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# Creating Meaning out of Difference: The Discourse of Alternative Relationships

Julian Imbrescia  
*Carnegie Mellon University*

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Julian Imbrescia

Advisor: Dr. Linda Flower

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## Abstract

This inquiry serves as an experiment for understanding how young gay men talk about love and find meaningful relationships. It explores the need to interpret an emerging discourse around the relationships of these men, a discourse that does not fit the stereotypes and conventions of heterosexual dating, marriage, or romantic love. An equally important need motivating this study involves finding ways to explain the discourse to others, in ways that hope to transform popular understandings of what a “relationship” is. After identifying critical aspects of this discourse and wrestling with powerful counterarguments in current public discussions, this inquiry finds ways to situate problems within a larger debate. The basis of research here involves an extensive collection of data from young gay men – from formal interviews, to notes on conversations, to reflective prose. The perspectives these men offer include how they negotiate both the need to create a shared understanding and the need to discuss the inevitable tensions in relationships. This combination of serious reflective engagement with a very real social issue, and close observation based on an experimental way of knowing, will aid in the goal of creating a discussion built around discourse, shared concerns, and different perspectives.

## Chapter 1: Introduction and Significance

This is an inquiry into the discourse of alternative relationships. What started out as a small class project has blossomed into an extensive experiment for understanding how young gay men talk about love and find meaningful relationships. At first, I anticipated using this inquiry as a legitimization for my own existence as a young gay man. I wanted to see if people felt the way I felt and know that I was in the company of others like me. I appreciated the sense of mutuality that I discovered, but it was not fulfilling enough. Through a deeper inquiry, I saw a gap that needed to be filled. I began to identify significant differences between the discourse of young gay men and the discourse of straight individuals. But even then, a critique of others and a critique of those like me only served a limited purpose. Thus, I sought to develop these critiques in a way that would allow all of us to talk across these differences so as to imagine the possibility that everyone can look at the options available to them and make decisions accordingly.

Simply stating “people in traditional relationships do x, and people in alternative relationships do y” does not help solve any problems of difference. It actually just helps create more distance between the two discourses. We currently live in a society that often supports the rights of gay individuals, yet the relationships and ways of discussing gay love are often marginalized and ignored. Too many times, the mainstream misinterprets what it means to live as a gay man operating within a straight discourse that only accounts for one form of a relationship. Many of these individuals from the mainstream do not realize that they are not only limiting the discourse surrounding relationships, but are also

imposing on marginalized discourses a societal way of thinking and talking about them. With this inquiry, I hope to uncover the situated knowledge young gay men offer in how they understand relationships and place this knowledge into a conversation with the larger discourse.

This alternative relationship discourse seeks to push common notions of what a “relationship” is into unfamiliar territory and emerge with a new definition. Theory-based research is useful here, but it is not the sole driving force. Rather, drawing on the personal experiences of roughly one hundred young gay men from across the country is the foundation for this inquiry. These sorts of personal stories help us to identify an area for discussion, and through these individuals’ rhetorical agency, I believe we can talk about different types of relationships and share them together.

In the absence of extensive sources written on this precise topic, I have gathered a multitude of perspectives through series of interviews, both formal and informal, and paired these with rhetorical discussions of literacy and public engagement, and also with queer studies discussions of gender and marriage. Indeed, many of the tools used in the field of literacy have useful applications to this study. The method of garnering information via interviews helps us to think more intimately about problems people see or problems I identified that I pursued further with the individuals I interviewed.

By uncovering distinct features of this discourse, it is necessary to understand that the responses collected reflect the current social realities. Thus, these men acknowledge that their present decisions to engage in a specific

alternative relationship are in a state of flux. As they navigate through their lives, their opportunities and circumstances may, and probably will, change. Yet what is important here is the reflective way of thinking that these men offer for us. This inquiry will seek to understand how traditional models contrast with these features, ones that many would often neglect, but others would regard as just part of a different way of thinking about relationships.

