accounting for their choice of strategy, the men often cited personal preferences or skills that made them favor one strategy over another. When these personal traits are brought to bear on any particular situation, what follows is a complex interplay of self and situation. For any given individual, in any particular setting, the choice of strategy will be a function of both personal and situational possibilities. Without veering into psychological analysis (which, given my limited, impressionistic data in this area, would be hazardous), I should at least point out importance of personal or psychic variables.

At the very least, different strategies require different skills of the performer, and not all men feel they are capable of the full repertoire. On the one hand, counterfeiting strategies require gay men to fool co-workers into thinking they're straight. Avoidance strategies presume the ability to take control of a conversation and steer it away from sexual topics or situations. Integration strategies require, in

many cases, that one muster the courage to "come out". To use any one of these strategies, the men need the *competence* to "pull it off."

Not all felt they were equally qualified to counterfeit, avoid, or integrate. In some cases, their personal dispositions or outward appearances seemed to favor one approach or another. When a particular strategy required the men to do something or appear some way they found impossible, they were usually forced to choose another strategy.

Sometimes, the men didn't feel they were able to disguise appearances or mannerisms that would mark them, in the eyes of their peers, as homosexuals. Rodney, a Wall Street trader, assumed that his voice might at least have raised some suspicion among co-workers. "Nobody ever called me faggot or anything like that," he explained, but "I just assumed . . . I mean I have a slight lisp, and I was a loner." Another man was more to the point. "I'm a big ole *queen*," he assured me, with a toss of the arm, "and *nobody* mistakes me for Mel Gibson. If they don't at least assume I'm gay, it's because they're sound asleep." Under the circumstances, I had to agree.

George, a Houston airline executive, felt that his demeanor made it unlikely that he could pull off a counterfeiting strategy. "I believe that where I really demonstrate gayness is in my voice," he told me. "I wish I could have a different speech pattern and just be able to fade into the woodwork when I wanted to. But I don't." At least in the United States, he felt that his voice gave him away, which led him to adopt an integration strategy.

Abroad, however, George finds that his behavior is coded differently. "By American standards, I'm more effeminate than your typical, average businessman. But internationally that gets lost. Because you're suddenly an American and there are so many other issues of difference that it pales in comparison." When he travels to Europe, George finds that different strategies are available to him. "My esteem as a gay man is much better internationally," he explained, which in part accounted for his decision to work for an airline headquartered in Europe. Though he thinks, "I probably speak German with a gay twang," he found himself using avoidance strategies abroad.

Other would-be counterfeiters described more subtle limitations that forced them to use different strategies. Phil, a consultant who recently divorced his wife and moved to New York, complained that despite years of practice (as a married man), he wasn't quite sure he was believable as a heterosexual. In particular, he felt uncomfortable playing the "single man" role:

I don't know what straight guys do at lunch, when they're single. All my co-workers are married, and they don't talk about who they went out with over the weekend, that kind of stuff.

Likewise, a New York advertising executive remarked, "I have no idea what straight people talk about. Sports? Car repair? Bad furniture? I wouldn't know how to act around them."<sup>9</sup> Given these limitations, both men used avoidance strategies at work.

As these examples suggest, the range of available strategies is a function of both personal competencies and the situations in which they are exercised. Individuals differ in the needs they bring to the workplace, in the expectations they have of peers, and in their desire to be sociable at work. They also differ in their ability to use each of the three basic strategies. Just as an identity is a relationship between audience and performer, a strategy is a function of both self and situation.

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<sup>9</sup> In her study of professional lesbians, Hall (1989) described several situations in which a counterfeiting strategy fell apart: "Even though the non-disclosure of their homosexuality was crucial, several respondents felt the secret was not always within their control. For example, one woman was showing a friend from work the plans of the new house she and her lover had bought. Pointing out the main bedroom, she accidentally said, "This is where we sleep." She was appalled to have revealed the intimate nature of her relationship. Other respondents felt they revealed their lesbianism through their physical appearance. A lesbian who wore jeans to a clerical job said, "The way I dress I was in a way forcing it down their throats." Another woman said, "At the time they started suspecting, I made a mistake and cut my hair short. That was the tip-off." (p. 132).

## CHAPTER NINE

### JOB PROSPECTS

It is difficult to draw conclusions about a population that one has trouble identifying. There is little doubt that gay professionals can be counted in the millions, that they can be found in every industry and region, or that they are as productive, ambitious or competent as their straight counterparts. They are probably late for work just as often.

