Coming Out in the Gay World

Barry M. Dank

In spite of the recent sociological interest in the study of the transition from primary to secondary deviance, few empirical studies have been addressed to this question. It is in essence posited that at one point in time the actor can be described as being at the "primary stage," in which he engages in rule-breaking behavior and still regards himself as "normal"; at a later point in time he may reach the secondary stage, in which he may engage in overtly the same behavior but regard himself as "deviant," or at least in some way different from the average, ordinary person. For example, at one point in time a person may furtively take goods from a store and regard himself as a borrower, but at a later time he may take similar goods and regard himself as a thief (Cameron). This paper is devoted to exploring the emergence of a particular deviant identity—the male homosexual identity.

There is almost no sociological literature on "becoming" homosexual. There is a vast literature on the etiology of homosexuality—that is, the family background of homosexuals—but little is known concerning how the actor learns that he is a homosexual, how he decides that he is a homosexual. In terms of identity and behavior, this paper is concerned with the transition to a homosexual identity, not in the learning of homosexual behavior per se, or the antecedent or situational conditions that may permit an actor to engage in a homosexual act. One may engage in a homosexual act and think of oneself as being homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. One may engage in a heterosexual act and think of oneself as being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual, or one may engage in no sexual acts and still have a sexual identity of heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. This study is directed toward determining what conditions permit a person to say, "I am a homosexual."*

RESEARCH METHOD

This report is part of a study that has been going on for over two years in a large metropolitan area in the United States. The analysis is based on data obtained from lengthy interviews with 55 self-admitted homosexuals, on observations of and conversations with hundreds of homosexuals, and on the results of a one-page questionnaire dis-

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1See Becker, 1963; Erikson; Goffman, 1961, 1963; Lemert, 1951, 1967; Lofland; Matza; Scheff.
2See Becker, 1953; Bryan; Cameron; Chambliss; Feldman; Goffman; Lemert, 1961; Lemert, 1962; Scheff; Wertham and Pillavin.

3See Bergler; Bieber; Freud; Gebhard et al.; Hooker, 1969; Krich; Ovesey; Ruitenbeek; Schofield; West; Westwood.

*It should also be pointed out that from the subjective viewpoint of the actor, it becomes problematic exactly at which point a "homo-

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distributed to 300 self-admitted homosexuals attending a meeting of a homophile organization. The statistical data are based on the 182 questionnaires that were returned.

The 4- to 5-hour interviews with the 55 self-admitted homosexuals were generally conducted in the subject's home, and in the context of a "participant-observation" study in which the researcher as researcher became integrated into friendship networks of homosexuals. The researcher was introduced to this group by a homosexual student who presented him correctly as being a heterosexual who was interested in doing a study of homosexuals as they exist in the "outside world." He was able to gain the trust of the most prestigious person in the group, which enabled him, on the whole, to gain the trust of the rest of the group. The guidelines employed in the study were based on those outlined by Polsky for participant-observation studies.

There is no way of determining whether the sample groups studied here, or any similar sample, would be representative of the homosexual population. Thus it remains problematic whether the findings of this study can be applied to the homosexual population in general or to other samples of homosexuals. Since age is a critical variable in this study, the questionnaire sample was used in the hope that the replies to a questionnaire would represent a fairly wide age range. The age distribution of the questionnaire sample is shown on Table 1.

COMING OUT

The term "coming out" is frequently used by homosexuals to refer to the identity change to homosexual. Hooker states: "Very often, the debut, referred to by homosexuals as the coming out, of a person who believes himself to be homosexual but who has struggled against it will occur when he identifies himself publicly for the first time as a homosexual in the presence of other homosexuals by his appearance in a bar" (p. 99). Gagnon and Simon refer to coming out as that "... point in time when there is self-recognition by the individual of his identity as a homosexual and the first major exploration of the homosexual community" (p. 356).

In this study it was found that the meaning that the informant attached to this expression was usually directly related to his own experiences concerning how he met other gay people and how and when he decided he was homosexual. For purposes of this study the term "coming out" will mean identifying oneself as being homosexual. This self-identification as being homosexual may or may not occur in a social context in which other gay people are present. One of the tasks of this paper is to identify the social contexts in which the self-definition of homosexual occurs.

*In homosexual argot, "gay" means homosexual and "straight" means heterosexual. These terms are acceptable to homosexuals whether used by gay or straight persons.

*Sometimes homosexuals use the expression "to bring out" or "bringing out." The meaning attached to these expressions varies; they are sometimes used interchangeably with "coming out." However, as used by my informants, they usually refer to the first complete homosexual act which the subject found enjoyable. The statement, "He brought me out," usually means, "He taught me to enjoy real homosexual acts."

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THE SOCIAL CONTEXTS OF COMING OUT

The child who is eventually to become homosexual in no sense goes through a period of anticipatory socialization (Merton); if he does go through such a period, it is in reference to heterosexuality, not homosexuality. It is sometimes said that the homosexual minority is just like any other minority group (Cory; Westwood); but in the sense of early childhood socialization it is not, for the parents of a Negro can communicate to their child that he is a Negro and what it is like to be a Negro, but the parents of a person who is to become homosexual do not prepare their child to be homosexual—they are not homosexual themselves, and they do not communicate to him what it is like to be a homosexual.*

The person who has sexual feelings or desires toward persons of the same sex has no vocabulary to explain to himself what these feelings mean. Subjects who had homosexual feelings during childhood were asked how they would have honestly responded to the question, “Are you a homosexual?,” at the time just prior to their graduation from high school. Some typical responses follow:

SUBJECT 1: I had guilt feelings about this being attracted to men. Because I couldn’t understand why all the other boys

were dating, and I didn’t have any real desire to date.

