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SECRETY IN THE LESBIAN WORLD

BARBARA PONSE

THIS STUDY is an ethnographic description of secrecy, its accomplishment and effects, among several groups of lesbians. Simmel (1950: 345-346) defines two types of secret societies. The first includes societies whose very existence is not known; the second, pertinent to the lesbian world, refers to groups whose existence is known but whose members are not.

The secrecy surrounding gay life in our society is rooted in the stigma which characterizes homosexual acts and persons. In the following pages I will detail the ways in which secrecy is an inextricable part of lesbian life. This analysis of secrecy among lesbians will concern the ways in which secrecy touches the lives of individual gay women, and the ways that secrecy informs their relationships with both gay and nongay audiences.

The data in this study derive from three years of participant observation in a gay organization, at meetings, parties, in other social settings, and in friendship networks in both activist and secret lesbian communities. Participant observation was supplemented by 75 in-depth interviews with women living in these communities.

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Respondents for the interviews were located in one of two ways: either through participant observation in a gay organization or through entry into friendship cliques. The earlier part of the research centered upon women involved with the gay activist group, largely because these women were more accessible than women not so involved. It became clear, however, that gay movement women or “activists” are not representative of lesbians who are not in the movement, particularly with respect to straightforwardness about homosexuality in front of many audiences. Access to nonmovement or “community” lesbians was achieved initially through personal friends who introduced me to their friends and acquaintances; these women in turn referred me to others. Secret community women comprise by far the larger of the two groups in the lesbian world.

The majority of women with whom I talked and whose lives I observed were middle and upper-middle-class, well-educated, and articulate. Participants in the gay organization tended to be somewhat younger than community women; the former also had a heavier concentration of students preparing for a career. The nonactivist community lesbians were mostly professional, holding positions of authority in the business world, academia, and in the arts and professions.

**SECRECY, STIGMA, AND AUDIENCES TO THE SELF**

In his descriptions of secrecy and secret societies, Simmel (1950: 361, 362) notes characteristic conditions for the development of these societies—conditions which are relevant for understanding the lesbian community. First, a secret society tends to arise under conditions of public “unfreedom” when legal or normative proscriptions regarding persons or behavior necessitate the protectiveness of secrecy. Homosexual activity is proscribed by law, and negatively sanctioned by social custom; homosexual persons are potentially or actually stigmatized in most nonhomosexual settings. Second, a secret society only develops within a society already complete in itself. Lesbian groups exist within the context of the larger heterosexual society, in some ways mirroring its patterns and in some ways opposing them. Third, Simmel (1950: 339) observes that secrecy tends to extend in importance beyond the secret itself and every feature of the secret world. Thus secrecy affects both the internal relations of the people in the gay community and the relations between the
participants in gay groups and the members of the larger heterosexual society. This paper focuses on the latter aspect of secrecy.

The perceived need for secrecy stems both from the ever-present possibility of stigmatization and from the perception, prevalent in the lesbian community, or heterosexual hostility toward homosexuality. For the lesbian who wishes to conceal her gay identity; knowing whether an audience is straight or gay is of critical importance. In fact, the relevance of categorizing audiences in terms of sexual orientation is frequently a concomitant of becoming gay. Intrinsic to a sense of gay identity is the definition of oneself as different from heterosexual others, and the realization that one will be defined by straight audiences as different. This sense of difference is accompanied by the realization that disclosure of the gay self is problematic before certain groups. As the secret has profound effects on the social relations of secret keepers, so the definition of an audience as straight or gay has implications both for whether a secretive lesbian will initiate a relationship with a particular audience and for the course such a relationship will subsequently take.

Comming Out

In the argot of the gay community, the initial process of indicating to the self that one is gay is called “coming out.” In addition to indicating gayness to the self, coming out refers to disclosing the gay self before an expanding series of audiences. This second usage is more characteristically used by activists, for whom disclosure is part of a political and ideological stance. Secret lesbians as well as activists refer to coming out before various audiences: for example, “I came out with my parents,” or “She came out with her straight friends at work.”

All lesbians, at the time they come out, are already enmeshed in a network of social relationships with heterosexuals. With respect to these established relationships as well as with new relationships, the issue is whether to conceal or to reveal the newly emergent gay identity. Thus, implicit in the idea of coming out is the progressive disclosure to the gay self, first to the self as its own audience, and then the extension of this disclosure to other trusted audiences.

But disclosure is only one of the responses to secrecy. More commonly, lesbians seek to maintain secrecy by employing strategies such as passing, counterfeit secrecy, restriction, or separation. These strategies are used differently with different audiences to the self; the family of origin, persons known in the world of work, friends and associates, and fellow
gays. This paper focuses on each strategy as well as on disclosure and the varying contexts of use.

In and Out of the Closet

In the parlance of the lesbian community, “in the closet” generally means being secretive about the gay self with nongays, although sometimes a lesbian may be in the closet with selected gay audiences as well. One is “all the way in the closet” when only the self is an audience to the gay self or when only the two parties to a gay relationship are aware of the existence of the gay self. One can also be “almost out of the closet” when most significant others know about the gay self. A 56-year-old respondent characterized the closet and her life style related to it:

There are all kinds of degrees of being in the closet. There are some people who are so in the closet that only they and their lovers know. All the rest of the world is dealing with a masquerade. And then, there are the kind of people I have known, the kind of life I have lived, where you have a circle of gay people that you move around with. And so, you have some social life with them and then there is the rest of the world that you deal with during the week, during the daylight hours.

PASSING: THE MAINTENANCE OF SECRECY

Passing means the successful accomplishment in social interaction of a usual, unremarkable social identity by an individual who would, if discovered, be deemed unusual or different in some crucial way. Passing is being accepted as being “just like everybody else” when in fact some aspect of the person’s character or biography if known would serve to set the individual apart from others. Goffman (1963: 2) distinguishes between virtual social identity and actual social identity. Virtual social identity refers to the self that audiences expect to see. It is self-imputed by an audience, gleaned from perceptible cues generated by an actor. Actual social identity refers to the “real” self that the individual could be demonstrated to be were all the evidence available (Goffman, 1963: 2). In this analysis virtual identity refers to the straight “mask” presented to some audiences by the gay actor while actual identity refers to the gay self.

