

## **It's Not Coming Out, So Then What Is It? Sexual Identity and the Ex-Gay Narrative**

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*In this paper, I analyze the personal narratives of "ex-gay" individuals who are attempting to transform their sexual identity in order to bring this identity in line with their understanding of evangelical Christian theology. Liang (1997) footnotes a distinction between "coming out stories," i.e. narratives of realizing and accepting homosexual identity, and accounts of homosexuality given in ex-gay ministries; however, no sociolinguistic investigation of ex-gay narratives and their distinct differences has been published. Here I examine ex-gay narratives and compare the language and identity issues they present with research on coming-out stories.*

*Based on the analysis of 20 hours of data from ten ethnographic "life history" interviews (5 males and 5 females), I found that ex-gay narratives reveal a plot-initial tension similar to coming-out stories in the recognition and self-naming of homosexual identity. However, within ex-gay narratives, religious discourse about homosexuality creates an inter-textual identity conflict and leads them to begin a complex process of re-naming and acquiring new discourse. Ex-gay narratives provide a significant opportunity to observe individuals using language as the primary tool to not only express identity but also create and transform it. My analysis of these narratives also reveals how individuals' identities and discourse replicate and are constrained by religious Discourse.*

### **1. Introduction**

This essay examines a particularly controversial aspect of human sexuality. It represents one part of a broader study that includes a plurality of possible narrative negotiations and resolutions of individuals dealing with perceived conflicts between their religious and sexual identities (Peebles, in preparation). Thus, both gay Christian and ex-gay narratives are part of this larger project. Rather than focusing on the question of "Who's telling the *right* narrative?" the current inquiry focuses on *how* people are using language to manage these deeply personal and profound identity conflicts.

Ex-gay individuals are defined here as self-identified evangelical Christians who are attempting to transform their sexual identity in order to bring this identity in line with their understanding of traditional Christian theology, which for them includes a moral conviction against homosexual practice. While the term "ex-gay" can be problematic for a

number of reasons, it is the media-popularized and thus commonly accepted term for this category of individual, and I use it here for ease of reference. During the summer of 2002, I conducted ethnographic “life history” interviews with 20 men and 17 women who were past or present participants in an ex-gay ministry in the southern and mid-western United States; the data for this analysis represent a subset of those collections.

In recent years, a number of studies have examined coming-out stories and the creation of the self (e.g. Penelope & Wolfe, 1989; Wood, 1997, 1999). Liang (1997) defines coming-out stories as narrative accounts of realizing and accepting gay or lesbian identity. Thus, Liang aptly footnotes a distinction between coming-out stories and other accounts of homosexual tendencies such as those seen in ex-gay ministries, in that the general understanding of coming-out involves an embracing of the homosexuality which ex-gay narratives explicitly disavow and seek to transform. This having been said, both story-types are told by narrators whose experience of same-sex attraction constituted an “identity demand” and required a response in their conception and “story” of the self; thus, correspondences between the two types would be expected.

In this paper, I examine ex-gay narratives and compare the language and sexual identity issues they present with research on coming-out stories. Specifically, I consider the ways in which ex-gay narratives are similar to coming-out narratives, as well as their marked points of divergence and alternate identity trajectories. In addition, I analyze some of the linguistic features and language ideologies that are characteristic of the ex-gay narratives in my study.

## 2. Coming-Out and Self-Naming

Most of the ex-gay individuals in this study had a coming-out story before they had an ex-gay narrative. Thus, not surprisingly, the ex-gay narratives examined reveal a plot-initial tension parallel to coming-out stories. Liang (1997) describes coming-out stories as a process of self-naming and discusses the stage of “coming out to self” which comprises an individual’s acknowledgment of same-sex attraction and recognition of homosexual identity. Thus, the process of acknowledging oneself as homosexual is the first component in both types of stories. This is exemplified in (1).

