

REPRODUCING AND SUBVERTING THE COMING OUT STORYLINE:
A CASE OF THE IT GETS BETTER PROJECT

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Abstract

The It Gets Better Project is a website that anyone in the general public can use to upload or view videos about experiences of living as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) individual. Using theories of discursive practice, socio-cultural learning, and cyberspace, I employ qualitative content analysis to examine the videos in the It Gets Better Project associated with colleges and universities to determine the common elements of participants' coming out stories: adversity, declaring, affirmation, and encouragement. Many of the narrators follow this prototypical storyline, strongly connecting LGBT identity with adversity and emphasizing the possibility of overcoming the adversity. Other participants disrupt the dominant narrative by significantly altering or excluding one or two of the themes. As they tell their coming out stories to support viewers who are struggling with their own experiences of sexual or gender identity, participants both reinforce and subvert dominant discourses of sexuality and gender.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Identities of sexuality and gender are messy and complicated. These socially constructed notions are saturated with historical power relations that cannot be tidily parsed, and they constantly reproduce themselves and the pain associated with them (Brown, 1995, 1997). Yet, these identities remain important at this historical moment. People's lived realities are experienced in ways that employ, inculcate, celebrate, and condemn various aspects of identities within different situations. These social constructions of sexuality and gender are sometimes placed on people without their knowledge or consent, just as people also assert these identities, particularly for strategic purposes. Making sense of and being able to fully embody sexuality and gender identities can be challenging, especially for young people when they first experiment with and enact these identities. In particular, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students live in a time of mixed messages. There are reports of high harassment levels for LGBT students on college campuses (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010), yet significant progress is being made in many states with regards to LGBT rights – as of December 2014, 34 states plus the District of Columbia have legally granted same-sex marriage.

Knowing that there is an array of opinions about sexual identity, LGBT college students must continuously negotiate where they feel safe enough to share their sexual orientation and express their gender identity. Studies show that college campuses have not been doing well in fostering safe environments for LGBT students (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Dolan, 1998; Rankin, 2003). Campus Pride, an organization that works to ensure that institutions of higher education meet the needs of the LGBT population, surveyed student leaders and campus groups to learn more about how hospitable campus climates are for students in regards to sexual orientation and gender identity (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer 2010). Their findings

reveal that LGBT students encounter far more harassment and discrimination than their heterosexual peers. The students point to sexual orientation as the target of the harassment. There is great complexity in how students read and respond to campus settings as well as how they navigate through various spaces, especially with intersecting, marginalized identities.

Unfortunately, one response to severe rejection and bullying due to sexual orientation and gender expression has been suicide. In September 2010 national attention focused on several young people who committed suicide after being bullied because of their sexual orientation. In response and in an effort to support young LGBT people, Dan Savage, an activist and columnist, and his partner Terry Miller posted a video on YouTube. Targeted towards middle and high school students experiencing bullying, their message was relatively simple – both Savage and Miller experienced bullying in high school because they were gay, but after high school, life got better (It Gets Better Project). As they grew older, they met more people who accepted them, regardless of their sexual orientation. And, even though their families initially rejected their sexuality, they eventually came to love and accept Savage and Miller's partnership. Shortly after this initial YouTube post, Savage and Miller launched the It Gets Better Project and website, www.itgetsbetter.org, which invites people to post their own stories about how life has gotten better for them. Relaying messages to LGBT youth that encounter disparaging words and behaviors about their sexual or gender identity, the project's mission is two-fold: to communicate that life does indeed get better, and "to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them" (It Gets Better Project). The rationale is that the very act of making and / or listening to encouraging messages helps to create the adjustments in society required to make life a more affirmative experience for LGBT youth.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I analyze It Gets Better Project videos attributed to institutions of higher education to gain insight into the messages that students share with viewers. I first explore the common elements of the stories and then determine how they operate within the narratives. I examine how the video participants follow a dominant coming out story prototype, thereby simultaneously reifying boundaries of sexuality and gender, *and* acting in the capacity of supporting viewers. Additionally, as participants share their stories, I note moments of subversion that serve to slightly alter how LGBT identity is understood and recognized.

Research question 1: What are the common elements of the participants' coming out stories and how do they operate in the It Gets Better Project videos?

Research question 2: How do participants maintain and subvert dominant coming out narratives within the It Gets Better Project?

To frame this study, I rely heavily on theories of dominant frames, discursive practices, and socio-cultural learning. I use these theories to explore how coming out stories associate LGBT identity with injury and how cyberspace creates a novel environment for learning about identity and subverting dominant frames. I then relate these explorations to the coming out stories within the It Gets Better Project.

Dominant Frames and Discursive Practices

How connected people feel to an environment is shaped by discursive practices; dominant frameworks provide the boundaries for what is accepted within a setting. Foucault's (1978) ideas of discursive practices illuminate how dominant ideologies within religious, political, economic, and social sectors control sexuality in a way that assumes that the truth of

sexuality is heteronormativity, the belief that heterosexuality is the “standard for legitimate and expected social sexual relations” (Ingraham, 1999, p. 17). These same sectors regulate gender norms, assuming that people’s identity as male or female aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. Examining Foucault’s understanding of confession elucidates how society’s focus on particular language and repetitive practices builds dominant frameworks that are then used to help regulate people. He posits that during the seventeenth century the Catholic Church encouraged people to confess the sins related to their physical bodies. This increased the rate as well as the details of people’s admission of impure thoughts and desires. Since the body and bodily desires were associated with evil, people were told to look deeply into their soul, their senses, their words, and their dreams in order to be liberated from their longings. The rationale was that confessing sex and desire would prevent people from acting on their impulses; a discursive release could replace a sexual one. As this intensified, discursive practice emerged not only in pastoral documents but also in literature. Foucault writes, “Sex was taken charge of, tracked down as it were, by a discourse that aimed to allow it no obscurity, no respite” (Foucault, 1978, p. 20). While the Church managed the morality of sex, as people shared their sexual truth, political, economic, and medical knowledge began to regulate sexuality through such things as the language of marriage and birth rates, frequency of sexual encounters, fertility and sterility, and contraception.

The continued discursive practice of confession has become a prime way to produce truth. Foucault (1978) writes, “When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat; it is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body” (p. 59). In fact, the truth is required to surface through confession. Confession frees oneself from violent repression while maintaining

silence submits one to the power of evil. And yet, the confession of truth is connected to power relations. In other words, what is viewed as truth and what is determined as needing confession is a direct result of who defines truth and why it is defined as such.

Given Foucault's (1978) explanation of the discursive practice of sexuality, people constantly enact heterosexuality and gender norms, making them the dominant frames to which all sexual and gender practices are compared. Subversive actions of same-sex attraction or expressing a different gender than the one assigned at birth must be confessed; they must be named and explained. The logic is that there must be some explanation for why people do not adhere to heterosexual and gender norms. Even with the current growth in acceptance of LGBT people, there remains an assumption that they will divulge their "truth" by metaphorically "coming out of the closet". Here, the closet refers to keeping one's marginal sexual orientation or gender expression in the shadow, protected from view. So, to "come out" is to verbalize one's truth – to bring the hidden out from the shadow and into the light, to be exposed to oneself and to others.

When people "come out", they profess their identity as LGBT, and thereby perform, enact, and reproduce their identity. Austin's (1962) theory about performative statements offers insight into how the declaratory statement, "I am gay" is to enact being gay. He explains that this type of utterance does not describe the actions of the narrator, nor does it claim that the narrator is actually doing something. Rather, the statement is performing the action; "it is to do it" (Austin, 1962, p. 6). Moreover, Austin claims that the statement typically indicates that performance of the act will occur. This argument is complicated slightly in that other physical or mental actions can provide evidence of truth without the statement actually being uttered. For instance, a gay man can be in a romantic relationship with another man without verbalizing, "I

am gay”. However, Austin suggests that when a physical action occurs without the outward announcement, a person has already performed an inward utterance that coincides with the action. These performative utterances declare, and thereby perform, a person’s sexual orientation as different from the dominant frame.

Butler (1996) takes this notion a step further, asserting that the discursive and ritualized act of making a performative statement draws on previous actions, including the power that the phrase has amassed through “repetition or citation of prior and authoritative set of practices” (p. 206). This means that the performative context of declaring, “I am gay,” carries with it the history and hegemony of heteronormativity. Dominant discursive practices expect gay and transgender people to “come out,” and as they do, their announcement reproduces the hegemonic power of previous iterations of the same words in a variety of settings.

While religious, political, economic, and social sectors regulate how heterosexuality and gender norms are defined, manage how they are discussed, and invent the “need” to confess any alternative to the norm, they also create space for a new community of dissenting discursive practice to emerge – that of the LGBT groups. No longer are professional experts such as doctors in their offices and lawyers in courtrooms the only ones who can address sexuality (Plummer, 1995). Rather, lay people are telling about their own varying experiences of sexuality and gender. And through the recognition and understandings of the concerns raised within the stories, nonprofits and support groups organized around LGBT interests have formed. Many of the organizations, both national and local, serve the purpose of providing accepting spaces for LGBT people to support one another, socialize, and advocate for LGBT rights. Over time, while these organizations that have worked to disrupt narratives of sexuality and gender, they have created

their own dominant narrative: the coming out story. The LGBT rights movement has aided in the formation of the dominant coming out story (Plummer, 1995).

Socio-cultural Learning and Storytelling

Socio-cultural learning theory can offer insight into how people learn to construct their identities. All learning is contextual, based in social and cultural norms, and organized through interactions (Gee, 2001; Mondada and Doehler, 2004). People come to understand their socially constructed identities, such as gender, ethnicity, or religion, surrounded by a community with similar characteristics – if not in the larger community, then within the family structure. Whether people hold dominant, subordinate, majority, or minority statuses within these identities, they learn the central and socially acceptable attributes of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion through their observations, interactions, and performed rituals. However, when it comes to minority sexual orientations and gender expressions, it is not quite the same, at least as they tend to be identified and expressed at this time. Depending on a variety of complex factors, including the geographic location, the social progressiveness of the community, and the exposure to subversive messages that challenge the dominant frames, historically, many young people have not had much access to openly gay or transgender people in the larger community. However, with the use of the Internet, the rise in same-sex relationships on television shows, and increased media attention on same-sex marriage laws, youth have much more exposure to alternative frameworks; although, worth noting is that homosexual relationships are more represented than transgender expressions.

Educational theorists Lave and Wenger (1991) provide insight into how discourses are altered through their concept of “legitimate peripherality” – the idea that where people are

situated is bound in social structures that are connected to power relations, and more specifically, that newcomers to a community of practice only partially participate while they learn from those who are more experienced (p. 36). How much people participate in their community is determined by how they continuously negotiate their understanding of and power in the world. In other words, there is a recurring interaction between understanding and experience, and this interaction is framed within social communities where people's relationships are constituted in, defined by, and define power dynamics. Power relations, however, are not static. As people learn, they can construct their identities and be transformed, they can navigate the complexity of changing power relationships and possibly obtain a different place in the community's power systems.

A look at Lave and Wenger's (1991) example of Alcoholics Anonymous (A. A.) as a community of practice wherein social learning and reproduction takes place illuminates how coming out narratives reproduce LGBT identity and shape discursive practices that render minority sexual orientations and gender expressions recognizable. They explain that communities of practice seek to maintain themselves – they employ means by which they can generate their own future. And as they do, they “leave a historical trace of artifacts – physical, linguistic, and symbolic – and of social structures, which constitute and reconstitute the practice over time” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 57-58). Consisting of both old timers and newcomers, the members establish the social community of A. A., with the old timers reproducing certain features and power relations with the community of practice. The old timers teach new participants how to talk and when to be silent as well as model specific ways of storytelling, including the particularly challenging stories. As members participate in A. A., they not only work to remain sober but also construct a particular identity – that of a recovering alcoholic.

Lave and Wenger suggest that the purpose for newcomers “is not to learn *from* talk” but rather to “learn *to* talk” (p. 109). Gee (2010) echoes Lave and Wenger’s thoughts, claiming that more experienced people within a community “apprentice” newer people as to what practices are standard. In effect, the social and cultural groups teach the apprentices the appropriate social language for their knowledge, beliefs, and interactions. Thus, the language within interactions used in social groups actually constructs the identity of the group, the uniqueness of the community of practice (Jones, 2011; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992).

Connecting socio-cultural theory to how people’s sexual stories are created, Plummer (1995) asserts that there are four different lenses through which people manufacture their stories: personal, situational, organizational, and cultural / historical. The personal level reveals why people want to share their story. The situational level is influenced by the processes through which people come to understand their story. The organizational level of stories is shaped by the structure of the setting in which they are created. Finally, the cultural/historical level is impacted by “the historical moment at which a story enters public discourse” (Plummer, 1995, p. 35). Similar to how Lave and Wenger (1991) write about socio-cultural learning, Plummer notes how people’s stories do not simply emerge from within oneself but rather are a collection of pieces – physical items, themed narratives, verbal and nonverbal symbols that they pick up from various parts of culture over time. The bits that people incorporate into their stories are pulled from fictional or non-fictional machinations. In other words, people’s stories might not only include what has happened in their past, but things that they wish would happen. Taking the autonomy to shape their own stories, narrators may appropriate items or themes from their cultural environment into their narratives.

Plummer (1995) distinguishes common elements within coming out stories: suffering, epiphany, and transformation. The telling of suffering points to deep pain, which often has been hidden from others and is mired in guilt and shame. At some point amid the victim's silent suffering, her consciousness is piqued; marked as epiphany, she needs to break the silence of suffering and take some sort of action. During the process of epiphany, voice is given to the pain and the person "comes out" as LGBT. The epiphany eventually leads to transformation, wherein one survives and possibly transcends the agony and role of victimhood. This process enables the person to transform from mere survival mode to being capable of dealing with and going beyond the pain. And in so doing, the person publicly produces a new sexual identity.

Describing this narrative arc in more depth, Plummer (1995) posits that in the 1960s and 1970s, coming out stories were characterized by the following patterns: they typically had a linear progression; people described unhappy childhoods as they dealt with the feeling of being different; narrators experienced a critical moment, typically in adolescence, when they struggled over and realized the fact that they were gay; and finally narrators' concerns about being gay began to subside when they met other people who were gay and they could have some sense of community. The narrators achieved both a sense of who they were as LGBT and a feeling of belonging amidst a community. What makes the point of epiphany so powerful in coming out stories is that under sexuality and gender norms, narrators began life practicing what Plummer (1995) calls "ventriloquism" – that of "mouthing of other's stories in the absence of your own" (p. 84). So, in effect, LGBTQ people moved from embodying norms that produced pain and confusion to a different discourse with a more positive perception of their identity. In the process of establishing a new identity and discourse, however, their family, religion, or community frequently disparaged them. Rather than being fully embraced, LGBT identity has remained on

the social margins of society. Thus, the process of coming out can be quite difficult, and, given the prevalence of homophobic and transphobic messages, the route to a positive sense of self is momentous.