As can be expected, when we begin to shape and identify different forms and practices, tensions and contradictions will arise. The problem of mutuality and commitment is one such issue. Patterns of communication will be identified as solutions, but the actual ways in which these young men think that pursuing their interests will work out for them will be up to them. There are many factors coming into play within each discussion, including legal issues, religious traditions, family life, etc., and to some extent, this discourse is able to answer some questions but sometimes it cannot. The purpose for this inquiry is to articulate how people are talking about relationships. Arguing against definitions of marriage or metaphors surrounding images of true love are not meaningful discussions. The right and wrong of a discourse are not important, nor is the task of creating a dichotomy.

There are multiple sides to this dialogue, from the moral to the social to the ethical, and with each perspective we see that people are actively thinking and talking about their relationships. Not only this, but they are staking their choices on their arguments. The claims that are brought up, therefore, are the sets of attitudes and beliefs that these people articulate. They each bring to the table the “story

behind the story,” in ways that will bring validation to this marginalized way of speaking about relationships.

What happens to these men farther down the line will remain unclear, to us and to the young men themselves. The question of durability within each of these relationships will be called into question each time a new claim arises. “Are these relationships going to prove true for these individuals?” The answer is that we do not know. Maybe this is only a young gay man’s discourse, and maybe it is not. Some of these men remain confident that they will carry their habits forward as they get older and adapt them. For anyone reading this inquiry, however, the focus should remain on the discussion currently occurring within the discourse itself.

There are two goals here for this inquiry. The first is to identify and lay out a discourse of alternative relationships as seen through the eyes of young gay men. The second is to situate it within the larger, dominant discourse so as to draw the larger public into a deeper understanding. I firmly believe that we can all experience what is outlined here as a shared difficulty. Through listening to these young gay men’s conversations, others can begin to take their voices seriously. Not only this, but they can also begin to ask themselves the same questions. This multi-voiced inquiry is important to discuss because it stresses the importance of personal fulfillment and the need to discuss alternative options. A relationship requires the individuals to be on clear terms to make it work; even those engaging in the most casual of relationships need to be clear with each other. Indeed, everyone in a relationship, whether gay or straight, needs to know this. Each human being should



be open to exploring what his or her own personal needs are and then be comfortable enough to live them out with another person.

## Chapter 2: Why Literacy?

This inquiry describes the social practices involved in the situated activity of negotiating alternative relationships. To most effectively address the complexities and differences outlined in these practices, the study draws upon the field of literacy to help make sense of all the words, texts, conversations, and online posts these men provided for this inquiry. The basis for the understanding of literacy used here is the assertion that literacy is a social practice which involves not only observable units of behavior, but also values, attitudes, feelings, and social relationships (Street 12). Thus, using literacy studies as a research tool will help justify our ways of thinking about discourses like this one and teach us how they work. We can see the ways men these men talk about and negotiate relationships as a set of literate practices that exists within a discourse of relationships.

### 2.1 Broader Definition of Literacy

The decision makers observed in this discourse are not simply young gay men; they have multiple identities and draw on multiple resources in literate activities, from orally negotiating the terms of a relationship to openly writing about their relationship choices online. These unique actions are situated within the context of the social and cultural practices of which they are part; thus, they show a

convergence of the appropriated conventional discourse surrounding relationships and the criteria for a valid alternative relationship within the members of this discourse community of young gay men.

The academic perspective that understands literacy as socially embedded is part of the field that has come to be known as New Literacy Studies (NLS). It is the result of a massive “social turn” away from focusing on individual behavior and individual minds to focusing on social and cultural integration (Gee, Street). NLS are ethnographic and focus on the social nature of literacy, on micro-literacy events and the practices that shape them (Barton and Hamilton, Heath). Contemporary literate practices are embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices and are influenced not only by the cultural history of three thousand years of literacy, but also by centuries of organized religion, a hundred years of compulsory schooling, and even the technological boom of the Internet. Therefore, literate practices are as fluid, dynamic, and changing as the lives and societies of which they are part (Barton and Hamilton 13). In addition to its focus on literate practices, literacy studies will also help us see how these practices work within a larger Discourse community and how they incorporate values, beliefs, and identities.