- (1) Trevor<sup>1</sup>: I just remember being called that word *queer* again and then called *homo*. I’ll never forget the day I went home after being called that and remembering that from Germany, I remember going home, opening up the dictionary to see what the word *queer* meant and to see what the word *homosexual* meant. And I just thought—I-I did-I didn’t remember all my emotions at the time, but I thought, well, that must be it. That must be, you know, what I am. [...] I remember, I would just, every once in a while, even a couple of times of day, I would go to-go open the dictionary, and I even remember where it was, you’d walk in our house, it was in the foyer on this table, <chuckle> like the Bible, and I remember I just opened it up and looked up the word *queer*, opened it up and looked up-looked up the word

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<sup>1</sup> Notes for all examples: All names are self-chosen pseudonyms, and all transcriptions have been standardized. Transcription conventions: underlining indicates emphatic speech, here defined in terms of stress and loudness. Bold-facing is used to highlight relevant points under discussion; it does not indicate speech quality and is not part of the actual transcription.

*homosexual*, and I began to get my identity from that. [...] Always inside, I identified as homosexual. That's what the books said.

In example (1) above, Trevor gives an account of coming out to self and the naming that occurs during this process. Trevor's experience of name-calling at school was an external labeling which triggered a personal investigation of the name given him by others. Through use of the dictionary, Trevor acquired the word *homosexual*, which previously was not available to him as a resource. This acquisition of knowledge then simultaneously both allowed and forced Trevor to either accept or deny that label in terms of his own identity. Trevor then admits that this word captures his experience of a male-centered sexuality, accepts the label as a self-definition, and then repeatedly names himself *homosexual*.

Leap (1999) emphasizes the importance of language as it becomes a major resource for young men's understanding of their experience of same-sex attraction and construction of gay identity during adolescence. Leap's research includes many "coming out to self"-type narratives and demonstrates the search for information through textual resources and labels being acquired through events such as teasing and name-calling as highly common themes in these accounts. Trevor's story includes each of these components and is a classic parallel; this is in fact his coming-out story, which now serves as an initial component of his ex-gay narrative. It should be noted here that literacy is intrinsic to the use of written texts as sources for shaping identity. Literacy plays a crucial role in understanding the self in many coming-out narratives, and I am currently investigating its equally important relationship to the process of defining and creating the self in ex-gay narratives.

Beyond coming out to self, coming-out stories also describe the process of revealing one's self as homosexual to others. As expected, many ex-gay narratives had this component as well, as self-recognition progressed to a revealing of this self to others. This can be seen in example (2), where Jacob comments on coming out to his parents at age 12.

- (2) Jacob: My parents were very calm about the whole thing. [...] And what they did, they got my parish priest who was my religion teacher, I guess to mentor me. And he was right there with me, "If this is what makes you happy, you just go for it with all you've got."

It is important to note that a smaller number of the ex-gay narratives I collected do not have an "official" coming-out story *per se*. Liang (1997, p. 291) discusses the fact that an individual's identification as homosexual is largely a matter of "personal decision rather than convention" due to the contested nature of homosexuality; for example, the term *homosexual* can be rejected even by those who are sexually active in long-term same-sex relationships. This was the case for Elizabeth, who lived with a woman for three years in a sexually active relationship, but would never define herself as lesbian or name the relationship to be homosexual. In example (3) below, Elizabeth tells about her moment of "naming," which is as critical a point in her story as the coming-out events given in other types of accounts.

- (3) Elizabeth: I was in a support group and process group and learned tons, but God was way far away. I didn't realize how far away He<sup>2</sup> was. And I was in the support group and you go through these steps and one of them is confession, and I said the *homosexual* word for the first time to people. Driving home that night, the Lord showed back up, I mean, He was right there. And I knew it was my shame that kept Him away. And as soon as I could speak and not feel rejected by these people I was telling, I could let the Lord back in.

Elizabeth's story demonstrates that in cases where there has been no coming-out component or where there has even been the categorical denial of the label *homosexual*, a naming must occur in order for the story to progress towards change. In that ex-gay narratives are self-transformation stories with an emphasis on sexuality, the state of the sexuality the individual seeks to transform must in a sense be owned before it can be relinquished. As part of the genre of conversion stories, these narratives clearly parallel evangelical Christian doctrine, in that one must acknowledge and confess that he or she is a sinner as a crucial initial step towards receiving salvation.