Bullied and Rejected Bodies and Identities

Social and cultural norms stipulate the dominant frameworks for sexuality and gender expression, and they also provide the foundation for homophobic and transphobic attitudes and behavior, such as name-calling, violence, bullying, rejection, and discrimination. Since many LGBT people have encountered negative reactions to their sexual orientation and/or gender expression, coming out stories tend to be abundant with themes of abandonment. Ironically though, sharing these moments of pain may reproduce the pain rather than diminish it.

Brown's (1995) explanation of how injured bodies are tied to identity politics helps illuminate the historical bind that can confound coming out stories. She claims that the ideal of justice is measured against white, bourgeois, straight men who point to the 1950s as the idyllic life. Meanwhile, gays, women, and people of color note the exclusion they faced during this time by not having access to the same rights and privileges. The economic stratification upon which capitalism is founded creates class injuries and produces wounds of "alienation, commodification, exploitation, displacement, disintegration" (Brown, 1995, p. 60). Interestingly, Brown notes that discursive practices render these injuries normal rather than holding the responsible systems accountable for the damages they have caused. In response to all of the pain, people seek revenge; they long to identify a culprit to blame so that they might shift the hurt away from oneself and to the site of responsibility. Since responsibility is perceived to lie with those who embody the dominant position, the alienation, rejection, and harassment experienced

by homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people would be blamed on people who ascribe to sexual and gender norms – those who create these exclusive, hegemonic systems.

However, Brown (1995) cautions that revenge does the opposite of releasing pain; it actually perpetuates it. She theorizes that revenge “produces identity as both bound to the history that produced it and as a reproach to the present which embodies that history” (p. 73). Moreover, the tragedies of the past cannot be undone unless identity becomes detached from the injury. Brown claims that identity must be released in order to reduce the power of the past and disrupt the pain that it causes. Even as Brown suggests a divestment of identity, she does not want to deny or erase its existence. Rather, her aim is to investigate how subversion can be deployed in politics that does not “re-subjectivize” people through their identities (p. 55). She suggests that a shift in language can alter how identity is formed and viewed. Rather than placing “I am” in front of an identity, which reifies identity as a static position and actually reproduces it, Brown advocates saying, “I want this for us” (p. 75), which destabilizes fixed identities and focuses on evolving desires.

Brown’s theory begs the question of why LGBT groups have clung to sexual and gender identities within their social movement if it serves to reproduce the pain? Polletta and Jasper (2001) note the importance of strategically framing collective identities in social movements so that the injustice is understood and people are motivated to act. Because there is a tension between claiming identity and deconstructing it to show how it is socially fabricated and fluid, collective identities must be managed so as not to threaten the goals of the movement. One of the ways in which identities can be controlled is by creating common understanding and group cohesion through narratives. Fine (1995) argues that narratives actually offer a way for a group to mobilize because “the stories provide models for appropriate behaviors, as well as

identification with the key actors in the movement” (p. 134). As stories help people understand their life experiences, they are affirmed when they find out that others share similar experiences and feelings. These common moments tend to bond group members and foster loyalty to the movement (Fine, 1995).

But narratives can be told in a myriad of ways. Thus, as a movement regulates identities, a major decision is how much to focus on how the collective identity is different or similar to the mainstream (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). In other words, should the movement show deviance from normative notions and run the risk of being considered too different to not receive attention from dominant groups? Or, should the narratives within the movement engender empathy by showing how people who seem different are really similar to people in the mainstream? Fine (1995) suggests that LGBT groups take up what he labels as “horror stories” to help advance the movement. In “horror stories”, something drastic happens (like bullying or harassment), thereby calling upon the sympathy of the audience and compelling them to act. Additionally, these stories take the ‘stigma’ associated with the narrator and turn it from a “public deficit to a subcultural advantage” (Fine, 1995, p. 135). Horror stories are used to reinforce the group’s organizational objectives. Another popular narrative theme Fine describes is that of “happy endings” wherein the narrator has experienced some type of personal triumph. For example, a narrator’s parents initially disown him due to his sexual orientation but are now accepting of him. Narratives with happy endings serve the purpose of offering hope and showing the possibility of success.

With the power of patterned narratives that shape collective identities within social movements in mind, the very groups focused on disrupting sexuality and gender norms within storylines actually shape and define the discursive practice of coming out. Thus, coming out

discourses are formed both by dominant structures and marginal frameworks. For instance, children must tell parents about their attraction to the same sex so their parents will not expect them to bring home a date of the opposite sex. Additionally, within LGBT norms, people are expected to include particular elements within their coming out stories for their identity to be viewed as legitimate.

The background of socio-cultural learning and collective identities raise the question of what do LGBT communities of practice – including the It Gets Better Project – hold up as important elements for a coming out story to be recognized? And, how do these coming out stories continue to generate what it means to be a part of the LGBT community?

LGBT Cyberspace

Because the Internet consists of a vast amount of information, it has become a central place for youth to learn about and experiment with constructing their LGBT identity. Using the Internet to find out what it means to be LGBT can be relevant for any young person but can be especially helpful if the youth are in rural areas with little access to visible gay communities and have limited contact to LGBT political issues and events being respectfully discussed in the public square (Cooper & Dzara, 2010). Researchers have noted how online spaces allow LGBT youth to “try on” and negotiate various identities; the Internet gives them the freedom to experiment with what it means to assume various characteristics, and they can receive feedback from a fairly anonymous audience before implementing those characteristics in real life (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Fraser, 2010). Using chat rooms, YouTube, Facebook, and other social networking sites, youth have the possibility of creating their identity as authentic or fictitious to their “real life” as they wish, which affords them the opportunity to adopt various machinations

of their curiosities and desires (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The responses to their identity presentation likely shape how they present themselves in the future and help them clarify their own identity and values (Cooper & Dzara, 2010).

Additionally, since people often use a pseudonym rather than their given name online, youth can feel comfortable knowing that they do not have to reveal their “true” identity. Nor will they necessarily have to disclose their online identity to people in their proximate community. In other words, LGBT youth can be anonymous on the Internet. They do not have to be as worried about being judged or denounced by online friends as they are with people they know offline; they find it easier to be out online than offline (Craig & McInroy, 2014; and Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012). If people receive negative feedback online, they can simply delete their online profile and begin with a new one. This cannot be done in the same way offline (Craig & McInroy, 2014). As youth experiment with various online versions of themselves, they can receive support from their online relationships, even though other members are geographically distant (Drushel, 2010). Online social networks not only provide emotional support, but they also offer helpful information, such as different people’s stories and experiences with coming out – and the consequences that coming out may have (Alexander & Losh, 2010). In fact, Craig & McInroy (2014) found that as young people watched online stories and learned about how other LGBT youth navigated particular situations, they became more comfortable with their own identities. In short, cyberspace presents an important “testing ground” for what coming out may be like in real life (Alexander & Losh, 2010, p. 42).

Another important and promising aspect about the Internet is that youth can feel connected to a group of people who share a common identity (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Drushel, 2010; and Hillier, Mitchel & Ybarra, 2012). And, because the Internet

is so decentralized, it has the potential to serve as a forum for people to democratically engage with its content and with one another (Kellner & Kim, 2010). This means that in addition to LGBT individuals being able to experiment with their sexual and gender identities, social media, in particular, affords the possibility of activism and of disrupting dominant discourses since, theoretically, there is very little management in such a decentralized space. Anyone who has access to a computer and the Internet can post their story and their organizing interests in a very public way. As people tell their own stories, they have the possibility to change the predictive nature of a story, depending on their experiences as well as their own motives for sharing their story. And, people can foster a sense of community and belonging when they use social networking sites to mobilize and advocate for causes they deem important (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Frazer, 2010). A boon is that due to the public nature of online social networking, advocates do not have to deal with the politicians or media players who have been the traditional “gatekeepers of dissent;” rather, they have a more democratic way of spreading the message to the people impacted by the specific issue (Cooper & Dzara, 2010; Kellner & Kim, 2010).

However, what can complicate online activist work and people’s self-presentations is how identity construction is regulated on the Internet. Alexander and Losh (2010) warn, “formalized advocacy campaigns...feature celebrities or professional spokespeople and limit both who can speak and to whom the message can be addressed. In the process, rhetorical moves in the coming out narrative and aesthetic standards of attraction are reproduced and reified” (p. 44). Kellner and Kim (2010) also caution that despite the Internet’s democratizing potential, it can be used to reproduce social dynamics and enforce hegemonic ideas. Fraser (2010) refers to the expression of identity boundaries that happens on LGBT websites as the “online closet” of the Internet, which both dictates how recognizable queerness is and maintains a space at the

margins of cyberspace – some LGBT websites can be difficult to find (p. 32). Scholars vary on how they interpret the role of the Internet in reinforcing or disrupting dominant discourses. Kellner and Kim (2010) assert that as ordinary users create videos and messages that they post online, they realize their agency; they engage in “performative pedagogy” for others to see. And, in their agency, youth have the possibility of countering dominant narratives if they so choose. Meanwhile, Fraser (2010) emphasizes that even though the “online closets” produce a dominant LGBT discourse that molds the understanding of what it means to be gay, this closet is occupied by LGBT individuals, offering a critical space for youth to experience a positive and welcoming LGBT setting and serving as a space for them to mobilize around their interests.

Adding the role of cyberspace to discursive practices and socio-cultural learning, I consider how participant videos within the It Gets Better Project use a dominant coming out storyline, which reproduces the familiarity of the story, but also supplements the story with a new element, which serves to slightly alter how coming out stories are told and understood. And, even though the It Gets Better Project produces and regulates a new dominant storyline, there remain moments of subversion that function to continuously keep the story in flux.

Chapter 2: Method and Data Description

I use qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to gain an understanding of coming out stories posted in the It Gets Better Project videos associated with colleges and universities.

Qualitative content analysis is an unobtrusive method that allows for data analysis in a more naturalistic way. The researcher does not interrupt the participants or guide the stories by her presence, verbal, or nonverbal language. Instead, the content has already been created and is examined afterwards, often times without those who created it even knowing that it is under review.

I acquired the videos from the project's website at www.itgetsbetter.org. Because the website is public, anyone can post videos and anyone can view them. Over 50,000 people have uploaded videos to the website – from President Barack Obama, movie stars, and pop icons to athletes, community leaders, business professionals, and college and high school students. There are a multitude of categories that people can search, finding videos that speak to their identities or interests. Some of the categories include: college, university, celebrity, politician, straight, African American, couples, Trevor Project, Asian American, Latino, organizations, and music.

Using the search feature on the website, I searched for “colleges” and “universities” in the United States between January 27 and February 11, 2013. The search for “college” yielded 300 results, and “university” yielded 312 results. Videos that did not identify a specific college or university were removed; people may have spoken generally about their college experience in a video, but the message was not connected with a particular institution. Additionally, the duplicate videos that appeared from searches “college” and “university” were eliminated. In a couple of instances, there were two different versions of the same video – an abridged and a longer one. I used the longer video. Videos that either had very poor sound quality or no sound –

because they were in sign language – also were removed from the sample. Neither of these instances had subtitles available. After sorting through all the results from the searches, there were 89 videos from 88 institutions of higher education (one institution created two distinct videos) that met the sampling criteria.

All of the 89 videos were downloaded and saved to a laptop in order to be accessed at any time, and in case any of the videos were to be deleted from the It Gets Better Project website. A Microsoft Access database was created to enter the coding for all of the variables measured within the videos. Every video within the sample was watched and reviewed at least three times for coding.

There are two units of analysis within this project. The videos are the first unit of analysis. Within this first layer of analysis, each of the videos was coded for type of institution of higher education – public or private. Additionally, the state where the college or university resides was noted, as region may have played a role in influencing the participants to create a video.

The second unit of analysis is the coming out stories of individuals who appear in the videos. “Coming out” is typically defined as the moment at which a person professes to be LGBT. Coming out is a speech act (Butler, 1996), a speaking into reality. Once one says the words, “I am gay”, it is very difficult to take them back. The admission becomes a reality. Slightly over 30% of participants make this specific announcement in the videos. The interesting part about sharing one’s marginal sexual orientation is that the act of coming out usually does not occur one single time, but for many people, happens again and again, under different circumstances, with different people. Related to, but defined differently, a “coming out story” is a narrative of what happened when a person came out to his family or friends. This narrative

likely includes information about whether he was accepted and supported, rejected, harassed, disowned, or ignored. The story may have a series of ups and downs that transpire over the course of time. I am conscious of the fact that while I have distinguished between coming out as single moments in time and coming out stories as more of a narrative, there are times when the two merge. For instance, one might use his coming out story as a way to come out to a friend.

Participants who shared coming out stories in the sample of videos were coded by the role they played within the institution. Roles consisted of students, staff, faculty, and administrators in varying combinations. For example, a group of college students could informally record a video and post it on their own. Or, a university president could post a video herself. Alternatively, a group of students, faculty, and administrators could partner in the creation of a video to show collective support at all levels of the institution. For the purpose of this study, people were coded as students if they look like a traditional age college students and did not classify themselves otherwise. Participants were coded as staff, faculty, or administrator if they mentioned their role or their title was featured while they were talking. In addition to the role participants played within the institution, people within the videos were coded by their gender – male, female, or transgender. In some videos, every participant shared a coming out story, while in others, only a few of the participants provided a narrative. There were also videos wherein no participants shared a coming out story.

As participants related their own coming out stories, due to the nature of the project, they also incorporated pieces of advice and encouragement to the viewers. Some phrases were easily distinguished as being targeted to the audience, while others blended the narrator's own story with the encouragement provided to viewers. This resulted in narrations flipping back and forth between first person and second person narration, making it difficult to parse out the difference

between people's own experiences and the words of advice they were offering to others. Thus, I did not code whether the narrator was speaking solely about her own story or if she was giving advice to the audience.

Important to note is that this study uses a dataset with very distinct parameters. The It Gets Better Project emerged at a specific point in time, when LGBT youth suicides were prevalent in U.S. national news. With a grim picture as the backdrop for these videos, the messages within the videos were targeted towards young people who were struggling with their identity, being bullied, and contemplating whether their life was worth living. While the audience could be different than the viewer that the video participants anticipate, the intent was to reach a certain fairly anonymous demographic with a particular message – that life is worth living, regardless of your sexual orientation and gender identity. Because the videos were crafted with these aims, one limitation is that the coming out stories were likely told differently than they would have been if people were sharing their coming out story with a friend or with a live audience. Additionally, due to the media used, some coming out stories were disclosed in splices. Rarely did the videos offer a series of coming out stories wherein the first person told their story, followed by the second, third and so on. Rather, the videos were edited showing each of the participants in random order, cutting back to one another's stories, eliminating some pieces of people's stories, and keeping the audience interested by mixing up the voices, images, and themes. Since the videos do not necessarily offer participants' full narration, we cannot assume that we have heard each person's full coming out story. Not to mention, people's accounts of their own lived experiences evolve, and they tend to emphasize various points for different audiences. Moreover, we cannot necessarily assume that participants' stories are shown in the sequential order that they are told. The video editing possibilities are such that it is easy to cut

and paste content of people's stories in a different order than how they tell it. Thus, while realizing that the coming out stories are highly edited, potentially omitting some parts while highlighting others, we can only be certain about what the videos present.