I am tempted at this point to make a few sweeping remarks about the place of homosexuality in American business, to set this report and its 70 informants into some sort of larger context. But the invisibility of the phenomenon seriously limits what we can say about its scope and significance. Though they briefly stood up to be counted, many of my participants remain hidden to their parents, friends, co-workers, even to me. Word occasionally reaches me that one of them has changed jobs or cities. Jason retired last spring, and Glen died over the summer. But even if I were to encounter these men on the street, I'm not convinced I would be able to identify them. In some cases, I was never told their names.

In the introduction, I suggested that the "gay industry" or "gay company" was the myth of a culture made uncomfortable by the idea that gay men inhabit its banks, high schools, law firms, and laboratories. Given our inability to draw a representative sample, we must remain skeptical about the occupational distributions found in surveys of lesbian and gay professionals. Even so, given the special circumstances under which gay men labor -- and the issues of concealment, stigma, and identity management that set them apart from nongay peers -- it is almost *inconceivable* that they are not differentially distributed across companies, industries, and regions. And while the patterns themselves must remain a matter of speculation, we can at least identify some of the factors that undoubtedly give rise to them.

Other researchers have identified forces that may attract gay men to white-collar occupations, and away from blue-collar or manual occupations.<sup>1</sup> Within white-collar environments, one can identify other, complimentary forces that may drive them out of some settings and into others.

### **Career paths**

Large, bureaucratic organizations are profoundly conformist places. In their efforts to reduce uncertainty, build trust, and ensure the smooth flow of communication, managers tend to hire and promote those who share their same social characteristics.

As Kanter (1977) has observed, it is this *situation* in which managers operate that makes social similarity so important to them. It begins with the need to reduce uncertainty:

For wherever there is uncertainty, *someone* (or some group) must decide, and thus, there must be personal discretion. And discretion raises not technical but human, social, and even communal questions: trust, and its origins in loyalty, commitment, and mutual understanding based on the sharing of values. It is the uncertainty quotient in managerial work, as it has come to be defined in the large modern corporation, that causes management to become so socially restricting: to develop tight inner circles excluding social strangers; to keep control in the hands of socially homogeneous peers; to stress conformity and insist upon a diffuse, unbounded loyalty; and to prefer ease of communication and thus social certainty over the strains of dealing with people who are "different" (p. 49).

The result is a tendency for managers to reproduce themselves in kind (a pattern that Kanter terms "homosocial reproduction"). The homogeneity of social class, ethnic background, prior social experiences, and of course, sexual orientation, become the social bases for trust.

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<sup>1</sup> Noting the tendency of survey research to find few gay men in the manual or blue-collar jobs, Harry and DeVall (1978) suggest that sampling error may not be the culprit. Rather, they find it plausible that blue-collar environments are less hospitable environments for gay men, who fear the homophobia they perceive within them. The authors also suggest that blue-collar settings, with their emphasis on more traditional masculine roles, may be incompatible with the self-concepts of many gay men. "Such traits as toughness, strength, and physical aggressiveness seem to have been rejected by many gays as not particularly desirable characteristics," they speculate, which may cause them to gravitate toward environments characterized by gentility and professional distance.

Much "work" is in fact the management of relationships, and most workers are concerned with the social qualifications of their peers. In some professions, intangibles like rapport and trust become the ultimate gauge of a co-worker's performance. For example, Milton, a Washington lawyer, felt that "the decision to hire a lawyer is a chemical one. After you pass a certain level of competence, it's a chemical decision, and you tend to work with people with whom you feel most comfortable." Randy, a Wall Street broker, explained that trust was a crucial component in all of his client relationships. It took time to build, he told me, and was based on both his professional and social performance:

Transaction after transaction, deal after deal, new idea after new idea, clients eventually come to say, "Well, whenever Randy says something in a certain way, we know we can believe him." So trust is a very important thing in our business. Eventually one of the things that gets talked about in any relationship that lasts is personal life. People want to talk to someone whom they have something in common with. They want to talk to someone who's forthcoming in many ways, including about his personal life. They may introduce you to their wives, bring you into their lives, so they would like to be brought into yours. It's kind of a reciprocal thing. And if they feel they're giving of themselves, letting down their professional defenses, then you should too. It's only fair.

Because Randy is reluctant to disclose his sexual orientation in work settings, he sometimes finds himself unable to respond to the social overtures of his clients and co-workers. "When you don't," he told me, "you risk a little bit of their confidence in you. Outside of work, they may feel that you don't have that much in common, and they may prefer chatting and having conversations with someone else. Or, at worst, they'll decide 'I don't trust him.'"

