

**‘The fact they knew before I did upset me most’: Essentialism and normativity in lesbian and gay youths’ coming out stories**

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**Abstract**

This article demonstrates, via discourse analysis of a group of young gay and lesbian people’s coming out stories, the salience of essentialist ideologies on their identity construction. The study reveals underlying normative assumptions in the young people’s narratives, including those associated with binary gender and innate sexual desire, which they employ in order to construct a culturally authentic sexual identity. Through close sociolinguistic analysis of interactions, it is shown how identity construction is directly influenced by broader ideologies. The analysis provides evidence of the continued prevalence of heteronormativity and homonormativity as key influences in young queer people’s identity work.

**KEYWORDS:** normativity; youth; identity; authentication; discourse analysis

**Introduction**

Gay and lesbian people have for generations been urged to come out; the metaphorical closet has long been cast as a dangerous place, whereas coming out ideally leads to self-fulfilment and pride (Sedgwick 1990: 72). Gray (2009: 1181) argues that there are also ‘ascribed moral duties of visibility’ within gay culture – a sense that one must come out in order to accept oneself and to increase queer visibility. Indeed, on a cultural level, the role that celebrities play in coming out has contributed to the demythologising of homosexuality in the past few decades (Plummer 1995: 82). However, as I will demonstrate here through the analysis of three narratives, in which young lesbian and gay people share their experiences of

realising their sexual desires and then telling their families, a sense of stigma and otherness may also be felt by the person coming out.

In this study, I employ sociolinguistic discourse analysis to investigate how speakers use language to construct and perform identity through interaction. Specifically, my analysis of the data included here shows underlying normative and essentialist assumptions in young people's coming out narratives which are associated with binary gender and innate sexual desire, employed in order to construct a culturally authentic sexual identity. Firstly, though, I provide a brief review of sociological and sociolinguistic work into coming out, including a consideration of queer theoretical concepts of normativity. I then introduce the context of this study and the analytical approach taken, before presenting three individual extracts of conversation which are analysed using sociolinguistic techniques.

### **Coming out**

Plummer (1995: 83) sets out the prototypical, 'modernist' coming out narrative in the West as follows: the story is linear in its progression, beginning with a sense of being 'different' as a child. It then moves to feeling ashamed or guilty, and often being frightened of discovery during adolescence. The story then concerns how the problem was resolved – often by meeting other gay people – after which, the narrator's sense of self as a gay person is secured. This presents coming out as a positive act whereby speakers ultimately construct a gay identity for themselves. However, Plummer goes on to argue that this classic, linear form of storytelling relies on 'the belief in some unitary, essential, core experiences which connect in some deeply patterned fashion' (1995: 132). More recently, he argues, 'postmodern' coming out stories have emerged; these are far more fragmented and varied, with sexual identities themselves

being less clearly defined on stable or binary lines. The sexual identities that speakers come out into may be contradictory, fluid, and changeable. This is not to say that modernist stories no longer exist, of course – indeed, Plummer (2017) argues they still dominate. His modernist model is mirrored in recent sociolinguistic analyses of Western coming out stories, in fact. In Kim's (2009: 260) analysis, for example, speakers are shown to typically position their sexuality as key to the realisation of their whole self; coming out may still tell the story of an experience which 'dramatically reshape[s] the life-route: life will never be the same again' (Plummer 1995: 84).

Two stages have been identified in sociolinguistic analyses of coming out narratives: firstly, speakers may outline 'coming out to oneself', before describing 'coming out to others' (Chirrey 2003: 26). Liang's (1997) analysis of coming out stories also finds this pattern; she suggests that the shared structure of the coming out narrative serves as a community-building and affirmative experience for gay people who tell one another their stories (1997: 294), particularly given that the heteronormative nature of society results in most people coming out continually throughout their lives.

Similarly, Wood (1999: 47) frames coming out narratives as 'rhetorical attempts to justify one's life [and] to realize acceptable selves by creating coherent identities' in the face of heteronormativity and homophobia, whilst Maher and Pusch (1995) find that coming out offers lesbian women the opportunity to create a sense of unity.

Coming out stories, then, may serve to reinforce notions of legitimacy and a sense of community – indeed, Wood (1997: 257) also suggests that they act as a 'ritualized conversation starter' in many gay communities<sup>1</sup>. As Fuss (1991: 4) puts it, 'to be out is really to be in – inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible'.

Whilst coming out is seen by many lesbian and gay people as an act of self-affirmation, however, it may also be viewed as ultimately limiting. Didomenico's (2015) study is an example of this; he examines how coming out stories are used as tools for training events for mainstream American audiences, with the intention of educating people about LGBTQ lives. Didomenico reveals that these narratives are somewhat homogenized during the editing process to give a coherent 'face' to an imagined queer community; the very fact that training events include such narratives demonstrates the assumption that there is one 'typical' or even 'normal' coming out experience. As Dhaenens (2013: 307) argues, the very act of coming out – though it may be celebrated – may reinforce heteronormativity by allowing the 'heterosexual majority the power to judge the intelligibility and accountability of the gay subject', given that the very fact of coming out is inscribed 'into the heteronormative sexual order'. He points out, for example, that the coming out process can be a particularly troublesome one for teenagers: 'though the teen may experience sexual desires that are various or conflicting, [they] will be forced to embody a fixed sexual identity' (2013: 306).