With these caveats in mind, I created a codebook for themes within individuals coming out stories. While I was familiar with literature and first-hand accounts of LGBT students experiencing bullying and discrimination within their school contexts, generating the theme codes was largely an inductive process by noting the common ideas within the stories. There were a total of forty-four codes for themes referenced in people's coming out stories. Codes ranged from the environment where the participant grew up, experiences of bullying and harassment, and fear of rejection to self-acceptance, finding support in friends and family, and messages of hope and encouragement for the viewer.

Even though the videos were spliced, going back and forth between different participants, I tracked each of the participants' stories, piecing their narratives back together so as to capture all the topics that they shared. I was able to patch their stories together by relying on facial and speech recognition as well as the clothing they wore and the backdrop that surrounded them. Even though we cannot be absolutely certain that the stories are shown in the sequence that the narrators tell their stories, as I pieced the stories back together, they remained logical. When quoting from the videos, I use a break in line spaces or "/" to signify the places where the participants' story was paused as the camera went to a different person. All the themes found in each story were initially coded into a single field in the database, which automatically generated sequential numbers.

While many participants spoke in the videos, some merely offered encouraging words and snippets of advice for those watching. I did not code these phrases since I did not consider

them to be coming out stories. For those who shared their coming out story, I first want to clarify how I coded whether a person identified as LGBT. My criteria were 1) they explicitly said that they were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer; 2) they referred to coming out, no longer having to hide who they are, or being able to find a community among an LGBT group; or 3) they mentioned a partner of the same sex. If a person referred to being LGBT through one of the above criteria, I then distinguished if they told a coming out story. In order to be classified as a coming out story, the narrator needed to 1) refer to being LGBT (as noted above); 2) share a personal experience of what it was like to come out or what it has been like to be gay throughout their life; and 3) include at least two topics from a codebook of 44 codes. I did not code the narration if it had only had one topic because it indicated that rather than sharing a story, the person's recording was truncated to one or two sentences in the entire video. Additionally, if a person's sexual orientation could only ambiguously be implied by the context of the video, their narrative was not recorded as a coming out story. An example might be a participant saying, "I was terrified" and then later in the video encouraging, "It gets better." While the sentences in the entire context of the video might be understood by the viewer as the narrator being terrified about coming out, and that life eventually got better for her, these two sentences by themselves did not relay enough information to be classified as a coming out story. Additionally, I did not code the story if someone conveyed the coming out experiences of a sibling or friend.

During the coding process, I viewed each video a minimum of three times. There were a total of 318 coming out stories coded from 89 videos. After all the coming out stories were coded, the topics that overlapped were grouped together in eight major categories (see Figure 1): 1) the environment in which people were raised; 2) exploration; 3) LGBT identified; 4) acceptance; 5) rejection; 6) negative emotions; 7) positive emotions; and 8) encouragement.

<p>1. Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grew up in small, conservative, religious town/area • Middle / High School Difficult • After high school... <p>2. Exploration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioned identity / Confused / Didn't have words / Something wrong w me • Living dual life / hiding identity • Explored who I was / feelings • Knew I was different when...or because • Realized I was gay • Denial (eg become super involved; ignore identity) • Wishing to be straight <p>3. LGBT Identified</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies as gay • When I came out... • Coming out difficult <p>4. Acceptance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found friends • Received support of friends • Received support of family • Found people like me / community • Family changed (now accepting) • Institution changed • Got / getting married 	<p>5. Rejection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bullying / Harassment • Parents/others tried to change me • Wasn't accepted in town • Alone / Isolated / Marginalized • Lost friends / unsupportive • Lost family / unsupportive • Experience internal / external homophobia <p>6. Negative Emotions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Suicide • Anxious / nervous / scared / ashamed / no hope / hate self • Fear <p>7. Positive Emotions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weight off shoulders/relief • Not afraid anymore • Became happy • Gained confidence • Reconcile values / beliefs w identity <p>8. Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding on / endure • Takes time, but it gets better • College is better • Reach out to others for support • Be yourself / Can be myself • I love/support you • People will support you • It gets better
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Figure 1. Topic Clusters from 44 codes

Data Description

For the first unit of analysis, of the videos sampled, 50 of the institutions were private (including nine religious institutions and one for-profit), and 39 were public (including two community colleges). Considering that public universities are more likely to have an LGBT resource center than private institutions, it is interesting that over half of the videos came from

private entities (Fine, 2012). Regionally speaking, institutions of higher education from 29 states, plus Washington DC were featured on the website. New York and California had the most colleges represented with 10 videos each; Pennsylvania was close behind with eight videos. While there were a total of 89 videos from colleges and universities, only 77 videos (86.5%) contained coming out stories.

There were a total of 318 stories from the 77 videos that featured stories. Out of these 77 videos, there was an average of 4.13 narrations per video that were classified as coming out stories. (If we look at the entire sample of videos [89], the mean of stories per video = 3.57.) After the coding was completed, queries were run in the database to reveal whether each of the topic clusters were present within each coming out story. While stories may have included a topic twice, with this type of query, any repeated topics within the story were only counted once. Topic clusters were marked as either present or absent within the “Coming Out Story Table” in Microsoft Access. This table was then imported into SPSS in order to run statistical analysis on the data.

Of the topic clusters, encouragement ranks the highest, showing up in over 80% of the stories. Identifying as LGBT is presented in over two-thirds of the videos, followed closely by rejection (63%) and then acceptance in over half the videos.

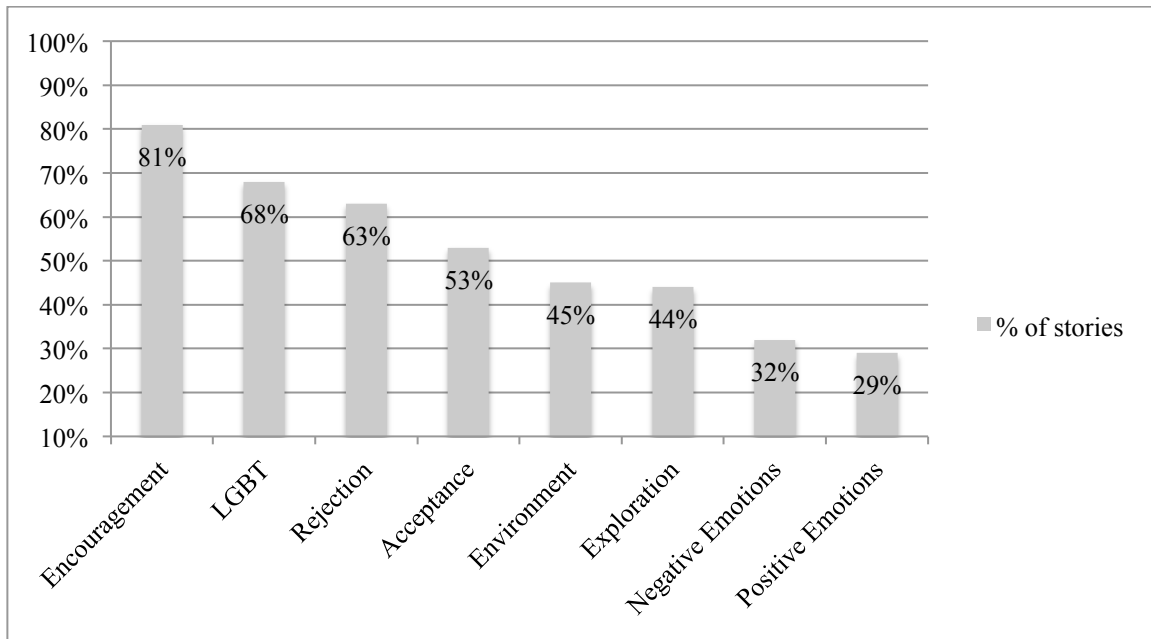


Figure 2. Topics within coming out stories by percentage (n = 318)

Using the topic clusters, all 318 stories had at least two topic clusters represented.

Counting the topic clusters represented in all the videos with coming out stories, there was a total of 1324 coded topics, with a mean of 4.16, $sd = 1.39$. Figure 3 displays the number of topics per coming out story by percentage.

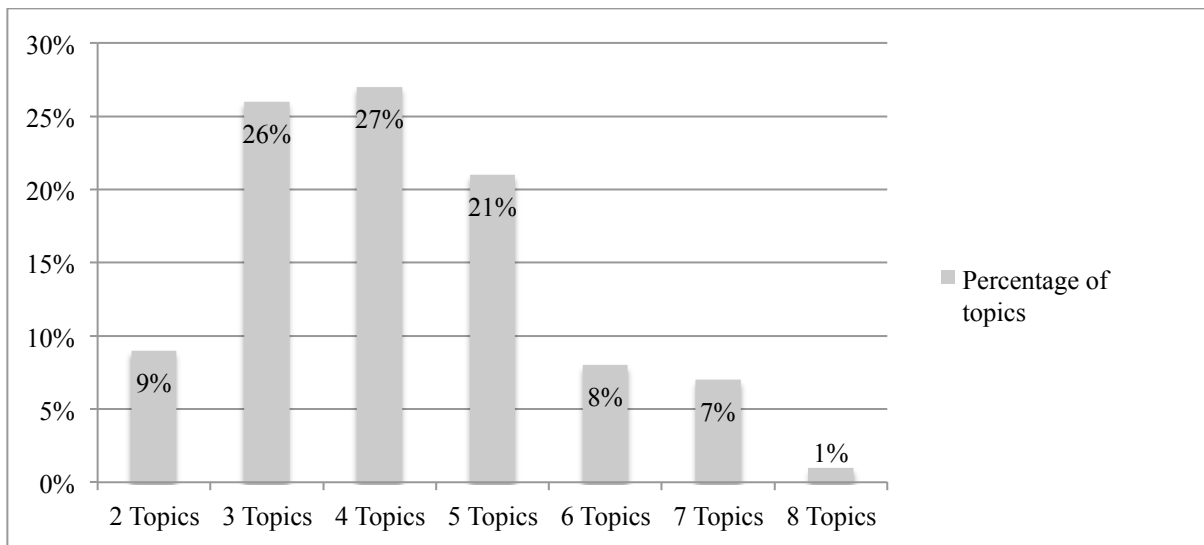


Figure 3. Number of topics per coming out story by percentage (n = 1324)

Out of the total of 318 coming out stories, 192 were from private institutions (30 of the stories being from religiously affiliated private institutions and three from for-profit entities), and 126 were from public institutions (12 of these stories were from community colleges). Table 1 shows the breakdown of topic clusters per institution type. Because there could be multiple coming out stories within an institution's video, the total numbers at the bottom of the table are well over the amount of actual institutions with videos. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted, showing that participants in public institutions were more likely to point to the environment within their coming out stories at the $p < .05$ level. Additionally, participants from public institutions are more likely than participants from private institutions to provide encouragement to the viewers at the $p < .05$ level.

Table 1. Topics in coming out stories by institution type

Topic Clusters	Overall n = 318	Overall Percent	Private n = 192	Private Percent	Public n = 126	Public Percent
Environment*	n = 144	45%	n = 73	38%	n = 71	56%
Exploration	n = 139	44%	n = 91	47%	n = 48	38%
LGBT	n = 217	68%	n = 137	71%	n = 80	63%
Rejection	n = 201	63%	n = 117	61%	n = 84	67%
Negative Emotions	n = 103	32%	n = 57	30%	n = 46	36%
Acceptance	n = 169	53%	n = 99	52%	n = 70	56%
Positive Emotions	n = 93	29%	n = 57	30%	n = 36	29%
Encouragement*	n = 257	81%	n = 146	30%	n = 111	88%
Total	1323		777		546	

* $p < .05$

The gender breakdown within the coming out stories was as follows: 151 women, 158 men, and nine transgender individuals. In regards to roles, the vast majority of participants who told coming out stories were students (232); followed by faculty, staff, and administrators (55), alumni (4), and community members (2). Twenty-five participants among the videos were

unidentifiable in regards to the role they played within the institution. Table 2 shows the prevalence of topics within the coming out stories by gender.

Table 2. Topics in coming out stories by gender

Topic Clusters	Overall n = 318	Overall Percent	Female n = 151	Female Percentage	Male n = 158	Male Percentage
Environment	n = 144	45%	n = 65	43%	n = 75	47%
Exploration	n = 139	44%	n = 74	49%	n = 63	40%
LGBT	n = 217	68%	n = 103	68%	n = 107	68%
Rejection	n = 201	63%	n = 100	66%	n = 95	60%
Negative Emotions	n = 103	32%	n = 53	35%	n = 46	29%
Acceptance	n = 169	53%	n = 82	54%	n = 82	52%
Positive Emotions	n = 93	29%	n = 44	29%	n = 47	30%
Encouragement*	n = 257	81%	n = 132	87%	n = 118	75%
Total	1323		653		633	

* $p < .05$

Males and females addressed the topics relatively evenly. The only significant difference appears between males and females with the topic of encouragement. An ANOVA reveals that females are more likely than males to offer encouragement to the viewer at the $p < .05$ level. There were not enough transgender individuals to run quantitative analysis on the topics within their stories.

A closer look at the data offers insight into how the coming out stories have a similar arc to Plummer's pattern of suffering, epiphany, and transformation, but take on slightly different meanings. First, while Plummer uses suffering to describe the turmoil that LGBT people feel before they come out, video participants in the It Gets Better Project videos refer to suffering both before *and* after coming out due to significant rejection, bullying, and harassment they have experienced. In order to capture all of the topic clusters that indicate considerable difficulty, I created a theme constellation named *adversity*, consisting of environment (which was referred to as heteronormative), exploration, rejection, and negative emotions. Second, Plummer describes

epiphany as the action of coming out. I switched this category to *declaring* because in addition to talking about coming out, participants make declarative statements such as, “I am gay” in order to explicitly reveal their sexual orientation to the viewer. I used the topic cluster of LGBT to comprise the category of declaring. Lastly, I changed transformation to *affirmation* because narrators articulate affirmative moments of acceptance, but they do not necessarily talk about being transformed. I combined the topic clusters of acceptance and positive emotions into a theme constellation of affirmation. Figure 4 summarizes how I modified Plummer’s themes to fit this project.