The history and definitions of literacy have applied to understanding all types of discourses, from the discourse of a social group working on an identity to a counterpublic discourse asserting itself in the larger public sphere. The characteristics of these discourses and the questions they raise are some of the same issues that literacy has dealt with over its history, so that now, we can use literacy as a tool for understanding this discourse.

Notions of discourse see literacy as helping us understand the way people write, the way they talk, the rules they make, the connections they make in their social lives, and the common themes they create. With a broader definition, literacy and its history help us see all of these discourse features through one complete lens. The young gay men who articulate alternative relationships challenge us to understand their discourse from a variety of perspectives. It is not just the words they say to one another; rather, this discourse encompasses text, written thoughts, conversations, online chats, computer profiles, and group discussions. As we progress through this inquiry, it becomes very important to take note of the complexity, and make use of our new understandings of literacy as tools that help us uncover its meaning. Thus, literacy and its history will help the reader later understand how to become “literate” in the discourse of alternative relationships. “Literate” here will mean that you will have the ability to become conscious of another discourse and identity, and be aware of the struggles and power relations that revolve around it. Not only this, but the reader can think more critically about the way things are and imagine alternatives to the status quo of relationships (Shor 24).

## 2.2. A History of Literacy

Historically, the subject of literacy is immense and complex and can only be understood in terms of its historical development (Graff vii). The supposed impact of literacy on lives, language, intellect, and social outcomes has resulted in many sweeping claims and broad debates about the presumed consequences of literacy

leading to many longstanding controversies. These claims have involved formal differences and similarities between spoken and written language, which are supposed to underlie many educational problems as well as ongoing discussions of the role of literacy in the economic arena.

The debates about the nature of literacy have been politically important as well, since they have often involved claims about “great divides.” Research in this area has often presumed dichotomies such as literate versus illiterate, written versus spoken, educated versus uneducated, and modern versus traditional, making claims about fundamental differences in humankind (Collins and Blot 3, 9). Most notable in a period recognized as the modern era is the work of classicists such as Walter Ong and Jack Goody. Goody argued that literacy is a “technology of the intellect” that leads to basic changes in thinking as well as providing the foundations for basic “transformations of social organization” (in Collins and Blot, 2003). Ong also made a case for literacy as a “socially determining technology, the pivot around which major differences between oral and literate cultures are drawn,” with writing enlarging the potential of language to restructure thought (in Collins and Blot, 2003).

The contrast between text-based mode of thought considered to be modern and scientific, and utterance-based mode of thought considered to be premodern and prescientific is supposed to underlie many educational problems. These literacy debates, however, have been largely inconclusive with critics noting numerous problems with literacy claims (Street, Collins and Blot 25).

The NLS response has been to argue that literacy does not necessarily lead to any of the social outcomes attached to it. By focusing on micro-literacy events and practices rather than on measuring the extent to which different individuals or groups possess a particular set of skills, NLS shifted focus from standardized skills to literate practices. The field analyzes how literacy is used and valued by people in different social contexts as seen from their own perspective and often focuses on the central role of power relations (Street 2). These approaches are particularly relevant to the discourse here because they help the reader when looking at how these men actually use words and how they articulate their relationship to another person. Not only that, but as the reader will see, the context in which these relationships operate matters a great deal, depending on the type of the relationship, the feelings involved, and the location where it takes place.

Barton and Hamilton also point out that these practices are often patterned social institutions and power relations, and some literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential than others (7). For example, in 1976, Scribner and Cole's study of literacy among the Vai in Liberia was a major contribution to the literacy divide debate by presenting a practice account of literacy. The researchers found three different literacies operating among the people, with only English literacy being school-linked and the indigenous Vai script and an Arabic literacy used for religious purposes. Scribner and Cole found that illiterate adults particularly in urban areas shared some of the skills and attitudes usually only associated with literate persons. They concluded that cognitive attributes were the outcome of

particular social practices such as schooling and not direct results of the acquisition of literacy (1981).