As these examples suggest, information about sexuality is routinely used to make tacit judgments about the personal and professional competence of others. We take someone else's sexual orientation as a sign of their worldview, and of our ability to share it. And judging this one area to be lacking, we are likely to perceive other deficiencies or limitations. In this way, social performance is taken as a sign of (probable or actual) professional performance, with serious consequences for those who are judged to be "different". As Escoffier (1975) notes, "Any occupation that must depend on 'trust' or intangible personal qualities will be extremely harsh to homosexual members, because any deviation would be



seen to undermine the effective performance of occupational responsibilities -- whether this is, in fact, the case or not" (p. 12).

When trust is most important, there is often the least tolerance for heterogeneity. The upper ranks of management, in which executives wield the greatest discretion and have the vaguest job descriptions, are notoriously homogeneous. Conversely, when jobs are more routinized and output can be measured in more concrete terms, "the personal characteristics of the people doing them become less important" (Kanter, 1977:55).

### *Ghettoization*

Men who don't conform to the strict social demands of the organization often find themselves drawn or pushed to its fringes. As Kanter (1977) observed in her study of professional women, those who lack the social characteristics of the privileged group tend to be clustered in places where "what to do and how to judge its doing" are more routine:

Most women in business have found their management opportunities in low uncertainty, non-discretionary positions that bear the least pressure to close the circle: closer to the bottom, in more routinized functions, and in "expert" rather than decision-making roles. They are also found in those areas where least social contact and organizational communication are required: in staff roles that are administrative rather than line management and in functions such as public relations, where they are removed from the interdependent social networks of the corporation's principal operations (p. 55).

Similarly, gay men often seem to be clustered in technical or skilled positions outside the central management hierarchy. They find themselves most welcome in sales positions, where performance can be most easily quantified. Or they find themselves hired into departments with large concentrations of other gay men, solving the immediate problem of social similarity even as it ultimately limits their mobility outside the ghetto. They find niches within larger organizations, and accept the glass ceilings and walls that exist around them.

Brent, a Houston executive, found himself in this situation. As supervisor of the records management department, he is both spatially and organizationally set apart from those who manage the company's central operations, who turn to him for support. Like others in technical positions, his skills are easily quantified, and

there is little emphasis on intangible qualifications. I asked Brent to describe his company, and his place within it. In particular, I asked if he "fit in" with the others at work:

For the most part, yes. Within my group and with my management, yes. With the company as a whole, I would say, yes, but with some reservations. It's an entrepreneurial, good old boy type company, and I don't fit into that category. I'm not one that's going to do deals over drinks and entertain Arabs, or that sort of thing. I'm talking about the company, the big picture.

Though he feels his job is secure, Brent knows that his mobility within the company is limited by his inability to socialize effectively with those in management. "I'm not the good old boy that you would need to be to go all the way to the top," he acknowledges. "Within my group, at my current the level and the one above it, I'll be okay. But beyond that, when we get to senior executive management, no."

Mark felt that his company, a consulting firm in Manhattan, had a similar series of slots for its gay employees. "I don't think that they have a problem with gays or lesbians working for the firm," he told me, "if it's in certain positions. It's clear that they don't want anyone in senior management who is gay or lesbian, or anyone in a business consulting job that is gay or lesbian because that isn't the image the firm wants to present. I don't think they have a problem with gay or lesbian support staff or technical staff or clerical staff. There are several male secretaries in varying offices that are obviously gay."

As Mark became increasingly involved with ACT-UP, he found himself pushed into one of these fringe positions. He was reclassified from Consultant to Senior Technical Specialist, a position of equal rank but less management responsibility. He was told that the change would allow him to "put his life back together" after the death of a lover, but Mark was suspicious. "Since that time, I was clearly kind of shelved," he told me. "I was pretty much written off as someone who would ever make partner. And so I became uninvited to any kind of planning meetings or social events." Mark knows that his career ultimately lies outside this organization. In fact, at the time of our meeting, he had begun to lay the groundwork for his own company, a real estate development firm that would buy

and rehabilitate abandoned Manhattan properties. Within a few years, Mark plans to leave the corporate world altogether.

### *Entrepreneurial flight*

Gay men often find themselves drawn away from large organizations altogether, and into smaller, entrepreneurial, or gay-owned businesses. Many planned to start their own companies at some point in the future. Some already have.

The lure of self-employment is strong in the gay community. My last request, in each of the interviews, was that the men describe their ideal job environments. Almost all described situations in which they were more independent, in which they were not subject to the whims of a particular boss or client, in which they had more latitude in their decisionmaking. For example, Tip outlined his plan to go into private practice after completing of his residency. "I'll have a private office somewhere, it won't be in the university system at all. Too many peers, too political, too many options for bad things to happen. It will be a private office or a private practice, where I don't have to deal with anybody."