Plummer’s themes	It Gets Better Theme Constellations	Topic Clusters	Examples of Codes
Suffering	Adversity	Environment	Grew up in small town High school difficult
		Exploration	Questioning or hiding identity Denial
		Rejection	Harassment Lost family / friends
		Negative Emotions	Depression Suicide
Epiphany	Declaring	LGBT	Announced LGBT identity When I came out... Coming out difficult
Transformation	Affirmation	Acceptance	Received support of family / friends Found friends
		Positive Emotions	Became happy Gained confidence

Figure 4. Coming Out Story Theme Constellations

The further combined theme constellations of adversity, declaring, and affirmation showed that adversity was present in the vast majority of stories, and declaring and affirmation were featured in over two-thirds of the stories. Figure 5 shows the percentage of which theme constellations were present within the coming out stories.

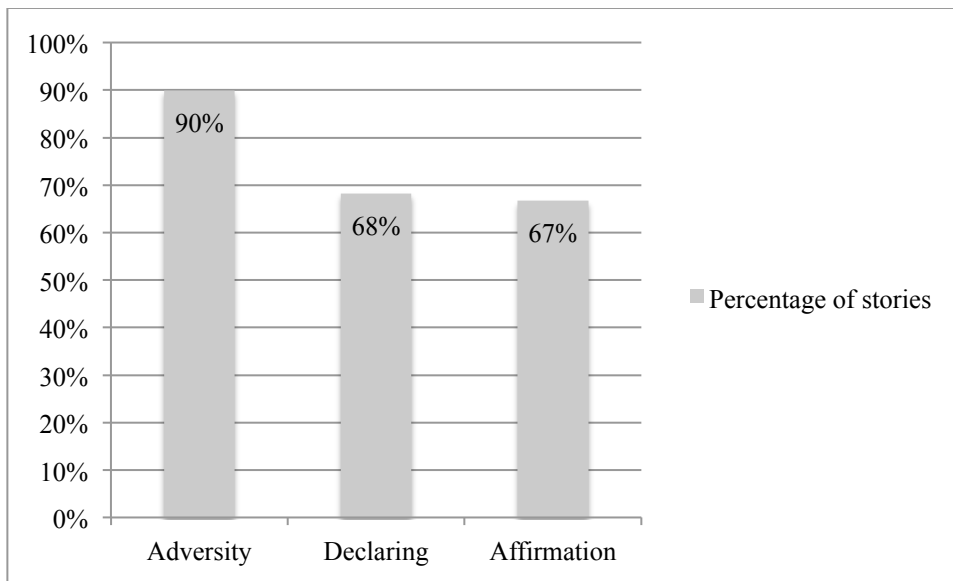


Figure 5: Theme Constellations within Coming Out Stories by Percentage (n = 318)

Taking these three larger categories together (adversity, declaring, and affirmation), 42% of the stories exhibit all of these constellations, following the pattern of disclosing a time of challenge due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, declaring their identity, *and* sharing a moment of affirmation that has occurred since the participants' admission / confession of being LGBTQ. Half of the participants revealed both adversity and affirmation but did not include declaring. Similarly, over half of the stories incorporated adversity and declaring but not affirmation. And, exactly half of the stories utilized both declaring and affirmation to tell their stories. While we might expect the number of people following Plummer's narrative arc would be higher, because participants' video recordings were edited and then placed into a larger,

cumulative video with peers, it is likely that pieces of their stories were cut out during the editing process.

Looking at the It Gets Better Project videos associated with colleges and universities reveals that there are very similar ways in which people share their coming out stories. Not only do narrators mirror the prototype that has been historically provided, but the stories within the videos parallel one another, regardless of gender or the type of institution of higher education they attend. While there are some notable differences, the amount of similarities is what makes the stories remarkable. Given such a wide array of participants, how is it that their stories seem to match one another so well? In the next chapter, we look closer at the common elements within the stories and how they serve a particular purpose.

Chapter 3: The Prototypical Coming Out Narrative

“When did you come out?”

The question is inescapable. Every gay man has his story, and his friends and lovers will, sooner or later, ask him to tell it. It is our common bond with one another, uniting the different races, classes, educational backgrounds and other groups that make up the gay community. Whether or not our lives have shared the same experiences, a coming out story stirs a powerful empathy in each of us, and brings to mind our own years of fear and pain. . . . Coming Out is not only a personal statement of worth and self-respect, it is a statement of dissent – a voice raised in defense of diversity and genuine democracy” (Curtis, 1988, p. 5).

Applying the ideas of socio-cultural learning and narrative plots to the process of coming out, the founders of the It Gets Better Project and subsequent narrators of early videos provide the prototype for how additional participants tell their story. There are particular language constructions and interactions that make LGBT identity decipherable. First, the declaration, “I am gay” uses a recognizable sociolinguistic form that produces homosexual identity. Second, the common plotline of adversity, declaring, and affirmation makes LGBTQ coming out stories recognizable. Third, a community of practice is created as LGBTQ youth look to those who have already gone through the process of coming out to gain the courage needed to tell their truth and to learn how to construct their coming out story. In a sense, the community of practice establishes a collective identity.

In the It Gets Better videos, there is a range of stories told, many by young people who chronicle living as an LGBT-identified person. In this chapter, I zoom in closer, taking a look at the various components of the stories to show how video participants mark their LGBT identity and how they follow the prototype given to them. As noted, slightly over 40% of the stories incorporate the three categories of adversity, declaring, and affirmation. To maintain a recognized coming out narrative for their website, Savage and Miller mirrored these basic

coming out story elements. Through these themes, their story could be associated with social movement narrative frames of horror stories and happy endings (Fine, 1995). More specifically, Savage and Miller presented a model of discovering and disclosing sexuality, pointing to moments of rejection, and sharing that they now experience social acceptance.

This section begins with a prototypical example and then more closely examines components of the accepted coming out stories. This illustration from Long Island University offers the general narrative.

Hi. My name is Jackie, and I am a lesbian. I break a lot of gaydar, so I'm sorry if I broke yours.

I realized I had some gay feelings in middle school. And, I realized I was different. Um, I didn't know whether I liked boys or girls more cause girls were nice to me and the boys were smelly. So, but then I learned the term called bisexuality, and that kind of described me at the time. I tried coming out to my twin, but she freaked out and I basically said I was kidding because I got so scared of how she reacted....Then throughout the years, high school, I got so scared of being bullied that I basically became what is known as super straight. I became boy-crazed, I grew out my hair, and I became the definition of straight. And, I suppressed my feelings for women for a very, very long time. And, I didn't realize I was gay until my freshman year in January when I realized that I really don't like men at all. I really don't.

I've told a lot of my friends. So, for those of you who don't quite know yet, 'Hi! I'm comin' out to you!'

So, it's just how I am. And if you can't accept me, then, sorry. If you can, great!

I had done something to myself in the past because of these feelings. I wouldn't have been able to live my life, I wouldn't have been able to meet my friends in the Rainbow Alliance. I wouldn't have been able to do any of that. I wouldn't have been able to do a lot of things. Frankly, that would have sucked.

It gets better. (Long Island University, It Gets Better Project)

In Jackie's story, she began by revealing that she is a lesbian (*declaring*), and even noting that she might break people's gaydar, a term akin to radar that assumes people can read another

person's sexual orientation based on the person's physical appearance and nonverbal cues.

During her process of self-discovery, she tried to reveal her sexuality to her twin, but went back into the closet due to her sister's negative reaction. Additionally, she closeted herself even more due to her trepidation of being bullied in high school. Even though Jackie did not tell the viewer that she experienced any bullying, the climate where she went to school policed her behavior; she would not allow herself to be out for fear of what would happen to her. She disclosed that she took a drastic action in the past that would have prevented her from making friends in the LGBT campus group, Rainbow Alliance. Whatever this action was, it implied either self or social rejection (*adversity*). Fortunately, she survived and was able to meet friends through an on-campus group; she achieved acceptance from herself and from others (*affirmation*). And, while she had already come out to many of her friends, she used the video as another mode of coming out to people in her life as she says, "for those of you who don't quite know yet, 'Hi! I'm comin' out to you!'" This statement alludes to her comfort with her sexual orientation. Echoing the slogan of the campaign, Jackie ended her story with the slogan of the project, "It gets better" (*encouragement*). This type of ending will be discussed in the next chapter. A closer look at the specific comments within the coming out stories provides more insight into how the theme constellations are employed within the narratives.

Adversity

To reiterate, the topics represented in coming out stories that are classified within the theme constellation of adversity include: the heteronormative *environment* in which people were raised, the challenge of *exploring* one's sexual and gender identity that did not fit within the norms, the *negative emotions* surrounding their experience, and the *rejection* they faced from

others. Revealing moments of adversity serves to make the coming out stories recognizable since the prototype described by Plummer (1995) tells people that LGBT individuals experience suffering. This section explains in greater depth each of the topics that make up the theme constellation.

In the videos where participants used the environment to constitute the adversity they faced, environment indicated the small town where they were raised, the religious ideology they were taught, the politically conservative setting surrounding them, or the difficulty of their middle or high school experience. Here is a telling description of the area where one student was raised.

I did come from sort of a mentally persuasive and coerced environment. I grew up, you know, in the South, with like your typical black, southern, very religious parents. And in that type of environment where being gay meant you're going to go to hell, that you're equal to, you know, Sodom and Gomorrah, like immoral type. That you've chosen that lifestyle that's just wrong. (University of Illinois at Chicago, It Gets Better Project)

Several aspects of this student's story stereotypically suggest a strongly heteronormative environment. As she names these characteristics of geographic region, race, and religion, she referenced the historical injury that these communities have placed upon LGBT people. Each of these characteristics created an intersectional axis of adversity, thereby multiplying her struggle against norms of sexuality.

Narrators also talked about not having access to any gay role models where they grew up, or the fact that alternatives to sexuality and gender norms were not discussed or accepted. Due to the environment within which they were raised, becoming familiar with a discourse outside of heteronormativity or gender normativity was a struggle in and of itself. A student from University of Idaho shared,

I grew up in a small town – 80 people. It's one of the smallest towns in Idaho. And there, nobody else is gay. You don't have gay role models; you don't have gay peers. It's just you. You're alone. But really you're not alone. There's so many more gay people out there – in that small town, in Idaho, in the US and in the world. And, it gets better when you find those people. (It Gets Better Project)

Without any gay role models growing up, the video implied that this student did not learn a non-heteronormative discourse or find other gay people until he attended college. Note that this student did not announce his sexual orientation, but strongly referred to being gay by speaking to the absence of gay role models in his life.

Interestingly, even growing up in a place where there was exposure to LGBT people proved challenging. A student from Kenyon College noted,

I grew up in San Francisco and, I mean, you'd think that's a pretty accepting place for gay people. But actually growing up and being in high school and being gay and knowing that you were gay still was really hard. (It Gets Better Project)

While she did not say exactly what was difficult about her experience, she seems to indicate that her high school was not a location where being gay was completely welcome, and she still had difficult moments in high school.

While each of the examples above maintained the boundaries of sexual orientation, the videos also revealed that the parameters of gender were enforced by societal and family expectations. The coming out story from a transgender (female to male: FTM) staff member at Simmons College told of his mother constantly questioning his gender expression even though his father tried to be supportive.

Growing up, my mom would constantly say things like, 'Why can't you be more like your sister? Why can't you wear dresses? You look like a linebacker. You dress like a linebacker. While I was hearing this message, I was hearing the message from my father, 'Leave her alone. She's fine the way she is.' ...And then when he passed away, there was nobody telling me that anymore. I was pretty lost for a while. (It Gets Better Project)

Growing up as a biological female, this narrator was expected to dress and act like a girl but instead performed the gender roles of a boy. His identity created tension as his mother compared him to the norm of his sister and other feminine girls. While his father was around, he felt supported in acting more masculine, but as soon as his father passed away, he lost the cushion against constantly being compared to a gender norm that did not fit. His gender identity was associated with the pain of gender norms his mother projected.

Exploration of one's identity also indicated moments of adversity. As people explored their sexual and gender identities, they often had to wrestle with the sexuality and gender norms they had internalized from society. A student from Brigham Young University who recounted his search to understand his sexual orientation shared,

I felt really alone. I didn't tell anyone. /
I thought that eventually, maybe it would be better if I died. /
And, I thought that I could still fix it. So, I did what every freshman here at BYU
does. I decided to go on a mission. /
It didn't really resolve the problem that I wanted it to resolve. I still felt gay. /
I never asked it that way before. I always fasted and said, 'Take this away. I don't
want it.' (It Gets Better Project)

This student wrestled to make sense of his sexuality so much that he thought it would be better to die. He even tried to "fix" himself so that he would not fall outside of the dominant discourse of heterosexuality. The fact that such turmoil resulted from realizing a part of one's identity indicates just how strong heteronormative and gender normative messages are.

A staff member from the Simmons College video noted, "Nobody was picking on me. Nobody was calling me names directly. But living, hiding all the time had taken this huge toll." Her comment illustrates that the struggle does not have to be physical nor overtly directed by someone. Rather, for people who identify as gay, the heteronormative environment can feel violent enough that they hide; they fear the ramifications of coming out.

Other participants pointed to incidences of extreme bullying or harassment to note adversity. A student from Hood University offered a telling example.

When I was about 15, I actually went and came out to my parents. Their initial reaction was...uh... my father beat me down with a baseball bat. So, obviously not a great experience. At the time, my mom basically just said to me, you know, 'That's not a decision you can make right now'. 'Oh, it's hormones'. 'Oh it's this'. 'Oh, it's that'.

My freshman and sophomore year were not pleasant because people did come up to me and said awful things. 'Oh you're gay'. 'You're a whore'. 'You're a drug addict'. Stuff that they had just associated. (It Gets Better Project)

This student suffered physically at the hands of his parents and emotionally through name calling from his peers.

Interestingly, video participants included injury within their coming out story without specifically declaring their identity; they did not announce that they were gay or talk about coming out. They simply used injury as a marker of gay identification. A poignant example came from a staff member at Columbia University.

So I grew up in a very rural, religious, politically conservative community in Pennsylvania. And I actually didn't know any out gay people when I was growing up.

I was teased in high school and junior high school, called fag and sissy and no matter how hard I tried or pretended that it didn't hurt, it was a very painful experience. (It Gets Better Project)

This participant did not state that he was gay, nor did he reference coming out. Rather, he implied his sexual orientation by saying that he did not know any gay people during his youth and by disclosing that he was teased and called "fag and sissy", two terms that are pejoratively used to refer to people who are perceived to be LGBT. While he did not reproduce his identity through the words, "I am gay", he used references of harm to mark himself as a gay man. While I did not include the mere reference to being LGBT as a

point of “adversity” within the coding scheme, these participants seemed to attach injury to being identified as LGBT.