Although claims have been made for the skills resulting from literacy, a historical perspective has not settled the issue of what literacy is, nor have ethnographic field studies. Research on the consequences of literacy continue to reveal that there are various complex political, economic, social, and personal forces that either foster or hinder literacy's potential to bring about change, as can the variety that is practiced (Street). In addition, misconceptions lead to the view that literacy is essentially the same thing for everyone, is simply a technical skill, and as such, is separate from any social context.

Literacy often continues to be viewed as the singular cause of technological, social, and economic developments that privileges one social formation as if it were natural and universal (Scribner and Cole in Gee 58). Even where evidence exists to assume the transformative effects that literacy can have, the role of literacy is always much more complex and contradictory, and deeply intertwined with other factors than the literacy myth allows. However, although deep questions have been raised about the literacy myth, the question still remains, "What good does (could) literacy do?" (Gee 26, 33).

### 2.3 Tools

Aside from providing the reader with a valuable way of approaching this discourse, literacy studies also provides a means to see firsthand how individuals like these young men take agency in their lives and their communities. It helps us to

draw out the voices they have that would otherwise have been silenced by more dominant ones (Flower 21, 2008). The evolution of literacy studies is interesting to bring up in this inquiry because it helps the reader recognize that literacy does not only include the ways individuals read and write. Rather, a historical overview has shown the reader that the field of literacy studies also recognizes how others construct meaning out of the different ways they communicate. In this case, the patterns of communication revolve around how individuals articulate and carry out a relationship.

#### *Literacy as a Community Resource*

Literacy is still an important focus in contemporary society from being seen as a set of autonomous skills with deterministic consequences to recognizing that there are multiple literacies embedded in various social contexts (Collins and Blot xi). The autonomous literacy models assumed that there is a clear cumulative distinction between literacy and orality and in initial and subsequent formations, argued that literacy of the West is somehow exceptional to other literacies. It also claimed that literacy has cognitive effects apart from the context where it exists and the issues to which it is put in a given culture. (Gee). They think of literacy as a uniform set of techniques and language use as having identifiable stages of development and clear predictable consequences for culture and cognition (Collins and Blot 4). Misconceptions lead to the view that literacy is intrinsically neutral and separate from its social context and uses.

Emerging from anthropological and historical criticism of claims made for an autonomous literacy, literacy's causal role in social and cognitive development was questioned and the situated study of multiple literacies developed. The situated perspective of focusing on the diversity and social shaping of literacy expanded and is best exemplified in detailed ethnographic studies of discourse, which undermine the notion of separate domains of orality and literacy (Collins and Blot 4). This ideological model recognizes that what matter are the social practices into which people are apprenticed as part of a social group, attempting to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and theorizing literacy in terms of the ideologies in which the literacies are embedded, rather than technical or neutral terms (Street 7).

Like the literacy models of Scribner and Cole, those produced by theorists like Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street are also practice models, providing alternative, flexible means for understanding literate practices and literacies in both traditional and complex societies. They deal with literacy in action and focus on what can be done with literacy and accomplished with the use of text and words, shifting the emphasis from the consequences of literacy for society to the study of its uses by individuals and its functions in particular groups.

Gee also argues that abstracting literacy from its social setting to make claims for literacy as an autonomous force in shaping the mind or the culture simply leads to a dead end (Gee 58). Literacy, therefore, has no effect and meaning apart from its use in particular cultural and social contexts, and it also has different effects and outcomes in different contexts.



The shift from a conception of literacy located in individuals to ways in which people utilize literacy so that it becomes a community resource, realized in social relationships, is important to us here. However, some theorists point out that the shift away from literacy as an individual attribute is perhaps the biggest difference from more traditional accounts. This conceptual shift does not ignore the individual, discrete skills of writing and speaking as cultural practices, but rather incorporates these and shifts the focus to a concern with the extent that literate tasks are jointly achieved; it looks at the implications of collaborative activities in particular social circumstances through procedures and practices (Prinsloo and Brier 19).