Tilsen and Nylund (2010: 136) also posit that, by claiming attachment to a cultural identity label (such as 'lesbian'), one must then additionally claim a predefined narrative; any individual story may be taken over by 'a universal, pre-scripted text' which has become 'restrictive, normative, and compliant by reifying traditional notions of identity and family and embracing neoliberal capitalist values'.

Neoliberalism is a set of economic values which prioritise 'privatization, personal responsibility, agentic individualism, autonomy, and personal freedom' (Weiss 2008: 89). Queer theorists posit that this has led to the reduction of gay culture to something narrow and commercially viable – something 'homonormative' (Duggan 2002),

where a restrictive notion of the ‘ideal’ gay identity exists (one which is usually white, Western, affluent, able-bodied, and marketable to the mainstream). Gay men and lesbians, it is argued, are encouraged through homonormativity to assimilate with heterosexual, mainstream norms (Seidman 2002; Warner 1999). From a queer theoretical perspective, then, coming out stories – though often presented and perceived as an individual act of self-affirmation – may in fact serve to reproduce a restricted, dominant, and homonormative ideal.

An example of this from sociolinguistics is Levon’s (2015) analysis of Israeli men’s coming out stories. He highlights the self-acceptance that his participants articulate, showing through ethnographic detail how they all work to construct an identity which matches the Israeli ideal of the ‘happy gay man’, invoking homonormative ideological notions of monogamy, acceptance, and visibility (2015: 150). The very idea that one must come out as gay at all, of course, is in itself a normative construct; one may experience and act upon same-sex desire without necessarily claiming a cultural identity as ‘gay’. Indeed, Seidman (2002: 11) argues that coming out is less significant now than it once was; his anthropological research with gay men leads him to suggest that many no longer feel that their sexuality is a core part of themselves, and it is increasingly common for individuals to refute the notion of a ‘gay identity’ altogether. Similarly, Savin-Williams (2005) argues that the very notion of ‘gay’ has changed in the twenty-first century, to the extent that many young people do not associate being ‘gay’ with having any particular identifying characteristics (see also Coleman-Fountain 2014). Indeed, as noted above, young people’s experiences in the twenty-first century may not reflect Plummer’s (1995: 52) account of a ‘modernist’ coming out story, whereby there is a sort of ‘rebirthing’, telling ‘initially of a frustrated, thwarted and stigmatised desire’ before describing a ‘metamorphosis’

whereby they realise that there is a name for what they are. Instead, many young gay people today document an easier path to the realisation of their homosexuality, shown by the increasing numbers claiming same-sex attraction but not feeling the need to define that with a particular label; this reflects what Savin-Williams (2005) refers to as a 'post-gay' time, as well as Plummer's (2017) observations about late modernist sexualities being blurred, fluid, and ambiguous. Yet the continued furore which tends to take place following a celebrity announcing their sexuality, such as in media responses to actors Ellen Page and Jodie Foster (who came out publicly in 2014 and 2013 respectively), also suggests that there remains significant cultural pressure to be 'out', and that the pull of culturally-salient identity labels is still strong.

Media representations of LGB life, and coming out more specifically, continue to be both popular and influential, then. They also help to reproduce normative ideas about sexuality. As an illustration of this, Gray (2009) investigated the coming out stories of rural queer youths in the USA, showing that her interviewees relied on media representations of LGBT people in order to make sense of their own identities. She shows that particular homonormative stereotypes relevant to popular culture were present, such as the idea of gay people being accepted by those they come out to because they were 'born this way' (also the title of a platinum-selling record by singer Lady Gaga, who is heavily branded as an ally of the LGBT community). Amongst Gray's participants, it was evident that these ideals were facilitated by representations in TV and film, as well as through the young people's engagement in chat rooms and with other social media.

This 'born this way' discourse, in which social actors are perceived to hold an innate sexual identity, is a form of essentialism. As Fuss (1989: 98) argues in her critique of

identity politics, adhering to such an ‘essentialist philosophy’ offers agency for oppressed groups who have an insecure position in society. Yet the construction of a coherent identity in response to homoerotic desire is a relatively recent phenomenon and, importantly, one which only exists as a reaction to the privileging of heterosexuality as ‘natural’ (Weeks 1987). Because coming out relies on an ideological binary between gay and straight (coming out as one means that you are not the other), hegemonic notions of essentialism which emphasise the ‘naturalness’ of the non-heteronormative are central – this also enables the argument that there should be tolerance and acceptance towards queer people. Indeed, Schilt (2015) argues that messages positioning gay people as ‘born this way’ invoke biological determinism, which in turn allows gay people (in particular) to be positioned as deserving of the institutional rights and legal protections afforded to heterosexuals. Essentialist discourse is therefore fundamentally homonormative; by positioning sexuality as a natural phenomenon, it presents a fixed (and limited) idea of what it means to be gay and uses it to justify political and legal claims to equality.

This ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1998) is typical of the practice of minority or marginalised groups. As Bucholtz argues, the use of discourse surrounding shared innate biological or cultural characteristics can be crucial for the construction of ‘authentic’ shared identities as ‘a tool for redressing power imbalances, as when the group under study is seen by the dominant group as illegitimate or trivial’ (2003: 401). The speech act of coming out, then, in the sense that it often involves claiming membership to a cultural category based on apparently innate characteristics, is in itself a way of claiming authenticity and positivity in relation to one’s identity. This is not to say that all those coming out necessarily think of themselves as performing a political act, but that by engaging in this practice – and constructing a coming out

narrative that they tell again and again – they are engaging with a broader process which legitimises them within a certain homonormative frame.

Since the culturally recognized and celebrated act of coming out *in itself* may reinforce normative ideas of binary, essential gender and sexuality, it is important to critique it via a queer lens. In the current study, I add to this body of work by exploring the language use of lesbian and gay members of an LGBT youth group, ultimately arguing that the telling of their coming out stories serves to reproduce these normative ideals. Firstly, below, I introduce the ethnographic context of the study and explain my analytical approach.

### **Context of study**

Between July and October 2012, I conducted ethnography with an LGBT youth group in the North of England, joining as a researcher and taking part in activities. The group met 6-9pm once a week in a council-run youth centre. Typically, the loose structure of the meetings were as follows: the first hour was spent chatting and catching up, as the young people arrived; the second hour involved some scheduled activity run by the trained youth workers (there were always at least two present, and all youth workers were gay or lesbian); the third hour was free time for the young people to either spend talking to the youth workers (such as if they needed personal advice) or to play games, read LGBT magazines, and so on. The scheduled activities tended not to be very popular as they were seen as boring or overly serious; these might involve a visitor coming to talk to the group about LGBT history, the group engaging in a creative writing exercise, or similar activities geared towards the youths' personal development and enrichment.



Despite the aims of the youth workers (and the agendas set for them by the local council, who funded the group), the young people typically just wanted the opportunity to ‘hang out’ and feel ‘normal’. The majority of them had been referred to the group by a teacher, social worker, or other professional because of concerns about their wellbeing, since most members had self-harmed and a number had attempted suicide. The group was based in a small, mostly white, working-class town, and there was relative socioeconomic hardship in the area. Far-right groups such as the British National Party and the English Defence League had enjoyed success there, and the town was relatively conservative. The young people tended to experience abuse and hostility from those in their local community as a result, including homophobic taunts while walking along the streets. The youth group was therefore a rare opportunity for them to spend time in a truly safe space.

I met fifteen young people during my time with the group, all but two of whom were cisgender, and the majority identified as lesbian or gay. I invited all members to take part in informal audio-recorded interviews, and seven agreed. I conducted one interview with a cisgender man (Tom, 18) and three in pairs of friends who chose to be interviewed together; one with two cisgender gay men (Josh, 22; Ryan, 16), one with two cisgender lesbians (Paige, 15; Emma, 16), and the other with Bailey (16), a transgender girl and Kyle (18), a transgender man (note pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality). All the young people at the group, with the exception of Bailey (who was mixed race) were white. Prior to interviewing, the participants received an information sheet and had the chance to ask questions, and those under 18 discussed it with their youth worker (who was responsible for their welfare while at the group) before consenting to take part. The hour-long interviews, which took place in a quiet room in the youth group’s regular building, were framed in terms of ‘what it

means to be a young gay person today'. I did not ask anybody for their coming out story, but most of the young people told me a version of this anyway, reflecting the salience of coming out to LGBT lives. Only three of those coming out stories are featured here (those of Emma, Josh, and Ryan), allowing close, in-depth analysis of each. As I have discussed elsewhere (Jones 2018), the gay and lesbian members of this group typically rejected the notion that their sexuality in any way defined them; they were anxious to present themselves in line with normative ideals, and the experience of constant othering by those in their local community led to a desire to minimise the relevance of their sexuality to their lives.

It may also be argued that the youth group, as an institution, itself contributed to the young people's motivation to draw on normative ideals. Indeed, Halberstam (2005: 222) argues that LGBT youth groups, whilst primarily aiming to offer sanctuary and safety, can also inadvertently create 'a sense of a fixed identity' in young people. For example, David, the lead youth worker for the group, talked often about his husband and their children, and was passionate about ongoing campaigns at the time for same-sex marriage rights; his concerns were largely in line with homonormative ideals. He also often expressed his frustration at hearing colleagues outside of the group refer to 'homosexuals', once stating "I tell them they shouldn't use that word, it's too clinical and it's offensive; they should say 'gay' instead". In itself, this reinforces the notion that being homosexual necessarily leads to a cultural identity of 'gay', an underlying theme which I will show to be evident in the data which follows. Of course, David's intention here was to normalize gay identity by removing it from a medical or psychiatric context, but it also demonstrates the influential role that he played amongst the young people. In this sense, it could be argued that the very environment of the youth group was normalising; a particular ideal of gay identity was put forward

in order to help the young people to feel that they were not deviant or marginal in society.