Another student combined the environment and bullying to reference adversity. This student, from Western Washington University, recalled, “I grew up in a fairly conservative area in Washington state and bullying kind of became common in my life when I came out” (It Gets Better Project).

These examples show how people’s sexual orientation was controlled and disciplined through the norms of the specific location and institutions in which they were raised, the internalized homophobia they had to wrestle against to understand their own identity, and overt bullying. The dominant discursive practices in these environments were heteronormative and gender normative, and these discourses regulated any practice deemed outside of the social and cultural norms. For some participants, the suffering became even worse once they came out. Discipline happened through exclusion, condemnation to hell, bullying, physical and emotional violence, and discrimination.

Using Foucault (1978) we can see how the discursive practices of heteronormativity generate the pain that these participants faced. At the same time, however, when the participants disclosed these moments of pain and deep struggle, they not only called to mind the history of pain associated with LGBT identities but also attached their own experience with injury to their sexual and gender identities (Brown, 1995; Butler, 1996). Thus, when they connected injury to identity, they ended up maintaining and reproducing suffering. The action of confessing a sexual alternative to the dominant frame of heterosexuality did not provide absolution; rather, it continued to reinforce the deviance against the norm.

One might wonder if the narrators would experience such violence or harassment if they did not come out. After all, a student from Central Pennsylvania Community College remarked,

After I came out of the closet, it actually, I found I got a lot more hate that I usually did. And, I had threatening phone messages, people telling me I was going to hell. You know, I had everything you could imagine. I went on a school trip with a club I was a part of and some kid said that I was going to rape him because I'm gay. (It Gets Better Project)

While this student may not have experienced the same threats had he not come out, Foucault (1978) cautions that if a person withholds the truth from himself or those close to him, he will experience the “power of violence” (p. 60). The assumption is that there is a psychic or emotional violence that one experiences if he does not come forward with the truth.

This section highlights the ways in which video participants shared moments of adversity – through the environment in which they were raised, the expectations they faced as they explored their identity, negative emotions, and rejection. The next section speaks to the moments of coming out, the declaration of being LGBT.

Declaring

Plummer (1995) writes about epiphany as the action that people take to break the silence of their suffering. This action is typically indicated by coming out. I changed the category of epiphany to that of declaring since video participants not only referred to their moments of coming out but also announced in the videos their sexual orientation or gender identity. While coming out seems to be done in an effort to relieve suffering, Plummer does not foreclose the possibility that the action of coming out can be associated with great adversity. After all, the heteronormative notions that make up an environment tend to shape the manner in which one

comes out. In other words, while the process of coming out marks a person's own self-realization and action to relieve the tension she feels, this does not guarantee that she is free from the ongoing impact of internalized homophobia or discrimination from others. As this section addresses declaring, we begin to see that when the video participants came out or took other actions to alleviate the tension they experienced between societal norms and their own feelings of sexual attraction and gender expression, many still strongly attached injury to their identity of being LGBT. This section begins with exploring how participants referenced moments of "coming out" in their stories and then shifts to examine how they announced their identity within the video itself with statements such as, "I'm gay."

One of the ways in which participants declared their identity in the videos was through talking about the moments in which they came out. Within these stories, there is a direct connection of identity to the pain they experienced. This is illuminated by a staff member from Montgomery College who reflected,

I came out when I was 18 years old. I was a freshman in college. I had just lost my mom, and I just knew it was the right time. But in coming out, I was really subjected to a lot of harassment and bullying.

I became a target on campus. My room was vandalized. A lot of ugly things happened. (It Gets Better Project)

Even though it may have felt like the right time for him to come out, this did not prevent him from being tormented on campus for his sexual orientation. Similarly, a student at Hebrew Union College shared about how her coming out was dismissed by her mother.

The first time I came out my mom said, 'You know, you just don't know what it's like to be liked by men.' And, I've sort of never forgotten that. And, it was pretty painful at the time. Now I can kind of look back and say, 'Maybe that was a blessing.' I don't know. (It Gets Better Project)

Upon reflection, this student can now look at the situation differently, but when she came out, she said that it was painful. She linked coming out to the adversity she faced. In another example, a student from Long Island University shared about how she did not have control over her coming out process.

When I was younger, I remember being in elementary school and in middle school, which was some of the worst years of my life. I got outed by somebody who I thought was my friend. And, it was heartbreaking. And, um, I just had a really tough time coming out to my mom and to my family. And, I think that she's becoming more and more accepting of who I am. She knows that I am involved in Rainbow (student club) and am active on campus. (It Gets Better Project)

By being “outed” – when someone shares the sexual orientation of another person without her permission – this student was not able to share her identity when she wanted or in the way that she chose. Being outed by peers at school likely forced her to come out to her family earlier than she otherwise would have. She highlighted that having her sexual orientation declared was connected to struggle. Even for students who were surrounded by examples of LGBT people shared about difficulty in coming out. From Kenyon College a student disclosed,

Coming out to my parents, my parents are like extremely liberal, like all of my mom's best friends are lesbians, but it was still like extremely terrifying and they didn't take it like all that well at first. (It Gets Better Project)

This student's experience disrupts the notion that exposure to different identities yields greater acceptance. Declaring her sexual identity to her parents was still linked to adversity.

Examining the moments in the videos wherein participants announced their identity, there begin to be mixed messages. As they explicitly named their identity, they constructed borders around the meaning of sexuality and gender. And, as Butler (1996) illuminates, these declarative statements take the collective heteronormative injustices of the past and place them into the

present, thereby reproducing and multiplying the pain associated with the statement. However, as they employed words that signified harm, they intoned them in a way that attempted to disrupt the injury. My analysis of an example of students from Brigham Young University shows how they possibly did a mixture of harming and breaking from the harm.

Hi. I'm Adam. I am gay, and I am Mormon, and I'm a student at BYU studying in music and theatre.

My name is Heather Waddington, and I'm a senior at BYU, and I'm a lesbian.

My name is Derek. I'm 24, a BYU student majoring in international relations, and *I'm gay*. (It Gets Better Project)

As the participants introduced themselves and their sexual orientation, they also announced their status as a student at Brigham Young University (BYU). In addition to the social, historical, and cultural injuries associated with sexual orientation, the students added a layer of injury by proclaiming affiliation with a private, religious school that has been, according to the BYU video, “consistently ranked (by The Princeton Review) one of the most unfriendly campuses for LGBT students in the United States”. The video disclosed that almost three-quarters of LGBT students at BYU have contemplated suicide and roughly a quarter of LGBT BYU students have attempted suicide. Stating “I am gay” at this university confirmed a sexual boundary but also included an implication of physical injury since so many of the LGBT students had suicidal thoughts. Within the context of this video, identifying as LGBT not only attached these students to the historical injury associated with their sexual orientation but also to the current emotional struggle that students at BYU faced.

However, read another way, the tone of the BYU students’ voices did not suggest that they wanted to limit themselves to moments of injury; rather, they began to distinguish the declaration of their identity from past wounds by announcing their sexual orientation with

conviction and by sharing additional factors that make up their lives. For instance, Derek in the example above majored in international relations and emphasized the words, “I’m gay” with certainty. This dynamic is evident in other videos as well. A student from the University of Iowa said with a smile,

Hi. I’m Hannah Wray and I’m a junior here at the University of Iowa.

And I’m gay. I’m blonde. I’m a daughter. I’m a friend. I sometimes think I’m funny. I don’t know. I find myself funny. And, I’m looking forward to the future.
(It Gets Better Project)

Hannah not only defined herself by her sexual orientation but also by a list of characteristics that she used to describe herself.

This section highlights that the act of declaring sexual orientation was linked to moments of adversity but that these same acts also indicated conviction to live in a way that their existence could be defined in multiple ways, not just injury.

Affirmation

Even though the vast majority of participants connected their identity with times of struggle, they avoided being defined solely by their injuries. Instead, they followed the coming out story prototype, sharing about how they experienced affirmation through some type of self- or social acceptance.

One of the ways in which participants talked about affirmation was through the relief they felt after disclosing their identity. A student from Amherst College stated, “I was anxious about coming out on a varsity sports team at Amherst. / Now that I’m out, it’s like a weight has been lifted” (It Gets Better Project). Another student also pointed to the feeling of internal struggle and then the release from this tension.

And year by year would go by and I would approach my birthday and I would blow out the candles and I would hope and pray to God that I turn straight. But it's better to face the hardships that it's going to take to come out of the closet. And I know how hard it is. I spent most of last year coming out of the closet, and it's the most difficult thing ever. But, once you're done, you feel so much better. It's like the world is off your shoulders. And even that's an understatement. (Canisius College, It Gets Better Project)

Additionally, affirmation countered the experiences in which adversity was faced. While participants often referenced adversity through the environment, during their process of identity exploration, negative emotions, and rejection, they continued by sharing that their stories also included affirmation. In regards to the environment, many video participants noted acceptance when they moved away for college. For instance, a student at Concordia College mentioned, "High school was really hard for me to keep positive. But then I got to college and literally, it was like the day I got to college, all of my anxieties and all of my fears just melted away" (It Gets Better Project). At college, he no longer had fear about his sexual orientation because he did not have to hide it anymore; he was free to act on his sexual orientation in a way that could be fully integrated into his life.

A student from Princeton University put her experience in perspective by pointing to the differences between high school and post high school.

When I was in high school the world seemed really small. The world consisted of about 2500 kids between the ages of 14 and 18 and there wasn't anything in the world that represented me. I felt very alone, I felt very weird; I felt very out of place.

When you graduate high school and you find that there are things outside of the small universe of 2500 kids between the ages of 14 and 18, you find that there are so many more bigger and better things out there. (It Gets Better Project)

Another student explicitly talked about the heterosexist messages she received from her community, which made her process of understanding her sexuality and gender quite difficult.

But, by positioning herself in different environment, she found an environment wherein she could be herself. She expressed,

Basically, I grew up in a world where I was taught almost on a daily basis that being homosexual was a sin. And that anybody who is homosexual was going to hell. And I believed in this, like, thoroughly, and as much as you could believe in something. And I remember being deeply confused, and tried to figure out the emotions that were going on inside of me. And trying to figure out who I was. Because in my head, I thought God had made some type of mistake, some type of, there was something wrong with me.

And today, things have gotten so much better. In college, I truly got to be myself. And, it's one of the things I value most about myself is that I can truly say that I am who I am, truly and honestly. And now, I have a girlfriend for a year and I love her and things are just amazing. My family came around. And, I can honestly say, it gets better. (Oxford College at Emory University, It Gets Better Project)

The language and norms within the initial environment taught this student that any sexuality outside of heterosexuality was not only wrong, but sinful. As she experienced tension with not feeling opposite-sex attraction, she became confused and thought that God had made her incorrectly. After she entered college, she was able to “truly and honestly” be herself. She no longer was pressured to hide or constrict her sexual orientation, which allowed her to embrace her identity. She noted also being accepted by others as she found a girlfriend and eventually was accepted by her family.

In regards to identity exploration, a student from East Carolina University shared that she did not have much support from family or teachers in high school; she did not have anyone to whom she could ask questions. However, in college she was exposed to people who willingly talked about their same-sex partnerships, and began to feel as though she could be open about her own identity.

In high school I was still figuring myself out. I had to deal with my family being unsupportive, not understanding. I had to deal with my teachers. I couldn't be open. I couldn't talk to them. You know, everybody has that one or two teachers

that they can go to and kind of say, you know, 'Hey, this is what's going on in my life. Have you been there? Can you help me out?' I couldn't do that in high school. I didn't have anyone to turn to.

But here (East Carolina University), you know there's a bunch of faculty that are openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender. There's a bunch of fellow students who are open with partners, past relationships. A lot of people I can pull from and ask about and stuff. I have a big community that I can learn from.

Of course having faculty that's open about it, either allied or part of the community, is really helpful.

I can tell my teachers now. You know, 'Hey, I'm bisexual.' Or I can say, 'My girlfriend'. I don't have to lie and say, 'Oh, it's my boyfriend.' I can be myself. (It Gets Better Project)

This student's experiences are similar to the examples of people who shared that they did not have any gay role models, making it very difficult for them to conceptualize what their LGBT identity meant. Once in a place where they could openly explore their identity, they were able to experience acceptance from themselves and others.

Those who experienced rejection at the hands of family and peers also incorporated affirmation into their narratives. The student from Hood College whose father beat him with a baseball bat, shared how he found acceptance.

It was so just freeing. You know, just come to college. You don't have this awful, oppressive feeling in college. You can just be who you want to be. And, that's straight, gay, asexual, lesbian, whatever it is, that's what you can be.

I think that's probably the biggest part about it is being able to accept yourself. Getting to that point where you're not in fear of people knowing, where you're not scared all the time of what's going to happen.

By the time I actually did go (to the LGBT support group on campus), I was so relieved. It was the community I first said this was what was going on in my life and they immediately just stepped in and started helping me with things and being supportive. (It Gets Better Project)

Out from under his oppressive home and high school he described college as a place wherein he could freely be who he wanted to be without fear. The space of college seemed to offer a greater variety of sexuality discourses with which he could connect. Within this space, he was able to accept himself for who he was and receive support of others on campus.

While the stories above indicate a linear progression from adversity to acceptance as the participants moved from one environment to another, other participants talked about the simultaneous contradictions of acceptance and rejection from different people in their lives. A student at Graceland University who started to have same-sex relationships but who had not come out to her mother yet shared the following,

There was this one day when I was on the phone and I was walking by my Mom. She was in the living room, my brother was in there. And, I'm talking on the phone and my Mom goes, 'Oh, is that a girl on the phone?' And I was like, 'What?' And she goes, 'Is that your girlfriend on the phone?' And she just looks at me and goes, 'I already know you're gay. You probably get more girls than your brother.'

And yet, just because her mother accepted her did not mean that all people did, herself included. She continued,

The hardest part about coming out was accepting who I was. I didn't want to be gay. And when people go around and say, 'Oh, it's a phase. You're experimenting.' It wasn't. I hated being gay. I didn't want to be gay.

The first person I came out to didn't accept me. So, I just kept it a secret and dated boys just so I would fit in. (It Gets Better Project)

The split between acceptance and rejection even came within one's immediate family. A student from Oxford College at Emory disclosed,

I came out to my parents this past weekend. My Dad was very accepting, and my Mom was going the route of choosing to ignore it and it doesn't exist. But, I realize that everything gets better in the end. I have a wonderful girlfriend who loves me and will support me no matter what. (It Gets Better Project)

These stories reveal that experiencing affirmation for one's sexual and gender identity did not mean that adversity would no longer happen. Depending on the people and the situation, video participants received acceptance in some locations and rejection in others. One of the sites of adversity was the internal battle people experienced in trying to accept themselves, especially given the internalized messages they sensed regarding straying from the norms. Mentioning the moment that she came out to her family, a student from Hood College expressed,

Everybody was basically like, 'I already knew', especially my Dad. He was like, 'Yeah, I kinda figured that'.