For purposes in this inquiry, a discourse of alternative relationships grounded in literacy depends on the voices of individuals and their surrounding discourse communities. This approach will ultimately recognize and use these men's approaches to formulate a working hypothesis for us all, about how we might construct meaningful relationships and appreciate the perspective these young men offer.

As already noted, the shift to plural literacies in the 1980s and the redefining of literacy based on literate practices and sociocultural contexts is referred as NLS. NLS carefully documents how literate practices vary from one context to another basing literacy on real texts and lived practices located in time, space, and Discourse - not in terms of skills or competencies (Gee).

A key concept of NLS is the idea of communicative practice. Street defines communicative practices as the social activities through which language or

communication is produced. Taking the definition one step further, this includes the ways in which these activities are embedded in institutions and domains, which are also implicated in other social, political, and cultural processes (Prinsloo and Brier 18). Indeed, to interpret the discourse of alternative relationships, one needs to recognize the ways in which its features are embedded in institutions and domains. This will help the reader strategically make sense of why a young gay man might “contradict” himself by speaking or acting differently in his public life as opposed to an online discussion, for example.

As one navigates this discourse, it is important to note how it takes shape and situates itself within the larger community. What literacy has also demonstrated for the purposes of inquiry is how discourses like this one are able to create a deliberative public sphere, but only after they are able to confront and understand their larger surroundings. The way you articulate your relationship preferences obviously affects how you live out your life. But, the ways in which another young man’s choices differ from yours could be a valuable resource as you think about redefining or incorporating his words into a new definition for yourself.

Therefore, in the study of literacy as a social practice, although literacy is understood as “concrete human activity,” the focus is not just what people do with literacy, but also their understandings about what they do, the values they give to their actions, and the ideologies and practices that encapsulate their use of literacy. This introduces the concepts of literate events and literate practices, which provide a lens and a methodology to see behind the surface appearance of reading, writing, and speaking to underlying social and cultural meanings (Collins and Blot xi).

### *Literate Event*

The notion of a literate event stresses the situated nature of literacy, which always exists in a social context. Heath further characterizes the term as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants’ interactions and their interpretive processes” (50). Street continues that the concept of literate events is useful because it enables researchers to focus on particular situations where things are happening and can be seen (10). For example, this inquiry harnesses meaning from literate events like blog writing, face-to-face conversations, and personal descriptions, where words and negotiations are essential to these men’s (as well as our own) understanding of their unique perspectives of relationships. Literate events, therefore, are shaped by occasions where language is part of the participants’ interactions, as well as their interpretive processes and strategies (Heath).

Observing studies like Heath’s reveals that central to this view of literacy are the activities where literacy has a role, along with the people and actions that constitute them. These actions may involve written text, as in an online chat, or words central to an activity and discussion, like articulating personal preferences. Some literate events may also be regular, repeated activities linked to routine sequences which may be part of formal procedures and expectations of social institutions; for example, asking someone out and planning a date (Barton and Hamilton 8). Other events may be structured by more informal expectations and pressures of various groups (Barton and Hamilton 9). An example here could include feeling pressured to go home with someone at the end of the night.

If the concept of a literate event is used on its own, it becomes problematic, as it remains descriptive and does not tell how meanings are constructed. Therefore, although theorists like Heath focus on written language, a literate event often encompasses more than language itself, as it is not just about texts and words, but all the actions around them. If we only looked at the text these young men provided, we would only have a glimpse of the ways this discourse works and shifts within different contexts. In this process, language may be peripheral to the total event, as people can be incorporated into the literate practices of others without reading or writing a single word (Barton and Hamilton 13). Theorists James Collins and Richard Blot also argue that focusing on communicative practices captures a range of modalities including visual, gestural, oral, and written (Collins and Blot xiii). Thus, we not only want to look at the word choices and the terms of these relationships; we want to see how they actual play out in these men's lives.