For the secretive lesbian, passing refers to the accomplishment of a virtual straight identity among straight persons. Passing may entail a variety of strategies on the part of the lesbian, including attentiveness to
the details of speech, affect, dress, and demeanor, and, sometimes, the construction of a straight front in concert with male accomplices. On the other hand, such elaborate strategies may be unnecessary since lesbians' secrecy is in part protected by the heterosexual assumption.

The Heterosexual Assumption

A feature of social interaction with straight audiences that facilitates passing is the "heterosexual assumption." The heterosexual assumption means simply that parties to any interaction in straight settings are presumed to be heterosexual unless demonstrated to be otherwise. The pervasiveness of this assumption, in addition to other prevailing norms of social interaction which include, minimally, an agreement to accept interactants at face value, makes it highly improbable that sexual orientation will be raised as an issue. The heterosexual assumption is obviously functional for covert lesbians, though some activist gay women see it as a de facto denial of alternatives in sexuality and life style. Thus a routine assumption of social interaction in the straight world facilitates secrecy for gays in straight settings.

Strategies of Passing

In addition to relying on the efficacy of the heterosexual assumption to obscure the gay self in straight settings, many lesbians employ one or more passing strategies. These strategies may involve impression management, the camouflaging use of dress and demeanor, and sometimes, the conspiracy of others. Often passing requires a conscious management of self, others, and situations. Lyman and Scott (1970: 78) note that passers must develop a heightened awareness of ordinary events and everyday encounters. The covert lesbian who wishes to pass must be concerned not only with obscuring the gay self, but also with presenting a convincing straight front to straight audiences. The woman who wishes to pass must be alive to the subtleties and nuances of communication and relationships. She must be attentive to the details of speech and to other cues to identity in social interaction. The following comment from a 58-year-old woman who has defined herself as lesbian since adolescence, and who, in most straight situations presents a straight image, suggests the extensiveness of impression management involved in passing as well as the tension it can occasion:

When a person is in the closet they, you know, they're... operating on all levels, and uh with ah... considerable tension. I mean you always know

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thirty seconds ahead of what you say, you know what you are going to say.
And you get, I got so used to that, I became almost inarticulate when I had a
chance to say whatever I wanted to say. I lost a lot of spontaneity of speech
because . . ., because I'd formed the habit of always knowing what I was going
to say. Changing genders where necessary.

Conversations that are relatively matter-of-fact for straight people may
take situations of elaborate impression management for the secretive gay
woman. One strategy used by gays who wish to pass as straight is to
remain neutral in the face of detrimental remarks about gay people.
Respondents stated that they felt they had silently to withstand casual
slanders about gay people or risk drawing attention to their gay selves.
Lesbians that I spoke with reported that they often experienced
derogatory remarks about gays as being directed, although unwittingly,
against themselves.

Simon and Gagnon have noted (1967: 28) that it is easier for gay
women to pass than it is for gay men, both because it occasions little
suspicion in the straight community for women to live together, and
because a category of the "asexual" single woman is both believable and
acceptable in the larger society. Some gay women, however, choose to
reinforce their straight image by referring to "boyfriends" and/or by
having a male friend accompany them on appropriate occasions. The men
who serve as legitimating "cover" for gay women are frequently gay
themselves. A 52-year-old lesbian recounted the way in which a male
friend was used to provide a covering rationale for the lesbian's distress at
the time when her 25-year relationship between her and her female lover
ended:

I always took one of the gay fellows to office parties. One in particular, a good
friend of mine, is the Vice President of a big company; so we played this game
for years and making like he and I had been living together, and during the
time the break-up with B--- was going on, my boss threw a big going-away
party for one of the guys' 50th birthday and I took along this other gay
fellow. And this just threw everyone into a tizzy, you know, and I said well,
Tom and I have been having problems, so they would think that all this
emotional crisis that I had was over him. It turned out well, they think I had
been living with him and all that and they think that's the problem. But it was
a terrible thing to have to sit there and you couldn't talk--there was nobody to
tell it to.

It is clear from the above that use of a male companion as a cover is
functional for maintaining secrecy but, ironically, this very success in
passing can exacerbate the subjective sense of isolation. Thus we can see
that techniques for maintaining secrecy are a double-edged sword. Secrecy
maintenance avoids the problems of stigma and discredibility. Yet passing obviates the possibility of truly intimate interaction with straight people.

Modes of dressing and management of appearance are nonverbal ways of giving information about the self. Thus an important aspect of passing is to conform scrupulously in dress and appearance to the feminine styles prevalent in the straight community. It is not unusual to hear very feminine-appearing lesbians express concern about features of dress which they fear might be clues to the gay self. Dress style and appearance can be used as "protective coloration" to conceal or reveal information about the self.

One respondent spoke about the way in which she would use dress and appearance cues when she felt that her gayness was in danger of being exposed:

> Sometimes I would feel that things were getting a little too close for comfort. I would feel uneasy and uh so I would do the super feminine bit. It's not too difficult for me to do. If I really work myself up to it, I used to be able to do it and enjoy it, but I've had times when I've gotten kind of nervous so I sent up smoke screens as much as possible. You recostume a little bit, you change your mannerisms, you psych yourself out and you bring up topics that are terribly okay, just do the whole thing. It's like guys who are straight but worry about what people think of them and get super-jock. You just select the parts of the role that are the best signals and you send them off (laughter).

**Secrecy, Passing, and Member Recognition**

The secrecy which is characteristic of lesbian life has implications for gay women's ability to recognize and meet other lesbians. The veils of anonymity are often as effective with one's own as with those from whom one wishes to hide. Thus, an unintended consequence of secrecy is that it isolates members from one another.

