
Introduction

The Distinctiveness of Lesbian and Gay Elders

OLDER GAY men and women came of age in an era of unprecedented surveillance, legal prosecution, and social persecution of homosexuals, and moved into a workforce that was unparalleled in its overt hostility to them. In the 1930s, the post-Prohibition politics of the United States worked to shut down the veritable carnival of gay expression and association that had emerged in cities in the first third of the century, and criminalized homosexual association in virtually any form. Particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, gay men and lesbians were systematically harassed, jailed, fired from their jobs, and subject to involuntary incarceration in mental hospitals. Until gay liberation, riding the wave of the radical politics of the late 1960s, galvanized a nascent reformulation and representation of homosexuality, cultural depictions of homosexuality as anything other than a shameful, pathological condition leading to isolation and misery were censored and hard to come by outside certain (usually urban) areas. As a consequence, the most readily available homosexual identity was a stigmatized one; moreover, while the homosexual subculture, which thrived in many cities and

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barely survived elsewhere, offered gay men and lesbians some respite from an isolated and insecure existence, it too was driven by the language of stigma. That “overt” homosexuals were discriminated against on almost every level was a constant reminder of the futility of leading anything other than a secret and secretive life.

Members of this group also lived through the gay liberation (in Mary Bernstein’s [1997, p. 2] words, “the quintessential identity movement”) and lesbian-feminist movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s during middle age, having spent their youth and much of their adulthood establishing relations with self and others in an exclusively stigmatizing context. At the brink of this movement, the homosexuals I interviewed (who were over the age of sixty-five¹ in 1995, when I collected my data) ranged in age from thirty-nine to sixty-three; for many, their stigmatized homosexual identities had been adopted and enacted within a distinctive nexus of relations for decades. For almost all, relationships with friends, family, and co-workers had been fashioned around passing as heterosexual, and relations with other homosexuals were often furtive, circumscribed, and complicated by the desire for association on the one hand and the threat of guilt by association on the other. Equally important, relations with self were shaped by an understanding of homosexuality as a potential danger to personal safety and, often, as a source of personal shame. Gay liberation bracketed stigmatized homosexual identities, condemned them as invalid and oppressive, and constructed those who continued to enact them—including the then-middle-aged—as ignorant and/or morally weak, implicating them in the radical rejection of a stigmatized homosexual identity and in its moral crusade to create a new one based on the open display of pride in transgressing traditional sexuality. Indeed, Steven Epstein’s (1990, p. 9) assertion that neither gay, lesbian, nor

homosexual identity “appeared in writing by or about gays and lesbians before the mid-1970s” suggests that the new gay activism that emerged in the 1970s was pivotal in making homosexual *identity*, rather than the homosexual *condition*, a phenomenon in its own right.

Clearly, then, the gay liberationist and lesbian-feminist movements that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s changed the symbolic and practical terrain on which gay men and women negotiated their identities and their daily lives. This change is evident in my respondents’ accounts of their past and present lives, although often in unimagined ways. The commonsense expectation that Stonewall was a “shot heard ’round the world” was not borne out by my data—indeed, few of my subjects mentioned it, and several had never heard of it. The assumption that those who did not jump on the gay liberationist bandwagon declined to do so because of shame or fear of being recognized as homosexual was not borne out either. On the contrary, in keeping with Lee’s (1987) and Adelman’s (1990) findings that the homosexual elders they studied found passing as heterosexual to be “adventuresome and special”² and key to building a “positive self-image,” respectively, many of my informants exhibited pride in having passed as heterosexual throughout their lives, and in having conducted their lives with skill, grace, and self-control. But the new formulation of homosexuality that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one that constructed it as a positive, essential, and authentic self that could only be honored through public proclamation, did affect all those I interviewed. It did so by challenging the integrity of those who continued to treat homosexuality as a private aspect of self best honored through its exclusively private enactment, and who shunned its public proclamation—and others’ insistence upon it—as a dangerous, ridiculous, and insulting practice that threatened

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the tenuous standing homosexuals had managed to create. Thus, although many both within and without academia divide the homosexual world into pre- and post-Stonewall eras, both “eras” continue to exist within a lesbian and gay world that remains riven by competing claims about the nature of homosexuality, its consequences for self, and how it is best handled in public and private life. As this book will show, these assertions constitute not only intergenerational tensions, but intragenerational ones as well.