Jeff, a financial analyst with a small Philadelphia firm, described a series of job changes in which he had been gradually moving towards his ideal job situation, in which he would co-own a small business. It was an unending hassle, he explained, to worry about his sexual orientation at work. "I think that's why I've continuously been moving to smaller companies," he told me. "For a long time, my best friend and I had it in our minds that we would eventually start our own company. He's the first person I told I was gay, and I think we've always talked about our career paths as paralleling that idea. And one of the reasons I wanted that was because there's a situation in which I could be open in my work environment."

Like many of my participants, Tip and Jeff are uncomfortable in situations in which they are vulnerable. Tip has witnessed frequent and painful displays of homophobia, and is exhausted by his efforts to disguise himself at work. Jeff feels that his environment is reasonably hospitable, but is bothered by his boss' apparent disinterest in (or discomfort with) his personal life. For both men, self-employment seems to promise self-empowerment and independence. Even when they described their co-workers as "tolerant," the men were often drawn to the

promise of escape. As one man told me, "who wants to be *tolerated*? I want to be affirmed in the workplace, and that probably means working for myself."

Together, these forces seem to pull gay men in several directions. On the one hand, they seem to be drawn away from big companies, managerial positions that require social conformity, positions that place heavy social demands on them, jobs that make them vulnerable, or industries that are perceived to be hostile. At the same time, they are drawn to technical, clerical, sales, and other support roles that place less emphasis on social characteristics. A sizable number abandon these organizations altogether, to become freelancers or entrepreneurs.

The unseen migration of this talent pool undoubtedly has profound implications on American business. Though few men claim sexual orientation as the main reason for pursuing a particular job or company, many acknowledge subtle ways in which it had guided their decisions.<sup>2</sup> John described the reasons his sexuality made the priesthood seem attractive. Craig thought it was probably his reason for leaving the Navy. For Duane, it was a reason to attend graduate school, and to select Columbia over a smaller school in a rural setting. Burt, Chip and Harry had all been fired from previous jobs, and felt certain that their gayness had been part of the reason. And George felt that his loyalty to the company was based, at least in part, on his fear of losing health insurance. Though their managers may not be aware of it, these men's productivity, mobility, and job satisfaction may all be influenced by their sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In a recent *San Francisco Examiner* survey, for example, only 15% of the men (and 19% of the women) said that their sexual orientation played a major role in their selection of a job or profession (see Badgett, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Hall (1989) observed a similar effect among the lesbian professionals in her study: "Though no respondent thought her homosexuality had any impact on work performance, most felt their future options were limited by their lesbianism. They could advance to a certain level but not beyond because they could not project the necessary corporate image. Some seemed not to care; several said, 'I'm not ambitious'; some were resigned: 'I've definitely settled for less.' Others aimed for careers outside the business world, where their lesbianism wouldn't be an obstacle. Several planned to go into business for themselves or to become freelance consultants. Still others took refuge in technical areas in which they had little interaction with co-workers" (p. 134).

For precisely this reason, I end this report on a hopeful note. Whatever its flaws, our version of capitalism seems to do one thing very well: it ultimately finds a way to package and sell whatever talents it can identify. As economists and business consultants have pointed out, *someone* stands to make a profit from the better use of their gay employees, and this virtually ensures that changes are on the horizon (Badgett, 1992; see also Thomas, 1990). The incentive to make money is ultimately in conflict with the forces that silence, stigmatize, and demoralize lesbian and gay professionals. As someone noted at a recent meeting of lesbian and gay professionals, "an investment in lesbian and gay Americans is an investment in the bottom line."

### **1992: The Silence is Broken**

After decades of conspicuous silence, American business seems to be taking note. Even within the past six months, one could hear the rumbles of change.

In September, several hundred consultants, activists, managers, and a handful of journalists gathered at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel in New York. They came to hear company representatives speak about their fledgling lesbian and gay employee organizations, to hear attorneys describe the key legal victories and setbacks of recent years, and to hear public policy experts describe their efforts to install non-discrimination policies and secure benefits for the domestic partners of lesbian and gay employees. The conference was titled, "Invisible Diversity: A Gay and Lesbian Corporate Agenda," and it was the first meeting of its kind in this country.

A few months later, Corporate America witnessed another first. Shortly after the conference, feature articles appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*, acknowledging that a change that was underway, and describing its probable implications for most businesses. Then, in December, *Fortune* ran an 8-page feature, "Gay in Corporate America." The cover photograph featured Jack Sansolo, the president of the Hill Holliday ad agency, stepping out of what appeared to be a closet. It was the first time a mass circulation business magazine had run a feature of this size or prominence, and its authors took an unambiguously supportive stance. Apparently startled by its own editorial decision, *Fortune* included the following explanatory paragraph on its "Editor's Desk" page:

Why would *Fortune* ever want to do a cover story about *that*? I suppose a few readers will ask the question. And I admit I was a bit skeptical when reporter Mark D. Fefer proposed that we examine what it's like for gays in corporate America. The answers soon became clear: because they're *there* -- sometimes in large numbers. Because they have special concerns on the job. Because business must make the most of everyone's talents and prides itself in managing diversity in the workplace. And because homosexuals surely deserve as much opportunity as any other minority. (p. 4).