It has been emphasized that gay women who are passing must be particularly alert to their audiences. Thus it can be inferred that a gay woman would be more likely than others to spot someone who, like herself, is passing for straight, as she would be aware of the nuances of passing.

People who pass are alive to the cues given off by others who are passing. Among these cues is the recognition of others' passing techniques and strategies. The failure to say certain things—for example, to specify the gender of an individual referred to in a conversation—to be secretive about one's personal life, to express a lack of interest in males, to never having been married, to have a roommate, and to fail to present a male
companion at appropriate times can start the speculative ball rolling on the part of a gay woman that another woman may, indeed, herself be gay.

When I meet new people I generally assume that they are straight. Then if I find out that they are single, have never been married, or have a roommate, I start to wonder...

A standard feature of gay lore is that "it takes one to know one." It seems that this is not attributable to any mystical sixth sense but rather to a sensitivity-honed by the experience of passing—to the subtleties of various cues. The following account exemplifies the belief that one can "always tell" one's own, and at the same time indicates some of the pragmatic ways in which gay people go about discerning secretive gays around them.

I was very closeted and wearing dresses to work and all that and this girl came to work and she really came after me! And I thought it was obvious to everyone in the place. "I'll take you to lunch. Come to my house, we'll have a drink after work," and "tell me about yourself," and it was much more than just your friendship type of thing and when finally I acquiesced, and figured "what the hell," and went over and we had a talk and I asked her, just that, I said, "Well how did you know I possibly would be interested in you?" and she said, "It takes one to know one," and I find that that's true. I usually always... in our crowd we used to call it getting a hum, you know, I can always tell if a girl is gay or if she's looking to be turned out [to have a gay affair].

Perhaps I pick up on this because I'm not bad looking and if a woman is attracted to women, she will look at me in a way that is different or in a way that is different from your heterosexual woman, I guarantee you!

Although the above account is illustrative of the way in which small cues such as eye-signals are put together to identify another gay person, it is highly atypical in suggesting immediate pursuit on the basis of such a hunch. There is, after all, considerable risk that one could be wrong, and gay lore is replete with stories of such mistaken identity. It is usually the instance that such a hunch or intuition about an individual would be followed up by a subtle process of testing the "gay hypothesis" without taking risks to the self or risking disclosure for the other. Some women refer to this inferential process as "dropping pins," by which is meant the casual mention of gay places, gay people, or gay events. If the person responds by acknowledging ("picking up the pin")—that she knows the persons, places, or events—it is tentatively assumed that she is gay. This inferential process usually takes place with seeming nonchalance and in an
indirect manner, so that at any point up to the actual verbal disclosure of the gay self, parties to an interaction can signal that they are "really" not gay after all and withdraw with impunity. As may be imagined, these negotiations frequently take place with straight audiences being none the wiser. The process for establishing interactants as secretly gay is such that alternative explanations can be proffered up to the point of denouement. There is no overt admission or talk of gayness, and the usual indirect approach presents little threat to the secretive status of either party. It is true, however, that many secretive gay women feel that it is too dangerous to engage in such identification games in straight settings; and in such instances secrecy is effective in concealing the gay self no only from the straight world, but also from other gays as well.

The World of Work

The necessity for passing may be perceived as more or less urgent with respect to particular audiences of friends and acquaintances. The consequences for the breach of secrecy are seen as more grave in some circumstances than in others. The world of work is a setting where most lesbians feel constrained to pass as straight. Typically the work world is a straight environment in which the lesbian must keep her gay self hidden. The consequences of disclosing the gay self to work audiences may reach far beyond disapprobation to include the curtailment of a whole career; thus, the necessity of maintaining secrecy about the gay self places considerable strain on what might appear to be extremely ordinary situations involving coworkers. For example, conversations about relationships or leisure-time activities can be problematic for the secretive lesbian. Casual exchanges about social life can constrain the gay woman to being noncommittal about her friendships and associations.

The perceived need for secrecy about a gay identity in work settings can have profound effects on establishing extrawork relationships with colleagues. This problem becomes exacerbated when the successful negotiation of one's business career involves business-connected sociability, increasingly a feature of many professional and business circles as the individual's career advances. One woman, prominent in the field of public relations, when asked how she handled business-connected entertaining, answered:

I haven't handled it very well up until now. I haven't done any business entertaining at home and that's a subject that's about to come up, because
we've just moved and taken an apartment where I now can entertain quite easily... and I'm not quite sure, how I can handle it--It's quite a problem on my mind right now.... Most of the people with whom I'm associated in business are very conservative in every respect.... I know specifically that my boss in particular has a big thing against gay women, because he's been very overt about it, never dreaming that he's stepping on any toes. I've been very uncomfortable. I never give in to the urge to say anything and I don't like that: there is a great deal of discomfort for me in any kind of dishonesty.

Some professions are regarded as more "sensitive" with respect to gayness than others. Women in the teaching profession, for example, and women who work with children feel particularly constrained to be very secretive about their lesbianism in the work world. Several women whose work is involved in some capacity with a school district stated that they feel inhibited about becoming involved actively or noticeably in the gay community: they fear that, if they become identified as gay, they might be fired. The following respondent indicated that although she was with the activists "in spirit," she herself could not be an activist for these reasons:

(I am) aligned with the gay movement in the terms that the feminist movement is. But as far as being active--no. At the present time my reasons would be self-protectiveness, in terms of, I don't know if it's a cop-out or not, but in terms of my employment, and... I work for (a large public organization) and I work in the school system in the area, and I think there would be negative repercussions if I were active and found to be active, by my agency, and yeah, I'm not willing to take the risk. I could not be an open activist in the Gay Movement, I cannot be on the barricades there at the present time, um, and in some respects I doubt that I would be at any time in the near future.

