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The creation of bent knowledge: how lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth negotiate and reconfigure homophobic and heterosexist discourse

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Introduction

By the turn of the millennium, IBM, Disney, and Levi-Strauss, among other corporations, had instituted domestic partnership benefits for same-sex couples; gay and lesbian characters proliferated on prime-time television; and a number of regions allowed either same-sex marriages or civil unions (e.g.: Denmark, France, Holland, and the U.S. state of Vermont). In Canada, sexual orientation now constitutes prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act (Hurley and Robertson 1997), the Canadian Armed Forces no longer imposes restrictions on enlistment and promotion on the basis of sexual orientation (Pinch 1994), and same-sex partners are afforded the same rights as married heterosexual couples under federal law (Fisher 2000). At no other time have lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) folk in Canada had so much institutional freedom and visibility.

Despite these newly won freedoms, however, LGB folk still have to contend with a largely heterosexist and often openly homophobic society. Legal freedom and antidiscrimination laws mean little if verbal and physical abuse remains socially sanctioned. LGB youth are especially vulnerable in a school culture that implicitly condones gay bashing and a peer culture that explicitly condones such behavior (cf.: Fontaine 1997, Rivers 1997). Indeed, such youth are especially vulnerable to the imposition of heterosexist and homophobic social discourses that are integrated within and span across larger hegemonic discourses including those of gender, medicine, science, and religion. And yet, despite a disproportionately high risk of homelessness, physical and psychological abuse, substance abuse, and attempted suicide (cf.: 1999 Oregon Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2000, Savin-Williams 1990), many LGB youth go on to develop a strong sense of identity and lead meaningful and productive lives. Against the odds, they manage to successfully navigate a particularly tight social gauntlet. How do they do this?

Research Questions

Drawing on the (meta)theoretical perspectives of Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, and, to a lesser extent, Michel de Certeau, I hope to gain some insight into the following questions:

1. How do LGB youth, in the process of coming out and developing a positive sense of self-identity, negotiate and reconfigure dominant heterosexist and/or homophobic discourses? What tactics and strategies of resistance do they employ, and how do they employ them?
2. How do LGB youth, in the process of coming out and locating community, demonstrate that they are knowledgeable agents?
3. What forms of informational and other capital relevant to sexual orientation and/or sexuality do LGB youth acquire, and how does this capital facilitate entry into community?

4. How is access to various forms of informational capital facilitated or denied, and why does this occur?

Research Assumptions

The following comprise the assumptions on which the research rests.

- Discourses of sexuality, including same-sex desire, are historically and culturally contingent, but they are also political. As such, discourses of sexuality undergo constant (re)construction at the structural level based on interests to be served.
- Discourses of sexuality help constitute our subjectivities, and they may be reconfigured at the level of the individual. Discourses of sexuality may be performative,[1] but they can be bent through knowledgeable agency.
- People are knowledgeable agents. They have the capacity to choose to act otherwise. As such, they have the ability to exercise power and make a difference. Agents follow rules that are transformational; however, because all action is interested, agents often become strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to various situations and contexts.
- Those who socially transgress often employ subversive tactics of resistance through time within dominant social structures. These structures may be physical (school, church) or discursive (heterosexism, gender). Once they have carved out their own cultural space, transgressors attempt to maintain that space strategically.
- Through the maintenance of space, social transgressors often begin to acquire various forms of capital, including informational, social, and symbolic, based on their transgression. The acquisition of such capital helps to normalize the transgression and to provide an air of legitimacy for the transgressor. This legitimacy has an impact, however slight, on social structures.

Conceptual Definitions

Due to the space constraints of this paper, I am unable to provide here a full theoretical framework for my study. Instead, I shall provide some brief conceptual definitions. These concepts are greatly expanded upon in my proposal, but they are included here as an indication of their importance for my research – these are the *key* concepts.

Discourse

Discourse, a *portmanteau* term, means many things to many people. It is often associated with lingistic utterances or communications, whether spoken or written, between a speaker and a hearer. However, following Foucault (1972), I take discourse to be a socially constitutive practice that produces and reproduces social structures and social subjects. Practice is a key idea here in that discourse is active; it is creative and constitutive. For example, in the late 19th century, medical science initiated discourse on homosexuality. This does not mean that same-sex desire did not exist prior, but rather that present-day conceptions of homosexuality commenced. What had previously been an *act* of sodomy with no social stigma attached (although with legal sanctions) became a *type* of person "with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (Foucault 1978, 43). The implication of this notion of discourse is that there is no inherent order or truth in the world; rather, there is, as the notion of practice would suggest, a will to truth.