However, she continued.

I couldn't stand myself. I couldn't stand to look in the mirror. I couldn't stand the fact that ok, I knew that I was attracted to my best friend, but I couldn't tell her. And why was I feeling this way, and all this other stuff. And, I started to write poetry or letters to myself. I would take a book like a normal notebook, and I would write letters to myself about how positive I am. How good I was. And if that didn't work, I would base my attention on the people who actually told me and acknowledged that I was a good person and that I was something. I was worth something. (It Gets Better Project)

This student tried to maintain her self-worth by creating positive messages for herself. She needed to actively counter the messages she had internalized that told her that having same-sex attractions was wrong.

The examples in this chapter disrupt the sexual norm of heterosexuality but also support the prevailing structure of a coming out narrative wherein people shared moments of adversity, declared their identity, and talked about affirmation. Even when participants shared the release they felt when they came out or talked about moments of affirmation, they did so while also referencing times of adversity. On the one hand, as participants in the It Gets Better Project shared common themes among their stories, they created a collective identity (Polletta, 1998), one in which they identified as LGBT, shared the horror stories of adversity due to their sexual

orientation or gender expression, and then revealed happy endings as they eventually came to find affirmation and acceptance (Fine, 1995). This collective identity could be strategically used to counter sexuality and gender norms. On the other hand, even though the themes of adversity, declaring, and affirmation help to make LGBT identity recognizable, they also reproduce the injury associated with LGBT experience, deeply incorporating harm into the core of LGBT identity. However, as with any community of practice, some people also alter how stories are told. Next, we look at how some participants resist replicating the dominant storyline.

Chapter 4: Disrupting the Narrative

As Lave and Wenger (1991) mention, when communities of practice are created, stories are told in ways that are recognized by the community, but newcomers tend to add their own twist; they personalize the story in a way that speaks to their own experience, which can end up altering the narrative. Similarly, as people use the It Gets Better Project website to mobilize around an issue they consider important, they play with the dominant narrative structure in small and subtle as well as large and deliberate ways. This chapter examines the manner in which participants begin to alter the coming out story discourse. Just as culture is dynamic, so too are narrative structures that help to identify groups of people. The previous chapter highlighted the common narrative of coming out stories, loosely based on the arc that Plummer (1995) describes. However, Savage and Miller add to this storyline by creating a new category to the narrative – that of encouragement. By supplementing the narrative structure, they slightly alter the older narrative. Their twist to the story is that life gets better for LGBT people.

Looking at these shifts and turns of narratives can shed insight into people's varying experiences as well as illuminate how the construction of discourse and cyberspace could serve LGBT social movement in different ways. Plummer (1995) notes that before the 1960s, coming out narratives did not typically end in transformation, or with people becoming happy with their sexuality. Rather, the stories ended in tragedy – loneliness, despair, or suicide. Not until groups of lesbians and gays came together in social movements, did the narratives start to include acceptance or transformation. But as LGBT groups added elements to the coming out story, the new, altered narrative became what was recognized as legitimate. The It Gets Better Project appears to be following this trend of adding a component to the narrative that becomes a

dominant feature; as they supplement the story, they actually produce a new prototype for subsequent narrators to follow.

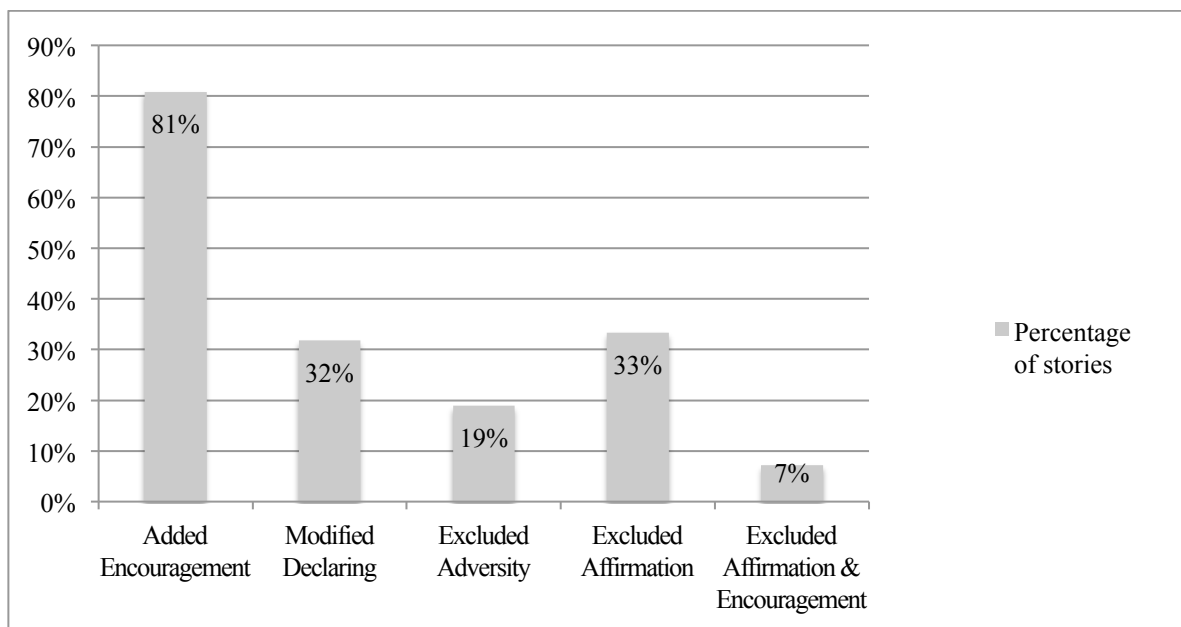


Figure 6. Altered stories by percentage (n = 318)

Four out of five stories incorporated encouragement. Savage and Miller, the originators of the It Gets Better Project, introduced encouragement as an element in their coming out story since in addition to telling about their experiences, they were speaking to an audience who they wanted to support and inspire. While I am choosing to use the element of encouragement as a way that coming out stories are altered from the dominant frame, I realize that the modified framework produces a new pattern for coming out stories within this particular project. Those who participated in the project tended to adopt the norms and values of those who framed the project, and thus included this fourth element in their coming out story. This chapter begins by exploring the use of encouragement within the videos. Then the chapter turns to additional ways in which participants altered the narrative that Savage and Miller outlined. By modifying how they talked about identifying as LGBT as well as excluding adversity, affirmation, or

encouragement, participants generated their own subversions, and in doing so, continued to aid in the evolution of this particular community of practice.

Supplementing with Encouragement

The recurring way that participants provided encouragement was through confidently reiterating the catch-phrase of the project: “It gets better.” Nearly two-thirds of participants actually say these words in their story. Here is one example:

One of the things I’ve had to struggle with being gender queer is the constant name calling. People asking me, calling me things like ‘it’ or asking me if I’m a guy or a girl, and just trying to put me into a gender binary when I do not fit into that.

I stuck it out. I joined the GSA [Gay Straight Alliance]. I got involved in my community.

Trust me, it gets better. (University of Idaho, It Gets Better Project)

This student suggested that life was better after becoming involved in a community of people who cared about similar issues and identities. A student from Central Pennsylvania’s Community College, who related excruciating times of bullying and rejection from his peers, also encouraged viewers that life gets better.

I found something in my life that makes it all worthwhile. Every bit of hatred I got from people, I now turn it into something wonderful. I’m a stand up comedian. I take every horrible thing that people have said to me, every ignorant and hateful thing and turn it into a joke.

Now I’m here. I’m a member of Allies, and I made amazing friends. I wouldn’t trade anything that I have for the world.

Just hang in there. It gets better. (It Gets Better Project)

Along with this, a handful of video participants even exclaimed that they personally supported and “loved” the audience, despite not even knowing them personally. Take the

statement from a staff member at University of Redlands, “I’m here for you and I love you and accept you, and I can tell you from experience that it does get better” (It Gets Better Project).

The participant’s words may provide a virtual safe space – a place wherein viewers can watch the video repeatedly to hear a friendly, supportive voice saying that she loves and accepts them, even if she does not know them. Listening to this positive message might offer enough reassurance for the audience to endure whatever hardship they may be experiencing.

Many participants chose to offer encouragement through their own words – phrases that provided reassurance to those who may be struggling – but did not necessarily promise that life gets better. For instance, the student from Hood College who encountered abuse from his family and negativity from his peers offered the following advice to viewers.

Just keep going. Even if it’s a day at a time, and it’s just a journal entry at a time, and it’s...*Just* keep going. No matter what. Don’t give up, and just keep going. / I’m Mark Woods. I’m a survivor. (It Gets Better Project)

His words encouraged viewers to continue with their life and suggested that they find ways to express their struggles. He implicitly plead with the audience not take their own life. Having mentioned finding support in college earlier in his narrative, his message was that if people trod through the challenges, they would eventually come to a point in time when they would find some sort of acceptance. In another instance, a staff member from Binghamton University shared his coming out story and then offered the following:

You have to share your concerns and you have to share your struggles with someone because if you keep it inside, it will eat you up and it will cause you to be insecure about yourself and it will cause you to feel isolated. (It Gets Better Project)

His way of offering reassurance was not to say that life gets better but to encourage people to reach out to others so that their pain does not take over their life.

And yet other participants only offered nuanced encouragement. Challenging the notion of life being completely better, a student from Yale College expressed, “It will get better when you get to college or when you get out of high school, but it still sucks in a lot of ways” (It Gets Better Project). Even though this student maintained that life gets better, rather than paint a completely positive picture of life as an LGBT adult, she acknowledged that there were still struggles.

In another instance, a student from Brigham Young University could not promise that life gets better.

I know you expect me to say it gets better, but if I’m going to be authentic, I can’t say that. I don’t know where you are in your life right now. I don’t know what experiences, what pain you’ve gone through. And I don’t know for sure if it will get better. But, people that I know that love me have told me that. And I’m trying to believe them. (It Gets Better Project)

In other parts of the video, this BYU student referenced moments of adversity and affirmation, but he explicitly chose not to provide the happy ending that the creators of the project suggested. While the student referred to the possibility of a better space, he had yet to fully endorse the entirety of the coming out discourse offered to him, and thus would not reinforce the tenuousness of the message to others.

Modifying Declaring

Rather than declaring their identity by announcing, “I’m gay” or by talking about “coming out”, some narrators shifted how they used words in their descriptions of sexual and gender identity and experience. In other words, they played with language, making slight modifications in how they and the audience could interpret their experience. They used other words and references that pointed to their sexual orientation so that they were identifiable to the

viewer as LGBT, but did it in a way that did not make their sexuality static. Consider what a faculty member at the University of Southern California shared as he referred to same-sex marriage,

I'm married now. And, if you would have told me as a kid that I would be married and that my family and friends would be fine with this, I would have laughed at you. I – it just didn't seem possible at the time. (It Gets Better Project)

Rather than announcing his sexuality by saying "I'm gay," he reflected back to childhood, finding it almost unbelievable that he would be in a same-sex marriage and have support from the people who have been meaningful to him throughout his life.

In another instance, a student expressed,

And when I came here (East Carolina University), I found a lot more people who were like me, so it was easy for me to adjust and get to know everyone on a different level.

Since I've joined the LGBT Resource Office and the club, I have found a lot of people that are just like me and have a lot of similarities, not just in sexuality, but in also in other things. They're really accepting, no matter what. They, like, care for you and treat you like you want to be treated.

It does get better. You will find people who will support you and love you and will treat you equally, as you want to be treated. (East Carolina University, It Gets Better Project)

Even though this student did not refer explicitly to his sexual orientation, through his involvement with the LGBT office and club on campus as well as finding people "like me, not just in sexuality," the viewer could infer that the student did not conform to heterosexuality even though he did not label himself. Alternatively, he chose to focus on how he found acceptance within a particular campus community. He did not reproduce his sexual orientation by declaring it to the audience, nor did he tether himself to injury to

make his experience recognizable. He altered the main narrative by sharing a different way of talking about being gay.

However, we must consider that Austin (1962) suggests that even if the words are not uttered, if there are actions that correspond to a performative statement, a person has already expressed the doing and the identity in their own mind. Perhaps though, since these participants did not incorporate moments of injury into their stories, it is worth considering that they subtly switch how and to what being LGBT is associated. In changing the reference point, LGBT identity can begin to be connected to affirmation rather than injury.

Excluding Affirmation

Not everyone associated LGBT identity with affirmation. In fact, another way in which participants altered the narrative model was to not speak of affirmation at all. A student at Eastern Michigan University disclosed,

I came out when I was 15 years old as a lesbian. / When I came out to my school, you know, my friends had a really hard time with it, and I got a lot of crap from the school, and it was hard, and it was difficult. / I went through a lot of hardships with my family, especially, and my friends, but it's definitely something worth living for. (It Gets Better Project)

This participant hinted that life was worth living for, but she skipped the routine part of the coming out narrative that focuses on receiving acceptance from people in her life. By her words alone, the viewer does not know if she felt some type of affirmation around her sexual identity, or if she decided to focus on other parts of her life and identity that allowed her to believe that life was valuable.

Another example even more poignantly shows how a story can turn from adversity to encouragement without revealing any moments of affirmation.

Hey, my name is Tab Reed. I'm 20 years old, and I'm bisexual. Unfortunately, I come from a small, hick town where everybody knows everything about everyone, and that's not ok. I came out when I was 13 years old. And when I was 15, I came out in my first openly gay relationship. Community didn't take that too well. I was threatened of my freedom. I was threatened of my well-being, and eventually threatened of my life. But, it hit pretty hard. I'm not gonna lie. School became really difficult for me. I was watching my back. Teachers were turning on me. I lost a lot of my family and support from a lot of my friends. But, one day I realized that the more you dwell on it, the worse it gets. Words are words, threats are threats. And most people just want to bring you down. But, I'm here to say that it gets better when you want it to. As long as you love you, and you're ok with who you are, nobody else should matter. Don't let anybody bring you down and don't let anybody tell you what you're worth because you're worth what you know you're worth. And you can prove it by going out there and being the best person you can be and just being an outstanding whatever you want to be. Just show the haters that love will triumph in the end and that you're not gonna back down. Hold you head high and never be ashamed of who you are. (Concord University, It Gets Better Project)

This participant decided to modify the dominant coming out story framework by not sharing a moment of affirmation by others. She had to turn to herself for love and encouraged others to do the same. From how she presented her story, the viewer likely receives the impression that this participant continued to tell herself the same words of encouragement that she provided to the viewers.