In describing homosexuals as a "minority group", and placing them in line for the same protections and opportunities claimed by women and minorities, the article acknowledged a dramatic shift in the way Americans have begun to view gay people. The *New York Times* acknowledged as much, a few months earlier, in its headline to a short article in the business section: "Gay Rights, Issue of the 90's".

Several of my participants saw the *Fortune* article, and gave me a call. People at work were talking about it, they said, even some of the straight ones. One man had given a copy to his boss, and they had discussed it over lunch. Another used the article to initiate a "coming out" conversation with a woman at work, who was a subscriber. The consensus was that some kind of change is afoot, and the men seemed excited. As one remarked, with a sigh, "Well, it's finally started to happen."

**APPENDIX I**

## Pseudonyms and employers

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Title, employer</b>	<b>Sexual identity</b>
Eric	51	Marketing Officer, estates division of bank	Counterfeit
Ralph	27	Account Executive, oil & gas company	Counterfeit
Geoff	33	Construction Manager, Catholic college	Counterfeit
Miguel	29	Medical Resident, urban hospital	Counterfeit
Terry	34	Attorney, law firm	Counterfeit
Jason	60	Senior executive, pharmaceutical company	Counterfeit
Rodney	27	Trader, investment bank	Counterfeit
Matt	40	Supervisor, car manufacturer	Counterfeit
Clay	53	Executive Secretary, clinical laboratory	Counterfeit / Avoid
Derek	37	Sr. VP/Marketing, employment agency	Counterfeit / Avoid
Tip	29	Surgical Resident, urban hospital	Counterfeit / Avoid
Dan	31	Director, psychiatric hospital	Counterfeit / Avoid
Steven	24	Staff Accountant, accounting firm	Counterfeit / Avoid
Phil	29	Sr. Manager, consulting firm	Counterfeit / Avoid
Scott	33	Group Sales Representative, insurance firm	Counterfeit / Avoid
Roger	46	Attorney, Department of Labor	Avoid
Ron	41	Psychiatrist, outpatient clinic	Avoid
Glen	46	General Counsel, diversified energy company	Avoid
Duane	38	President, entrepreneurial oil & gas company	Avoid
Gary	36	Director of Tax Administration, public utility	Avoid
Craig	45	VP of International Finance, investment bank	Avoid
Bill	31	Park Ranger, public recreational facility	Avoid
Russ	27	Claims Negotiator, insurance company	Avoid
Joel	50	Partner/Co-owner, lobbying and consultant firm	Avoid
Todd	29	Human Resources Consultant, public utility	Avoid
Dave	27	Credit Manager, energy company	Avoid
Les	64	Business Manager, technical high school	Avoid
Brent	28	Supervisor, diversified energy company	Avoid
Tony	32	Product Development, financial services	Avoid
Tom	42	Teacher, public elementary school	Avoid
Nick	27	Project Manager, consulting firm	Avoid
Milton	27	Director of Marketing, urban shopping mall	Avoid
Roy	38	Vice President, division of Time-Life	Avoid
Jeff	30	Financial Analyst, entrepreneurial investment firm	Avoid
Justin	44	College Professor, untenured	Avoid
Greg	33	Architect, diversified construction company	Avoid
Andy	34	Partner, law firm	Avoid
Darren	32	Dentist, medical clinic	Avoid
Burt	41	Legal Assistant, diversified hospitality company	Avoid / Integrate
Al	28	Attorney, law firm	Avoid / Integrate
Charles	56	Travel Agent, large travel agency	Avoid / Integrate
Randy	34	Broker, investment bank	Avoid / Integrate
Arthur	32	Partner, entertainment law firm	Avoid / Integrate
Chuck	28	Sr. Swaps Trader, investment bank	Avoid / Integrate
Chip	27	Manager of Information Systems, investment firm	Avoid / Integrate