Power

The concept of power is often linked with authority and domination. For instance, the state imposes its power on the citizenry in order to maintain social order. Employers impose power on employees in order to increase productivity and/or profits. However, drawing again from Foucault (1978), I do not take power as a top-down commodity that is owned by a dominant elite, nor as some possession that a marginalized group can steal away. Power is relational. Dispersed through social relations, power both produces and restricts forms of behavior. As such, it is hegemonic in that it does not simply dominate people, it incorporates them. This is not to say that imbalances of power do not exist, but power is a relational rather than a top-down affair, and it is exercised rather than owned.

Symbolic Power (Symbolic Capital)

Symbolic power (or symbolic capital) stems specifically from Bourdieu (1987, 1990b). It is world-making power in the sense that it attempts to impose the "legitimate vision of the social world" (Bourdieu 1987, 13). It does this through the process of misrecognition whereby an exercise of power, always interested, is misrecognized as disinterested. I, however, argue for a slight reconceptualization in that legitimacy can also be obtained through an exercise of *explicitly* interested power.

Knowledgeable Agency

Knowledgeable agency stems from Giddens (esp.: 1984) who defines an agent as one who has the capacity to act otherwise. As such, agents are able to exercise power and make a difference. Knowledgeability results through practical consciousness, which allows us to do what we do without thinking about it. For example, we know how to speak grammatically without necessarily being able to articulate the rules of grammar. However, Giddens' notion of practical consciousness is heavily dependent upon rule-following. Even though these rules are transformational, I prefer to inflect Giddens' notion of agency with Bourdieu's notion of strategy (1977, 1990a). This is not to say that rules do not exist, or that people do not follow them. However, Bourdieu views agents as strategic improvisers who respond dispositionally to various situations. All action is interested, and people will be governed by social rules only if it is in their interest to do so.

Informational Capital

Bourdieu (with Wacquant 1992) has argued that was has been called cultural capital should in fact be called informational capital. In the embodied form, it is the various dispositions that have been internalized by an individual through the process of socialization. In the objectified form, it refers to writings, works of art, scientific instruments, and other objects that require specialized cultural abilities to use.

Resistance

Foucault's conception of resistance is not well articulated (where there is power, there is resistance), nor is it operationalized, so I employ Certeau's (1984) concepts of strategy and tactic. Strategies emanate from space, and they are often employed in the maintenance of that space. Tactics have no space and must depend on time. They attempt to subvert strategic space. "Strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose. . . spaces, . . . whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces" (Certeau 1984, 30). One can act strategically and tactically at the same time. For example, LGB youth, once they have come out and created their own space, may operate strategically to maintain and extend that space. At the same time, they may operate tactically within heterosexist and/or homophobic spaces in an attempt to subvert or manipulate those spaces, or even to survive.

Beyond these concepts, one will find through the work of Foucault, Giddens, Bourdieu, and Certeau that a number of common themes consistently emerge. The concept of practice is central to all of these thinkers, as is the notion of the production and reproduction of society. I expect these general themes and concepts to emerge from the interview transcripts along with other insights into the research questions that I have posed.

Methodological Framework

Critical Research

Rubin and Rubin (1995) posit three different types of social research: 1) positivistic research, which strives to be value neutral with respect to both researcher and results; 2) interpretive research, which strives simply to understand and accept the values of individuals, cultures, and societies; and, 3) critical research, which strives to expose social flaws and, in so doing, promote actions that would help eliminate those flaws (35). The research proposed here falls into the latter category. By gaining some insight into how LGB youth negotiate and rearticulate dominant homophobic and heterosexist discourses, how they demonstrate knowledgeable agency in the formation of their identities, what forms of capital they acquire and how they acquire it, and how access to such capital is facilitated or

denied, we can begin to understand the processes by which LGB youth are able to develop for themselves a voice with which to help shift the space of pervasive and hegemonic sexual prejudice. Further, because sexual prejudice often goes misrecognized, whether deliberately (Zizek 1990) or implicitly (Bourdieu 1987, 1990b), I would hope that, by exposing the relations of power played out on the field of sexuality, this study would help heterosexual people come to recognize the nature and impact of sexual prejudice.