Resources that the youth workers would draw on in their scheduled sessions were often from the gay press, but also from social media. During the time of my research, the young people watched a number of videos from the YouTube campaign *It Gets Better*, started in response to a spate of gay teenagers committing suicide in the USA, and to date the most influential and wide-spread campaign targeted at LGBT youth. Some videos in this series are filmed by LGBT allies (such as then US President Barack Obama and singer Adam Levine), and many are by lesbian and gay celebrities (including TV host Ellen DeGeneres and actor Chris Colfer) who have used the opportunity to tell *their* coming out stories. Typically, these depict a period of sadness during their youth, ending with the positive note that life ‘gets better’ with time. Though well meaning, the campaign has received criticism for reproducing certain heteronormative messages regarding the need to ‘survive heterosexism’, which may imply that it is up to LGBT people to find ways to cope with homophobia rather than society’s responsibility to change (Grzanka and Mann 2014: 388). The videos also tend to show a somewhat narrow version of gay life, led by youthful aspirations to leave home and find acceptance in ‘the big city’, typically reflecting the privilege of the middle-class, white, and able-bodied (Puar 2010; Meyer 2017). Normative representations of homosexuality are, after all, often very narrow and exclusionary. In the analysis which follows, I aim to show evidence of the salience of messages such as these amongst gay and lesbian youth in the UK, and to critique them. Before this, I provide a brief account of the method of analysis used in this study.

### **Analytical approach**

My approach is informed by Butler's (1990) theory of performativity; culturally meaningful identities – such as those associated with gender and sexuality – are constructed and projected through individuals' language use and other social behaviour. My analysis is also informed by my knowledge of the ethnographic context where the interviews took place. Using this insight, I have analysed the following three extracts using sociolinguistic approaches to discourse analysis. 'Discourse', here, refers to the minutiae of speech and interaction. I note how linguistic resources (such as words or phrases) are employed by speakers and consider the effect of those resources on both the interactive moment (e.g. what stance they enable a speaker to take) and the broader sense of identity being constructed (in relation to the context of the youth group). I argue that momentary and temporary identity moves are relevant due to the fact that they invoke, reproduce, and rely on cultural stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality.

This situates identity construction as taking place on three levels identified by sociolinguists Bucholtz and Hall (2005) as the principle of 'positionality'. The first is the level of cultural ideology which is broadly recognized (if not experienced) by most people (such as hegemonic, heteronormative notions of what a 'man' is); the ethnographic level where the utterance occurs (in this case, an LGBT youth group); and the level at which the utterance is made (the temporary moment of speech itself). In the analysis which follows, I make use of Bucholtz and Hall's framework as follows: I consider an individual utterance in relation to the interactive context *and* in relation to the broader hegemonic level of meaning. This makes it possible to develop an understanding of not only how speakers position themselves in line with certain

salient stereotypes and identity categories, but also how other speakers they interact with in that moment can accurately *interpret* that positioning.

In the data extracts which follow, selected for their pertinence to the coming out narrative, I show how the utterances made by three young people allow them to produce a version of their identity which is meaningful within the context of their youth group and their interview with me, but also how this relates to broader ideologies of gender and sexuality. I take a queer critical perspective in my approach to the data below; I aim to identify not only the means by which the young people tell their coming out stories, but also the normative stereotypes that constrain them in doing so.

### **Analysis**

The first extract, below, comes from a conversation between 16-year-old lesbian Emma (E) and me (L), during a joint interview with her friend Paige. We had been discussing homophobia, and Paige talked about experiencing this within her family. This led Emma to share her own, contrasting story<sup>ii</sup>:

#### Extract 1: Emma

- 1        E        see I never got it my mum has said like tiny little thing but my mum is  
2                    perfectly fine she said (.) something without meaning anything by it  
3                    about being able to have children thing (.) she was like “oh I wanted  
4                    grandchildren”- she thinks my brother’s like (.) on his way so:: (.) but  
5                    er:::m/  
6        L            /what on his way to gay?  
7        E        oh yes. I think he’s just very camp and (.) in touch with his feminine  
8                    side but my mum- my mum does have the instinct she’s known since I

9           was playing with my brother's action figures that I would come out at  
10           some point.  
11    L       okay  
12    E       so::  
13    L       so do you feel like she knew before you did then?  
14    E       oh she did. she used to tell like all my family "oh (.) she will be. you-  
15           you watch" and then when I have come out obviously my mum's just  
16           been proven right I tried to hold it back so I couldn't prove her right  
17           but <@ no.@>