### 3. Complication: Moral Conviction

Above, I have shown the initial elements of ex-gay narratives to be parallel with and almost identical to coming-out stories. In addition to the self-naming, the ex-gay narratives I have examined always include accounts of first same-sex encounters or relationships, the progression of sexual awareness, and other elements common to coming-out stories. However, at some point, there is a clear divergence from the coming-out story line in that coming-out stories lead to an acceptance of homosexual identity. For ex-gays in this study, either the presence or introduction of a moral conviction against homosexual practice led them to re-evaluate their understanding of themselves and their sexuality and seek an alternative to embracing a homosexual identity.

The narrative flow of an ex-gay story from this point depends largely upon the trajectory of the religious life of the individual. For instance, Trevor described himself as having been raised in a Christian home and always having believed that homosexual practice was not compatible with his understanding of that faith. Thus, Trevor's self-naming as seen in example (1), though followed by a discussion of his coming out to others and being involved sexually with other men, led ultimately to a commentary on the inner conflict and spiritual struggle he experienced and his response to that conflict. This can be seen in (4), where Trevor's expression of a "re-commitment to Christ" reflects his background in which a moral conviction and a traditional Christian belief system had, according to him, "always been present." Trevor validates his return to his faith by clearly indexing a departure from same-sex behavior, and the alternative identification trajectory continues from that point.

- (4) Trevor: But my re-commitment to Christ was real. [...] In 1976 was my last intimate act with a man.

Unlike Trevor, Jacob describes himself as having grown up "secular." Though his family was Catholic and attended church, he states that this was for him "cultural

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<sup>2</sup> For clarity and in keeping with convention, capitalization is used to denote references to Deity.

Catholicism” and had no real spiritual connection for him. As seen in (2), there was no struggle in Jacob’s coming-out story. He references this again in (5), stating that there was no moral dilemma because he had “nothing but support” and did not have any religious conviction against homosexuality. But then he goes on to describe an occasion where he “came out” to a customer he was helping, which ultimately introduced a moral conviction that would eventually turn the plot of Jacob’s narrative from coming out to a laying aside of the gay identity he once embraced.

- (5) Jacob: I didn’t see anything about it that was wrong, um, and I never had a conviction about it being wrong, well, because I had nothing but support. Everything around me supported me; I never heard anything negative. And one night, I was working, I was working in a chain called <store name>, and I was in automotive at the time. And this lady came in, and you know, I don’t remember ever having any kind of compulsion ever at any one point before to boast about my **being homosexual** but to this woman I just had this compelling need to gush it out at her, you know what I mean? And I was trying to help her find an oil filter or an air filter, and somehow **I came out**. And, she just shared the Lord with me, and she just spoke the Word<sup>3</sup> to me. And I mean uh, it was loving, and it was kind. [...]  
(Question: What did she share with you?)  
Jacob: She shared the Word, what the Word said about homosexuality. Um and it was in a real direct, but it was very gentle, and it was very loving, and it was very tender. There wasn’t any condemnation to it, there wasn’t any “You’re going to hell; you’re going to perish,” it was nothing like that. It was a very simple, “You know, the Word, have you ever?” and told me what the Bible had to say. And I was like, “Wow, I had never ever heard anything like that.” And I left that night with this feeling inside of me that something had happened. There was like a-a a physical sensation inside of me; you know the Word talks about it being like a seed.<sup>4</sup> And here was the seed. I could almost feel it. And so then from that time, **the brother who led me to the Lord also happened to come out of the lifestyle...**

Thus, example (5) shows Jacob’s narrative departing from a coming-out story and transitioning into a conversion narrative, which for him involved a spiritual identity transformation, i.e., embracing Christian faith or being “led to the Lord,” that in his understanding necessarily entailed a sexual identity transformation as well. It is significant to note that Jacob’s language with respect to homosexuality changes, shifting within a few phrases of his being told of the previously unheard-of moral conviction. I have bold-faced several phrases that capture this shift. While Jacob describes boasting of “being” homosexual and coming out, after the beginning of his conversion, he refers to “the lifestyle,” i.e., the homosexual lifestyle. This reflects a different conception of homosexuality, moving from seeing it as a state of “being” and identity to a “lifestyle” of choices and behaviors that can be left behind. From “coming out” as homosexual, Jacob begins to speak of “coming out of the lifestyle,” and indeed that is the new coming out trajectory of ex-gay narratives in general.