These claims are not merely background noise. On the contrary, they shape my subjects’ assessments of their own past and present lives. For most, if not all, of my informants, the claims they make are matters of personal honor, and those that others make are matters of annoyance, even moral outrage. These claims are such important features of their talk that they became evident to me even when I wasn’t looking for them, emerging through my analysis rather than my research design. It was through these claims that my informants constructed a world, and through which they produced themselves as competent actors appropriately responding to it. For many, producing themselves as competent in the context of the interview involved casting their past actions and interpretations as incompetent. In short, it was through these claims that they engaged in *identity work*—the situated work actors do to produce social categories and to affiliate themselves with or disaffiliate themselves from them.³ This identity work is conducted in the context—and through the invocation, manipulation, and application—of available discourses, or mutually reinforcing statements about the world. Capturing the identity work of homosexual elders—their production of homosexual identities in general and their own homosexual identities in particular—thus involves appreciating their self-location in the discourses of

sexuality to which they had access. As this book will show, the identity work of the lesbian and gay elders whose accounts figure here was strongly shaped by these discourses. While these informants treated the properties of these discourses (that of homosexuality as a stigma, and that of homosexuality as a source of status) as more or less salient at different points in the interview, they clearly displayed their understanding and assessment of them as unique and unmistakable features of competing ideologies. In short, they treated these discourses as ideal types, recognizable as such to anyone versed in the details and contingencies of gay life.

Data Collection

In 1995, I set out to interview⁴ twenty-five gay men and twenty-five lesbians over the age of sixty-five living in the greater Los Angeles area. Conducting research in Los Angeles has many benefits, not the least of which is an internationally recognized organized lesbian and gay community, and finding groups of older gay men and lesbians was as easy as opening the *Gay and Lesbian Community Yellow Pages*, which listed the Coalition of Older Lesbians (COOL) and Rainbow, a group for older gay men and women. I attended their meetings and events, which included panels, picnics, dinners, parties, and book sales, as well as funerals and memorial services for members of COOL. While talking to these groups' chair people, I learned that the city of West Hollywood was organizing the West Hollywood Gay and Lesbian Aging Task Force, which I promptly joined. Several members of the task force were over sixty-five and active in these groups, and I cultivated relationships with them, asking their advice, interviewing them, and relying on them to introduce me to other potential subjects.

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Soon after I began my research, the task force put on an event for lesbian and gay seniors. I helped organize the event, which was heavily advertised, and the task force included a description of my research in the questionnaire it distributed at the event. This yielded approximately forty potential subjects, half of whom I interviewed (the others were too young or were unavailable). Because they saw me at a variety of events, some overcame their initial distrust and consented to be interviewed. Abby, for example, had put me off several times, but told me that she had changed her mind once her friend Marilyn told her I had interviewed her and that it “was fun.” Two or three refused to be interviewed, stating that they were closeted, and no amount of assurance about confidentiality would sway them. Most, however, agreed, expressing their happiness that someone was documenting the experiences of their homosexual generation, and were helpful when I asked if they knew of others I could interview.⁵ This “snowball sampling” technique (Bailey 1994) provided me with fifty subjects, fourteen of whom do not figure in the book, for a variety of reasons. Some of the tapes were unintelligible in whole or in part, and, because I didn’t want to misrepresent informants’ statements, I withdrew them from the study. Some interviews were never completed (sometimes because of death), one was withdrawn by the subject, and others were either unsuccessful as interviews (i.e., due to memory problems) or proved, upon review, to offer few, if any, accounts of direct relevance to the book’s focus (the range of identity practices in which homosexual elders engage). These practices, my analysis showed, are firmly grounded in the discourses of homosexuality that emerged over the course of the twentieth century and through which respondents identified as homosexual.