Excluding Affirmation and Encouragement

While the vast majority of participants followed the prototype provided by Savage and Miller, this new pattern might be troubling for participants who did not offer affirmation or encouragement. Technically, they are not beholden to do so; they can practice their agency to share their story about their own experiences and not provide an ounce of evidence of

affirmation within their own life or encouragement to the viewer. Of course, if we look within the broader context of the entire video, their story is featured in a video wherein other participants express their experiences of affirmation and encouragement. While it may be that the participants' messages of affirmation and encouragement were edited out of the video, not presenting a happy ending is powerful and can offer insight into how people consider their own experiences. One reason might be that these participants had not received much affirmation and did not want to promise to viewers something that might not happen by providing false reassurance. A short-haired, fairly masculine looking student from Harvard College revealed,

You know, I really should be content with myself, but something was different. / I always grew up knowing that I didn't want to disappoint my parents, but knowing deep down that I was going to at some point. / It's the little things of not wanting to disappoint people that you like or not wanting to embarrass them. / As strange as it seems, sometimes it's more about other people than yourself. / It's just the expectation that you're something that you're definitely not that is a constant, um, struggle to navigate sometimes. / I've been mistaken as a guy for some time, especially, you know, during the winters here you're wearing like these huge jackets, no one can tell what's underneath them. Um, I mean, it was always kinda awkward when cashiers would say, "Sir", and then they would hear my voice and say, "Oh, I'm sorry, ma'am." (It Gets Better Project)

Without the inclusion of affirmation, this participant's story can seem incomplete. The story also disrupts the dominant narrative within the It Gets Better Project by not declaring her sexuality and not providing encouragement. There were other stories that also took this route. For example, a student focused on how hard it was to find experiences that matched his own and referred to never again having to see the people who created the heteronormative environment of high school. This student also excluded declaring, affirmation, and encouragement.

I was kind of withdrawn and was kind of off and on depressed throughout that time. / I'd love to find stories that were, that had like gay stuff in them. And that was just, like, I just loved that. I don't know. And I looked really hard to find books like that. I just lived through other media. / I don't have to say anything to them because I don't ever have to see them again. That's awesome cause I never

have to see them again, which that's all I can say. After high school, I'll probably never see them again. (Purdue University QSA, It Gets Better Project)

This student used adversity to relate his sexual orientation and to hint at the difficulty he experienced from peers in his high school but did not mention affirmation or encourage viewers.

Another student revealed that he started to receive harassment, but in order to avert more maltreatment, he became actively intolerant of gay rights.

I grew up in a really Catholic family. / It started in 5th grade. I actually remember the exact incidents. / A lot of kids from the other schools who didn't know me that well kinda started harassing me a lot in school. I was getting pushed into lockers. / When I got into high school, I actually started actively speaking out against gay rights in like an attempt to cover it up, I guess, stifle it. (Wheelock College, It Gets Better Project)

This student not only omitted the other themes common to a coming out narrative but also disclosed that he projected adversity in order to try to align himself with the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.

Another participant described herself as a survivor as she divulged moments of adversity. Even though she declared her sexuality, she never mentioned moments of affirmation or encouragement.

I'm Erica, the head soccer coach here at Simmons College, and I'd like to share my story with you about my coming out experience, and to let you know that I'm a survivor of being bullied. / They cut a hole in a tissue box and used the old school web cam and hid the camera in my room and um, trying to see if I was gay and catch me with my girlfriend. / My girlfriend also went through the same issue, and she um, developed an eating disorder, and um, I found her one day in her room with an empty bottle of pills, and um, you know, I saw notes on her desk – one to me and one to her mom and one to her dad. / When I told my parents, my mom cried and was a little angry and um, she you know said the typical, 'How did this happen?' (Simmons College, It Gets Better Project)

This participant only shared the challenges she faced around her sexual orientation – both in college and with her parents. According to the prototypical story, her testimony also remains incomplete since she only focused on two themes, adversity and declaring.

These stories focused on the experiences of adversity rather than following the narrative arc that would include affirmation and encouragement. What is important about this is that the small moments of subversion allow for the endings to remain open and varied, and thus relatable for a broader range of viewers. At the same time, because these stories are surrounded by other participants' stories within the videos, the happy ending prototype stays relatively intact.

Excluding Adversity

On the flip side, some participants did not refer to adversity at all. They used affirmation as a way of sharing their sexual and gender identity or as a way of telling about their coming out experiences. These stories also altered the dominant narrative. Here is an example of a student's coming out story that did not point to injury, but rather shared about affirmation upon her mother finding out about her sexual orientation.

One day she found a can of Axe (men's personal and beauty product) in my room and she comes up to me and she looks so upset, and she goes, "I found this in your room. Are you a lesbian?" And, I was like, "Yes!" And we both burst into tears and we cried for like a good 20 minutes, but she told me she wasn't upset. She wasn't angry. She was just worried that my life was going to be harder.
(Simmons College, It Gets Better Project)

When participants do not disclose adversity, viewers do not necessarily know if there were challenging moments, such as bullying or micro aggressions that made up the narrator's experience; they only know what the video participant chose to feature. These slight modifications in narratives revealed that the coming out story prototype was not completely

echoed; rather, participants took agency to alter how their story was shared. The participant quoted above was actively working to construct a different narrative by which LGBT-identified people could be understood.

A student from Hood College more explicitly exposed that she had not experienced adversity in regards to her sexual orientation.

I've never had a problem with my sexuality. I think coming from a family that's openly gay and having my aunt be with her partner for 18 years, I've never viewed it as something negative. It was just something different.

My roommate laughed and said, 'Wow. I never realized it, but you're so right.'

There are millions and millions of people out there. And, I know this is a really silly quote, but I lived off of it. 'Those who matter don't mind and those who mind, don't matter.'

I'm Jackie Fenning. I'm bisexual, and it gets better. (It Gets Better Project)

While both of the above examples include the element of *declaring* in their stories, by not talking about adversity, they resisted attaching their identity to injury. They interrupted the common plot of bullying or rejection by introducing the idea that same sex relationships are accepted within their families. So, even amidst heteronormative structures, there seemed to be space for marginal identities to be viewed in affirmative ways. By declaring their identity to people in their lives, they actually garnered support. Their stories focused on the common elements of social acceptance and encouragement of others, and by excluding adversity, they altered the discourse to fit their experiences.

Another student shared,

You know, back then we didn't have any It Gets Better videos. But, I was lucky to have very supportive parents who did give me advice on this. I remember my Mom told me one day, 'You know, this is it for this guy. This is the high point of his life, whereas yours is in the future.'

I've been pretty open about my sexual orientation throughout my medical training, including medical school, undergrad and throughout high school. In fact, some of my best mentorship has come from queer people I've known. You know, and I actually really struggle to think of ways that my training has been negatively affected by being out, especially since I enjoy being open and comfortable with whom I am.

When you're older, life is kinda what you make out of it. And so, this gave me a reason to look forward to the future, and just know that it does get better. (University of Illinois College of Medicine, It Gets Better Project)

This participant revealed that his parents were supportive as well as his mentors in medical training. He could not even think of a moment of adversity based on his sexual orientation. He also interrupted the common narrative of adversity, offering a sense of how affirming experiences could be with the right supports and mentorship in place.

Another example introduced humor about harmful behavior not happening.

So, I came out my senior year of high school, and less than a year later, my family met my 32 year old boyfriend named Mike. And, nobody punched. They shook hands, and now they love him. It definitely gets better. (SUNY Oneonta, It Gets Better Project)

There is absolutely no moment of injury that this participant shared, even though he joked that “nobody punched”, which implied what could have happened given heteronormative expectations, but that did not occur. His story offered declaring, affirmation, encouragement, but left out adversity.

There are various machinations of how video participants in the It Gets Better Project interrupted the common coming out story narrative. Mirroring Savage and Miller's story, the main disruption to Plummer's (1995) arc is through the addition of the fourth element of encouragement. But there are also a variety of ways in which participants modified the It Gets Better Project prototype: they changed how they announced their sexuality, and depending on the story, they excluded adversity, affirmation, or encouragement. In doing so, the dominant norms

of sexuality and gender were disrupted. The notion of life becoming better was even questioned. These interruptions in the dominant narrative serve the purposes of both connection and distinction. The altered discourses offer more connections: since not everyone's experience is the same, the vast array of stories has a better chance of reaching a more diverse audience than if all the stories shared the exact same themes. At the same time, some of the modified discourses serve as a place of distinction. The stories that refused to disclose moments of adversity avoided reproducing the injury typically associated with LGBT identity. The participants of these stories seem to be seeking a different way to define and understand what it means to be LGBT.

So far we have looked at how the coming out stories follow and disrupt the dominant storyline. Common narratives of struggle serve to build a collective identity while disruptions to the narrative create space for more people's experiences to fit within the community's boundaries. What is particularly interesting about the It Gets Better Project is that the stories have a public purpose. They are posted on the Internet in order to reach a particular audience – LGBT youth who are experiencing bullying and harassment and may be considering ending their lives. Now we will turn to how these coming out stories attempt to reach this specific audience.

Chapter 5: Using Identities to Save Lives

Foucault (1978) sheds light on how dominant discursive practices regulate which identities are privileged in various contexts and which are located on the social margins. Brown (1995) and Butler (1996) explain how naming identities that have been marginalized both reproduce the peripheral boundaries of the identity as well as link it to all of the historical injury associated with that identity. So, as people name minority sexualities and genders, they end up reifying their marginalization, and when they talk about the injury they have experienced because of these identities, they tend to reopen old wounds. At the same time, however, Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasize that within communities of practice, people begin to alter normative discourses. As subversive narratives challenge the norms, space is opened for alternative practices to form. Notably, naming identities and talking about the experiences associated with them can be employed as strategies to disrupt dominant discourses. I assert that participants in the It Gets Better Project restate their identities and reopen past wounds in an attempt to save lives and create a more affirmative world for people who are LGBT.

Within the It Gets Better Project, video participants did not necessarily share their story with their family or friends; rather, they disclosed their story to anonymous viewers in cyberspace. The narrators constructed their coming out stories with LGBT youth in mind. Based on the string of youth suicides in the Fall of 2010 – and scores of others that did not receive national media attention in the years before but could be tracked through LGBT advocate listservs, the assumption was that the gay youth were distraught. They were struggling with their sexual orientation or gender expression, were being bullied or harassed, and were possibly contemplating self-harm. Through their own stories, narrators in the It Gets Better Project tried to provide virtual support through cyberspace.

The creation of an “ideal viewer” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 72) provides additional context to why participants may tell their stories in the ways that they do, reaffirming parts of discourses and disrupting others. Looking at these coming out stories with an ideal spectator in mind further illuminates the production and function of the stories.

Ideal Spectators

Because the unit of analysis for this project is in the medium of video, it is important to remember that these short films were created with a particular audience in mind. In the initial YouTube post that led to the launch of the It Gets Better Project, the creators specifically referenced an audience of middle and high school students – their “ideal viewer” – who might be struggling with issues that arise due to their sexual orientation (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 72). Important to note is that there is a relationship of power between the producers – whether people or institutions – and consumers of an image, with the producers having more power and often attempting to stimulate emotions within the viewers. Producers have explicit goals in mind as they encode a message and its associated images with particular meaning. These aims include evoking emotions and getting people to connect with a particular identity that the producers are trying to construct through the video. Meanwhile, viewers decode, or interpret the meaning of messages and images based on their experiences as well as the physical, social, and emotional context in which they are viewing the message and image (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). To illustrate how important a person’s experience and context is to the project of decoding a video, an image can be read completely differently by an older, wealthy, heterosexual, white person as opposed to a young, gay, person of color who lives in poverty. Additionally, an image viewed in quiet solitude likely does not have the same impact as if a person sees the same image when

amidst a boisterous group. An image is consumed differently based on the various physical, social, and emotional factors of the audience. These elements impact the relationship between the producer and the audience, and influence how the meaning of the image is seen and interpreted. While the creators of the It Gets Better videos do not have any control over the audience and in what context they choose to view the videos, the creators can still construct their messages and the videos in ways that attempt to elicit particular emotions from the viewers. On the viewer side, people place themselves in relationship with the subject of the video, recognizing some components of themselves by projecting their “desires, fears, memories, and fantasies” onto the images, and perhaps differentiating themselves from other components (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p. 74).

Researchers have pointed out that social movements, such as the movement for LGBT rights, use images and stories to create a collective identity as well as to provoke emotions and actions from viewers (Fine, 1995; Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta, 2004; Polletta, 1998). Participants in social movements rely on emotions to strengthen group cohesion and commitment in addition to recruiting people who are sympathetic to the issue but may have yet to get involved. One of the most important emotional components to develop is trust. Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2004) assert, “Trust is a kind of shortcut through which we can avoid processing a lot of information for ourselves” (p. 419). If image producers and storytellers form a faithful bond with their viewers, the message may not be highly scrutinized, but rather taken at face value, which allows for ideal viewers to more closely align themselves with the narrator. Polletta (1998) notes that activists who tell stories of endurance in spite of great challenges have a greater likelihood of eliciting support among movement members, as opposed to those who only slightly struggle and then achieve success. If this is the case, there is a greater incentive for narrators who want

others to join them in their efforts either to embellish or more strongly focus on the challenges within their stories instead of the positive moments. Interestingly, Polletta asserts that the lack of resolve or the ambiguity within a narrative draws the audience in but leaves them in a position of wanting to hear more stories in order to try to make sense out of elements that do not add up in a rational way. This infers that stories that do not contain resolution will leave the viewer craving more stories – stories that are likely to reproduce the same narrative – until there is finally some sort of righting of the wrong that has occurred. Drawing upon empathy, fostering a collective identity, and encouraging commitment are ways that narratives – and their associated images – are used in social movements to involve viewers.

Linking these ideas to the It Gets Better Project, we have seen that video participants shared stories of extreme hardship, many of which ended happily through affirmation and encouragement of others, and others that did not reach a resolution. On the one hand, considering that severe stories are more likely to attract people to the project, there may be exaggeration or competition between narrators of whose story is the most grave. On the other hand, leaving a story with an ambiguous ending may leave ideal viewers searching for more – in effect, consuming more videos until the viewer feels resolution, either in her own life or in that of the project's narrators. As a collective identity is formed in cyberspace through the It Gets Better Project, the purpose of the videos is not simply to tell the coming out stories of the narrators but to reach out to other people who might be going through similar experiences – to use one's story to assist others, to help them not feel so alone, to normalize the variety of experiences that people have with LGBT identity, and to offer visual images of all different types of people who identify as LGBT.

