Peacocks, Chameleons, and Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity

Wayne Brekhus

1. Gay Suburbia: *A Case Study in the Grammar and Microecology of Social Identity*
2. Everything about Me is Gay: *Identity Peacocks*
3. "You Have to Drive Somewhere Just to be Gay": *Identity Chameleons*
4. "Gay Defines Only a Small Part of Me": *Identity Centaurs*
5. Shifting Grammars: *Life Course Changes in and Structural Constraints on Identity Management*
6. Contested Grammars: *Gay Identity Disputes*
8. Duration Disputes: *Identity Stability vs. Identity Mobility*
9. Density Disputes: *Identity Purity vs. Identity Moderation*
10. Dominance Disputes: *Identity Singularity vs. Identity Balance*
11. Conclusion

**Gay Suburbia: A Case Study in the Grammar and Microecology of Social Identity**

- New York as "extraordinary" but also "typical" in terms of a reference category.
- "how to organize their 'gayness' in relation to their overall 'presentation of self'" (4.1)
- re-orderable hierarchy of "facets" of identity/self
- Suburbs as "nothing interesting" zones
- So, what do we expect would be the difference between cities and suburbs in terms of what is "interesting"?
- But consider Davis on "interesting" – that which runs counter to expectations.
- General issue: how identities combine valued and devalued attributes.
- For underlying dynamic, recall Emerson’s comments about the dialectic of formality and informality.
- Look closely at logic expressed in paragraph at 5.5.
- "…difference submerging places where most people live…” 5.8
- "This book provides a general theory of social identity…” 7.3
- Methodological Points
  - Goffman not Liebow. Analysis vs. thick description
  - WEBER: traditional, charismatic, legal-rational
  - Brekhus: noun, verb, adjective
- The story 9ff
  - gay commuters = chameleons
  - gay integrators = centaurs
gay lifestylers = peacocks
* Raising questions about marked identities as "master statuses" (11.3)
  What IS a master status?
* By writing about the most visible we are subject to a selection bias that assimilates entire category to those who are easiest to find.
* Problem of assuming that "more authentic" is more overt, out, (stereo-)typical
* "social logic" that assumes that to study gays you have to be gay, but that to study suburbanites you don't have to be suburban
  * Marked vs. Unmarked
  * Figure vs. Ground
  * Default assumptions
* There are spatial and temporal regions where marking is reversed ⇒ ecology of identity
* Fischer – urbanism as property with causal effects – place as variable (15ff). Do people make the space or vice versa? "The underlying assumption is that gay individuals make a space more gay, but not necessarily that gay spaces might make the individual more gay" (16.8). What can this mean?
* Who ⇔ WHERE and WHEN
* PROJECT: identify a space which elicits identity patterns

Everything about Me is Gay: Identity Peacocks

"You Have to Drive Somewhere Just to be Gay": Identity Chameleons

"Gay Defines Only a Small Part of Me": Identity Centaurs

Contested Grammars: Gay Identity Disputes

Start looking at the whole schema:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID strategy</th>
<th>metaphor</th>
<th>grammar</th>
<th>value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lifestyler</td>
<td>peacock</td>
<td>noun</td>
<td>dominance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commuter</td>
<td>chameleon</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>integrator</td>
<td>centaur</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>moderation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Distinguish ETIC (researcher) from EMIC (subject) point of view.

ETIC equilateral triangle
versus

EMIC isosceles triangles

Duration Disputes  Natives ⇔ Tourists
commuters are "mere dabblers," "not authentic," "self loathing," "internalized homophobia," etc.

Density Disputes  Purists ⇔ Moderates
Issues of purity, contact, tainting oneself. Non-lifestylers as pollutants. Note the reproduction of the
dominant, outside society's style of thinking here.
Questions of "subcultural sophistication" – cf. Charity's paper.

Dominance Disputes  Univores ⇔ Omnivores    ID singularity v. ID balance
Discursus: tourists as a social type. What IS the issue? For whom is it an issue? Traveler vs.
tourist. Under what conditions do these things become an issue? What identities, that is. Not such
a big deal with hobbyists (usually – but go to a renaissance festival?). Which identities lend
themselves to marketing categories (NASCAR dads, for example).
Summary: less coherence in groups/categories than is conventionally assumed (121.6)

Shifting Grammars: Lifecourse Changes in and Structural Constraints on
Identity Management
Multiple "progress" or "maturation" narratives.