The need for wearing a straight mask in the world of work is part of the gay folklore—a folklore which is documented by the experiences of some gay women. Among the lesbians I interviewed, two had been expelled from college and one had lost a teaching position for reasons related to lesbianism. But even among women who have not had such a personal experience, the experiences of others, the stories which circulate about such incidents, and a pervasive belief in the likelihood of negative consequences accompanying disclosure in the work world are strong deterrents against revealing the gay self to this particular audience. In turn, this prohibition against revealing the gay self in work situations serves to prevent the work world from being a source of sociable relationships.
Counterfeit Secrecy

Lesbians who conceal their gayness from straight audiences usually express the conviction that the attempt at secrecy is effective and that the straight masks they present are unquestionably accepted. However, in the experience of some of these women, relationships with friends and family are more accurately characterized as patterned by the tacit negotiation of mutual pretense through which the gay self is not acknowledged. I call this pretense "counterfeit secrecy."

Glazer and Strauss (1965: 64-78), in their discussion of awareness contexts, refer to the state of silent "collusion" between actor and audience as a "mutual pretense awareness context," whereby both parties to an interaction know a secret but maintain the fiction that they do not know it. Both audience and gay actor cooperate to maintain a particular definition of the situation and both parties tacitly agree not to make what is implicit, explicit by direct reference to it.

Emerson (1970) notes the function of such tacit negotiations in smoothing over a potentially disruptive breach of social expectations. She remarks that social actors frequently prefer to ignore a violation of social expectations and to act as if "nothing unusual is happening" in order to maintain the flow of interaction. Emerson's observations illuminate an important aspect of social interaction which gives rise to counterfeit secrecy. Straight audiences often act as if "nothing unusual is happening" when presented with gay people or gay situations, providing that no one makes the implicit, explicit. Making the violation obvious, by naming it or pointing it out, would of course force acknowledgment of the pretense.

A respondent in her late fifties commented on the quality of counterfeit secrecy in her relationships with straight friends and neighbors:

Were you open about being gay? Well you know, certainly not verbally, no. But it was that life that so many of us had led. Technically "in the closet" but where the neighbors, the people you work with, have to know! How can they avoid—but they don't want to put it into words: "Don't tell me, don't tell me." But they would ask my friend what she was going to cook for dinner, and I would interchange with neighborhood men about how to fix the lawnmower, how to build this and that (laughter) and we're talking. . . . It was role playing that we had not constructed but they simply sensed that these were the appropriate people to talk to these things about. We used to be just aghast at the assumptions that these people acted on, and yet uh nothing was ever said . . . it seems that people are willing to take you as you are if you just don't burden them with any names.5
Thus if lesbianism was not explicitly referred to, interaction flowed smoothly, suggesting a kind of acceptance. However, this seeming knowledge and seeming acceptance cannot be tested for fear of rejection: the whole structure of this ambiguous acceptance is founded upon not acknowledging the gay self, and thereby functions to confound the very possibility of disclosure. In this way, the etiquette of counterfeit secrecy entails a posture of discretion which becomes more and more difficult to disrupt as time passes.

Although counterfeit secrecy undoubtedly facilitates the appearance of amicable relations, knowing that one is excluded from confidence has impact upon the behavior of those who interact with gay people. The person who has not been granted the right to know is also constrained not to admit knowing that which has never been acknowledged. The relationship between the concealer and the person from whom something is concealed is weakened by the facsimile of secrecy. A barrier, paralleling the barrier of real secrecy, is thereby raised against real intimacy by counterfeit secrecy.

THE FAMILY OF ORIGIN

After a woman has come out and acknowledged herself a lesbian, she is confronted with decisions as to which audiences she should reveal her gay identity. Few audiences rival the place of the family in terms of intimacy and importance to the individual. The typical intimacy of family relations creates its own pressures toward disclosure. Simmel (1950: 335) notes that intimacy in relations makes secret keeping difficult and contains many impulses to disclose. Thus, the family of origin is of particular salience to the lesbian with respect to secrecy and disclosure. Disclosure of the gay self to the family of origin, however, raises the specter of rejection from an audience that a lesbian may consider important. The lesbian typically (and often not incorrectly) has an image of her family as disapproving heterosexuals.

The family, both in terms of proximity and intimacy, is so situated that the management of secrecy is difficult, and the gay self may be inadvertently revealed. During the time a young woman is living at home there are many more opportunities for the family to observe her and to draw conclusions about her personal life and relationships than would be the case if she lived away from home. Occasionally, discovery of the gay identity by the family may occur dramatically, as it did for one young woman whose spurned lover called her parents:
I had been seeing this woman for about a year, and the relationship ended on a rather sour note. She called my parents and informed them that I was a lesbian. It was terrible. I didn’t know what to do at the time. They thought maybe I should go to California and that it would help me to get over this relationship, this woman. They always thought it was other people that were exerting a bad influence on me. They thought that going away would keep me away from those influences.

The consequences of ruptured secrecy, or inadvertent disclosure of the gay self, may be that future references to the gay self and acknowledgment of the lesbian’s personal life are proscribed within the family. The gay self is considered “off bounds” as a legitimate topic of conversation; the lesbian is unacknowledged as a lesbian by her family. Thus, counterfeit secrecy commonly limits relationships between the lesbian and her family.

For the gay woman, counterfeit secrecy entails many of the same consequences for interaction with others as does actual secrecy. If, in order to maintain a relationship, one must obscure or deny the “true self,” the implication is clear that the true self is unacceptable. Such relationships, no matter how intimate in terms of conventional social roles, are thus limited in their intimacy. Lesbians who maintain counterfeit secrecy with their families affirm that they feel cut off from being themselves, just as do gay women who maintain real secrecy. The context of counterfeit secrecy, especially the fear of disapproval, renders the family unavailable to provide emotional support to the lesbian and thus serves to attenuate relationships in ways quite similar to real secrecy.