But what about the viewers who happen upon the video but are not the anticipated audience? If the intended audience of the It Gets Better Project is LGBT youth, unintended viewers, broadly speaking, are adults and/or heterosexuals. How might these people receive the messages in the videos? As the It Gets Better Project has expanded, it now encourages educators, lawyers, and people in the media to use the videos, initially created for LGBT youth, to learn more about issues of minority sexual orientations and gender expressions. Connecting the concepts already presented, the desire would be for inadvertent viewers would be twofold. First, the videos help unintended viewers to become cognizant of the ways in which they have inflicted harm on LGBT individuals so that they might become better informed and change their own behaviors. Second, heterosexuals may be able to see themselves in some aspect of the narrator and/or the story they tell. Rather than viewing LGBT youth as anomalies on the margins of society, inadvertent viewers can begin to normalize queer youth as they see images, hear voices, and listen to stories. In this process, these viewers see aspects of themselves within the youth, recalling moments in life when they felt rejected, excluded, or questioned some aspect of their identity. These videos offer the possibility of eliciting empathy for the lives of LGBT youth from those who might not be in their situation but who have the opportunity to create spaces differently so that the lived realities of LGBT youth can be more positive. For instance, lawyers can better understand the nuanced ways that laws assume heterosexual relationships; educators can interrupt homophobic language when they hear it in their classrooms; administrators can include sexual orientation and gender expression in their non-discrimination clauses; classmates can learn to think differently about their gay peers; and parents can understand a bit better the various dynamics that their children negotiate as they navigate through home, school, and community environments. Thus, another purpose of the videos is to put people's coming out

stories on display for public consumption in order for people to learn about LGBT people's experiences. As the public consumes these stories, the further hope is to create an ally base that helps to change the discourses and the environments that shape society so that LGBT youth will have more positive experiences; they will feel welcome and included.

I now turn to how the videos in the It Gets Better Project reach out to an ideal audience, attempting to save their lives. In the midst of offering such crucial support for the ideal viewer, I suggest that narrators also do the critical work of creating accepting spaces as they speak to the ideal viewer through their message and as they evoke the unintended viewer's sympathy.

One way in which video participants offered support was through creating a community of practice through cyberspace. We tend to think of communities as having a space for interaction. Ironically, the It Gets Better website is not set up to foster an interactive community and thus does not provide a structure of participants and viewers to contact one another.

However, there is a slight caveat. In order to submit a video to the project, the creator was required to upload it via YouTube, a website that offers a place for people to reply with comments. For those who are media savvy, they could find a video on the It Gets Better website and then search for it via YouTube in order to make a comment. Connecting with one another through the comments on YouTube may have provided some type of interaction, albeit limited since there was no guarantee that the creator or viewers tracked the comments made.

Nonetheless, despite very restrictive possibilities for synchronous interaction, video participants attempted to create a cyber-environment of affirmation and support, which could be crucial for viewers who did not find acceptance in other avenues of life. Viewers could watch the same video multiple times, observing the participant say over and over again that they love the viewer and that they are rooting for the viewer. Providing some evidence that the project created a

community of practice, one of the video participants shared that he once was a member of the audience. This participant was one of the viewers that the videos helped to save.

I had a hard time in high school. I was always the weird kid who everyone cracked jokes at. And to get through, I made jokes about myself. And, that would get a laugh, and that was the ‘friendships’ I had back then. And, I was really depressed. Really depressed. And, I considered hurting myself, a lot actually. And it was actually one of these It Gets Better videos that sort of helped. And I felt less alone. I also had a really great therapist, which was good. And then, high school ended. And, things got better. I met a lot of amazing people, some of the best people I’ve ever met. And I have really great friendships now, and I can be completely honest with who I am. And it’s great, and, I don’t have to hide. I don’t have to make fun of myself to feel accepted and loved. / Things can and will get better. (Citrus College, It Gets Better Project)

This newcomer to the It Gets Better Project was helped by the videos and then reciprocated the guidance by participating in a video himself. He is living proof that the videos are reaching at least part of their ideal audience.

Even though the target audience of the videos is LGBT young people, there are other messages interwoven into the videos that are at play. Through the stories, some of the participants talk about a world wherein life is better and people are more accepting. As they encourage the ideal viewer to continue their life, they also impact other viewers. They make heterosexual spectators empathize with the varying experiences of LGBT individuals. And, as the participants provide encouragement, they suggest that the audience should offer such support as well. The following excerpt captures this reassurance for the ideal viewer. By using the language of “we” and the plural of “people”, this participant not only suggests that there is a larger group of people who offer support, but in some ways invites others to join him in this project of encouragement.

There are people rooting for you. There are people who love you. We might not know you personally, but we are cheering for you the whole entire way. And we

hope that you'll really take this message to heart and I want you to know that it really does get better. (Brigham Young University, It Gets Better Project)

Similar to Brown's (1995) suggestion that people link their identity to what they desire, some video participants speak about lives that they yearn – lives wherein various sexual orientations and gender expressions are accepted. Video participants in the It Gets Better Project constructed their stories to encourage and empower gay youth *and* to relate the importance of making the changes within heteronormative environments that will allow LGBT people to feel more valued.

While the coming out stories provide copious examples of performative statements, injury, and rejection, the It Gets Better Project complicates Foucault's notion of confession and Brown's idea of injury reproducing identity and pain. Foucault posits that in order for confession to be legitimated, there needs to be a receiver of the statement – a person who “requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault, 1978, p. 61-62). A confession is not considered complete unless the person who receives the confession can record it in some way. However, in the confession of coming out stories through the It Gets Better Project, the ideal spectator is the recipient. These viewers can receive and appreciate the video participants' coming out stories, but do not intervene in order to judge or console. Instead, the tables are slightly turned. The video participant intercedes in the lives of the ideal spectators, attempting to console those who might be at risk of harming themselves. By declaring their sexual and gender identity, sharing stories adversity and affirmation, and providing encouragement, the narrators in the videos offer connection and hope to viewers who might be depressed or considering self-harm. This is where Brown's ideas about the political project of using injury are complicated. Since the founding of

the It Gets Better Project was in response to gay youth committing suicide after being bullied due to their sexual orientation or gender expression, the telling of prior injury in the stories serves to connect and empathize with people struggling in one way or another with their sexual or gender identity. The ideal spectator has already experienced injury, so the video participants are not projecting hurt onto the audience or empowering the site of blame; rather, they are trying to relate with the pain of the audience and then interrupt it by explaining that life will get better. If the narrators in the videos only provided positive and hopeful messages, their stories might not be credible to those whose current rejection feels unbearable. Thus, in order to gain trust and have their audience take them seriously, it is important for at least some of the narrators to testify that they too have had similar experiences of bullying and rejection. The discursive practice of telling one's coming out story, including the points of injury, acts as a protective factor for the viewer who is wounded or confused. Additionally, in this process of telling their coming out stories, as participants alter the discourse, they create the possibility of transforming themselves (as confessors) as well as the recipients. The video participants take the opportunity to speak back to heteronormative practices, and even dominant coming out narratives, while the viewer considers that life can be greater than the adversity currently experienced.

As an organization that contributes to the subversive discursive practices of coming out, one of the goals of the It Gets Better Project is to create a world where in fact, life does get better for LGBT people. The fact that young people are openly talking about their non-normative sexualities and genders has, in Foucault's words, "the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (Foucault, 1978, p. 6) to the accepted discursive practice. People are using their confessions to actively speak against the dominant norms of sexuality and gender; their confessions free them to relate to others who might be experiencing similar pain or rejection. Their truth-telling also frees

them to alter the prototypical, subversive discourse that Savage and Miller provided to show that not everyone has to experience rejection in order to be recognized within LGBT groups.

Foucault (1978) warns of the proliferation of discourses that spread through complex networks and result in greater regulation of sexuality. The more that is known about sexuality, the more it is measured, controlled, and evaluated through various mechanisms of power. One could argue that the It Gets Better videos are merely “devices...invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what is said about it” (Foucault, 1978, p. 34). In fact, the very project of people making videos of themselves available to such a public audience raises the question of whether the participants will be able to privately or publicly take back or change their performative statements if the truth of their identity evolves. While these videos are a snapshot of a point in time and thus can seem static, identities are not. As people gain experience, have more interactions, and simultaneously define and become defined by different communities of practice, their identities – as well as their understanding of their identities – will evolve, and so will the discursive practices surrounding them. Even though Foucault’s caution is important to keep in mind, identifying as LGBT and telling one’s coming out story through the It Gets Better Project at this historical moment has the possibility of strategically acting as a protective factor to save young people’s lives while also constructing alternative discourses that begin to shape more affirmative experiences for people who identify as LGBT.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis examines the contours of coming out stories embedded in videos associated with colleges and universities that are posted on the It Gets Better Project website. I have highlighted how many of the stories within these videos followed the narrative arc that Plummer (1995) describes as typical to coming out stories. Loosely based on his theory, I offer the themes of declaring one's identity, disclosing moments of adversity, and sharing times of affirmation. However, as a new generation – a cyber-based generation – has emerged, the stories within the LGBT community have evolved to supplement the narrative with the theme of encouragement. At the same time that the stories of marginalized sexuality and gender pushes back against the more familiar, dominant frames, the stories also create a new pattern of coming out stories that is seen as the prototype for others to follow. As alluded to, a new model has the advantage of being able to foster a collective identity for those interested in changing how LGBT people are viewed and treated, but also has the disadvantages of continuously connecting LGBT identity with adversity and creating a structure that seems limiting to those who do not identify with the experience that the prototype offers. However, as within any community of practice, subversions begin to take place when the main storyline no longer fits. Newcomers use enough elements of the narrative arc to remain recognizable to the community as they also twist or supplement the narrative to make it more realistic to their own experience.

What is particularly interesting about the It Gets Better Project is that while it has over 50,000 videos posted on its website and now has expanded to an international audience, there are numerous critiques about the project and the message that it sends. First and foremost, a legitimate question is why do young people have to wait for life to get better? Why shouldn't their lives be better now? Are we giving license for the bullying that young people experience in

school since the messages do not rail against the normative discourses that regulate sexuality and gender? A second and related critique is that rather than telling stories to LGBT youth that life gets better when they are older, perhaps we should be focusing on the structural things that we need to make happen in order for them to be valued members of society now. If people spent the same amount of time and energy into making sure that their school or workplace had non-discrimination clauses that include sexual orientation and gender expression that they do on recording, editing, and posting the videos, there might be some major positive shifts in the inclusiveness of institutional structures.

A third accusation is that in order for a coming out story to be considered legitimate inside and outside the LGBT community, it needs to incorporate the themes in the It Gets Better prototype. Since so many coming out stories feature adversity, does one's coming out story need to include what Fine (1995) calls a "horror story" in order to be recognized as a legitimate coming out story? In other words, there becomes a hierarchy of coming out stories, and the ones that are most valued may be the ones wherein people experienced extreme pain. Further, it seems paramount that people need to have overcome the pain and experience what Fine calls a "happy ending". The fact that the vast majority of the stories relayed experiences of affirmation or shared words of encouragement to the viewers emphasizes that people value when everything works out, despite hardships. What about people who have not experienced life getting better? Is there space for people within the community of practice to be in a continuous space of adversity, or are they under pressure to proclaim that life has improved?

A fourth criticism of the project is a question of what does "better" really mean when people say, "It gets better"? Is this "better" only in comparison to the overt bullying and harassment that people experienced in middle school and high school? Is "better" in reference to

a historical view when people were more blatantly discriminated against? Even though many participants in this sample talked about their college environment being better than their high school one, according to reports on college campuses, students still experience name-calling, hear derogatory language about LGBT identity, and are the recipients of micro aggressions (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). Often, when there is not overt discrimination but people's attitudes and perspectives have yet to change, discrimination becomes more covert. So, while life gets better, does that mean that it is good? Is life endurable?

A fifth contention is that the It Gets Better Project relies on the dominant experiences of two white males from the U. S. to frame its message. Other than their marginal experience of being gay, these two men have experienced many privileges within society. Since sexual orientation cannot be immediately read just by looking at someone, Savage and Miller could be mis-recognized as straight, affording them even more privileges of U. S. society. In other words, they can choose when they want to share their sexual orientation and when they wish to hide it, which is not possible for people of color since skin color cannot be physically hidden.

So, with all these critiques – and there are likely more than what I have presented – why is the It Gets Better Project valuable? Important to remember is that while the project has many critiques, it does not have to be the only effort to disrupt sexuality and gender norms. The website can be one of many that operate to support youth in the coming out process. Further, I maintain that the telling of stories creates an opportunity for participants to have their stories acknowledged in a way that perhaps they have not had before. And, these stories provide a perspective to the viewers that life is about more than this one moment in time, this one hardship. Within the various stories, there is likely something within which viewers can relate – something that mirrors an experience they have had. Seeing part of their own story represented in the lives

of video participants may help the viewers feel less alone. Additionally, the viewers' experiences are normalized. No longer are they the marginal ones within their school or neighborhood; they become a part of this pseudo cyber community of LGBT individuals. If the viewing of videos and other people's coming out stories serves to encourage young people not to take their own lives, then the It Gets Better Project has been successful.

Simultaneously, I am interested in additional potential consequences of the website. Particularly, can the telling of stories, many of which share a similar message, form a collective identity that draws the attention of a broader network of people who might sympathize with the message and work to make the changes needed in order for LGBT people to be recognized and valued for who they are? Most coming out stories share messages of vulnerability within one's life experience. The strategy of using vulnerability within the stories encourages compassion for those who experience such adversity. Had the narrators railed against the people and institutions that have caused their hardships, they may have left the ideal viewers with more negativity than they were already experiencing and likely would have generated indifference in the unintended viewers. Interestingly, while the narrators sometimes mention certain people or places that were part of their adversity, they do not necessarily place blame on people or institutions. Overwhelmingly, they do not belabor moments of adversity but rather remain focused on the core message of life getting better.

What this particular research project shows is that despite the limitations of the It Gets Better Project, it can also serve to help LGBT youth feel as though they matter and that there are people in the world who have shared related experiences. Additionally, this research highlights how even though a new prototype was created through the website, newcomers to the community subvert the dominant storyline in powerful ways, choosing to exclude key themes

either in order to fit their experience or to shape how they would like coming out stories to be told. Where there is space for subversion, there is possibility for change.

What will be interesting to see in the future is whether the additional theme of encouragement becomes a part of the narrative arc for coming out stories even beyond this website. Maybe the It Gets Better Project website has reached a large enough audience to have sustained the extra theme within the coming out storyline. In other words, perhaps people who publicly tell their coming out story will now feel a responsibility to offer encouragement to those listening in case anyone in the audience identifies as LGBT.

Stories about people's coming out experiences can be powerful – both for those telling the stories and for those listening. Dominant discursive practices shape the content, telling, and reception of the stories. But, as people use their own agency, they begin to modify the discourses. Over time, the representation and understandings of stories change. So, while the It Gets Better Project is by no means a perfect way to represent coming out stories, nor goes far enough to dismantle the harmful discourses of sexuality and gender norms, it does present a small alternative to these norms. And, when we look close enough, we can also see that even the new coming out story prototype is altered in ways that continue to crack and evolve the coming out storyline.

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