Emma reproduces essentialist and heteronormative expectations regarding gender and sexuality here, thus drawing on cultural norms at the ideological level outlined by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). She presents her mother as being 'perfectly fine' about her sexuality (line 2) and begins her story of coming out by positioning her experience of telling her mother as unproblematic. This presents an interesting construction; whilst the adverb 'perfectly' provides emphasis, 'fine' is a neutral term. Emma therefore stresses that there were no problems but does not go so far as to present the experience as a particularly happy one. Indeed, in line 2 she suggests that a remark about not having children was made by her mother 'without meaning anything by it'. I argue that Emma's framing of this event draws subtly on heteronormative assumptions regarding homosexuality and the family, referring to the 'being able to have children thing' (line 3). Emma's use of the noun 'thing' positions the apparent incapacity of having children if one is gay as a well-known phenomenon and typical response. Indeed, the assumption that this would be a usual reaction is shown in Chirrey's (2011: 291) analysis of advice literature for young people planning to come

out to their parents. Emma's downplaying of this moment, then, may reflect the heteronormative expectation that all parents want and expect their children to reproduce, and it therefore being inevitable for her mother to voice this. Emma also does not challenge the assumption that, as a lesbian, she could not have children because she would not have a male partner, despite her knowledge (via David, the lead youth worker) that same-sex couples could have families. In this way, Emma engages in positionality (Bucholtz and Hall 2005) by producing a version of her future self in which she would not be able to have children because of her sexuality. This is in line with broader cultural ideologies which are relevant to the local ethnographic context of the LGBT youth group, and it is therefore a way for Emma to perform a salient identity in this moment.

Emma also invokes essentialist assumptions in this extract in order to position her sexuality as inevitable, including biological explanations to present her desires as deep-seated and innate. Drawing on homonormative ideals, she positions her sexuality as biologically determined rather than a choice. First, she claims to have engaged in supposedly non-normative gender behaviour as a child, 'playing with my brother's action figures' (line 9), marking the toys out as her brothers' to emphasize her gender non-conformity – action figures are normatively boys' toys, given their use in fighting games and the links this has with heteronormative masculinity. Emma therefore once again draws on the essentialist notion of gender inversion; she constructs an implicit link (seen in lines 9-10) between her claiming that she played with action figures and the inescapability of her coming out 'at some point', reflecting heteronormative logic that lesbians are masculine.

Emma can also be seen to be engaging in a common feature of ‘life story’ telling, here, by articulating something from childhood to demonstrate that it is deep-rooted. Linde (1993: 135) calls this ‘temporal depth’, whereby a ‘tenet of our common-sense view of the self is that an activity, an aptitude, or an ambition that goes back to early childhood must be seen as intrinsic to the self’. This enriches the stories that we tell, making them seem more authentic. In Emma’s case, her identity work at the interactional level – framing her sexuality as embedded since childhood – allows her to position herself as ‘naturally’ gay, reflecting the ‘born this way’ discourse discussed earlier (enabling her identity positioning in line with the norms of the ethnographic context) and aligning herself with popular, homonormative notions of sexual identity (on an ideological level). In sociolinguistic terms, this is an act of ‘authentication’, whereby speakers position themselves as somehow genuine or legitimate (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 601). My own work with older gay women also shows this to be a viable means of producing an ‘authentic lesbian’ persona, such as by drawing on stereotypes of lesbian masculinity in projecting a ‘butch’ identity (Jones 2012).

Emma’s identity positioning as authentically lesbian is produced as part of a broader narrative that she constructs, whereby her mother has ‘the instinct’ (line 8) about her children’s sexuality, also believing that her son may be gay. Though Emma refutes this, believing that he is ‘just very camp and (.) in touch with his feminine side’ (lines 7-8), she reproduces the norm of gender inversion whilst also suggesting that gender itself may be fluid. In response to my question about whether her mother was aware of Emma’s sexuality from a young age (line 13), Emma is unhesitant in claiming that she was (‘oh she did [know I was gay before I did]’, line 14) going on to present her mother as irritatingly prophetic. Emma quotes her as telling the family ‘she will be,



you watch' (lines 14-15), hence Emma's claim that she 'tried to hold [her sexuality] back' (line 16) as a sort of rebellion. This allows her to position her sexuality as a strong natural force that she could not resist, again invoking homonormative, essentialist discourse.

Like Emma, the young people I met in the group often talked about their sexuality in relation to their families and the reactions they had, as in the following example.

Extract 2: Josh

1 J the thing that I had at school was where- when I came out (.) I wasn't  
2 ready to come out myself? (1) I felt like I were forced to come out.  
3 because everybody else were pointing the finger and saying "oh  
4 <\*you're gay you're gay you're gay">. (.) and it kinda made me think  
5 am I actually gay? do I need to tell everybody that I'm gay? I felt  
6 forced (.) into coming out before I actually felt comfortable with it  
7 myself. (2) erm because I never:: (1) I never really thought about  
8 being gay until people started calling me it.

[2 minutes omitted]

9 J (XX) I think the fact that they just knew before I did upset me most.  
10 I'd come out to my mum and I told her that I were gay and she was  
11 like "oh:: you need to think about it you need to decide whether you  
12 are or not it's not something that you can get rid of if you (.) tell people  
13 straight away you need to be sure in yourse::lf" and (.) it were the best  
14 (.) kind of advice that she ever gave me 'cause I needed to be sure.

15 L mmhmm  
16 J you know I could've (.) I could've not been gay (.) and told everyone  
17 that I was gay and it's very difficult to get rid of that if you're not. (.) if  
18 you're confused in yourself. (1) a::nd then you say it to everybody (.)  
19 they're just going to automatically (.) forever you're just gonna be that  
20 gay lad (.) even if you're not.