The Discursive Terrain: The Historical Revision of Homosexual Identity

Homosexuality as Stigma

The shift from sexuality as a function of gender to a function of sexual object choice has been well documented.⁶ It was not until the middle of the century, when this version of homosexuality was imposed by the World War II-created psychiatry-state alliance (which “continued into the post-World War II era as the national state and local social control agents fiercely policed the moral and political landscape in the McCarthy era”), that same-sex desire, rather than gender and a range of other cultural codes that had informed gay culture, became “essential to group status” (Valocchi 1999, p. 213). This new discourse, while imposed from above, was also embraced from below, as middle-class gay men and women worked to distance themselves from the dominant image of homosexuals as gender inverts. (See Chauncey 1994.) The new gay identity that emerged from this middle-class aversion to public sexualized personas posited homosexuality as a benign yet stigmatized condition that required the homosexual to avoid heterosexual persecution by passing as heterosexual in public. Passing, in turn, required homosexuals to avoid recognizable homosexuals—in other words, recognizable gender inverts—and to condemn their public identification as unnecessarily legitimizing stereotypes of gay men and women that invited the persecution of all homosexuals. As Nardi (1994, p. 11) wrote, “for many in the 1950s, the debate to organize ‘a highly ethical homosexual culture’ centered on assimilation, either to seek respectability within the framework of the dominant ideologies or to recreate alternative socio-political structures.”

This was particularly evident in early homophile organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) (the first

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lesbian organization in the world and founded in 1955), designed as an alternative meeting place to bars, where butch/femme relations often prevailed and where lesbians often served as a “floor show” and were vulnerable to police raids. The DOB was committed to encouraging and shaping the adjustment of the “sex variant” to society;⁷ indeed, its statement of purpose⁸ declared its aim to be the “education of the variant, with particular emphasis on the psychological, physiological, and sociological aspects, to enable her to understand herself and make her adjustment to society . . . by advocating a mode of behavior and dress acceptable to society” (Daughters of Bilitis 1956, p. 4).⁹

As Goffman (1963) noted, the implications of this stigmatizing discourse for the identities and relationships of those who adopted it should not be underestimated. First, it posited the achievement of a heterosexual persona not only as the sole available key to safety, but as the only way to exhibit a respect for the “natural sexual and gender order.” Second, those adopting this discourse would use what Goffman termed “recipes of being” to construct and understand homosexuals, including themselves, as stigmatized persons, and hold them to that discourse’s standards of conduct for such persons. Put simply, members of their stigmatized category could either do the work required to keep their homosexuality a discreditable characteristic, or fail to do so and thus transform this characteristic into an actively discrediting one. Since the failure of one can easily redound to the status of all, the latter course of action threatens the tenuous safety that other homosexuals have managed to achieve. Any desire for affiliation with other homosexuals must, therefore, be balanced, if not weakened, by feelings of distrust; indeed, stratifying other homosexuals on the basis of the obtrusiveness of their stigma (see Goffman 1963, p. 107) resonates as a central aspect of my informants’ homosexual identity work.

*Out of the Closet and into the Streets:
Homosexuality as Status*

Although riven by internal differences regarding their goals, methods, and stance toward the existing gay subculture,¹⁰ the political movements that emerged in the aftermath of the Stonewall uprisings of 1969 agreed on a radical rejection of the stigmatized discourse of homosexuality and of the assimilationists' adoption of it, and on the replacement of this discourse with one constructing homosexuality not as a discreditable aspect of self best handled by passing as heterosexual, but as an accrediting political identity to be openly enacted in public as well as private arenas. Central to this construction was the insistence upon coming out as a crucial step toward achieving their individual goals, which diverged along the lines of the nature of homosexual identity on the one hand and the scope of the desired social change on the other.¹¹