DENIAL

An important concomitant of counterfeit secrecy is denial on the part of the family or others. Denial may be manifested by continued questioning of the gay woman about boyfriends, by references to future marriage, or by other tactics which presume the heterosexuality of the lesbian. Denial is instanced in the following account by a lesbian whose mother had been apprised of her daughter’s lesbianism:

My mother will ask me occasionally, “how is your love life dear? Have you met any nice boys?” And I can just see her clapping her hands over her ears and saying inside, “Oh please! Don’t tell me!” And I don’t. I just say, “Oh it’s fine,” or “Yeah, groovy!” It’s an unspoken thing in our house. We don’t talk about things like that. My brother used to know, but we never talk about it. There are boundaries on the things we talk about. It’s funny how people know and refuse to know, and won’t talk about it.
In the experiences of some lesbians, parents and family think of the lesbian as "sick" and hope for a "cure."

My parents sent me to a psychiatrist to be cured. He said, "I don't know what your parents want me to cure you from." To this day, that's the way they think about it, as something to be cured from. "You can't be happy. There is no way you can be a lesbian and be happy," they think. That's all they pray for, a big miracle. I mean that's the way they perceive it. But I tell her, "Mother," I said, "What is happiness for you is not happiness for me." We don't talk about it... it used to really bother me but it's gotten to the point where she's more unhappy than I could ever be. ... There is nothing I can do about it. I have done my best to try and get her to accept it, you know. I've said to her, "You've got a good kid. She's doing good things and she's bright and she's got a nice home and I've got nice friends and I'm telling you I'm happy." But it's not enough... I can't change her. I finally came to terms with the fact that it was her trip, not mine.

In sum, for many lesbians, relations with family members are strained because of the family's perceived lack of acknowledgment or acceptance of lesbianism. Secrecy, counterfeit secrecy, and the tensions generated by the acknowledgment of an unacceptable gay identity may all result in the lesbian feeling separated or cut off from her relatives. As the above accounts illustrate, the modal pattern of relationships between the lesbian and her family of origin was counterfeit secrecy combined with an implicit denial of the woman's homosexuality.  

Handling Secrecy: Restriction and Separation

Besides passing, other ways of handling secrecy with respect to particular (straight) audiences (and occasionally, "untrustworthy" gays) can be typified as follows: restriction—straight persons may be restricted as audiences to the gay self, that is, they are categorically inadmissible as personal friends; separation—audiences may be kept separate from one another, where gay friends are segregated from straights with the latter usually unaware of the existence of the former.

RESTRICTION

Among the women with whom I spoke, a few preferred to avoid straight people altogether as potential friends. For these women, the world of work provided the single avenue of contact with straight people, and these relationships were maintained at an instrumental level only.
Extrawork relationships with coworkers were discouraged. In a very special sense, the real lives of these secretive lesbians are spent with gay people in gay spaces. (See Warren, 1974, for an extensive description of gay time and gay space.) The times, places, and people that are significant to these women are all gay. In line with Simmel’s observations about the intensity of relations among secret sharers, the gay audiences before whom the straight mask is dropped assume great importance for the hidden lesbian (Simmel, 1950: 360). Correspondingly, gay time and gay space are given a greater accent of reality. It is only before gay persons in gay places that the authentic self is revealed. Lesbians whose world of sociability is exclusively gay describe themselves as living a “totally gay life.”

Not surprisingly, women who segregate themselves from contacts with the straight world perceive the greatest differences between the categories gay and straight, and express the greatest social distance from the straight world. Simmel (1950: 365) and Warren (1974: 6, 141) both note that secrecy may promote the sense of superiority in the way of life of the secret group. This was exemplified in the comment of one gay woman who maintained she had nothing in common with straight people:

> When I’m around straight people, I can be very shy and uncomfortable, because I can’t be myself. So it’s probably all tied together. I like gay people more, to me they’re much more interesting, maybe because I’m able to talk about myself and my marriage so that makes them more interesting.\(^8\)

**SEPARATION**

Most of the lesbians in both secretive and activist communities did not want to isolate themselves from friendships with straight people. Yet initiating or maintaining relationships with heterosexuals confronts the lesbian with decisions about disclosure or concealment of her gay identity. Both lines of action entail tension. Disclosure risks the possibility of rejection, and concealment carries the tension of secrecy and conscious management of the self. Many of the lesbians with whom I spoke elected to handle these tensions by keeping their gay lives and straight friends separate, revealing the gay self only to gay audiences and donning a heterosexual mask for straight friends.

Within the community, the segregation of gay and straight friendship worlds is described by lesbians as “living a double life”:

> Oh boy, I’ve lived a double life like you wouldn’t believe all my life and sometimes the pressure was so enormous I thought I was going to explode.
We'd sit around and have coffee, the girls in the office, and they'd say... this woman looks like a man... Omygod that's a queer and I'd sit there and listen to this kind of stuff and... until I'd just get violent sometimes. And there's been a few times when it's been all I could do just to keep from jumping up and saying, "Look you guys have lunch with me, we've socialized together for fifteen years. I'm queer!" I've wanted to do it so bad that you know, I uh, almost explode! Because you know... Why? I mean, what would I have accomplished anyway--I would have lost more than I had gained.

The above respondent expressed with a great deal of feeling the twin themes of the frustration imposed by secrecy and the certitude of rejection by straight friends should the gay self be revealed that is typical of community women.

Among activist women, though not to the extent characteristic of community women, leading a double life did occur. Being secretive among one's friends and at the same time an activist in the gay community was experienced as dissonant by these women. One activist lesbian, unwilling to reveal her gay self to straight friends, expressed the incongruity between her political and personal life when acting as a group leader at an activist meeting:

This is hard for me. I am the leader (of the discussion group) and I wish I were in a better place as an example. I feel very gay, I live an entirely gay life style, that is my involvement sexually as well as socially is with women, with a woman. And yet I am not entirely comfortable with my gayness. For example, my neighbor is like a sister to me, I've known her for ten years and yet I have never told her I am gay. I am very closed about being gay with many people. It has gotten better over the years. I go back twenty years being gay. I don't feel entirely comfortable within myself about it... in terms of sharing it and yet more and more of my life is devoted to making it possible for gays to live without oppression.

