



**Leisure, Narratives and the Construction of Identity Among Lesbian, Gay
& Bisexual Youth**

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At the age of 15 I became good friends with a woman named Susan. She was the person I played tennis with several times a week, she was the person who took me joyriding in her MG and who took me to the First Baptist Church in an attempt to save my Jewish soul. She was also the first person I fell in love with-an unrequited love-during my adolescence. At the time, I didn't have a name for how I felt-I couldn't articulate what she meant to me and I intuitively knew that I couldn't tell others how I felt about her. At the age of 17, I befriended a young woman I met at the end of my junior year in high school. We fell in love and then I knew what to name myself and what those feelings toward my friend had meant two years before. I also quickly learned that other people had a name for me, too. My girlfriend and I were called dykes, 'queers,' 'lezzies' and 'weirdos.' We were verbally harassed at school; students slashed the tires on her car; and someone threw a rock through the front window of my house. One night, a carload of guys followed us to a [dead-end] road. They parked their truck perpendicular to ours, blocking us from leaving. They got out with clubs and sticks and came over to our car. They shook the car and then pressed their faces up against the windows and began to taunt us with: 'dyke, "cunt, "lezzie, "queer. 'After awhile they got bored and "allowed" us to leave. We lost them by speeding through a red light. Because we weren't suppose to have been together and because we thought no one would care or do anything about it, we never told anyone about that night. At some level we had believed it was our fault-if only we had been more discreet about our relationship, if only we had stayed in the closet.

This narrative, written about events that occurred in my life almost 20 years ago, although perhaps a bit unusual, is not altogether that uncommon for someone who is a lesbian, gay or bisexual adolescent and acknowledges this identity while in high school (cf. Hunter, 1990). This part of the narrative from my adolescence recounts one consequence of "coming out" (acknowledging to myself and others that I am a lesbian) in high school during the late 1970s in a Northeast Texas town. These incidents occurred

during my leisure (as defined by free time) and within the context of leisure.

Introduction

Although conceptualizations of the term leisure have varied throughout this century (i.e., leisure as an objective activity, leisure as a subjective state of mind), an implicit, underlying assumption of our understanding of leisure has remained constant. Leisure is, at least for young people, a context for the development of heterosocial, and by extension, heterosexual, relationships. Peiss (1986) has argued that heterosocial relationships were sanctioned, encouraged, and legitimated within leisure contexts and leisure spaces at the turn of the century. Gender, class, and sexual desire were also constructed within leisure contexts (Peiss, 1986).

Although much has changed for young people throughout this century, leisure contexts and leisure space continue to provide opportunities for heterosocial interactions, as well as opportunities for identity development. Historians and social scientists have broadened our understanding of adolescence and youth by focusing on the contexts of adolescent development (i.e., schools, family, peers and leisure). However, they have focused little attention on examining the current discourse about young people, sexual identity, gender, race and leisure. Some questions not included in this discourse include the following: How have gender, sexual, racial and ethnic identities been constructed through leisure contexts? Do leisure contexts for identity development reinforce conventional sex roles and heterosocial relationships? Who has been marginalized by institutionalized and conventional leisure spaces? Whose stories and experiences of leisure have not been included in the scholarly discourse about adolescence, leisure and identity?

Such questions reveal that young people, like people of all ages, have identities that are multilayered and reflect biological, social, emotional and cognitive components, as well as components based on social constructs such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and age (Heath & McLaughlin, 1993). Moreover, young people's identities are also influenced by numerous contexts, including family, peers, school and leisure. Indeed, young people's lives are multidimensional and complex and their experiences and narratives reflect the extent to which they speak with multiple voices (Nies, 1989) within a variety of contexts.

Why Narratives?