Critical research derives from the fractious early 20th century Frankfurt School, whose leading proponents included Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). According to Raymond Morrow (1994), the School was characterized by 1) its systematic employment of traditional empirical research methods, such as survey research, to test and refine propositions derived from Marxist tradition; and, 2) an acceptance of interdisciplinary theories and methods appropriated from the social sciences and humanities, including non-Marxist philosophy. While the critical theory of the Frankfurt School was never unified, and while it has spun off in many different directions (cf. the wide-ranging work of Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, Anthony Giddens, Nancy Fraser, and Mark Poster to name but a few), a number of characteristics remain. In no particular order, critical research

- views all people as positioned (Rothe 1993, Tierney and Rhoads 1993) – researchers are tied to their theoretical perspectives, and participants are tied to various social, cultural, economic, religious, etc. structures;
- is self-conscious and reflexive (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, Wodak 1999) – researchers are upfront with their epistemological baggage, and they are aware that their subjective, intersubjective, and normative assumptions, their values and beliefs, none of which they separate from their work, may change as a result of the research or even through the research process itself;
- assumes that knowledge (and language) is interested (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, Rothe 1993, Tierney and Rhoads 1993) – as such, critical research attempts to expose relations of power, uncover ideologies, and render problematic that which is taken for granted;
- often focuses on marginalized and powerless groups (Rubin and Rubin 1995) – see for example hooks (1989) on black women, and Rhoads (1994) on queer college students;
- is praxis-oriented (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Lather 1986, Tierney and Rhoads 1993) – "Critical theory seeks genuine unity of theory and praxis where the theoretical understanding of the contradictions inherent in existing society, when appropriated by those who are exploited, becomes constitutive of their very activity to transform society" (Bernstein 1976, 182);
- seeks social transformation and cultural emancipation (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, Rhoads 1994, Thomas 1993) – rather than simply asking how social processes function or how they can be made more efficient, critical research seeks insight into the mechanisms by which social processes exclude and/or marginalize. Only when such mechanisms are exposed can change begin.

Perhaps Kincheloe and McLaren best articulate the critical research approach:

> Critical research can be best understood in the context of the empowerment of individuals. Inquiry that aspires to the name *critical* must be connected to an attempt to confront the injustice of a particular society or sphere within the society. Research thus becomes a transformative endeavor unembarrassed by the label "political" and unafraid to consummate a relationship with an emancipatory consciousness. Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world. Traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself [italics in original]. (Kincheloe and McLaren (1994: 140)

For critical researchers, *knowing* things is not enough. Critical researchers seek insight into *how* things come about in order to show that change is possible and sometimes even desirable.

Data Gathering

According to Irving Seidman (1998), "The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to 'evaluate' as the term is normally used. . . . At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (3). Rubin

and Rubin (1995) distinguish between topical oral histories in which participants are asked to relate how they understood particular historical events such as the Gulf War or the fall of the Berlin Wall, and life histories in which participants are asked to relate their life experiences (27). For this study, I am currently undertaking a hybrid form of interviewing: the topical life history. The interviews focus on the coming-out processes encountered by 30 to 40 LGB youth aged 18 to 24, but not for the purpose of delineating a cause or a model. Ken Plummer (1995) tells us that coming-out stories are often "'modernist tales' in that they use some kind of causal language, sense a linear progression, talk with unproblematic language and feel they are 'discovering a truth.'" (83). Rather, I am interested in how participants were able to reconcile prevalent homophobic and heterosexist discourses with a non-normative sexuality, what they did, and how they did it. I am interested in acts of resistance, whether strategic or tactical. I am interested in how informational capital was negotiated for and acquired in a game in which the participants were likely novices. Because my overarching interest is in how macro structures are reconfigured at the micro level, topical life history is the most appropriate interview strategy. With its focus on how external events have an impact on one's lived experience, the topical life history allows me to explore areas that other methods would not.

Critical Discourse Analysis

In order to analyze the data, I shall undertake methods of in-depth content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). According to Teun van Dijk (1998),

> Critical Discourse Analysis is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, critical discourse analysts take explicit position[s], and thus want to understand, expose and ultimately to resist social inequality.

Fairclough and Wodak (1997, 271-280) summarize the primary tenets of CDA.