This shift toward the public proclamation of homosexual identity reflected a critical refashioning of homosexuality from a relatively private matter enacted within a circumscribed, relatively private social arena into an essentially political matter to be hashed out in a public, political one. The new gay activism redefined and politicized the term *coming out* and made it the movement's central and most immediate goal, claiming that the voluntary, public disclosure of homosexual desire would undermine heterosexual society's grip on homosexuals, which centered on a fear of discovery and forced gay men and women to pass as heterosexual—a practice that, in this new formulation, hardly resonated as benign. On the contrary, passing was seen not as a protective masking of an aspect of self, but as the denial, even suppression, of the authentic self. Given the “true” nature of homosexuality as a valid and validating essential and political identity, its “denial” in interaction with others was

also a denial of the true, authentic self and an obstacle to the liberation of all homosexuals, even, to some, of all humans. Coming out would not only provide an immediate sense of personal well-being, but would constitute a social and political force for change.¹²

Despite these changes, stigmatized understandings of homosexuality are oriented to by gay men and lesbians living today as constituting a way to live or a way *not* to. Stigma thus remains a conceptual keystone of homosexual identity politics and identity work, clearly present in the discourse that formulates homosexuality as a stigma, and in that which formulates it as the opposite of stigma, as a source of status.¹³ These discourses supply actors with the tools to construct, contest, maintain, and assess their own and others' identities, and provide their own scripts for constructing and evaluating the self, and for enacting it in interaction with others. In short, discourses call up particular sorts of selves: in the case of the discourses of homosexuality, a stigmatized or an accrediting one.

From Identity Discourses to Identity Cohorts

Once I started analyzing the transcribed interviews, I found significant differences between respondents' accounts and concerns, differences that were not based on traditional demographic variables such as age, race, socioeconomic status, and the like. Rather, they were based on the *type of homosexual identity* informants had adopted, which was, in turn, linked to the *historical era* in which they had identified as homosexual. The central fault line seemed to be the emergence of the accrediting homosexual discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s, dividing the era in which homosexuality was exclusively constructed as a shameful stigma from a new one in which it was constructed as a

positive political identity. This division complicated the array of options through which those I interviewed could understand and pursue their desires. Informants varied in their response to this discourse, some embracing it as an interpretive frame, others declining to do so. Consequently, while these respondents came of age in the same historical period and encountered the same stigmatizing discourse of homosexuality at more or less the same time, their identity careers are significantly different. Specifically, while some identified as homosexual well before the late 1960s and thus did so through the properties of the dominant stigmatizing discourse of homosexuality, others identified as homosexual during or after the late 1960s through the properties of the emerging accrediting one.

Types of identity careers shaped by the acceptance and enactment of different versions of the homosexual self thus emerged, and I began to think of these subjects as members of what I termed *identity cohorts* (see Rosenfeld 1999), composed of actors who identified as members of a particular category of person (in this case, a homosexual one) in different historical periods with distinctive, historically specific ideologies of self and other. My informants fell into one of two identity cohorts: the *discreditable* one, consisting of those who adopted a homosexual identity before the late 1960s and thus through the properties of the stigmatizing discourse, and the *accredited* one, consisting of those who adopted a homosexual identity during or after the late 1960s and thus through the properties of the accrediting discourse.

The implications of membership in one cohort or another would be wide. Theorizing identity cohorts requires us to take seriously the emphasis on the interrelated production of the homosexual self on the one hand and the world in which the self makes sense and in which it acts, interprets, and evaluates on the other. After all, as Jenness (1992, p. 72) has

written, identification as homosexual “arises out of a partial reconstruction of the social world, including ourselves, as type constructs. . . . *In essence, [homosexual] identities are simultaneously products of and resources for social categories*” (emphasis added). Accordingly, informants would use the discourses through which they and other members of their identity cohort construct their identities to understand and construct a range of related realities, and to position themselves among them.¹⁴ These realities include categories of others, and distinctive standards of action for (and evaluation of) self and other. In exploring the identity work of homosexual elders, then, this book examines these constructions within the context of sociohistorically anchored discourses to which these elders relate in distinctive ways by virtue of identity cohort membership.