INTERVIEWER: Were you thinking of yourself as homosexual?

SUBJECT 1: I think I did but I didn’t know how to put it into words. I didn’t know it existed. I guess I was like everybody else and thought I was the only one in the world. . . . I probably would have said I didn’t know. I don’t think I really knew what one was. I would have probably asked you to explain what one was.

SUBJECT 2: I would have said, “No, I don’t know what you are talking about.” If you had said “queer,” I would have thought something about it; this was the slang term that was used, although I didn’t know what the term meant.

SUBJECT 3: I don’t think I would have known then. I know now. Then I wasn’t even thinking about the word. I wasn’t reading up on it.

Respondents were asked the age at which they first became aware of any desire or sexual feeling toward persons of the same sex; subsequently they were asked when they decided they were homosexual. Results are presented in Table 1. On the average, there was a six-year interval between time of first sexual feeling toward persons of the same sex and the decision that one was a homosexual. The distribution of the differing time intervals between a person’s awareness of homosexual feelings and the decision that he is homosexual is presented in Table 2. As Table 2 indicates, there is considerable variation in this factor.*

The fact that an actor continues to have homosexual feelings and to engage in homosexual behavior does not mean that he views himself as being ho-

*Some homosexuals are parents. In the homosexual social networks that I am involved in, there are many persons who once played the role of husband and father—generally before they decided they were homosexual (Dank). In addition, there are homosexual couples who are raising children they adopted or children from a former heterosexual marriage; however, such couples tend to be lesbian. In some cases one parent has decided that he or she is homosexual, but both parents have remained together as husband and wife. “Front” marriages also occur, in which a male homosexual marries a female homosexual and they adopt children or have children of their own; such marriages are generally for purposes of social convenience. What the effects are, if any, of being raised by at least one homosexual parent have not been determined. In this sample, there were no cases in which a subject had a homosexual mother or father.

*First sexual desire toward persons of the same sex was chosen instead of first sexual contact with persons of the same sex since it is quite possible for one to have homosexual desires, fight against those desires, and have no homosexual contacts of any type for an extensive period of time. The mean age of first homosexual contact of any type was 13, which was not significantly different at the .01 level from age of first homosexual desire. In reference to which came first, homosexual act or homosexual desire, 31% (56) had desire before the act; 49% (87) had act before desire; 20% (36) had first homosexual desire and first homosexual act at approximately the same time.

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### Table 1

**Age Characteristics of Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Age Distribution</th>
<th>Age of First Sexual Desire Toward Same Sex</th>
<th>Age at Which Decision Was Made That Respondent Was A Homosexual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-4</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>28 (15)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>83 (46)</td>
<td>27 (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>13 (7)</td>
<td>54 (29)</td>
<td>79 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>36 (20)</td>
<td>14 (8)</td>
<td>52 (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>39 (22)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>11 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>28 (16)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>21 (12)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>18 (10)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>11 (6)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>8 (4)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>180 (100)</td>
<td>182 (99.5)</td>
<td>179 (99.5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X = 32.5, S = 11.3$  $X = 13.5, S = 4.3$  $X = 19.3, S = 6.4$

In order for a person to view himself as homosexual he must be placed in a new social context, in which knowledge of homosexuals and homosexuality can be found; in such a context he learns a new vocabulary of motives, a vocabulary that will allow him to identify himself as being a homosexual. This can occur in any number of social contexts—through meeting self-admitted homosexuals, by reading about homosexuals and homosexuality. Knowledge of homosexuals and homosexuality can be found in numerous types of physical settings: a bar, a park, a private home, a psychiatrist’s office, a mental hospital, and so on (see Table 3). It is in contexts where such knowledge tends to be concentrated that the actor will be most likely to come out. It is therefore to be expected that an actor is likely to come out in a context in which other gay people are present; they are usually a ready and willing source of knowledge concerning homosexuals and homosexuality. In the questionnaire sample, 50 percent came out while associating with gay people.

It is also to be expected that a likely place for an actor to come out would be in one-sex situations or institutions. Sexually segregated environments provide convenient locales for knowledge of homosexuality and homosexual behavior. Examples of these one-sex environments are mental institutions, YMCAs, prisons, the military, men’s

### Table 2

**Time Interval Between First Homosexual Desire and the Decision That One Is A Homosexual**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time Interval (years)</th>
<th>Distribution</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>29 (16)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>66 (37)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>49 (27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>21 (12)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>7 (4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>5 (3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>1 (0.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>179 (100)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$X = 5.7, S = 6.4$
TABLE 3
SOCIAL CONTEXTS IN WHICH RESPONDENTS CAME OUT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Contexts</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequenting gay bars</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequenting gay parties and other gatherings</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>(26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequenting parks</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>(24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequenting men's rooms</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>(21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a love affair with a homosexual man</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>(30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a love affair with a heterosexual man</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>(12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the military</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>(19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in a YMCA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(1 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in all-male quarters at a boarding school or college</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(7 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In prison</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(1 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patient in a mental hospital</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(2 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing a psychiatrist or professional counselor</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>(6 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read for the first time about homosexuals and/or homosexuality</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just fired from a job because of homosexual behavior</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(1 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just arrested on a charge involving homosexuality</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>(4 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was not having any homosexual relations</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>(20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Total N of social contexts is greater than 180 (number of respondents) because there was overlap in contexts.

rooms, gay bars, and school dormitories. The first six case histories below illustrate the influence of such milieux.