In this extract, Josh (aged 22) shares the difficulties he faced in coming out both to himself and to others, following the typical structure of a coming out narrative (Chirrey 2003, Liang 1997). His narrative reveals the cultural pressure he felt to conform to a normative sexual identity (to claim an identity of *either gay or straight*), and the role of his peers in this. In the first half of the extract (two minutes are omitted, while a youth worker interrupted our conversation), Josh reveals the importance of temporality to his personal identification as gay, beginning in lines 1-2 with the statement 'I wasn't ready to come out myself'. The reflexive pronoun 'myself', in conjunction with the following claim 'I felt...forced to come out' allows Josh to articulate a lack of agency since he did not feel able to choose the best moment *for him* in which to come out.

Following this, the prepositions of time 'before' and 'until' are used by Josh to emphasize the role others played in pushing him to come out 'before I actually felt comfortable with it' (line 6), and to suggest that he had not realized he might be gay 'until people started calling me it' (lines 7-8). Combined with the claim that he felt 'forced' to come out (line 2), Josh implies that he was placed in a role by others that he might not otherwise have been in. The lack of personal responsibility that he

articulates here shows a feeling of helplessness in relation to his own discovery of his sexuality, which is then compounded by his belief that his peers ‘knew before I did’ (line 9). This also, however, enables Josh to attribute a latent quality to his sexual orientation; if he did not realize it was there, and had no agency in establishing it, its existence must be innate. As in Emma’s speech, above, this use of temporal depth in his story may be seen as an act of authentication as genuinely (normatively) gay.

Levon (2015) finds something similar in his analysis of Israeli gay men’s coming out stories, mentioned earlier, whereby they construct their identities via claims of innate homosexuality. Levon argues that his participants do this as ‘a kind of distancing strategy, a way for the narrator to abdicate personal responsibility for the events described’ (2015: 140). In Levon’s data, this reflects the men’s efforts to reconcile the difficult intersection that they perceive between being gay and being Israeli. In Josh’s case, it indicates a reluctance to come out and therefore be defined as gay, reflecting the largely homophobic culture which dominated his childhood.

It is clear that Josh felt under some pressure to determine his sexual orientation and thus come out to himself, though from line 10 onwards he focuses on the process he went through in deciding whether to come out to others. He positions his mother as giving him advice not to tell people immediately: ‘I told her that I were gay and she was like “oh, you need to think about it, you need to decide whether you are or not”’ (lines 10-11). He evaluates this positively (‘it were the best...advice that she ever gave me’, lines 13-14), reinforcing normative ideas of binary sexuality that one is gay, or not gay; this effectively erases bisexuality, since only being *gay* is mentioned here as something one would come out as.

Coming out is also positioned here as a potentially risky thing to do because ‘it’s not something that you can get rid of’ (line 12). The phrase ‘get rid of’ (repeated again in line 17) denotes erasure; this suggests that, if Josh changed his mind or was just ‘confused’ (line 18), he would want to be able to delete the identity claim because, otherwise, he would ‘forever’ be ‘that gay lad’ (lines 19-20). Josh’s concerns about coming out too soon may therefore be related to being branded in a permanent way and imply that being gay is ultimately not desirable – it is instead something one eventually feels comfortable with (line 6) and comes to terms with. Josh’s utterance ‘just gonna be that gay lad’ itself may be seen to position homosexuality in a negative light; the adverb ‘just’ frames being gay as the primary and most important feature of a person once they are out, as one will be defined by that before anything else. As outlined above, the young people in this group were concerned *not* to be defined by their sexuality, so this linguistic construction has significance in relation to the context of the group. Josh’s narrative also refers to a time when he felt confused about his sexuality, and it is perhaps unsurprising that he was reluctant to be labelled at that point by those in his social networks.

Similarly, within the phrase ‘that gay lad’ (line 20), ‘that’ functions as a demonstrative pronoun which specifically points to one person and suggests othering. The use of ‘gay’ to pre-modify ‘lad’, in turn, also positions sexuality as of principal importance by emphasising it as a definable characteristic. Josh’s fears may therefore draw on his awareness of heteronormative expectations whereby those who are gay are othered or stigmatized (as they are in his local community); Josh’s identity positioning in this moment therefore appears to be informed by his desire for his sexuality not to define him. This contradicts the ‘homonormative’ ideal discussed above, of course, whereby gay people are assumed to have some pride in their

sexuality, and live openly, so long as they do so in a broadly normative, ‘palatable’ way (Agathangelou *et al* 2008). But Josh’s concern that ‘everybody’ (line 18) would believe that he was gay – referring, presumably, to all members of his local community – helps to explain his reluctance to come out to others before he was completely certain of his sexuality: he seemingly felt fear of marginalisation, reflecting the young people’s overall experiences of homophobia. Importantly, this also reveals the implicit assumption that one must at some point claim membership to a coherent cultural identity category in response to their own personal, intimate desires; this assumption applies only to those who are not heterosexual. The normative assumption that men who desire other men must take on a ‘gay’ identity underlies this entire extract, in this sense.