The separation of gay and straight worlds is the typical pattern among community lesbians and is characteristic of some activist women as well. Although this tactic engenders a subjective dissonance and the conflict of "disloyalty" to activist gay audiences (if not to straight audiences as well), it allows the maintenance of relationships inside both heterosexual and homosexual groups with minimal risk of rejection from either.

Living a double life can be accompanied by a sense of alienation—and can escalate the fear of discovery. Not only must the secretive lesbian be an audience to the deprecation of gay people (which she may interpret as "really" directed at her) but she must also be able skilfully to negotiate relationships so that straight friends remain unaware of gay friends. Thus a
double life requires the most stringent management not only of the self, but of situations and others who might give clues to the gay self. Relationships with the straight world, though uninterrupted, are nonetheless thinner when the “true self” must be concealed. At the same time, though gay friends are privy to the gay self, their friendship claims may be limited by the extent to which the gay actor is committed to maintaining friendships in the straight world; for, under the conditions of living a double life, sociable time must be divided between gay and straight friends, and straight friends must be handled in such a way that they are unaware of the existence of the individual’s commitment to the gay world. This boundary between gay and straight friendship worlds comes to be zealously guarded, not always to the advantage of gay friends, as the following account illustrates:

At a party one evening a group of women discussed the disadvantages of people dropping in without notice.

Sometimes, if I’m not expecting anyone I won’t answer the door. I think it’s terrible, what if you are entertaining some straight friends or something and some big dyke comes in. You know, people tell me I shouldn’t feel that way, that I’m ashamed, of my friends, and well, maybe I am, I don’t know, I just feel that way.” Another woman concurred: “no, no! I can understand it, I mean. You have to choose who you’re going to tell, you have to keep things separate, I mean I agree with you.”

Many gay women experience the fearfulness of disclosing the gay self to straight friends as alienating. Obviously, secrecy precludes the possibility of social supports from the straight world. A community lesbian spoke about the lack of acknowledgment and social supports in terms of oppression:

Well, like most oppressed people I didn’t realize it. Now I realize that my private life wasn’t okay. To have to sit around and go to endless wedding and baby showers and buy gifts and things and no one celebrated my emotional highs with me ... and uh then when you are in an emotional hole, there is no one to hold your hand as any woman can expect when she breaks up with her boyfriend.

Such lack of reciprocal sharing in straight/gay relationships tends to promote a sense of isolation; and the gay woman may see herself successively cut off from meaningful interaction with heterosexual others while correspondingly strengthening her bonds with the community of lesbians.
DISCLOSURE

Passing, restriction, and separation all involve the keeping of the secret. Disclosure, on the other hand, involves revealing the secret to given audiences. The most salient distinction that gay women make with respect to audiences to the self is to categorize them as either straight (heterosexual, i.e., potentially hostile) or gay (homosexual, i.e., potentially friendly). This distinction is particularly important with respect to making friends and building friendship networks, as the intimacy of friendship relations escalates the tension toward disclosing a gay identity. Goffman (1963: 20-31) distinguishes between the "own" and the "wise" as two categories of ingroup and outgroup persons (Goffman's general term for nondeviant outgroup individuals is "normals"). The own are the ingroup, whose members share both the stigma and the secrecy of stigma. The wise are those outgroup persons who know ingroup secrets—they have been effective in piercing secrecy. Within the lesbian community, even more subtle discriminations are made: not all of one's own are considered trusted audiences to the gay self, and would therefore, like straight (i.e., normal) audiences, be presented with a straight mask.

Four of the women with whom I spoke have never revealed their gayness to straight friends even in relationships of considerable duration. Considerably more of my respondents, however, expressed great apprehension about having their gayness revealed to further audiences of straight people although they had straight friends who were aware of their gayness. Subsequent disclosures do not necessarily become easier despite having experienced acceptance from heterosexual friends previously.

The timing of disclosure is considered problematic by many. To disclose the gay self at the beginning of a relationship with nongays runs the risk of immediate rejection by a relatively "untested" audience, and opens up the possibility of accusations of being "blatant." To wait until a relationship has been established, on the other hand, means that the secretly gay woman may be accused of dishonesty in her relationships with her friends. Thus lesbians who wish to maintain or initiate relationships with the straight world perceive themselves in a "damned if I do, damned if I don't" situation.

The social meanings of disclosing the gay self to straight audiences can only be adequately appreciated with reference to the secrecy of which it is an opposite. Disclosure of the gay self occurs with an awareness that the secret once revealed cannot be hidden again. Disclosure also means that
with every person to whom the secret is revealed, a trust is given in which the risk of further disclosure is inherent. Nonetheless some lesbians do select particular straight audiences to whom they reveal the gay self.

Some audiences of heterosexuals are differentiated by members of the lesbian community as being safer than others for the presentation of a gay self. These include straight people with whom the relationship predates coming out; straight friends who have successfully demonstrated the qualities of empathy and discretion; feminists who are ideologically encouraged (or constrained) not to stigmatize lesbians and to be supportive of the lesbian life style. Special audiences of straight persons such as therapists or lawyers are usually considered safe audiences to the gay self.

One activist lesbian remarked that the pressure within certain feminist groups toward acceptance of lesbianism as an alternative life style helped mitigate, for her, the risks of disclosure:

You know if I've gotten bad reactions (from disclosure) I don't know about it. But you have to remember that I'm doing this mostly with feminists and there would be a certain kind of social pressure on them from other people if they indicated that it did bother them. They're in a funny position right now because they supposedly can't think that there's anything the matter with (lesbianism).

Disclosure to straight friends is usually a gradual process. Some lesbians report some preliminary "feeling out" of their audience prior to disclosing. An audience to whom a gay identity is to be revealed might be sounded about their attitudes toward gay people or toward minorities in general. A "stage setting" tactic reported by several respondents was to engage a prospective audience in conversation about prejudices against "minority groups." Agreement about the "unfairness" of prejudice would create the background for the revelation of the gay self.