The first example of an actor coming out in the context of interacting with gay persons concerns a subject who came out in a mental hospital. The subject was committed to a mental hospital at age 20; his commitment did not involve homosexuality and the hospital authorities had no knowledge that the subject had a history of homosexual behavior. Prior to commitment he had a history of heterosexual and homosexual behavior, thought of himself as bisexual, had had no contact with self-admitted homosexuals, was engaged to marry, and was indulging in heavy petting with his fiancée. In the following interview excerpt the subject reports on his first reaction to meeting gay persons in the hospital:

SUBJECT: I didn’t know there were so many gay people, and I wasn’t used to the actions of gay people or anything, and it was quite shocking walking down the halls, going up to the ward, and the whistles and flirting and everything else that went on with the new fish, as they called it.

And there was this one kid who was a patient escort and he asked me if I was interested in going to church, and I said yes . . . and he started escorting me to church and then he pulled a little sneaky to see whether I’d be shocked at him being gay. There was this queen10 on the ward, and him and her, he was looking out the hall to see when I’d walk by the door and they kissed when I walked by the door and this was to check my reaction. And I didn’t say a word. So he then escorted me to the show, and we were sitting there and about half-way through the movie he reaches over and started holding my hand, and when he saw I didn’t jerk away, which I was kind of upset and wondering exactly what he had in mind, and then when we got back to the ward, he wrote me a long love letter and gave it to me; before we knew it we were going together, and went together for about six months.

[After 3 weeks] he had gotten me to the point I’d gotten around the hospital, where I picked up things from the other queens and learned how to really swish and carry on and got to be one of the most popular queens in the whole place. [About that same time] I’d gotten to consider myself—I didn’t consider myself a queen. I just considered myself a gay boy; we sat down, a bunch of us got together and made out the rules about what was what as far as the joint was concerned, drew definitions of every little thing . . . if someone was completely feminine, wanted to take the female role all the time, then they were a “queen,” if they were feminine but butchy, then they were a “nellie-butcher,” and I was considered a “gay boy” because I could take any role, I was versatile.

INTERVIEWER: Before this bull session were you considering yourself gay?

SUBJECT: Yes, I had definitely gotten to

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10In gay argot, the meaning of the term “queen” is variable. Depending on the context, it can mean any homosexual or a homosexual on the feminine side.

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be by this time; after three months my folks came down to see me and I told them the whole thing point blank.

INTERVIEWER: What would you say was the most important effect the hospital had on you?

SUBJECT: It let me find out it wasn't so terrible. . . . I met a lot of gay people that I liked and I figured it can't be all wrong. If so and so's a good Joe, and he's still gay, he can't be all that bad. . . . I figured it couldn't be all wrong, and that's one of the things I learned. I learned to accept myself for what I am—homosexual.

This subject spent a year and a half in the mental hospital. After release he did not engage in heterosexual relations, and has been actively involved in the gay subculture for the past four years.

The above example clearly demonstrates how a one-sex environment can facilitate the development of a homosexual identity. Although some one-sex environments are created for homosexuals, such as gay bars, any one-sex environment can serve as a meeting and recruiting place for homosexuals, whether or not the environment was created with that purpose in mind.

The YMCA is a one-sex environment that inadvertently functions as a meeting place for homosexuals in most large urban areas in the United States.11 The following subject came out while living and working at a YMCA. He was 24 when he first visited a Y, never had had a homosexual experience, and had just been separated from his wife.

I became separated from my wife. I then decided to go to Eastern City. I had read of the Walter Jenkins case and the name of the YMCA happened to come up, but when I got to the city it was the only place I knew of to stay. I had just $15.00 in my pocket to stay at the Y, and I don't think I
ever had the experience before of taking a group shower. So I went into the shower room, that was the first time I remember looking at a man's body and finding it sexually enticing.12 So I started wondering to myself—that guy is good-looking. I walked back to my room and left the door open and the guy came in, and I happened to fall in love with that guy.

After this first experience, the subject became homosexually active while living and working at the Y and became part of the gay subculture that existed within the Y.

. . . . I found that the kids who were working for me, some of them I had been to bed with and some of them I hadn't, had some horrible problems and trying to decide the right and wrong of homosexuality . . . and they would feel blunt enough or that I had the experience enough to counsel them along the lines of homosexuality or anything else. . . . Part of this helped me realize that one of the greatest things that you can do is to accept what you are and if you want to change it, you can go ahead and do it . . .

This subject spent six months living in this Y; by the end of three months he had accepted himself as being homosexual and has been exclusively homosexual for the last two years.

The prison is another one-sex environment in which homosexual behavior is concentrated. Although there have been studies of situational homosexuality in prison (Giallombardo; Sykes; Tittle; Ward and Kassebaum), and of how homosexual activities are structured in prison, there have been no studies that have looked at the possible change of the sexual identity of the prisoner. In the following case the subject was sentenced to prison on a charge of sodomy at the age of 32, and spent five years in prison. He had been homosexually active for 22 years, and before his arrest he had been engaging predominantly in homosexual behavior, but he had not defined himself as being

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11 YMCAs have not been studied in their relation to homosexual society. It appears that YMCAs function as meeting places for homosexuals and for those desiring homosexual relations but defining themselves as straight. This is not a regional phenomenon but is, according to my informants, true for almost all YMCAs in large metropolitan areas. YMCAs are often listed in gay tourist guides.