In the final extract, which occurred as part of my interview with Josh and his friend Ryan (age 16) and which followed immediately after Josh’s final turn in Extract 2, Ryan corroborates many of Josh’s experiences:

Extract 3: Ryan

- 1 R with being called gay all the way through school it were like a (2) am I  
2 really ga::y (.) do I just think it because they’re calling it me or:: (1)  
3 d’you know what I mean it were it’s like I- (.) I told my mum (.) when  
4 I were twelve @(.) <°when [I were] twelve>. and then- and then I  
5 J [wow]  
6 R went and got a (.) girlfriend. (1) I forced myself to have a girlfriend.  
7 And then I went home and went <\*ah mum it’s all fine now I’m not  
8 gay I’ve got [a girlfriend now] yeah it’s all fine.\*> err (3) but then (1)  
9 L [@(1)]  
10 R but before that I- like ten (.) nine (.) I were debating whether I were

11 bisexual or not (.) 'cause I- I knew I liked boys (.) but I didn't know if  
12 that were 'cause of being called gay.  
13 L mmhmm/  
14 R /was I being forced into being gay but (.) no and then I come  
15 out again and (.) I ran away.

Like Josh, Ryan emphasizes the role of his peers in his determining his sexuality, having also been labelled gay before establishing the fact for himself. Both of these young men experienced homophobic bullying at school, so what they describe here is likely a form of pejorative name-calling. Also like Josh (Extract 2, line 5), Ryan describes an internal narrative: 'am I really gay...do I just think it because they're calling it me?' (lines 1-2). Unlike Josh, however, Ryan explicitly states that he felt some confusion around whether his homosexual feelings were real or imagined. He is candid in his account, stating that, at one point, he thought he was gay *because* he was being called these names. More than simply not being ready to come out, then, Ryan frames the role of others as potentially *leading* him to identify as gay. However, he then refutes this, expressing the rhetorical question 'was I being forced into being gay' (line 14) which he immediately follows with 'but no', disregarding the idea. Ryan expresses confusion: 'I knew I liked boys...but I didn't know if that were 'cause of being called gay' (lines 11-12). This again demonstrates the heteronormative bias of coming out; it is one thing to experience same-sex desire, but quite another to assign oneself the cultural label of 'gay' (as Ryan was being called by others) due to its stigma.

Ryan goes on to discuss his exploration of his sexuality, in terms of his attempt to have a girlfriend (line 6). He constructs a timeline whereby he was first aware that he

was attracted to boys at age nine or ten, came out to his mother at twelve, got a girlfriend and changed his mind, then eventually came out in a more permanent sense as gay. Again, this follows the typical structure of coming out narratives, whereby one first reports coming out to oneself, and then to others, before asserting a specific identity. Ryan emphasizes the age that he was at each of these stages; in discussing the first, he states 'I told my mum when I were twelve', employing a stage whisper in his repetition of the phrase 'when I were twelve' to emphasize its significance. Indeed, this repetition leads Josh (who was taking part in this interview as well) to exclaim 'wow', an appropriate response given the relatively young age by which Ryan claims to have known he 'liked boys' (line 11). As with Emma's narrative of playing with action figures, Ryan engages here in authentication by drawing on normative and essentialist notions of innate desire relevant to the level of cultural ideology which informs his identity positioning; this allows him to add temporal depth to his narrative. Given his earlier admission that he felt quite unsure of his sexuality, given the context, this may also be seen as a face-saving move.

Ryan also draws on essentialist stereotypes in lines 6-8, claiming that 'I forced myself to have a girlfriend' (line 6). By employing the verb 'forced', Ryan is again able to position himself as inherently gay: to force oneself to do something suggests that it is difficult and against one's instincts, so aligning this with having a girlfriend is a clear way for Ryan to signal his inherent homosexuality. Ryan tells the story that follows (whereby he tried to claim a straight identity) with rapid speech, emphasising that he is telling a humorous story and ultimately allowing him to show that it was unlikely for him to have a female partner. I also argue that he invokes the heteronormative assumption that a boy with a girlfriend is heterosexual, hence his claim that everything was 'fine now, I'm not gay I've got a girlfriend now' (lines 7-8). This once

again reveals the binary assumption of being *either gay or straight*, though he positions himself as briefly ‘debating whether I were bisexual’ (lines 10-11) before establishing that he was gay. This demonstrates the salience of this assumption within the group and therefore on the ethnographic level, hence its relevance to the young people’s identity positioning. In doing this, Ryan also reproduces the cultural trope that bisexuality is either a transitional phase or simply homosexual denial (see MacDonald 1981). Furthermore, his utterance ‘it’s all fine now’ (line 7) upon having a girlfriend seems to demonstrate his awareness of the stigma of homosexuality, since the logical inverse of this is that it is *not* ‘fine’ to be gay.

### **Conclusion**

I have taken a queer critical approach in the analysis above. I have argued that each of the coming out narratives demonstrates the continued prevalence of normative expectations on young LGBT people’s identity construction. Specifically, I have made use of the positionality principle to explain the ways in which the young people perform an ‘authentic’ version of their identities through their language use. Their linguistic behaviour on the interactional level allows them to draw on homonormativity and heteronormativity on the cultural, ideological level. In turn, this informs their version of gay identity as it is relevant at the local, ethnographic level of the youth group. By focusing on their discourse through attention to close sociolinguistic detail, I have therefore revealed the various processes by which these young people not only report on their coming out experiences, but indirectly articulate their sense of what it means to be gay.