Mitch	34	Attorney, law firm	Avoid / Integrate
Jim	36	Software Engineer, computer equipment supplier	Avoid / Integrate
Larry	47	Managing partner, law firm	Avoid / Integrate
Keith	27	Senior Clerk, diversified energy company	Avoid / Integrate
Paul	55	Information Management Supervisor, airline	Integrate
Milton	41	Partner, law firm	Integrate
Chris	40	President/CEO, arts management consulting firm	Integrate
Roland	36	Art Director, advertising agency	Integrate
Ray	32	Financial Analyst, clothing manufacturer	Integrate
Howard	31	Labor Relations Representative, public utility	Integrate
George	33	Design Director, training division of airline	Integrate
Mark	36	Compensation Consultant, consulting firm	Integrate
Carl	40	President/co-owner, real estate company	Integrate
John	39	Priest, Episcopal congregation	Integrate
Michael	41	President/owner, entrepreneurial consulting firm	Integrate
Rob	60	Instructor, private music school	Integrate
Peter	28	Realtor, real estate firm	Integrate
Patrick	28	Human Resources Trainer, hospital	Integrate
Jack	61	VP of Human Resources, publishing house	Integrate
Kirk	31	Professor/Obstetrician, medical school	Integrate
Harry	49	Dir. of Development, AIDS service organization	Integrate
Carter	34	Sales Manager, hotel	Integrate
Sean	22	Account Executive, public relations firm	Integrate
Barry	40	Attorney, law firm	Integrate
Jerry	32	Trader, investment bank	Integrate



## APPENDIX II

### Sample profile

Though I've drawn on a number of other anecdotal and quantitative reports, the bulk of my report is based on 70 interviews that were conducted between July of 1990 and February of 1991 (see Chapter 1). The first names have been changed to protect the anonymity of my participants but all other details, when given, are accurate.

While most of the men were using a single strategy at the time of our interview, more than a quarter (26%) used a different strategy with two or more "audiences" in the workplace. As I observed in Chapter 7, however, only two of the four possible combinations were found; significantly, none of the men was simultaneously using both counterfeiting and integrating, nor were any using all three strategies simultaneously. The columns below reflect these observed groupings. Columns 1, 3 and 5 represent the three basic strategies, while columns 2 and 4 represent combinations.

When I wanted to describe *all* of the men using a particular strategy, I combined two or more of these columns. When speaking of counterfeiters, for example, I combined the first two columns (15 men, or 21% of the sample). When describing those who used an avoidance strategy, I combined columns 2, 3 and 4 (41 men, or 59%). And when speaking of integrators, I combined the last two columns (32 men, or 46%). Because 18 men are counted more than once, the total number of cases (88) represents 126% of the actual sample (70).

**Sample description**  
**Participants**

	STRATEGY USED					TOTAL	% USING STRATEGY			
	COUNTER	COUNTER /AVOID	AVOID	INTEG /AVOID	INTEG		COUNTER	AVOID	INTEG	TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5		1-2	2-4	4-5	
<b>Age</b>										
21-25		1			1	2	50%	50%	50%	3%
26-30	3	2	6	4	2	17	29	71	35	24
31-35	2	2	6	3	6	19	21	58	47	27
36-40	1	1	3	1	6	12	17	42	58	17
41-45			4	1	2	7	0	71	43	10
46-50			3	1	1	5	0	80	40	7
51-55	1	1			1	3	67	33	33	4
56-60	1			1	1	3	33	33	67	4
60+			1		1	2	0	50	50	3
<b>Religion</b>										
"Important"	6	5	10	4	6	31	35%	61%	32%	44%
Protestant	4	3	5	1	4	17	41	53	29	24
Catholic	2	2	4	2		10	40	80	20	14
Jewish			1		1	2	0	50	50	3
New Age				1	1	2	0	50	100	3
"Not important"	2	2	13	7	15	39	10	56	56	56
<b>Racial identity</b>										
African-American		1			1	2	50%	50%	50%	3%
Latino	1					1	100	0	0	1
White	7	6	23	11	20	67	19	60	46	96
<b>Marital status</b>										
Married	2					2	100%	0%	0%	3%
Divorced			2		1	3	0	67	33	4
Never married	6	7	21	11	20	65	20	60	48	93
<b>City of interview</b>										
Philadelphia	3	2	9	3	6	23	22%	61%	39%	33%
Houston	3	3	6	2	2	16	38	69	25	23
New York	1	2	4	3	7	17	18	53	59	24
Washington			3	3	3	9	0	67	67	13
San Francisco	1		1		3	5	20	20	60	7
<b>Strategy used with parents</b>										
Counterfeit	4	1				5	100%	20%	0%	7%
Avoid	2	5	15	3	2	27	26	85	19	39
Integrate		1	7	8	19	35	3	46	77	50
(Deceased)	2		1			3	67	33	0	4
<b>Lesbian or gay co-workers</b>										
Many		2	2	3	11	18	11%	39%	78%	26%
Some	2	3	9	5	8	27	7	63	48	39
Not aware of any	6	2	12	3	2	25	24	68	20	36