12 This subject later admitted that he had previously been attracted to other males.
a homosexual. He had had only peripheral contacts with the gay subculture before his arrest, largely because he was married and held a high socioeconomic position.

INTERVIEWER: In prison did you meet homosexuals?

SUBJECT: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I’m not talking about people who are just homosexual while in prison.

SUBJECT: People who are homosexual, period. I became educated about the gay world, how you can meet people and not lay yourself open to censure, and how to keep from going to prison again. And still go on being homosexual. While in prison I definitely accepted myself as being homosexual. . . . I had frequent meetings with psychiatrists, various social workers. We were all pretty much in tacit agreement that the best thing to do would be to learn to live with yourself. Up until then, I rationalized and disillusioned myself about a lot of things. As I look back on it, I was probably homosexual from ten years on.

After his release from prison, this subject became involved in the gay subculture and has been exclusively homosexual for the last eight years.

The military is a one-sex environment that is a most conducive setting for homosexual behavior. In the military, a large number of young men live in close contact with one another and are deprived of heterosexual contacts for varying periods of time; it is not surprising that a homosexual subculture would arise. Given the young age of the military population, it should also be expected that a certain proportion of men would be entering military service with homosexual desires and/or a history of homosexual behavior, but without a clearly formulated homosexual identity. Approximately 19 percent of the sample came out while in military service. The following subject had a history of homosexual desires and behavior previous to joining the Navy, but came out while in military service.

INTERVIEWER: How did you happen to have homosexual relations while in the Navy?

SUBJECT: We were out at sea and I had heard that one of the dental technicians was a homosexual, and he had made advances toward me, and I felt like masturbation really wouldn’t solve the problem so I visited him one night. He started talking about sex and everything. I told him I had never kissed a boy before. And he asked me what would you do if a guy kissed you, and I said you mean like this and I began kissing him. Naturally he took over then. . . . There were other people on the ship that were homosexual and they talked about me. A yeoman aboard ship liked me quite a bit, was attracted to me; so he started making advances toward me, and I found him attractive, so we got together, and in a short period of time, we became lovers. He started to take me to the gay bars and explain what homosexuality was all about. He took me to gay bars when we were in port.

INTERVIEWER: Did you start to meet other gay people aboard ship?

SUBJECT: The first real contact with gay people was aboard ship . . .

INTERVIEWER: Was it while you were in the Navy that you decided you were a homosexual?

SUBJECT: Yes. Once I was introduced to gay life, I made the decision that I was a homosexual.

Public restrooms, another part of society which is sexually segregated, are known in the gay world as T-rooms, and some T-rooms become known as meeting places for gay persons and others who are looking for homosexual contacts (Humphreys). Sex in T-rooms tends to be anonymous, but since some nonsexual social interaction also occurs in this locale, some homosexuals do come out in T-rooms. In the sample studied here 21 percent came out while frequenting T-rooms for sexual purposes. The following subject came out in the context of going to T-rooms when he was 15. Previously he had been sexually active, but had not thought of himself as being a homosexual.

I really didn’t know what a homosexual was. In the back of my mind, my definition of a homosexual or queer was someone who
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wore girls’ clothes and women’s shoes, ‘cause my brothers said this was so, and I knew I wasn’t.

At the age of 15 this subject had a sexual relationship with a gay man.

And he took me out and introduced me to the gay world. I opened the door and I went out and it was a beautiful day and I accepted this whole world, and I’ve never had any guilt feelings or hang-ups or regrets... I was young and fairly attractive and I had men chasing me all the time... He didn’t take me to bars. We went to rest-rooms, that was my outlet. He started taking me to all the places they refer to in the gay world as T-rooms, and I met other people and I went back there myself and so on.

After meeting other gay persons by going to T-rooms, this subject quickly discovered other segments of the gay world and has been exclusively homosexual for the last nine years.

Gay bars are probably the most widespread and well-known gay institutions (Achilles; Hooker, 1965). For many persons who become homosexual, gay bars are the first contact with organized gay society and therefore a likely place to come out. In this sample 19 percent came out while going to gay bars. Since gay bars apparently are widespread throughout the nation, this could be viewed as a surprisingly low percentage. However, it should be remembered that generally the legal age limit for entering bars is 21. If the age limit is enforced, this would reduce the percentage of persons coming out in gay bars.

The following subject came out in the context of going to gay bars. He had been predominantly homosexual for a number of years and was 23 at the time he came out.

SUBJECT: I knew that there were homosexuals, queers and what not; I had read some books, and I was resigned to the fact that I was a foul, dirty person, but I wasn’t actually calling myself a homosexual yet... I went to this guy’s house and there was nothing going on, and I asked him, “Where is some action?” and he said, “There is a bar down the way.” And the time I really caught myself coming out is the time I walked into this bar and saw a whole crowd of groovy, groovy guys. And I said to myself, there was the realization, that not all gay men are dirty old men or idiots, silly queens, but there are some just normal-looking and acting people, as far as I could see. I saw gay society and I said, “Wow, I’m home.”

INTERVIEWER: This was the first time that you walked into this gay bar that you felt this way?

SUBJECT: That’s right. It was that night in the bar. I think it saved my sanity. I’m sure it saved my sanity.

This subject has been exclusively homosexually active for the last 13 years.

Even after an introduction to gay bars, labeling oneself as homosexual does not always occur as rapidly as it did in the previous example. Some persons can still, for varying periods of time, differentiate themselves from the people they are meeting in gay bars. The following subject came out when he was 22; he had been predominantly homosexual before coming out. He interacted with gay people in gay bars for several months before he decided he was a homosexual. He attempted to differentiate himself from the other homosexuals by saying to himself, “I am not really homosexual since I am not as feminine as they are.”