<sup>3</sup> A common evangelical Christian reference to the Bible, which is viewed as the inspired word of God.

<sup>4</sup> *Seed* is a metaphor used in both the Old and New Testament to describe the word of God, indicating that it is “living and active,” having a life and power of its own. E.g., Isaiah, chapter 55, verses 11 and 10; Luke, chapter 8, verse 11.

#### 4. New Discourse and Re-Naming

In discussing her work with an ex-lesbian support group, Ponticelli (1999) states that the mastery of new Christian discourse is critical in the process of creating a new identity. My work finds the acquisition of new language to be crucial as well, as is poignantly exemplified in (6) below.

- (6) Question: Why did you come to this [ex-gay] ministry?  
 Morghan: I came to get language. [...] I finally got names for the things that I was experiencing. And I was never-in all of my spiritual training in [name of youth ministry], they didn't know anything about same-sex attraction, emotional dependency, or homosexual struggles, and I was never taught those things. And so, finally, I was equipped with what I should have been equipped with a long time ago.

Morghan's response of coming to a ministry to "get language" and "names" is reminiscent of the previously discussed search for terms and understanding in the process of coming out. However, due to her religious convictions, Morghan's understanding is gained within the context of a particular evangelical Christian discourse. It is within this Christian 'meta-narrative,' defined here as an overarching story that gives coherence and universal meaning to life as a whole, that Morghan chooses to situate her individual life narrative. Thus, homosexuality is seen as brokenness and a condition needing healing, as well as, in Morghan's words, a "struggle."

Coming-out stories have been shown to be "processual" (Liang, 1997) and not a one-time identity event; similarly, the life stories that ex-gays tell represent a complex type of identity work that is most often described as a "journey." If coming out is a process of self-naming and ongoing creation and identification of one's self as gay or lesbian, then the ex-gay narrative is an intentional process of being re-named and being alternatively identified as 'not' or 'no longer' homosexual. Clearly, language is not only used to express this change but also is used to effect it. In (7) below, Naomi discusses this re-naming as a divine process, and references the Bible to support her claim.

- (7) Naomi: God said He would change my name.<sup>5</sup>

Wood (1999) writes about the coming-out story as a means to create a coherent sense of self and states that "for a life story to be coherent, the justification of one's choices or experiences must be recognizable and acceptable" (p. 47). But unlike coming-out stories, which express a sexual identity that is consistent with the narrator's same-sex attraction, ex-gay individuals seek to create or live out an identity that is, at least initially, incongruent with their sexual desires. For ex-gay narratives, I have found that it is a particular evangelical Christian meta-narrative that actually provides the narrative coherence system (Linde, 1993) that helps ex-gay individuals recognizably justify their choices and experiences while managing the incoherence that might seem to be intrinsic to

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<sup>5</sup> A reference to Old Testament verses from the book of Hosea, chapter 1 and Isaiah, chapter 62. "I will change your name" is also the title and theme of a contemporary praise song commonly known in evangelical circles.

the initial stages of this identity transformation process. Example (8) below shows the deep identity struggles that this process can involve.

- (8) Deborah: I prayed one night, and I said, “Lord, you know, I’m not in this lifestyle anymore, but I feel like I’m still a homosexual. And I no longer walk in this lifestyle. It’s been going on three years and I haven’t been with a woman, I haven’t been with a man, I’ve just been with You and healthy friends.” And I said, “But I feel like I’m still in that lifestyle. These feelings won’t leave me.” And then the Lord just showed me a vision. He said that, um, I saw myself on my knees, and automatically I just-I saw these two names over me. It was um, He said to me, He said, He had called me, you know, He was expressing to me how much He loved me, He said, “You know, I never called you homosexual. I never named you to be a homosexual. I never created you to be that way.” He said, “I’ve created you to do and go and do mighty things in Me and for Me.” He said, “You are My child.” He said, “But there’s two names you can walk under.” [...] And I stood up from my knees from the prayer and I said, “I am not a homosexual. I don’t care how I feel. I am not a homosexual. God did not give me that name; He didn’t call me that name. I am a child of God.” And that’s when I started fighting back, regardless of how I felt. I was never going back, and I was-I meant that. I was going forward. So when the Lord spoke to me that night, He continued to speak to me...