**Sample description**  
Workplaces

	STRATEGY USED					TOTAL	% USING STRATEGY			
	COUNTER 1	COUNTER 2	AVOID /AVOID 3	INTEG /AVOID 4	INTEG 5		COUNTER 1-2	AVOID 2-4	INTEG 4-5	TOTAL
<b>Type of organization</b>										
company	7	7	16	11	14	55	25%	62%	45%	79%
self-employed			3		3	6	0	50	50	9
not-for-profit					2	2	0	0	100	3
government			2			2	0	100	0	3
educational	1		2		2	5	20	40	40	7
<b>Size of office</b>										
fewer than 25	3	6	10	7	6	32	28%	72%	41%	46%
25 or more	5	1	13	4	15	38	16	47	50	54
<b>Homophobic incidents or comments</b>										
Major/often	6	1	3		3	13	54%	31%	23%	19%
Minor/occasional	1	3	8	4	8	24	17	63	50	34
Rarely/never	1	3	12	7	10	33	12	67	52	47
<b>Expected consequence of having sexuality revealed</b>										
Fired	1	1	2			4	50%	75%	0%	6%
Harassed	3		3			6	50	50	0	9
Embarrassed	4	2	9	5		20	30	80	25	29
None		4	9	6	21	40	10	48	68	57
<b>Social obligations at work</b>										
Often	3	4	3	4	7	21	33%	52%	52%	30%
Sometimes	3	2	5	5	9	24	21	50	58	34
Rarely/never	2	1	15	2	5	25	12	72	28	36
<b>"How often do people at work talk or joke about sex?"</b>										
"Often"	6	4	3	4	17	34	29%	32%	62%	49%
"Not too often"	2	3	20	7	4	36	14	83	31	51
<b>Vulnerability to being fired</b>										
High	5	3	7	3	3	21	38%	62%	29%	30%
Moderate	2	1	4	4	2	13	23	69	46	19
Low	1	3	12	4	16	36	11	53	56	51
<b>"Does your company have a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation?"</b>										
"Yes"	3	2	5	4	9	23	22%	48%	57%	33%
"No"	4	5	11	4	4	28	32	71	29	40
"Not sure"	1		7	3	8	19	5	53	58	27
<b>"With whom do you spend most of your time?"</b>										
Co-workers	5	3	14	5	7	34	24%	65%	35%	49%
Clients/customers	3	4	9	6	14	36	19	53	56	51

**APPENDIX III**  
**Interview Schedule**

**I. Job characteristics**

- type of occupation

*What sort of work do you do?  
Industry? Title?*

- field, industry

- functional occupation

- structure of job

- structural relationship with co-workers/boss

- geographic site

- time spent in office

*Where do you do most of your work?  
In a central office? At multiple sites?  
On the road?*

*Do you have a private or semi-private  
office? What is your physical  
workplace like?*

- number of people

- degree of contact

*About what proportion of your time is  
spent communicating -- in person, by  
phone, letter or memo -- with other  
people?*

- relationship with co-workers

*Think of the people with whom you  
have the most frequent contact. Tell  
us about these key groups or  
individuals.*

*Would you say that these relationships  
are competitive? Supportive? Formal?  
What words would you use to describe  
them?*

*Which of these people are you closest  
to?*

- performance evaluation

- keyed to group or individual

- mobility
  - turnover
  - internal

*Are you on a fixed salary? Is your compensation tied to individual or group performance?*

*About what proportion of the people in your position will change jobs or positions in a given year? How about people in other positions?*

*How long do you plan to stay in this position?*

*About how long do you plan to stay with this company?*

- evaluation of performance
  - clients
  - superiors

*What constitutes "success" or "good performance" according to your superiors/clients?*

*In what way do your superiors/clients evaluate your performance? Formal procedure? Informal?*

*What criteria do they use?*

*Does this feedback affect your job (income, promotions)?*

- personal and professional realms
  - company gatherings
    - frequency and type
    - nature of attendance
    - penalties for non-attendance

*How many company events -- planned and funded by your office -- were held last year? Who was invited to these?*

*How many did you attend, if any, and why?*

*Are there other company activities -- like blood drives, charities, or sports teams -- in which you participate?*

*Is there any pressure or encouragement to participate in any of these events/activities? Any penalty for not participating?*

*Did most people bring spouses or dates?*

*Was this expected or required? What information did you have to create this expectation?*

*For each event that you attended, whom did you bring?*

- personal gatherings
  - frequency and type
  - nature of attendance
  - penalties for non-attendance