Closet (commuter) ⇔ Out (lifestyleer)
Out (lifestyleer) ⇔ Calmer (integrator)

Important that things unrelated directly to identity can influence these trajectories (e.g., changes in
SES, occupation, relationship status ("settling down").
Role of AGE. (Jacob 125)
Consider passing through adolescence as big example of these identity trajectories. Little kids are,
perhaps, classic integrators. Then they might become lifestylers. Then they mature and learn identity
flexibility. But authenticity question bothers them. Consider Holden Caulfield and "phoniness."
Important point: distinguish what "real" folks say (e.g., "very few moments of my day are defined by my sexual orientation" (102.4)) vs. what activists and ideologues argue (e.g., "the personal is political").

When in Rome… Out of sight…

Question: brainstorm about identity action idioms such as "flaunting it," "wearing it like a badge," "as if that's all I am." How many different identity strategies can we find these attempting to justify or pass off as taken-for-granted as right and proper? POINT: we have to be careful about hearing these as moral absolutes – ETIC p.o.v. they are just legitimating rhetoric.

Trajectories – Biographical Narratives

Role of economy, demographics, etc. in these identity trajectories. POINT: normal life stuff happens to these folks too!

Numerous variables (jobs, social networks, ethnicity, relationship status, geography) combine to "cause" choices among identity strategies. POINT is that they are structural influences not part of one's essence (126.6).

DJR: note need for narratives to legitimate identity trajectories. And narratives, generally, are socially sanctioned. It's a cultural vocabulary that lets us tell stories others will nod their heads to.

"Coming out and later maturing" Closet Commuter ⇒ Lifestyler ⇒ Integrator
"Consciousness Raising" Integrator ⇒ Lifestyler
"Finding the courage to be who you really are" Commuter ⇒ Lifestyler
"Recompartmentalizing" Integrator ⇒ Commuter
"Settling down" Lifestyler ⇒ Integrator

Vegan Peacocks, Christian Chameleons, and Soccer Mom Centaurs: Identity Grammar beyond Gay Identity

A student in intro asks me to explain "all dimensions of social identity including profession, religion, political affiliation, race, religion, status, ethnicity, …" (138.4).

Lifestylers

- full time commitment to ID
- essentialist view of identity
- accentuation of compatible auxiliary characteristics and suppression of conflicting ones
- live in identity specific region
ghettoized social networks

**Project (journal)**: try to catalog as many "lifestyle spaces" as you can (138.8).
- gated communities, country clubs
- prepackaged vacations
- cults

Note social requirements. US society "wants" new mothers to be full time. So to for first year professors and beginning lawyers. Politicians, too, with no private life.

"In general, marked identities require more commitment than unmarked and thus produce more lifestylers" (144). Can be accomplished by either stigma or privilege.

Time commitment (who has time to hang out with non-swimmers?)

Social network issues (if you're high all the time, non-users will notice)

**Commuter Characteristics**

- part-time commitments
- fluid view of identity
- multiple specialized knowledges
- separable networks, audiences, role others

**Project**: catalog commuter destinations in your own life. Special groups of friends? Activities you participate in which you leave the rest behind for? Let's **brainstorm** on all the things that can go in **X friends** in our lives.

Sportsbars as a commuter locale?