Outline of the Book

Chapter 1 begins the daunting task of making sense of subjects’ voices and experiences by tracing their identity careers—their self-understanding and self-identification as homosexual (or not) over time and in the contexts and constraints of their personal lives. It does so by considering their same-sex desires, experiences, and understandings before they actually identified as homosexual. This chapter begins the search for informants’ construction of homosexual identity over the life course and within the context of prevailing discourses—lifelong projects I call *identity careers*—through which they came to understand the nature and implications of their desires, and determined (in the sense of understanding *and* creating) their quality and social standing. Chapter 2 continues to trace these careers, documenting the process of identifying as homosexual. The third chapter sums up and theorizes these identity careers, showing that they vary

according to the historical era in which subjects came to identify as homosexual and thus according to the discourse of homosexuality through whose properties they construct themselves as homosexual. Chapter 4 begins to explore the influence of identity cohort membership on informants' understandings and practices by documenting their accounts of the world and their position in it as re/constructions informed by the discourse of homosexuality through which they identified as homosexual. Chapters 5 and 6 are devoted to the impact of these understandings on how each identity cohort managed its homosexuality in the context of the threats described in Chapter 4, and on subjects' evaluations of their own and other homosexuals' management practices. The final chapter discusses some methodological challenges and opportunities the research provided, and summarizes the book's main points, situating them in the relatively recent debate about the nature of identity in postmodern society. The book's appendix is a "cast of characters," presenting demographic information and key moments in subjects' lives to provide a coherent overview of their past and current circumstances.

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“I Didn’t Have Identity”

Same-Sex Desire and the Search for Meaning

It’s funny, when I think back now, I can remember other instances in my life where I realized how attracted I was to women. I didn’t act upon any of it, but I always had this thing in the back of my mind. –Abby

Before they can see themselves as homosexual, people must realize that homosexuality and homosexuals exist, learn what homosexuals are actually like as people, and be able to perceive similarities between their own desires and behaviors and those of people labeled socially as homosexual. –Troiden 1988, p. 269

Awareness of Difference

When recounting their identity careers, some respondents described always knowing that they were different. Those who always knew spoke of being attracted to members of their own sex during their early years, often in childhood, in strong terms, emphatically linking the significance of their sense of difference to the earliness of its emergence. A central theme was the development of a nonerotic homosexual gaze: a growing but as-yet-nonsexual fascination with watching members of their own sex. Dan (70), for example, “just felt good looking at men,” and viewed this fact

as evidence that he “must’ve been” gay from an early age: “Even as a little boy, before I had orgasms, I used to look at men, and I was always attracted to men. So I mean, nobody seduced me, nobody came up to me. I just had the attraction looking at other men.” In her early teens, Marge (81) said her response to seeing girls was strongly physical, but not recognizably sexual—she would “get a feeling and I would start perspiring. My sweat glands used to overact.”

When talking about their early desires, some described key moments during which they became aware of their same-sex attractions or during which vague feelings suddenly became clear as sexual desires. Often, these accounts hinged on *how they looked at* what they saw: on an emergent, reflexive awareness of their distinctive interest in and focus on members of their own sex. Marilyn (66) recalled an instance in the early 1960s in which, while having a drink at the home of a co-worker to whom she was “very attracted,” she found herself looking at the woman “with such a desire, such a *wanting* feeling, and she caught my expression and I was very ashamed.” This shame affected how she interpreted and acted upon her same-sex desires; while “there were times along the way where I wondered about being gay because I felt more comfortable with women,” she “never fully faced it.” In the late 1930s, when Rodney (75) was “maybe seventeen or eighteen,” he “really began to notice guys.” He recalled attending a state fair with his uncle and realizing “all day long, literally, that I was just ogling every attractive male that I saw, every guy that I saw. And it stood out in my mind how interested I am in them.” He remembers “that one day in particular” because “it seemed to be a demarcation for me.” For Kate (76), this demarcation came at age “six or seven” in the context of childhood play, during which “somehow or other somebody got the idea . . . of putting” a local four-year-old boy, undressed, into “a great big piano

case on one of the vacant lots near us . . . and then charging people a penny to come in and look at him.” Kate remembers “being very much aware of the fact” that she was uninterested in looking at the captive, naked boy, but “wanted to look at the girls.”