Finally after hanging around there for so long, some guy came up to me and tried to take me for some money, and I knew it, and he said, “You know, you’re very nellie.”13 And I said I wasn’t, and he said, “Yes, you are, and you might as well face facts and that’s the way it is, and you’re never going to change.” And I said, “If that’s the case, "

13In gay argot, “nellie” means feminine or feminine-appearing. The word is not usually used in a complimentary manner.
then that's the way it's going to be." So I finally capitulated.

This subject has been predominantly homosexually active for the last 21 years.

It should be made clear that such a change in sexual identity need not be accompanied by any change in sexual behavior or any participation in homosexual behavior. It is theoretically possible for someone to view himself as being homosexual but not engage in homosexual relations just as it is possible for someone to view himself as heterosexual but not engage in heterosexual relations. Approximately 20 percent of this sample came out while having no homosexual relations. The following subject is one of this group; he came out during his late twenties even though he had had his last homosexual experience at age 20.

I picked up a copy of this underground newspaper one day just for the fun of it... and I saw an ad in there for this theatre, and after thinking about it I got up enough nerve to go over there. ... I knew that they had pictures of boys and I had always liked boys, and I looked at the neighborhood and then I came home without going in. ... I went back to the neighborhood again and this time I slunk, and I do mean slunk through the door... and I was shocked to see what I saw on the screen, but I found it interesting and stimulating and so I went back several more times.

Eventually this subject bought a copy of a gay publication, and subsequently he went to the publication's office.

I visited with the fellows in the office and I had time on my hands and I volunteered to help and they were glad to have me. And I have been a member of the staff ever since and it was that way that I got my education of what gay life is like... For the last ten years, I had been struggling against it. Back then if I knew what homosexuality was, if I had been exposed to the community... and seen the better parts, I probably would have admitted it then.

This subject has been very active socially but not sexually in the gay subculture for the last year.

In contrast to the previous examples, there are cases in which the subject has no direct contact with any gay persons, but yet comes out in that context. Fifteen percent (27) of the sample came out upon first reading about homosexuals or homosexuality in a book, pamphlet, etc.; ten of these (about 6 percent of the sample) were not associating with gay people at the time they came out. The following subject came out in this context. He was 14 at the time, had just ended a homosexual relationship with a person who considered himself to be straight, and had had no contact with gay society.

I had always heard like kids do about homosexuals and things, but that never really entered my mind, but when I read this article, when I was in the 8th grade, and it had everything in it about them sexually, not how they looked and acted and where they go. It was about me and that was what I was thinking. I just happen one day to see a picture of a guy, and thought he was kind of cute, so I'll read the article about him. But before that I didn't realize what was happening. I didn't even realize I wasn't right as far as heterosexuals were concerned. I didn't realize that what I was thinking wasn't kosher. ... If people don't like it I'll keep my mouth shut. The article said people wouldn't like it, so I decided to keep my mouth shut. That's the way I was, so I accepted it.

This subject has been active sexually and socially in the gay subculture for the last five years.

Another context in which a subject can come out is that of having a homosexual relationship with a person who defines himself as being heterosexual; 12 percent (21) of the sample came out in such a context. Of these, 12 (about 7 percent of the sample) had never met any self-admitted homosexuals and had never read any material on homosexuality. The following case involves a subject who came out in such a context. At the age of 21 he was having an intense love affair with a serviceman who defined himself as straight. The subject also became in-
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involved in a triangular relationship with the serviceman’s female lover.

This got very serious. I told him I loved him. . . . He wanted me for a sex release; I didn’t admit it then, but now I see, through much heartbreak. He liked me as a person. . . . At the same time he was dating a married woman; he was dating her and having sex with her. . . . She couldn’t admit to having a relationship with him ‘cause she was married, but he told me and I was extremely jealous of her. [We worked together] and privately she was a very good friend of mine. So I started feeling hatred toward her because she was coming between me and I, competition. I was strong competition, ’cause I frankly dominated it, and she sensed this; so one day she said, “I bet he’d be very good in bed.” So I said, “You know he is.” She said, “What did you say?” and I said, “Oh, I guess he would be.” And I wanted to tell her; so I finally acted like I just broke down and I told her everything in order to make her not like him. So she got on his tail and told him to stop seeing me or she wouldn’t have anything to do with him. . . . I taped all their phone conversations and told her if she wouldn’t leave him alone, I’d play them for her husband. She got furious, so she said if I tried to blackmail her she would go to the police with the whole thing . . . it all backfired on me and I really didn’t want to hurt her, but my love for him was so strong; I’d hurt anybody to keep him, so I erased the tape. And later I bawled and bawled and cried about it to her because I was very sensitive at this time and I told her I was sorry, didn’t want to hurt her, but I loved him so much. . . . After I fell in love with him I knew I was homosexual. I talked to my brother about it and he said I wasn’t really in love. He said you’re just doing it cause you want to; it’s not right, boys don’t fall in love with boys. He wasn’t nasty about it. . . . I really loved him; he was my first love; I even dream about him once in a while to this very day. . . . It was during this time that I came out, and I was extremely feminine, not masculine in any way. I wore male clothing, but dressed in a feminine way, in the way I carried myself, the way I spoke. . . . I realized that I was homosexual because I loved him. I was afraid of gay people; heard they did all kinds of weird things from straight people talking about them.

Before this relationship, the subject had engaged in both homosexual and heterosexual petting. Shortly after the relationship terminated the subject became involved in the gay subculture and has been almost exclusively homosexual since that time.