A dimension along which we can characterize things: How separate do we keep people, ideas, times, places, paraphernalia? ("my non-christian rolodex"). Eng's "segmenters" vs. "integrators"

**Integrators (centaurs)**

- live in unmarked space
- self as coherent AND multifaceted
- toned down auxiliary characteristics
- multidimensional social networks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temporal commitment</th>
<th>Lifestylers</th>
<th>Commuter</th>
<th>Integrator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>full time commitment to ID</td>
<td>part-time commitments</td>
<td>interleaved commitments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is identity?</td>
<td>essentialist view of identity</td>
<td>fluid view of identity</td>
<td>self as coherent AND multifaceted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auxiliary Characteristics</td>
<td>accentuation of compatible auxiliary characteristics and suppression of conflicting ones</td>
<td>multiple specialized knowledges</td>
<td>toned down auxiliary characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do you live?</td>
<td>live in identity specific region</td>
<td>in unmarked but spend time in marked?</td>
<td>live in unmarked space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Networks</td>
<td>ghettoized social networks</td>
<td>separable networks, audiences, role other</td>
<td>multidimensional social networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Duration Disputes: Identity Stability vs. Identity Mobility

Density Disputes: Identity Purity vs. Identity Moderation

Dominance Disputes: Identity Singularity vs. Identity Balance

Conclusion
There is more than one way to organize an identity.

Commuter, lifestyler, and integrator differ in terms of dominance, duration, and density.

Structural Constraints

"Oppression Truncates against Integrating and in Favor of Commuting" (216)

- stigma/oppression yanks attributes out of low volume mode
- stigma/oppression encourages hiding attributes

Visibility Inhibits Commuting and Facilitates Lifestyling

- If your attribute shows you can't choose when to "do" the identity
- This can be encouraged as a way to build solidarity among members of identity category (make commuting less an option)

Low cost attributes discourage lifestyling, encourage integration

- High cost identities more likely to be commuting or lifestyling. Fewer Swedish-Americans than Asian Americans lifestyle. But even low cost identities like "liberal" are sometimes just troubling enough to force us into temporary closets in certain situations.
- QUESTION: can any of us think of relatively low cost identities that we nonetheless regularly hide?

Evolutionary/Ecological Pressures: Near extinction may promote lifestyling

- Perceived threats to racial group (e.g., whites, ruralists, Christians, conservatives)

Other Factors

- Oppression-commuting-lifestyling-integrating not the only trajectory.
- Urban/rural extremes ⇒ lifestyling.
- Homogeneous environment ⇒ commuting
- Heterogeneous & tolerant environment ⇒ integrating
- Women as more likely to be integrators?
- Multiple identities ⇒ may be difficult to lifestyle more than one ⇒ integrating or commuting
- Achieved vs. Ascribed characteristics?
QUESTION: what do I do that I lifestyle on? Integrate? Commute?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>myth</th>
<th>Lifestylers</th>
<th>Commuters</th>
<th>Integrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class/Income</td>
<td>Rich/Poor all week long. Friends, fashion, location, etc. No efforts to &quot;blend in.&quot; Conspicuous consumption. Enclaves</td>
<td>One has &quot;rich&quot; friends and &quot;poor&quot; friends and can adapt to interact with either. One's class is only foregrounded among like-situated peers. slummers?</td>
<td>One's class is ambiguous. Not a primary feature of one's persona. One &quot;dresses up&quot; as best one can but it's not a obsession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>werewolf,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise/Fitness</td>
<td>Exercise nazis</td>
<td>&quot;Weekend Gym Warriors&quot; (cf. Jim Fixx : &quot;weekend runners always die on weekends&quot;)</td>
<td>Regular exercise as part of everyday life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Cultists, Fundamentalists</td>
<td>Sunday Christians, High Holy Day Jews</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Ethnic studies?</td>
<td>I'm all X in one situation, just an x in others.</td>
<td>hyphenators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Assistant Profs, first year associates</td>
<td>Intense worker but leave it at the office. Don't want to get personal phone calls at work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting</td>
<td>new moms</td>
<td>Moms with child care who switch between completely absent and overly intensive parenting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hobbies</td>
<td>Rack prominently displayed on car. Hobby (e.g., ski) clothing even when not ski-ing. Hobby takes over house. Magazines. Gifts. Clubs and groups. Ski-bum.</td>
<td>Weekend rafters, opera fans, etc. Friday comes around and we're off. Female athletes? Old style amateur athletes. Multiple hobbies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vegan etc.</td>
<td>Works in health food store. Smells like bulk food. Braided hair, jute bags, magazines, books</td>
<td>Eat one way at home, any way when out.</td>
<td>Deliberate about food but you'd never know unless you paid close attention.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>