### *Literate Practice*

In his development of the social approach to literacy, Street gives the reader another tool for understanding this discourse with the concept of literate practices, which are a person or group's responses to a particular life demand that involves written language in some way (Street 11). Literate practices are also a broader concept than literate events; they attempt to include both the literate event and the knowledge and assumptions about what the event is, and then decide what gives it meaning. These practices handle the events and patterns around literacy and link them to something broader, of a cultural and social kind (Street 11). Literate events

refer to this broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading, writing, and speaking in cultural contexts. For example, this discourse attempts to describe not only how these men might define a “friends with benefit” relationship; it actively engages the reader to notice how these men articulate this term with others, how fulfilling it ends up being for them, how they reflect back and analyze this choice of relationship, and how they address conflicting views.

Academic scholar Mike Baynham is also helpful to our definition of a literate practice. He describes it as a “concrete human activity” that involves not just the objective facts of what people do with literacy, but also what they associate with what they do, how they construct its value, and the ideologies that surround it. These practices refer to particular ways of thinking about and doing literacy; they cannot be wholly contained in observable units of behavior or activities. Instead, the resultant activities and behavior associated with language will involve values, attitudes, feelings, patterns of privileging and purposes, and social relationships, which are often processes internal to people (Street 12). This is why the inquiry here draws upon situated knowledge, and uses it to drive past abstractions. Situated knowledge helps to observe behavior and social conceptualizations that give meaning to these individuals’ lives, a meaning that would otherwise go unnoticed.

This discourse uses the idea of literate practices as a way of conceptualizing the link between reading, writing, and speaking activities and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help shape (Barton and Hamilton 7).

People attempt to make each of these practices meaningful and valuable, each in themselves and as a configuration of elements all related to each other in a specific meaningful way. However, the individual elements in a configuration are meaningful and valuable only as they are related within that configuration (Gee).

This study is not just about describing the personal and social goals of the discourse through literate practices and literate events. Rather, it is also about situating itself within a larger context, calling for active reflection. These literate tools help us formulate and explain the discourse because they help create a framework for understanding the voices of these marginalized individuals. However, to the point that this discussion could end up as nothing more than a one-way conversation, an expanded view of literacy also helps us understand that these practices and events also call for us to exchange perspectives, negotiate meanings, and create understandings (Flower, 2008).

Literate practices straddle the distinction between individual and social worlds and exist in relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than being just a set of properties residing in individuals. They include both the social processes that connect people with one another, and the shared cognitions represented in ideologies and social identities (Barton and Hamilton 8).

## 2.4 Multiple Identities and Discourse

A problem that this discourse tries to deal with involves issues about multiple identities. When they confront voices outside of their discourse, young gay men often find that these confrontations also lead to questions about personal

identity. Issues of identity become problematic for them because they carry pressure from the straight world, as well as the world of veteran gay men. Literacy helps us analyze these issues by offering up a unique way to see how young gay men actually confront these issues through speech, text, and actions.

A powerful result of using literacy to frame these problems of identity is that this inquiry was able to notice how young gay men are able to more comfortably negotiate these differences from outside discourses. They are able to construct a problem and identify ways of solving it through literate action. For example, many young gay men feel a lack of acceptance from the discourse of older gay men, a generation above theirs, who feels that these younger individuals are not truly “gay” because they have not experienced enough to be counted as such. Similarly, the discourse of straight individuals insists that young gay men do not belong because they are “gay,” and cannot fully exist in a straight world. The discourse outlined here will be a way to develop an identity for these men, as a way to solve this problem of identity.

Thus, as people do not assume simple, singular identities, but rather inhabit multiple identities, acquiring certain literate practices may involve becoming a certain type of person. This will include not only mental processes and strategies, but also decisions as to whether to employ written language at all, which types of reading and writing to engage in, discourse choices, feelings and attitudes, as well as practical procedures for activities (Gee).