COGNITIVE CHANGE

What is common to all the cases discussed is that the subject placed himself in a new cognitive category (McCall and Simmons), the category of homosexual. In some cases, such placement can occur as soon as the person learns of the existence of the category; an example of this is the boy who placed himself in that category after reading about homosexuals in a magazine. However, probably most persons who eventually identify themselves as homosexuals require a change in the meaning of the cognitive category homosexual before they can place themselves in the category.

The meaning of the category must be changed because the subject has learned the negative stereotype of the homosexual held by most heterosexuals, and he knows that he is no queer, pervert, dirty old man, and so on (Simmons). He differentiates himself from the homosexual image that straight society has presented to him. Direct or indirect contact with the gay subculture provides the subject with information about homosexuals that will challenge the “straight” image of the homosexual. The subject will quite often see himself in other homosexuals, homosexuals he finds to be socially acceptable. He now knows who and what he is because the meaning of the cognitive category has changed to include himself. As one subject said: “Wow, I’m home”; at times that is literally the case since the homosexual now feels that he knows where he really belongs.

A person’s identification of himself as being homosexual is often accompanied by a sense of relief, of freedom
from tension. In the words of one subject:

I had this feeling of relief; there was no more tension. I had this feeling of relief. I guess the fact that I had accepted myself as being homosexual had taken a lot of tensions off me.

Coming out, in essence, often signifies to the subject the end of a search for his identity.

IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Identifying oneself as being homosexual and accepting oneself as being homosexual usually come together, but this is not necessarily the case. It can be hypothesized that those who identify themselves as being homosexual; but not in the context of interacting with other homosexuals, are more likely to have guilt feelings than those who identify themselves as being homosexual in the context of interacting with other homosexuals. Interaction with other homosexuals facilitates the learning of a vocabulary that will not simply explain but will also justify the homosexual behavior.

Identifying oneself as homosexual is almost uniformly accompanied by the development of certain techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza). In this self-identification, it would be incorrect to state that the homosexual accepts himself as being deviant, in the evaluative sense of the term. The subject may know he is deviant from the societal standpoint but often does not accept this as part of his self-definition. Lemert (1951) has defined secondary deviation as the situation in which "... a person begins to employ his deviant behavior or a role based upon it as a means of defense, attack or adjustment to the overt and covert problems created by the consequent societal reaction to him" (p. 76). Once the subject identifies himself as being homosexual, he does develop means, often in the process of the change in self-definition, of adjusting to the societal reaction to the behavior. The means employed usually involve the denial, to himself and to others, that he is really deviant. Becker (1963) explained the situation when he stated:

But the person thus labeled an outsider may have a different view of the matter. He may not accept the rule by which he is being judged and may not regard those who judge him as either competent or legitimately entitled to do so. [pp. 1-2]

The societal reaction to homosexuality appears to be expressed more in a mental health rhetoric (Bieber; Hadden; Ovesey; Socarides; Szasz), than in a rhetoric of sin and evil or crime and criminal behavior. In order to determine how the subjects adjusted to this societal reaction to homosexuality, they were asked to react to the idea that homosexuals are sick or mentally ill. With very few exceptions, this notion was rejected.

SUBJECT 1: I believe this idea to be very much true, if added that you are talking from society's standpoint and society has to ask itself why are these people sick or mentally ill. . . . In other words, you can't make flat statements that homosexuals are sick or mentally ill. I do not consider myself to be sick or mentally imbalanced.

SUBJECT 2: That's a result of ignorance; people say that quickly, pass quick judgments. They are not knowledgeable, fully knowledgeable about the situation.

SUBJECT 3: I don't feel they are. I feel it's normal. What's normal for one person is not always normal for another. I don't think it's a mental illness or mental disturbance.

SUBJECT 4: Being a homosexual does not label a person as sick or mentally ill. In every other capacity I am as normal or more normal than straight people. Just because I happen to like strawberry ice cream and they like vanilla, doesn't make them right or me right.

It is the learning of various ideas from other homosexuals that allows the subject to in effect say, "I am homosex-

"Particularly, denial that there is a victim and denial of injury.
ual, but not deviant," or, "I am homosexual, but not mentally ill." The cognitive category of homosexual now becomes socially acceptable, and the subject can place himself in that category and yet preserve a sense of his self-esteem or self-worth.

It should be emphasized that coming out often involves an entire transformation in the meaning of the concept of homosexual for the subject. In these cases the subject had been entirely unaware of the existence of gay bars or an organized gay society, of economically successful homosexuals, of homosexually "married" homosexuals, and so on. In the words of one subject:

I had always thought of them as dirty old men that preyed on 10-, 11-, 12-year-old kids, and I found out that they weren't all that way; there are some that are, but they are a minority. It was a relief for me 'cause I found out that I wasn't so different from many other people. I had considered consulting professional help prior to that I caused at the time I thought I was mentally ill. Now I accept it as a way of life, and I don't consider it a mental illness. It's an unfortunate situation. . . . I consider myself an outcast from general society, but not mentally ill.

PUBLIC LABELING

It should be made clear that the self-identification as a homosexual does not generally take place in the context of a negative public labeling, as some labeling theorists imply that it does (Garfinkel; Lemert, 1951; Scheff). No cases were found in the interview sample in which the subject had come out in the context of being arrested on a charge involving homosexuality or being fired from a job because of homosexual behavior. In the questionnaire sample, 4 percent (7) had just been arrested and 1 percent (2) had just been fired from a job. A total of 8 respondents or 4.5 percent of the sample came out in the context of public exposure.