Others described making similar comparisons, realizing that their feelings for members of their own sex were stronger than their feelings for those of the opposite one. George (75) recalled being grabbed and held down by his ten-year-old female cousins, one of whom “would yell at everybody, ‘We’re married!’” His response, he recalls, was “We’re *not!*”, adding “Things like that,” which “a heterosexual boy . . . would’ve *loved*,” he “hated.” This made him realize that he didn’t “want [to be] attacked by these girls. I knew that I didn’t object to the boys doing the same thing. I accepted that, but I wouldn’t accept the girls.” When, at three or four years old, she spent time with her next-door neighbor, Barbie (67) “recognized that there was just something about it, that gee, I enjoyed little girls’ company better than boys, and I just had a stronger feeling toward girls that way.”

A small minority cited gender differences as the source of their eventual identification as homosexual—indeed, as one of the sources (if not the sole source) of their same-sex attractions. Tony (70), for example, spoke of an early attraction to “feminine attitudes,” which he only connected to his homosexuality in later years. Although he did not identify as a “sissy,” he now feels that he “had to be sort of sissy in some of my actions, but I mean, I didn’t recognize ‘em. I didn’t recognize the sissy in *me*. But it had to be there.” He cited his having “almost cried” when, at age five, he was given “an Indian suit” instead of the tea set he had requested, and his desire for “an old black doll” belonging to one of his family’s upstairs boarders, as examples of these early affinities. These “feminine attitudes” that existed “basically in the

beginning”—before the emergence of his sexual desires for men—“grew into, basically, the desire, the physical attraction and the physical desire.”

Indeed, for Val (74), gender differences continue to be the central factor in her identification as lesbian. She described herself as having always been “male-identified,” and told me that her sense of self as essentially male, which began “before ten,” led her to become attracted to women after she decided that she was not going to follow the social prescriptions associated with being female. Her lesbianism is, in her words, “a gender thing.”

I didn’t say “homosexual,” I certainly didn’t say “lesbian,” I just said “I don’t feel like a girl, I’m not a girl, and I’m not going to live in the framework of a girl. I am going to live in the framework of me, and I have to live in a certain element of that framework, but I am going to read and learn, and understand about homosexuality.”

Val emphasized that she “didn’t say I was attracted to girls, at that time.” When I asked her how she was thinking about herself at the time, she explained that she “knew I had a girl’s body, and I just knew that I wasn’t happy in it, and that somebody made a mistake, that’s all. I identified with males, I always did, and I still do.” Her attraction to women was, in her words, “the next natural step.”

Some cited others’ responses to their own gender nonconformity—real or ascribed—or to their suspicious same-sex interactions as critical to their ultimate sense of self and sexual identity. As a child in the 1920s, Rodney was taunted for being effeminate: because he was “a sissy,” he “went through all this trauma a lot of gay fellows go through. Believe me, I got my share of it. I couldn’t play ball—I hate sports, I hated baseball.” This caused “an incredible amount of unhappiness” which, in turn, created a “sickly” and “very, very unhappy childhood.” As Rodney put it, “In retrospect, I would

say that I was a semi-invalid.” As a result, he “had a nervous breakdown [at] twenty-one” and “really never refurbished.” Jan (68) provided a contrasting account; when I asked her how she had interpreted having always known she was attracted to women, she described her mother supporting—indeed, even enjoying—her identity as a tomboy and her athletic activities and focus. As a result, Jan took her identity as a tomboy for granted, not questioning its consequences for self, and was secure in her athleticism and her eventual relationships.

I was a quote tomboy, and she aided and abetted that. I think she kind of enjoyed the fact that I was quite an athlete, which was kind of unusual back in those days, when girls were supposed to be nice little girls and never get dirty and all that kind of stuff. I think she really rather aided and abetted in my relationships—the way I grew up and the fact that I was very athletic.