In Deborah’s story, the challenge to the creation of a coherent sense of self is portrayed in essence as a conflict of narratives—Deborah’s individual narrative of her subjective experience of same-sex attraction and perceived self-identity as opposed to her understanding of the Christian meta-narrative in which embracing a homosexual identity is seen as outside of God’s will and plan. This conflict is centrally about who has the authority and power to name the self, and whether Deborah’s identity is to be defined as homosexual due to her same-sex attractions. She is basically asking the question, “Who am I?” For Deborah, this conflict is managed and coherence is actually achieved through the submission of her individual narrative to the Divine narration that she claims to have received in a vision and word from God. As Bacon (1998) points out, Bakhtin (1981) claims that truth is born in dialogue; in Deborah’s case, she reports a dialogue with the Divine, and the Christian meta-narrative wins.

This example once again vividly exemplifies the process of re-naming that is central to ex-gay narratives. Deborah claims that two labels or names were offered to her. In response, Deborah chose to accept the re-naming and no longer “walk under” the name *homosexual*; this led her to begin to re-narrate her own life and re-name the sexual identity of the self regardless of whether she continued to experience same-sex attractions or not. For Deborah, establishing this identity premise served to determine and guide her future sexual behavior, in that she states, “That’s when I started fighting back, regardless of how I felt. I was never going back.”<sup>6</sup>

Ex-gay narratives are laden with a rich understanding of language as having power to affect and produce destiny. A final example of this is given in (9) below, where Bart

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note here that individuals in the ex-gay category may have a range of differing goals: no longer engaging in certain behaviors, no longer having proscribed desires, having heterosexual desires, and/or being in a heterosexual relationship.

claims a deterministic effect from the labels and names others gave him as one of two primary factors contributing to his experience of homosexuality. To support his claim, he quotes a Biblical proverb about the power of the tongue to produce either life or death.

- (9) Bart: Throughout school, throughout elementary, I was always called a homosexual, a faggot, gay. Not only by people in school, but also my family members. [...] So I thought that I was a homosexual. I thought that I was going to end up this way. [...] I have become it, because they said it. The Bible says that the power of the tongue brings life or death,<sup>7</sup> and the things that you speak and the things that you think you are are what you're going to become. And what people say and people think of you is what you're going to become, because words are so powerful, you know. And so, I've become a product of what they-they have said.

With this understanding of language in mind, it was interesting to note the intentionality with which many of the participants chose their pseudonyms for this study. When Jacob informed me of his, he mentioned that God had changed Jacob's name to Israel, implicitly referring to the fact that he was in the same process. Trevor clearly engaged in self-parody and indexed the former identity as well as the new by laughing and saying, "Let's see, Trevor sounds like a good gay recovery name." I also had women in the study choose Deborah, Ruth, and Naomi, all names of honored women in the Old Testament whom they admired and wished to be like. Thus, while not wanting to exaggerate the observation, for several participants, I saw a self-conscious and deliberate use of language even in the process of naming themselves for this study, the choice of which mostly located their individual identities within the meta-narrative space through which they were seeking to be re-defined.

### 5. Tension between 'Old' and 'New'

The processual nature of the ex-gay journey of identity transition can sometimes produce an interesting tension between the 'old' self and the 'new.' In the same sense that some degree of naming as homosexual is a necessary precursor to being re-named and the self being re-formulated in an ex-gay narrative, sometimes the old identity must be referenced in order to lay claim to the new. This phenomenon can occur when presenting the self to an audience of others and can be seen in example (10) below.