It can be hypothesized that the public labeling of an actor who has not yet identified himself as being homosexual will reinforce in his mind the idea that he is not homosexual. This is hypothesized because it is to be expected that at the time of the public labeling the actor will be presented with information that will present homosexuals and homosexuality in a highly negative manner. For example, the following subject was arrested for homosexual activities at the age of 11. Both before and after the arrest he did not consider himself to be a homosexual. His reaction to the arrest was:

SUBJECT: The officer talked to me and told me I should see a psychiatrist. It kind of confused me. I really didn't understand any of it.

INTERVIEWER: And were you thinking of yourself at that time as a homosexual?

SUBJECT: I probably would have said I wasn't. 'Cause of the way the officer who interrogated me acted. It was something you never admit to. He acted as if I were the scum of the earth. He was very rude and impolite.

If the actor has not yet identified himself as being homosexual, it can probably be assumed that to a significant degree he already accepts the negative societal stereotype; the new information accompanying the public labeling will conform to the societal stereotype, and the actor consequently will not modify his decision not to place himself in the homosexual category. This is not to say that public labeling by significant others and/or official agents of social control does not play a significant role in the life of the homosexual; all that is hypothesized is that public labeling does not facilitate and may in fact function to inhibit the decision to label oneself as being homosexual.

THE CLOSET QUEEN

There are some persons who may continue to have homosexual desires and may possibly engage in homosexual relations for many years, but yet do
not have a homosexual identity. Self-admitted homosexuals refer to such persons as "closet queens." Such persons may go for many years without any contact with or knowledge of self-admitted homosexuals. The subject previously cited who came out in prison was a closet queen for 20 years.

An interval of 10 or more years between first awareness of sexual attraction toward males and the decision that one is a homosexual, would probably classify one as having been a closet queen. As Table 2 shows, the questionnaire sample included 35 respondents (20 percent of the sample) who at one time were closet queens.

It is the closet queen who has most internalized the negative societal stereotype of the homosexual. It is to be expected that such persons would suffer from a feeling of psychological tension, for they are in a state of cognitive dissonance (Festinger)—that is, feelings and sometimes behavior are not consistent with self-definition.

The following subject was a closet queen for over 50 years. He had his first homosexual experience at the age of 12, has had homosexual desires since that time, and has been exclusively homosexual for 53 years. At the time the subject was interviewed, he expressed amazement that he had just come out during the last few months. Over the years, his involvement with the gay subculture was peripheral; at the age of 29 for about one year he had some involvement with overt homosexuals, but otherwise he had had only slight contact with them until recently. During that earlier involvement:

I was not comfortable with them. I was repressed and timid and they thought I was being high hat, so I was rejected. It never worked out; I was never taken in. I felt uncomfortable in their presence and I made them feel uncomfortable. I couldn't fit in there, I never wanted to, never sought to; I was scared of them. I was scared of the brazen bitches who would put me down.

During the years as a closet queen he was plagued with feelings of guilt; for varying periods of time he was a patient in over twenty mental hospitals. His social life was essentially nil; he had neither gay friends nor straight friends. His various stays in mental hospitals relieved continuing feelings of loneliness. At the age of 65 he attended a church whose congregation was primarily homosexual. It was in the context of interacting with the gay persons who were associated with this church that after 53 years this subject came out.

SUBJECT: I had never seen so many queens in one place; I was scared somebody would put me down, somebody would misunderstand why I was there. I had this vague, indescribable fear. But all this was washed away when I saw all were there for the one purpose of fellowship and community in the true sense of the term. . . . I kept going and then I got to be comfortable in the coffee hour. . . . Then out in the lobby a young fellow opened his heart to me, telling me all his troubles and so forth, and I listened patiently, and I thought I made a couple of comforting remarks. Then I went out to the car, and when I got in the car I put my hand out to shake hands and he kissed my hand. . . . it's hard for you to understand the emotional impact of something like this—that I belong, they love me, I love them.

Until the last few weeks, in all my life I had never been in a gay bar for more than a few minutes, I was acutely uncomfortable. But now I can actually go into it; this is the most utterly ludicrous transformation in the last few weeks . . . there's no logic whatsoever. I'm alive at 65.

It's a tremendous emotional breakthrough. I feel comfortable and relieved of tensions and self-consciousness. My effectiveness in other fields has been enhanced 100 percent. I have thrown off so many of the prejudices and revulsions that were below the surface. . . . I'm out of the closet.
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In every way, they know, where I work, in this uptight place where I work; I've told them where I live; I've written back east. What more can I do?

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you are now more self-accepting of yourself?

SUBJECT: Brother! I hope you're not kidding. That's the whole bit. How ironic it would come at 65. The only thing that I wouldn't do now is to go to the baths. I told the kids the other day; it's the only breakthrough I cannot bring myself to.

One can only speculate why after all these years this subject came out. The reason may have been that he had had a very religious upbringing and could not conceive of homosexuals in a religiously acceptable manner. The church he attended for the first time at age 65 presented homosexuals as being religiously acceptable, and presented to the subject highly religious homosexuals. Contact with this church may have helped change the meaning of the category homosexual so that he could now include himself.

In a sense the closet queen represents society's ideal homosexual, for the closet queen accepts the societal stereotype of the homosexual and feels guilt because he does the same sort of things that homosexuals do, yet believes he is really different from homosexuals in some significant way. This inability of the closet queen to see himself in other homosexuals prevents him from placing himself in the cognitive category of homosexual, and he will not come out until some new information is given to him about homosexuals which permits him to say, "There are homosexuals like myself" or "I am very much like them."