Three subjects spoke of being made aware of their nascent homosexuality by others’ reactions to their same-sex interactions, although the subjects had not yet ascribed any significance to them themselves. Jeannine (66) “had my first relationship when I was sixteen,” in the late 1940s, but “did not know anything about homosexuality, what it was, or anything else. I was walking around school with my girlfriend holding hands and people made remarks. I think somebody called us fairies.” Although Val had been “getting flack” for being a “tomboy” throughout her childhood, she only began to connect her attraction to—and sexual encounters with—women with homosexuality when she “began to get flack for the way I felt or responded to women.” This occurred only after she had left high school in the late 1930s, when the mother of her lover of several years “came and said, ‘If you continue to see my daughter I will have her arrested and thrown into juvenile hall, I will see that your

name is mud, that you will never work again. Don’t call my daughter, don’t come by the house.”

As a freshman in a Catholic women’s college in the late 1950s, Deborah (74) “had this big crush on this senior,” whom she would meet and accompany to church every morning. Deborah characterized the friendship as “kind of this mutual thing” with no explicitly sexual overtones, explaining that “we didn’t do anything about it, and I never thought to do anything about it, but I liked being with her.” This was the first time that Deborah had had a crush on a girl, and when I asked her what she had thought that crush meant, she replied that she “just liked her a lot” and thought “great, gee, how wonderful.” This benign understanding was corrected by one of the nuns in the college:

I wasn’t aware that we had done anything wrong and all of a sudden one morning I was going to meet her, this nun came out and said, “She’s not coming, you go on ahead.” And I said, “What’s the matter, is she sick?” “No, she’s not sick, you just go right on. You are not to meet her anymore.” Just like that. You know, I’ve always thought of it because gee, she wasn’t allowed to talk to me after that. No communication whatsoever, it was just (hand clap).

Deborah agreed with my suggestion that “it’s almost as though [the sister] had a particular understanding” that she didn’t have. When I asked her if she would have joined the nun in condemning her actions had she shared that understanding, she replied, “If I had thought I was doing something wrong, I wouldn’t have done it. You know, it was just weird.” When I asked how she had interpreted the situation, she replied that she “didn’t know how to interpret it. I didn’t know and I was really hurt, you know, I was really hurt.” Deborah’s inability to understand why her friendship with the senior was so quickly and summarily forbidden was exacerbated by that very ruling. Because “the girl was

forbidden to talk to me, and she didn't talk to me. . . . I've never had any more contact with her. We wrote a couple of letters but they didn't explain anything and it just kind of dropped off." Thus the very person best capable of giving Deborah an unofficial version of what had happened was prevented from doing so by those who had organized the segregation and who refused to explain their actions or specify what, exactly, had inspired them to take them. Indeed, the fact that Deborah "knew that sister was angry, but didn't know why" was not only immediately upsetting, but was also, in retrospect, a missed opportunity to be educated in the norms of interaction and the nature and implications of breaking them. Deborah explained that "it was such a good opportunity for them to have talked to me because I didn't know what was happening and I didn't know—this felt so normal—that there was anything wrong with it." As it was, she lost both the opportunity to learn how to avoid such punishments in the future and the friendship that had meant so much to her.

Interestingly, few subjects provided accounts in which awareness of difference emerged from sexual experiences.¹ More often, first same-sex encounters clarified previously vague feelings of difference. Mark's (72) growing awareness, for example, was sharpened by a sexual experience he had in 1940, at age sixteen, with another teenage boy during which they "masturbated together. And that was the first time. We didn't *touch* each other, but I knew at that time that there was something different about me." With no available sexual taxonomy, no discourse through which to understand his difference, "the only thing I could think of was I enjoyed it. It was different than boys and girls touching each other. I had that experience when I was five . . . playing doctor underneath the front porch." Similarly, Tex's (72) first sexual encounter with a man in 1958, at age thirty-