Narratives, personal stories, are the basis for explaining and constructing experience and knowledge. Widdershoven (1994) suggested that "the meaning of life cannot be determined outside of the stories told about it" (p. 2). The words and stories in this paper focus on the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth whose narratives have remained outside of the dominant discourse on adolescence, youth, and leisure. Narratives are also the evidence of our individual and social experience (Scott, 1993), and help us to understand how individual lives and social relationships are constructed, maintained, and perpetuated in the social order. Van Manen (1990) asserted that the purpose of anecdotal narrative is:

- (1) to compel: a story recruits our willing attention;
- (2) to lead us to reflect a story tends to invite us to a reflective search for significance;
- (3) to involve us personally-one tends to search actively for the storyteller's meaning via one's own;
- (4) to transform: we may be touched, shaken, moved by story; it teaches us;
- (5) to measure one's interpretive sense: one's response to a story is a measure of one's dependability to make interpretive sense. (p. 121)

Finally, Van Manen (1990) posed this question: "Aren't the most captivating stories exactly those which help us to understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly?" (p. 19). I have been interested in knowing what lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth understand "most ordinarily and directly" about their leisure, and leisure and identity. I have also been interested in self stories that "position the self of the teller centrally in the narrative that is given. It is literally a story of and about the self in relation to an experience" (Denzin, 1989, p. 43).

In an attempt to broaden the current discourse about young people, leisure, and identity it seems critical that we begin to ask them to speak about their narratives and to tell their life stories. Opportunities need to be provided for them to convey what they are saying, or not saying, about leisure in general and leisure as a context for identity formation. The purpose of this paper is to examine excerpts from narratives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth between the ages of 18-23 as they speak about their leisure.

Background

Of the 30 million adolescents, ages 10 to 20 in the United States today, 10% or 3 million are lesbian, gay, or bisexual or are questioning their sexual identity (Deisher, 1989). Despite these numbers, researchers across disciplines either overlook this population as an authentic category of youth or they continue to perpetuate misinformation about them. Boxer, Cohler, Herdt, and Irvin (1993) argued that:

The issue of adolescent homosexuality, one of the most sensitive social problems of our time, is little studied because of its taboo subject matter. It is much more difficult for family and school to accept the possibility of a group of adolescents who early recognize their homosexual orientation and who seek a consistent life-style in the same manner as their heterosexual counterparts. (p. 255)

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are confronted with the typical issues of adolescence (i.e., parental conflict, peer pressure, sexuality). Their concerns, however, are magnified by experiencing emotions, feelings, and attractions that run contrary to the dominant messages and norms of a heterosexual society. They are marginalized, isolated, the victims of homophobic attacks; and they are two-tothree times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people (Gibson, 1989). Defined as an irrational fear and hatred

of homosexuals, homophobia manifests itself through institutionalized discrimination and through verbal and physical harassment.

Despite the difficulties in pursuing research about lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, many studies over the past 18 years have been conducted. Such studies have focused on "coming out" (c.f. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; Zera, 1992), identity development (c.f. D'Augelli, 1996, 1994; Herdt & Boxer, 1993), suicidal tendencies (c.f. Gibson, 1989; Remafedi, Farrow & Deisher, 1991), and issues of violence against lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (Hunter & Schaefer, 1987). These studies, however, have tended to focus on coming out, identity formation, and engagement in self-destructive behaviors (i.e., drug and alcohol abuse, unsafe sex, and suicide), ignoring other dimensions of the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. The research on leisure, and leisure as a context for adolescent identity formation, has also been reflective of the experiences of young people who are presumably heterosexual. To date, only a few studies have examined the intersection of sexual identity, leisure, and identity formation (c.f. Kivel, 1994; 1996).

Leisure, Narratives and Identity

Since 1993, I have conducted two studies that have focused on the narratives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. In the first study, I asked them to define and conceptualize the term "leisure" within the context of their personal narratives. The narrators in the 1993 study, all of whom were between 18-23 and residents of the Bay Area, clearly articulated a connection between their identity as lesbian and gay youth and their understanding of leisure. Participants said that sexual identity was related to what they did in their free time and with whom. One woman, a 19-year old, said "... if it's something I'm going out to do for fun I wouldn't choose something where I felt like I had to be always educating people or dealing with people's ignorance and homophobia about lesbian and gay issues." They also said that physical and emotional safety was related to the issue of leisure choice-where to go to participate in leisure activities and with whom were central concerns for participants. One man, a 23-year-old AfricanAmerican, said, "You have to be cautious of what you're doing and who you're around because you're just afraid of the harassment or afraid of someone beating you up because of your sexual orientation. You have to always be aware. You still see 'kill fags' up on the bathroom walls."