Decisions and choices, discursive resources available, and competing discourses of street, school, and workplaces construct identity and often shape and

are shaped by various literate practices (Gee). Identity, therefore, becomes a crucial factor as it is implicated and constructed by the literate activities and the linguistic choices of other people. This can sometimes be problematic for individuals who experience a change in identity when operating within another discourse, as we will see in the case of young gay men living outside of the mainstream heterosexual discourse, and the discourse of older gay men. In such an endeavor, a literate practice may be encountered that belongs to people with different social identities. To take on these new identity aspects when engaging in these practices, there is often a mixed desire for and resistance to insider status depending on how far a person is “colonized” or “appropriated.” (Gee 147, Bartholomae 135). Multiple literacy models reveal not only conditions contributing to approved literate practices, but they also reveal subversive practices which result in damaged identities, feelings of inadequacy, and the self-defined tensions with authorized literacies (Collins and Blot xviii).

Michael Foucault expands on identity conflict by arguing that all literate practices are embedded in and controlled by discursive fields of power and knowledge. This power is manifested not only in top-down flow, but extends itself in capillary fashion becoming part of daily action, speech, and life (Foucault, 1972). However, although literacy is shaped by power, this is not always some concentrated force that compels individuals or groups to behave in accordance with the will of an external authority (Collins and Blot 5).

The more subtle dimensions of power exist in the tensions between primary and secondary discourse types. Gee distinguishes between these broad Discourse



types, defining primary discourses as those to which people are apprenticed early in life during their primary socialization as members of particular families within their sociocultural settings (Gee 137). Primary discourses form the first social identity and are the base within which later discourses are acquired or resisted. Second discourses are those to which people are apprenticed as part of their socialization within various local, state, and national groups and institutions outside early and peer group socialization - for example, churches, schools, and offices (Gee 137).

The boundary between the two Discourses is not set in stone and is constantly being renegotiated and contested in society and history. Many social groups filter aspects of secondary discourses into their children's acquisition of them, and people also strategically use aspects of their primary discourse to pull off performances in some of their secondary discourses (Heath, Gee 138). Gee uses the concept of a "borderland discourse" to describe the structure and negotiation of power through communication models like literacy (Gee 137). Thus, he gives us a method for looking at non-traditional literate practices and events as ways to understand an emerging discourse like alternative relationships. Young gay men can ultimately find ways to explore their discourse and understand it as a parallel to other, more dominant discourses like those of straight individuals.

Using literacy as a framework for this inquiry helps us better describe and discuss the meanings of literacy through the practices of young gay men and their alternative relationship choices. This discourse follows the belief that literacy is always situated within specific social practices that shape and are shaped by these individuals' actions and negotiations in response to recurrent situations within their

discourse community. This literacy work will help us make sense of the various sources of data collected, from the hour-long conversations to the intimate reflections posted online, and see how they work within the discourse.

Each literate practice described here will further the goal to help those outside of this discourse better understand how to become literate in the language of alternative relationships. Throughout the inquiry, we will be uncovering ways in which we can see literate achievement, instances where individuals can successfully understand and negotiate alternative relationships. This inquiry will recognize the problem of trying to articulate these alternatives, how these men realize that in looking to the standards of our culture, they see no patterns to interpret somebody else's relationship within their community. The struggles to uncover what their words and their actions mean as well the subsequent implications of their choices is work for the field of literacy. Thus, in the spirit of Linda Flower's work in community literacy, literacy is no longer seen as a rhetorical skill, based simply on reading and passive reception, but on writing, argument, and public dialogue by young gay men engaging in a larger conversation (22, 2008).

### Chapter 3: Beginning an Inquiry into Alternative Relationships

When critical voices like those of well-intentioned mothers and straight friends sit down to talk with young gay men about their relationships and lifestyles, their notions surrounding what these men think and do are often not accurate. An outmoded set of assumptions reflective of the mainstream discourse tends to reveal a rift between young gay men and the people they come in contact with. The

concerns that these men engage in promiscuous sex or that they assume certain gender roles in relationships display a need to talk about these issues. They set up the foundation for beginning an inquiry that seeks out ways to talk across differences, to find ways that are able to mutually construct an understanding across both parties. Behind simple phrases like “friends with benefits” lie very different interpretations from each side. Unsettling images of a son serial dating or a friend going home with a stranger form the basis of what the critical public uses to construct their images of young gay men.