I have argued here that running through each of the extracts is the underlying expectation that, in experiencing same-sex desire, one must eventually claim the



culturally meaningful category 'gay' (or 'lesbian'); when one 'comes out', it is to align oneself with this predefined identity. It is clear from Josh and Ryan's narratives, in particular, that there may be a great deal of social pressure to do this, and particularly to position oneself on one side of the ideological gay/straight binary. Furthermore, given these young men's experiences of homophobic bullying, this is presented as a challenging and difficult thing to do because of the stigma that continues to be attached to being gay. I have argued here that this provides evidence of the sustained role of heteronormativity in shaping LGBT identities; despite the young people's desire to be seen as 'normal', they clearly felt othered due to being gay.

I have also argued that the data shows the young people working to position themselves as genuine and authentic in relation to broader homonormative ideals. Of particular relevance here are essentialist stereotypes; the young people draw on notions of innate desire, positioning it as unnatural to be attracted to the opposite sex (Ryan) or to ignore the force of their sexuality (Emma), and all three young people use temporal depth to position themselves as having realized their sexuality at a young age. My analysis shows heteronormative assumptions regarding gender inversion to be reproduced by Emma, while both Josh and Ryan imply that there was something in their behaviour which allowed others to identify them as homosexual before they were aware of it themselves. This identity positioning draws on what Weber (2012: 680) calls 'biological homonormativity', whereby sexual identity is assumed to be continuous throughout individuals' lives and determined at a very early age, and those who do not relate to this ideal are excluded from gay culture. This biological determinism perspective, as a form of strategic essentialism, has of course been enormously important for the progression of gay rights and is a dominant

cultural ideal. In this sense, it is no wonder that these young people draw on it as an intelligible way of constructing their sexual identities.

Yet it is also important, in this analysis, to account for how the intersecting experiences of these young people – who are from a conservative, working-class town, mostly without the means to relocate to a cosmopolitan or ‘gay friendly’ city – might have influenced their reliance on normative ideals. The young people are marginalised daily and are frequently the targets of abuse. As a result, they do not engage in celebratory acts of pride or assert their sexual identities in overtly queer ways; in this sense, they do not conform to the homonormative ideal of the happy, proud, openly gay subject (see also Jones 2018). But by positioning their sexual orientation as a fact of themselves for which they claim no agency, and by constructing their identities in line with heteronormative ideals, they are able to emphasise the *naturalness* of their identities; this allows them to challenge the stigmatisation they experience. In this sense, the identity work that is apparent from their coming out stories may be seen as an empowering tactic and a survival strategy which responds to a context in which they do not feel accepted and are instead made to feel ‘other’. Their coming out stories, as a result, remain linear and traditional rather than fluid, diverse and open-ended. This may suggest that only the relatively privileged have access to a ‘late modern’ (Plummer 1995) coming out experience.

Although it is apparent why the young people draw on the particular stereotypes that they do in their identity construction, it is nonetheless the case that the ideologies surrounding this are highly problematic. On a local level, the young people’s erasure of bisexuality and reliance on hegemonic notions of binary gender may delegitimise and thus exclude potential youth group members who do not conform to these

normative cultural expectations. Given how crucial the group is for these young people as a safe space, it is deeply troubling that others may not also benefit from it. There are broader implications for the young people's reliance on these ideas, too, since it is apparent from this study that notions of normative authenticity in relation to gay identity continue to have salience. The stereotypes these young people are reproducing may not only be facilitating their construction of a coherently gay identity, but also *restricting* and *limiting* their sense of self. This small-scale study thus needs to be expanded to determine the significance of normative ideologies beyond this youth group. In particular, further sociolinguistic work with queer youths from varying backgrounds and with differing intersecting identities will serve to reveal the extent to which these normative ideals are produced and reified in the construction of other aspects of the self. In turn, this will reveal the degree to which the ideologies can be challenged as well as reproduced, and the ways in which relative advantage or disadvantage may impact on young people's orientation to heteronormative and homonormative ideals.

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<sup>i</sup> Importantly, this differs to the experience of transgender people coming out; as Zimman explains, though trans people may have a moment of self-realisation and initial declaration, as in LGB identification, individuals may or may not choose to disclose their history following transition (2009: 60).

<sup>ii</sup> The method of transcription used here is adapted from Jefferson (2004):

[	beginning of overlap
]	end of overlap
-	self-interruption or false start
/	latching (no pause between speaker turns)
(.)	pause of less than 1 second
(2)	timed pause
.	end of intonation unit (falling)
?	end of intonation unit (rising)
<◇	transcriber comment
::	lengthening of sound
(XX)	emphatic breath out/sigh
@(10)	laughing, plus duration
<@ @>	laughing quality
<u>underline</u>	emphatic stress or increased amplitude
<* *>	rapid speech