The narratives also revealed that some of the respondents were able to enjoy themselves more fully as a result of "coming out," acknowledging to oneself that one is lesbian, gay and/or bisexual. One woman, a 23-year old said, "and when I came out, I finally felt at home with myself and I finally felt like I really knew who I was I think the self-confidence of coming out has a lot to do with how I have spent my free time."

In the second study in 1995, I asked participants to share their narratives in an attempt to examine and understand the connection between leisure and identity formation among lesbian and gay youth. During the spring and summer of 1995, I conducted structured interviews and follow-up semi-structured interviews with five men and five women. Four of the 10 participants were of African-American descent; one person was of

Chinese descent; and one person identified as being an "Orthodox Jew." The interviews were conducted in a college town in the Southeastern United States and participants were solicited through a lesbian, gay, and bisexual student organization on campus. Transcripts from the interviews were analyzed using narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993) and modified constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

There were numerous findings from the individual and collective narratives of participants. The primary finding was that participants demonstrated that leisure was a context for developing personal, not social identity. Indeed, they said that they used leisure contexts to help them understand themselves, their relationships with others and the world, rather than the "roles" that they might play in the world. Yvette (a pseudonym), a 21 year-old African-American woman, played softball in high school because she wanted to know if there were other women like her (i.e., other young lesbians). Yvette wanted to confirm that she was attracted to other women, not necessarily that she wanted to embrace the identity of a "lesbian." Another finding was that participants engaged in a variety of activities (e.g., drama, music, reading) which could be described as existing on a continuum of doing and being. These activities led them to contemplate, confirm and/or cope with different aspects of identity, including sexual identity. The following excerpt from Sally's narrative and the analysis of her narrative further illustrates this finding (see Kivel, 1996 for further details regarding the analysis itself).

Sally's involvement in drama, cheerleading, and sports presents one image of who she was in high school. Sally said her identity was almost like a split personality.

When I was a cheerleader I was this kind of person. When I was in soccer or basketball, I was this kind of person. I was two separate people in different arenas. And I was very aware of it. I was very aware of hiding things when I was cheerleading and I was afraid of not being so afraid to hide things when I played soccer or basketball. Because I don't know, I guess those were like team sports or something and so we were much closer and it was much more accepted that we, we're close ... with soccer there were only a few girls

.. we were really close and we were really affectionate with each other so that was a lot more open. It seemed to be more, I don't know, acceptable. But with cheerleading that was a kind of personae, it was a way to say oh I'm not that way, not necessarily, I'm not that way, but in reality I knew that I was. In basketball, being open to ideas, you know and being open with other people and being aware of my sexuality that way.

Sally talked about having separate parts of her identity and about her view of herself and her world in high school. "School is one part and then this is another part of me that is completely and totally separate."

For Sally, leisure meant being active (i.e., doing theater, playing soccer and basketball, and competing in cheerleading). Leisure was a context in which the process of 'doing,' and more specifically, the process of 'doing and being involved in theater' allowed her to negotiate and manage her different personae. Sally also used drama to help her solidify

her personal identity. She wanted to be involved with activities such as cheerleading and sports. However, at the same time she wanted to remain somewhat removed from these activities because she was concerned about the reactions of those who might discover that she was a lesbian (Kivel, 1996, p. 83-84).