- ***CDA addresses social problems***. Homophobia carries with it ideological baggage, which may be seen to operate through a hegemonic heterosexism. CDA is interested in the linguistic character of such a process.
- ***Power relations are discursive***. Many right-wing conservatives are able to exercise rhetorical power in their fight against homosexuality. CDA seeks to expose this exercise at the discursive level in order to show it for what it is – rhetoric.
- ***Discourse constitutes society and culture*** (and is constituted by them). Such a cycle allows for change. After decades of gay activism, social discourse on homosexuality has shifted to a greater acceptance. Conversely, this has led to ever more extreme and shrill rhetoric on the side of the far right (see especially the work of the Reverend Fred Phelps (Westboro Baptist Church] nd.).
- ***Discourse does ideological work***. It is not enough to merely analyze discourse. One must also consider how discourses are received and interpreted, and what effects they have. Thus, one might ask, as do I, how LGB youth receive and interpret homophobic and heterosexist discourse.[2]
- ***Discourse is historical***. By tracing through histories of the medicalization of homosexuality, LGB activism, and so forth; and, by considering present day conceptions of homosexuality as derived through science, social science, library science, and so forth, we can begin, but only begin, to understand the context in which present-day LGB youth operate.
- ***The link between text and society is mediated***. Such links should not be seen as direct, but rather indirect and complex. LGB youth, in the practice of their everyday lives and in their acts of transgression, forge these complex links.
- ***Discourse analysis is interpretive and explanatory***. Discourse can be interpreted in very different ways, depending on the contextual backgrounds of the interpreters. Thus, when undertaking CDA, a rigorous and systematic methodology and a thorough investigation of context are crucial. However, CDA is always reflexive, and one must keep in mind that "interpretations and explanations are never finished and authoritative; they are dynamic and open, open to new contexts and new information" (279).
- ***Discourse is a form of social action***. CDA is socially committed, and researchers working within a CDA

> framework make no secret of their interests and agendas. They often take explicit political and ethical stands, they work in good faith, and they are nothing if not honest.

Further, Fairclough and Wodak also echo Dijk above:

> What is distinctive about CDA is both that it intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups, and that it openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it. The political interests and uses of social scientific research are usually less explicit. This certainly does not imply that CDA is less scholarly than other research: standards of careful, rigorous and systematic analysis apply with equal force to CDA as to other approaches. (259)

Indeed, writes Dijk (1993), "Critical discourse analysis is far from easy. In my opinion it is by far the toughest challenge in [a] discipline. . . . it requires true multidisciplinarity, and an account of intricate relationships between text, talk, social cognition, power, society and culture" (253). Further, by taking a position, researchers must be self-reflexive in terms of their interpretations and analyses. They must maintain some distance in order to avoid producing analyses that map directly onto their own personal beliefs. According to Ruth Wodak (1999), analysis must be neither purely inductive nor deductive, but rather abductive. "This means that members of a culture (including researchers) will work to understand their own culture and, rather than pronouncing truths, propose interpretations and solutions to perceived problems" (186). No one would claim that CDA is easy, but it is perhaps one of the most appropriate methods for use in critical research.

As the interviews are being transcribed, I shall examine them closely keeping in mind the primary tenets of CDA. Discourse analysis cannot be described in "recipe-type" terms, and, in discussing his own form of CDA, Fairclough (1992) states that "there is no set procedure for doing discourse analysis; people approach it in different ways according to the specific nature of the project, as well as their own views of discourse" (225). As such, there is no way to operationalize CDA *a priori*. First comes a close examination of the transcripts, then come specific decisions about how to analyze them.

End Notes

[1]I take the terms performative and performance from Judith Butler (1990, 1993) who distinguishes between the two terms. Performance is something one does. For instance, when a woman wears makeup, or a man dons suit and tie, they are performing gender. Performativity, on the other hand, is something that produces us. For instance, when the doctor exclaims, "It's a girl," the exclamation is not merely descriptive. It is performative in that the newborn is hailed a gendered subject. Further, I understand Butler to be attempting to apply Austin's speech act theory on a broader basis. For Butler (1993), "performativity is the vehicle through which ontological effects are established. Performativity is the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed." As such, we can view gender and sexual orientation as sets of discursive practices, which, in effect, produce who we are. Because most of us experience ourselves as gendered beings at core with fairly specific sexual orientations, we become implicated in the construction of ourselves as gendered and sexual. We are complicit in our own construction as we work to achieve what may only be an ascribed status.

[2]A caveat: I do not believe that all discourse necessarily does ideological work, and the concept of ideology may actually be at odds with the concept of knowledgeable agency. Indeed, following Bourdieu's notion of strategic agency, it may be that much of human action has no ideological underpinning whatsoever. Nonetheless, I shall bear this tenet of CDA in mind as I analyze the data.

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