There may be significant differences between ex-closet queens and those closet queens who never come out. Of course, I had contact only with ex-closet queens, and they uniformly reported that their own psychological adjustment has been much better since coming out. Their only regret was that they had not come out sooner. Possibly the closet queen who remains a closet queen reaches some sort of psychological adjustment that ex-closet queens were unable to reach.

THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE

The change of self-identity to homosexual is intimately related to the access of knowledge and information concerning homosexuals and homosexuality. Hoffman has observed:

Society deals with homosexuality as if it did not exist. Although the situation is changing, this subject was not even discussed and was not even the object of scientific investigation until a few decades ago. We just didn't speak about these things; they were literally unspeakable and so loathsome that nothing could be said in polite society about them. . . . [p. 195]

The traditional silence on this topic has most probably prevented many persons with homosexual feelings from identifying themselves as being homosexual. Lofland has noted that the role of knowledge in creating a deviant identity is an important one. If significant others or the actor himself does not
know of the deviant category, his experience cannot be interpreted in terms of that category; or if his experience appears to be completely alien from that category he will not interpret his experience in terms of that category. If the societal stereotype of homosexuals is one of dirty old men, perverts, Communists, and so on, it should not be surprising that the young person with homosexual feelings would have difficulty in interpreting his experience in terms of the homosexual category.

The greater tolerance of society for the freer circulation of information concerning homosexuality and homosexuals has definite implications in reference to coming out. The fact that there is greater overt circulation of homophile magazines and homophile newspapers, that there are advertisements for gay movies in newspapers, and that there are books, articles, and movies about gay life, permits the cognitive category of homosexuals to be known to a larger proportion of the population and, most importantly, permits more information to be circulated that challenges the negative societal stereotype of the homosexual.

Since there has been a freer circulation of information on homosexuality during the past few years, it can be hypothesized that the development of a homosexual identity is now occurring at an increasingly earlier age. Indeed, older gay informants have stated that the younger homosexuals are coming out at a much earlier age. In order to test this hypothesis, the sample was dichotomized into a 30-and-above age group and a below-30 age group. It can be seen in Table 4 that the below-30 mean age for developing a homosexual identity was significantly lower (at the .01 level) than the above-30 mean age; the drop in mean age was from approximately 21 to 17.18

\*It can be argued that this was not a mean-

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**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age at Homosexual Self-Identification</th>
<th>Age of Respondents</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 and above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>8 (9)</td>
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<td>15-19</td>
<td>35 (38)</td>
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<td>7 (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
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<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>91 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>21.4*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Means significantly different at .01 level.

Indications are that the present trend toward greater circulation of information that is not highly negative about homosexuals and homosexuality will continue. The fact that a mass circulation magazine such as Time gave its front cover to an article entitled "The Homosexual in America" (Oct. 31, 1969) and that this article was not highly negative represents a significant breakthrough. The cognitive category of homosexual is now being presented in a not unfavorable manner to hundreds of thousands of people who previously could not have been exposed to such information through conventional channels. This is not to say that more information about homosexuals and homosexuality will lead to a significantly greater prevalence of persons engaging in homosexuality. What is being asserted is that a higher proportion of those

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with homosexual desires and behavior will develop a homosexual identity, and that the development of that identity will continue to occur at an increasingly younger age.

CONCLUSION

This study has suggested that the development of a homosexual identity is dependent on the meanings that the actor attaches to the concepts of homosexual and homosexuality, and that these meanings are directly related to the meanings that are available in his immediate environment; and the meanings that are available in his immediate environment are related to the meanings that are allowed to circulate in the wider society. The commitment to a homosexual identity cannot occur in an environment where the cognitive category of homosexual does not exist. Hoffman in essence came to the same conclusion when he hypothesized that the failure to develop a homosexual identity is due to a combination of two factors:

...the failure of society to make people aware of homosexuality as an existential way of life (and of the existence of the gay world), and the strong repressive forces that prevent people from knowing what their real sexual feelings are. One might consider this a psychological conspiracy of silence, which society insists upon because of its belief that it thereby safeguards existent sexual norms. [p. 138]

In an environment where the cognitive category of homosexual does not exist or is presented in a highly negative manner, a person who is sexually attracted to persons of the same sex will probably be viewed and will probably view himself as sick, mentally ill, or queer.

It can be asserted that one of the main functions of the viewpoint that homosexuality is mental illness is to inhibit the development of a homosexual identity. The homosexuality-as-mental-illness viewpoint is now in increasing competition with the homosexuality-as-way-of-life viewpoint. If the homosexuality-as-way-of-life viewpoint is increasingly disseminated, one would anticipate that the problems associated with accepting a homosexual identity will significantly decrease, there will be a higher proportion of homosexually oriented people with a homosexual identity, and this identity will develop at an earlier age.19

If the homosexuality-as-way-of-life philosophy does become increasingly accepted, the nature of the homosexual community itself may undergo a radical transformation. To have a community one must have members who will acknowledge to themselves and to others that they are members of that community. The increasing circulation of the homosexuality-as-way-of-life viewpoint may in fact be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It may lead to, and possibly is leading to, the creation of a gay community in which one's sex life is becoming increasingly less fragmented from the rest of one's social life.

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19Weinberg has recently reported that younger homosexuals have on the whole a worse psychological adjustment than older homosexuals.

As the age for the development of a homosexual identity drops, the psychological adjustment of younger homosexuals may significantly improve.

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