- (10) Bill: For all practical purposes, apart from someone who might have run into me on the street who knew me 10 or 15 years ago, no one would be able to distinguish me from an ever straight.<sup>8</sup> [...] So when I came to <name of ministry> for the support group, the guys were like, "What are you doing here?" And so, you know, it was like, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to swish? Do I need to lisp? I'll do whatever I need to do to show you that I fit in here." Then they heard my story and were like, "Oh, OK, you belong here."

<sup>7</sup> A quotation from the Old Testament book of Proverbs, chapter 18, verse 21 (New International Version).

<sup>8</sup> A term used by some ex-gays to refer to someone who has never experienced same-sex attraction.

Bill's example in (10), in which he tells the story of the first time he attended an ex-gay support group, aptly illustrates the above-described tension. According to Bill, his acceptance in the group was questionable to the other men due to the fact that his identity had changed to the degree that "no one could distinguish him from an ever-straight." Thus, he jokingly offers to perform stereotypical effeminate behavior to index the fact that he had dealt with same-sex attraction and had at some time in the past embraced a gay identity. With this particular audience, it was necessary for him to establish his former identity in order to gain access to the new. Bill ultimately achieved this through telling his story—"then they heard my story"; thus, the possession and performance of an ex-gay narrative validated his identity claims and won him acceptance in the group.

As mentioned in the introduction, the term *ex-gay* can be problematic for a number of reasons. One of these relates to this dynamic of tension between old and new identities. Many individuals for whom the term *ex-gay* would be historically accurate with respect to their sexual history and former identity conception concede that while it has a degree of accuracy, they do not like the term itself. Numerous individuals commented to me that they do not like being defined by what they "used to be" or by "what they're not." This can be seen in example (11), which is a response given to the question "What do you think of the term *ex-gay*?"

- (11) Deborah: Me personally, I don't like it. It's identifying with the old man.<sup>9</sup>  
[...] I can't identify with homosexuality today. I am no longer a homosexual.

Example (11) shows that "ex-gay" is an identity label that Deborah does not wish to wear. Whereas Bill's indexing of previous homosexual identity boosts his claim to newness in (10), Deborah and many others feel that such identification with the past diminishes their current identity status.

There is great variation of opinions among ex-gay individuals with respect to the appropriate terms for an evolving and transforming identity, especially where sexuality is concerned. Considering the care with which names and labels are both acquired and removed in this community, it is not surprising to find objections to the term. Regardless of the differing stances on the terms and issues, what we can be certain of is that the language matters.

## 6. Conclusion

Liang (1997) asserts, "the presentation and construction of the self is a social process conducted through the telling of a personal narrative" (p. 288). Here I have examined some of the aspects of ex-gay narratives and some of the language processes involved in constructing a *new* self. Ex-gay individuals usually have a coming-out story as the initial component of their narratives; minimally, there is an acknowledgement and naming of homosexuality. However, the presence (or introduction) of religious discourse and moral conviction against homosexual practice then creates an identity conflict between their perceived sexual and spiritual identity. Because these individuals privilege their religious convictions over acceptance of gay or lesbian identity, they begin an intentional process of

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<sup>9</sup> *Old man* is used frequently in the New Testament as a metaphor for the self that is associated with sinful behavior and attitudes prior to conversion to Christianity. E.g., "Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the *old man* with his deeds," Colossians, chapter 3, verse 9 (New King James Version).

being re-named. Ex-gay narratives are textually layered, multi-voiced, and processual in complex ways. Identity is being discursively re-created through the interaction of self-narratives and the religious meta-narrative which is mediated through the Biblical text and claimed dialogue between God, the self, and others.

In the same way that coming-out stories are performative acts that not only express but also serve to create the gay self (Wood, 1997), ex-gay narratives are also performative acts of identity. Language is the mediator that brings the self in line with both lived experience and spiritual beliefs. Talk is a primary tool throughout the process of both effecting and enacting the desired identity transformation. For future study, the theology of language itself is critical to understanding ex-gay narratives and the conceptions of identity they represent. Evangelical Christians in particular anchor themselves in a meta-narrative to which they look to define their identity and frame the story of their lives. Their understanding of a God who creates by speaking and calls Himself the Word powerfully affects their own use of language and story, and I seek to explicate this further.

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