**Modes of Disclosure**

Modes of disclosure include both direct and indirect verbal and nonverbal forms. For example, the family's awareness of the gay self usually occurs through observation of cues rather than by direct disclosure on the part of the lesbian. As already indicated, the family as a close audience to the gay self is ideally situated to notice cues to the gay self.
A respondent after years of secrecy described the method of disclosure by implication that she had initiated with straight friends.

If it is quite clear up front that this is part of my life, then I don't have to go through all that crap with these people, little stupid games of easing into it, getting to know someone really well and then trying to figure out you know like how do I break it to them, because I may lose this friendship, because it'll be too much for them or I can ignore it and never state it and always have a huge chunk of other things I'm stifling. ... I don't come out and say "I'm a lesbian." But when I'd come in with someone it would be pretty clear. I'd say "she and I have done this," or "she and I had done that," I'd try and be as natural as I would be with a guy, if I was going with a guy, but not having to make this, blowing trumpets, making an announcement when I walk into the room.

The above account illustrates that implication and inference may be the vehicle by which the gay self is disclosed. Such a technique entails simply no longer hiding the gay self. The straight audience is presented with the everyday concerns accompanying the gay self or with cues to the woman's gay identity.

ROLE PLAYING AS NONVERBAL DISCLOSURE

One of the most important ways of negotiating an image is by the manipulation of appearance and dress. Affecting a masculine appearance is an aspect of role playing, as this term is used in the lesbian community. "Butch" and "femme" refer, respectively, to masculine and feminine roles in the lesbian community. Although the terms have reference primarily to a division of labor and constellations of behaviors based on heterosexual models, they may include styles of dress and mannerisms. The butch woman affects a masculine style of dress and mannerisms; the femme, a stereotypically feminine mode of dress and comportment. The butch mode of dressing has characteristically served a minority of gay women as a nonverbal means of announcing gay identity to others. The adaptation of the butch role, insofar as that includes distinctive clothing styles, reveals the gay self to other lesbians and often to heterosexuals as well. The presentation of an identifiably gay style has repercussions in the lesbian world as well as in the straight world. It may serve to circumscribe relations with more secretive lesbians. Since it is likely that gayness could be imputed on the basis of association alone, a very secretive lesbian would avoid being seen with any obviously gay friends. Such women state that
they are fearful that associations with identifiably gay persons may evoke suspicions about their own gayness.

One woman, in referring to friends that she described as very butchy looking, stated:

Now they don’t go—they don’t have anything to do with straight people, and truly sometimes I was embarrassed to be with them. They were so butchy looking—I felt like I didn’t want to go out with them to the store—What if we should meet some straight friends or something? I’m ashamed to admit it—it’s shitty to feel that way about friends but I can’t help it.

Although the tactics of concealing one’s friendships with other gay people was widely accepted as expedient, understandable, and even necessary for the preservation of secrecy, it was nonetheless an intense experience for many gay women.

It is clear, therefore, that the perceived necessity for secrecy influences the selection of friends in the gay world as well as in the straight world. Highly secretive lesbians cannot afford to have extensive relationships with men and women who are obviously gay. In addition to meeting other criteria for friendship, gay friends must be chosen with an eye to the convincingness of their straight masks and to their lack of detectability in the straight world.

**VERBAL DISCLOSURE**

A critical feature in most accounts of disclosure is the emphasis placed on the **verbal assertion of gayness**. It is “putting it into words” that marks the irrevocable breaking of secrecy. According to this logic, behaviors and situations are capable of multiple interpretations and imputations, but words are not. Frequently, it is only through such a verbal assertion that a straight audience will be acknowledged by a gay actor as “really knowing” and it is through words that counterfeit secrecy may be forfeited or broken. Knowing the gay self through direct disclosure by the gay actor is distinguished by many gay women from all forms of proximate knowledge such as strong suspicions, guessing, or hunches. Thus disclosure to straight friends—precisely because of the importance and irrevocability it entails—may serve to intensify the bonds of friendship. The friend becomes the wise and shares the special knowledge of a secret world. The intensity which marks the relations of secret keepers is thereby extended to special audiences not intrinsically part of the secret world.
Disclosure as an Ideology

Disclosure has a special emphasis in the lesbian community at the present time, and both secretive and activist lesbians have developed lines of action in response to this special emphasis. The tension between secrecy and disclosure among lesbians exemplifies Simmel's (1950: 333) observation that disclosure is always just under the surface of secrecy, creating a constant tension toward breaking the secret. Simmel (1950) asserts that pressures develop in secret societies that predispose their members toward disclosure: as these societies sustain themselves, enduring over time, the strength of assertion comes to replace the protection of secrecy.

Over the past several years, with the advent of both gay liberation and the rise of the feminist movement, there has been increasing resentment against the structures of secrecy. An ethos of openness has been developing in certain parts of the gay community. This phenomenon has evoked a wide range of responses from within the community. The reactions of the secretive lesbian community toward activists and activism span the range of possibilities (with the exception of disinterest). One woman in her sixties, who remains quite secretive about her own gayness with straight friends and family, nevertheless expressed enthusiasm for what she perceived as a movement toward legitimation of homosexuality through the new openness about gayness by activists:

You asked me how I felt about the gay liberation thing and I’ll tell you I think you have to go overboard on anything, way overboard, before you go to the extreme—before you back up, then you’re a step ahead of where you were before and this is why I have such a faith in the kids—nothing is going to change till we go to these extremes. . . . You have to demonstrate, you have to make a scene before you make the slightest impression on anybody.

Lesbians such as the one quoted above categorically state that secrecy is the worst feature of gay life. Paradoxically, some women who find secrecy oppressive also find the openness in the gay activist community to be very threatening. They feel that activism will draw attention to gay women who heretofore went largely unnoticed.