*Do you socialize after hours with people from work? With whom?*

*How often? What types of gatherings (sports, drinks after work, dinners, double dates)?*

*Do these events usually involve spouses or dates? Who did you bring?*

- ambition, long-term goals
  - perceived dependence on job
  - opportunities for mobility in/out of company/industry

*If one of your superiors or clients wanted to damage your career -- because of a disagreement of some sort -- could they hurt you at this company? If so, how?*

*How about if you left this company or industry?*

*How hard would it be to find a comparable job?*

- general assessment of culture
  - personal "fit"

*Do you feel that you "fit" into this environment? Why or why not?*

*How would others in your office describe you?*

## **II. Personal characteristics**

- age

*How old are you?*

- religion

*Do you consider religion an important part of your life?*

- gay identity
  - how long

*Do you consider yourself gay? Bisexual? If so, since when?*

- gay identity outside workplace
  - family
  - friends, in general
  - gay friends

*Do your parents consider you gay?*

*How about your siblings?*

*Of the group you consider your closest friends, about what proportion consider you gay?*

*About what proportion of these friends are gay themselves?*

## **III. Personal strategies**

- gay identity at work

*Who at work -- if anyone -- considers you gay?*

- For each of those who do
  - how do they know
  - current status

*How do you know? Can you think of anything they've done or said? In what ways is this discussed, implied, or made apparent?*

- for those who don't
  - current status
  - issue surfaced
    - If yes, how handled

*How do you know? Can you think of anything they say or do to make you assume this?*

*How did they get this impression? Do you do anything to convey this impression?*

*Have there been instances in which you had difficulty maintaining this impression? Has the issue come up in some way? How do you handle it?*

- changes in strategy
  - reasons for change/evolution of strategy,
  - nature of change
    - structural
    - personal
  - evaluation of status/outcome
  - plans for future

*Has this always been your approach, or has it changed over time? If so, why?*

*Are you satisfied with this approach?*

*What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach (present and past)?*

*Do you plan to change this approach in the future? If so, why? And if so, how will you do it?*



*What would happen if others learned you were gay by some means beyond your control (i.e. all the gay people suddenly turned green?)*

- subject's treatment of gay co-workers (if any)
- subject's evaluation of gay co-workers
  - feelings about gay co-worker
  - relationship to gay co-worker

*Are there gay people in the groups you contact in the course of your work?*

*How did you find out that this person is gay? What special opportunities/problems does this person face as a result of being gay?*

*Have these gay co-workers ever presented a problem?*

*Alternatively, have you served as a mentor/sponsor for other gay people in the firm?*

#### **IV. Sexual norms in the workplace**

- perceived consequences of gay identity
  - others' treatment of gay co-worker (if any)
    - consequences of gay identity
    - how others behave towards
    - consequences for career

*Think again about the other gay people at work, if any.*

*For each individual, how do other people treat him or her?*

*Can you think of any [comments, jokes, actions, situations] that indicate their attitudes toward this person?*

*Do you think that this person's sexual orientation has had any impact on his or her career? On the decisions made by superiors or peers?*

*If it did have an impact, in what way?  
How did you find out about these  
impacts?*

- categories of evidence (aided)
  - knowledge of company policy on sexual minorities
    - how communicated
    - how actually applied

*Does your company have a policy that  
prohibits discrimination on the basis of  
sexual orientation?*

*If so, how did you find out about it?*

*Can you think of any situation in  
which it was used or applied?*

- knowledge of co-workers' personal lives
  - how gained
  - how others evaluate these activities
  - personal relationship to co-worker
  - professional relationship

*How much do you feel you know  
about the personal lives of the people  
you work with?*

*Do you tend to know if they're  
involved in a relationship? Do you  
know the other person involved?*

- knowledge of co-workers' explicit sexuality
  - how gained
  - how others evaluate these activities

*Do you ever discuss or hear about the  
explicit sexual activities of others?*

*Do you participate in these  
discussions?*

*How do others seem to feel about  
these discussions? (i.e. joking, serious,  
critical, etc.)*

- gay-related encounters with others
  - conversations

*Can you think of situations in which homosexuality was discussed or mentioned?*

*In these encounters, what was the general attitude toward gay people?*

*Can you think of situations in which (gay culture, AIDS, gay jokes, other minorities, gay politics, anti-gay violence, etc.) were discussed?*

*Again, what was the general attitude toward gay people?*

- perceived consequences of gay identity
  - anticipated/actual behavior of others
  - anticipated/actual impact on career

*When you think about your career, can you think of any decision point at which your sexuality became an consideration?*

*Imagine your ideal job environment, and describe it. How would you locate such an environment?*

- conclusion

*Any questions about us? About the project?*

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