Interestingly, the participants' identities as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people were private and not generally made public to others. This is an issue that distinguishes this marginalized group from others. These young people felt as if they did and could "pass" as being heterosexual. Yet, this private, internal knowledge influenced their actions with others in public contexts. Examples included decisions over whether to participate in a particular club or activity, to play a certain musical instrument (one participant said he wanted to play the saxophone, but chose the trumpet instead because he did not want to empower the rumors that he might be gay), or to quit participating in an activity such as cheer leading. Many of the unstructured and structured leisure contexts that are available to young people are either explicitly or implicitly heterosexual. Public settings such as school dances, proms, dance clubs, and the mall, as well as private conversations, are contexts in which young people talk about and engage in heterosexual dating, relationships, and sex.

Clearly, leisure contexts have the potential to benefit young people developmentally in terms of identity formation (Larson, 1994; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994). Indeed, for the participants in this study, leisure contexts were influential in helping them identify strategies for developing and managing different aspects of their personal identities. At the same time, however, some of the strategies that they developed (i.e., learning to hide and distancing themselves from others) may be detrimental to their identity formation. A Carnegie Corporation Report (1992) suggests that young people have too much unstructured free time, time in which they can engage in self-destructive behaviors. For the young people in this study, the issue was not having too much free time. Rather, it was not feeling free to be open and honest with others and, perhaps not having safe and supportive leisure contexts in which to experience different opportunities for positive growth and development.

Implications for Research and Practice

Collectively, the excerpts from the narratives of the participants in these two studies reveal the ways in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth conceptualize leisure; and the ways in which leisure can, to some extent, be a context for identity formation. There are numerous implications for both researchers and practitioners. In terms of future research, several questions can be developed which might lead to more narratives, more self-stories about lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and identity vis-avis leisure. Perhaps we should ask these questions. How do lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people construct multiple identities to conceal their sexual identity? How do they negotiate their friendships and love relationships within different developmental contexts (i.e., school, synagogue, church, sports leagues and other extracurricular activities)? How do they manage multiple identities (based on race, ethnicity and sexuality)? Ultimately, the narratives developed as a result of these questions might lead researchers and theorists to conceptualize their research differently. Perhaps researchers will recognize that groups

of young people, as is true of the balance of society, are diverse. They differ both within and between groups around sexual identity, race, ethnicity, and gender.

These narratives also provide practitioners with ideas for and about program development. Specifically, the participants have clearly identified the need for "safe" space in which to interact with their peers. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual young people need to be assured that they will not be harassed when they attend public events and programs. They also need to see signs and symbols (i.e., posters, photographs, the rainbow flag') that let them know they are not alone and that there is support for their identities as lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth. Direct service providers should develop a resource file with contact information for organizations that cater to lesbian, gay, or bisexual clients or are lesbian, gay, or bisexual friendly. Direct service providers could offer lesbian, gay, or bisexual young people opportunities to develop their social identities as athletes, musicians, and cheerleaders without concern that their sexual identity might be a barrier or constraint to their participation in a variety of activities. Programs such as the Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center (LYRIC) in San Francisco, California provide a model for other social and recreational programs throughout North America. Young people, 23 years of age and younger who identify as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or who are questioning their sexual identity have opportunities to participate in after-school programs. Program offerings include softball, volleyball and other sports leagues, peer-led support groups, dances, camping trips and drama, art and music programs. LYRIC is a non-profit organization that provides opportunities to a segment of the adolescent population in the Bay Area who would otherwise not have access to these activities. These programs assist young people in developing and integrating their personal and social identity.

While social services agencies for lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth can be found in mostly urban areas throughout the United States (i.e., New York, Seattle, Austin, Minneapolis, etc.), programs in smaller and perhaps more rural communities are more difficult to find. Initially separate programs for lesbian, gay, or bisexual youth might be needed to provide a "safe" space. Ultimately, however, the integration of all young people (i.e., people of color, people with disabilities, people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual) should be a longterm goal of leisure service providers.

Narratives provide us with important clues in understanding individual's meanings and experiences of leisure. For lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people, their narratives have been important in broadening the discourse about adolescents, leisure and the construction of identity. Their stories also provide us with many considerations for future research and practice.

Note

1. The rainbow flag has become a symbol for lesbian, gay, and bisexual liberation.

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