Most of the time they associated homosexuality with men and now you know they’ve started looking at women and—before we were kind of back over here and it never occurred that two women—two women who aren’t even gay at all probably have people looking at them and I’d just as soon not have that kind of attention. What’s the benefit of it? Because nobody is really going to accept this. Not in my lifetime.
Other lesbians state that they cannot identify with the activists either on the basis of activist techniques or personal style. Some emphasize what they perceive as class differences between themselves and the activists, and characterize activist lesbians as "having nothing to lose."

And you see the public is still not seeing that there are good and bad in this life, too. And unfortunately the ones they've seen aren't ones I'd run around with either, at least some of the ones I've seen on television, why they're not my caliber that I would associate with. ... You get a lot of mouthy women up there, who go hollering around and they're obnoxious--some of--a lot of them are--I guess they are out there fighting the battle for us but I'd rather see some women up there who look like women, presidents of companies that had responsible jobs saying their piece on a little higher plane.

Many secretive lesbians—like the one quoted above—have an ambivalent attitude toward secrecy, perceiving its necessity and at the same time desiring disclosure from the "right" kind of people to educate the public about the diverse individuals under the umbrella of homosexuality.

Lesbians whose secret status depends upon the ignorance about lesbianism in the heterosexual world fear the liberationists who emphasize the "truth about gayness." For their part activist lesbians develop rationales to account for their openness, which they express in political terms. In a political sense—they maintain—disclosure is a "consciousness-raising technique" making people aware of gayness as a life style, while at the same time it is a refusal to hide the gay self. According to some gay activists, concealing the gay self is tantamount to being ashamed of it.

Most overt activists say that they feel a sense of personal freedom in no longer having to mask their gay identity. However, they do acknowledge that "doors may be closed to them" in the future for having done so. On the other hand, most activists observe that identifying people by sexual orientation is in itself oppressive and thus consider this emphasis on disclosure a temporary, situated phenomenon which at some future point will no longer be necessary.

I feel that it was necessary to state that I was a lesbian because it's almost like flaunting it and why would I flaunt that sort of thing, and um I'm hoping that I'll reach a point in say three years where I won't ever have to designate myself by any stupid arbitrary word . . . but politically, it's absolutely essential, because every time I say that (I'm a lesbian) it's so much easier for someone . . . who doesn't feel free . . . to be whoever they are, someone who spends all their time hiding. It makes it so much easier for them to be comfortable with it, comfortable with themselves.
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The lesbian creates her social identity in a matrix of secrecy and disclosure. She may choose to conceal her gay self by passing, or by restriction and separation of the audiences to the self. The emergence of the gay self thus renders the presentation of the self problematic. The lesbian must take into account the factors of stigma and the risks attendant to the revelation of her gay identity in most social settings apart from the community of her own.

It has been emphasized throughout this paper that one of the most significant aspects of being or becoming gay is that it alters fundamentally the relationship of the self to others, based upon the perception of hostility toward gayness on the part of heterosexual society. The relationship of the gay self to the straight world is mediated through secrecy. Secrecy in turn further isolates the gay self from straight others and binds it closely to its own.

The requisites of secrecy necessitate the categorization of others as gay or straight. These become the primary typifications through which interaction is filtered. The interactive process of indicating to the self that the self is gay, that the other is gay or straight, serves to reiterate the primacy of these categories. Concomitantly, the process of bringing into awareness the gay self serves continuously to elaborate its importance.

Warren observed that the stigmatization of the gay world ensures that all gay space and time will tend toward secrecy (Warren, 1974: 18). This paper demonstrates the multiple ways through which secrecy intensifies commitment to the gay self and binds the gay self to the gay world.

By the same token, the importance of disclosure and assertion newly emphasized in sectors of the gay community is grounded in the context of the secrecy of that world. Simmel (1950) emphasizes that the allure of disclosure inheres in secrecy. Thus secrecy itself impels toward its own destruction. But in addition to secrecy containing the seeds of revelation, factors that develop within the secret society militate toward disclosure. The posture of the secret society toward the larger society is ultimately one of vulnerability: the possibility of discovery threatens the safety it offers. Thus, Simmel (1950) asserts that if a society is to survive, the strength of assertion must take the place of secrecy.

The initial phases of the new ethos of openness continue to reverberate throughout the gay community. With it, new definitions of gay identity are emerging. Although there is hardly a rush out of the closets, it is likely
that the process of disclosure on an individual level and on the community level will continue. The process of disclosure will, in turn, continue to demystify and depolarize what still remains a hidden and secret world.

NOTES

1. Note that Goffman's definition of the real self is that which corresponds to prevalent social categories, a difference in perspective from the existential sociologist who locates the real self in the actor's meanings of self.

2. Not surprisingly, lesbians express relief about the current relaxation of dress codes within the straight community, which make casualness if not ambiguity in women's clothing the norm. Thus dress styles have, within limits, become a much less precise indicator of the gay self than formerly.

3. Lyman and Scott (1970: 80) call this process the giving of signs of a double identity. These signs should be such that they can be withdrawn or redefined should "pure passing" become necessary.

4. The rise of gay liberation and gay advocate organizations has led to the advent of the "professional gay," an individual whose professional status derives from the status of being gay—i.e., as an editor of a gay publication. The professional gay is distinguished from the gay professional—an individual who, in addition to being an incumbent of a professional occupational role, happens to be a gay person.

5. "Friend" in this context is partner in a gay "marriage."

6. Lover: the term used among lesbians to designate parties to a sexually and socially intimate relationship.

7. Similar disclosure and secrecy problems obtain with the family of procreation of the women I interviewed who had children of their own from a previous (heterosexual) marriage, or who had been involved with another woman who had children.

8. Marriage: a monogamous relationship with another woman in this case.

9. However, the activist lesbian tends to express an empathetic understanding of more secretive lesbians. More likely than not, the activist herself has audiences with whom she is in the closet.

REFERENCES