The logic surrounding popular notions of what a relationship is often enforces an understanding that what is the most popular also carries the greatest authority. Unfortunately, this creates a multitude of issues, namely that those types of understandings reinforce the power structure and social assumptions that perpetuate problems (Flower, 2003). Thus, if this inquiry seeks to help others within the larger discourse understand and come to terms with alternative views of relationships, we all need to question the image that what we think or what we do is the right and only way.

As an inquiry guided by literate practices and everyday achievements, it is difficult to confront critical voices that usually have the authority to speak on behalf of others, rather than listening to and incorporating these marginalized views into the mainstream. There is a tendency for prestigious academic discourses to remain very theoretical in these circumstances. What becomes important, however, is to avoid generalizing experiences and remaining abstract about them. The things the

skeptical public does not wish to discuss or specify may often be the hardest to articulate, but they are also the most valuable.

John Dewey offers us a great deal of insight for how to begin talking with alternative discourses like this one, even across such differences. His work in education informs us that the starting point of any process of thinking is something going on, something which just as it stands is incomplete or unfulfilled. Its point, its meaning, lies literally in what it is going to be, in how it is going to turn out (Dewey 112, 1944). The rationale here, that the meaning of something lies in the outcome, is an important truth one could apply to alternative relationships. The pragmatic meaning of a relationship is not what a typical straight couple would regard as a path to marriage or never-ending commitment, but rather it is the unique outcome that two individuals seek to create.

Sharing across differences necessitates compassion, as well as intellect, on the part of the readers, those individuals who are interested in and willing to engage in this discussion. To begin talking about alternative relationships, one must enter into the discussion with the ability to actually conceptualize how marginalized individuals like these men can interpret ideas – the assumptions they have, the priorities they set, and the kinds of experiences they discuss. The pain and the desire young gay men feel each time they try to assert their views and see them suppressed must be felt across all parties. Then, our real dialogue can commence. Paulo Freire argues that dialogue “requires an intense faith in man, faith in his power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in his vocation to be more fully human (which is not a privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all men) ...

Founding itself upon love, humility, and faith, dialogue becomes a horizontal relationship of which mutual trust between dialoguers is the logical consequence.” If we simply assume that the mainstream discourse surrounding traditional relationships is the authority on the issue, then our discussion could end right now by creating a hierarchy that pins people who are the problem against those who are the solvers. In this case, those of us with alternative views of relationships could solve our problems by adapting the mainstream and thus become accepted. As a result of this mindset, however, there are no practical outcomes. Instead, to uncover a more thoughtful and better-informed solution, we enter into an inquiry that asks us to forget about hierarchies and certainties.

The young gay men who took part in this inquiry are also curious about what other individuals have to say in regards to their experiences. They are interested in how readers would see this problem, and how they might communicate this knowledge to the larger public. The inquisitive nature of these men regarding what others would think conveys that they are up for constructing and communicating their relationship ideas with others, negotiating as they work through the possibilities.

In the spirit of inquiry then, I am able to enter into multiple conversations with these men like myself, because we have an understanding of trust based off of our similar experiences. However, in asking young gay men about something as complex as “relationship preferences,” one can likely assume that we are going to collect a lot of common sense and predictable responses about what a relationship would entail for them. This is a good start, but these only lead to more

generalizations. Looking for critical incidents within each of these types of responses helps us determine what these men really mean. To do this, I ask these men to take their generalizations and make them more “operational.” What actually led them to make these choices in their relationships? In which types of relationships were they the happiest? Looking for and asking about specific events can help determine what people really want to say and get to the story behind the story.

In order to get past this barrier, I actively draw out the situated knowledge these men carry with them. Underneath the dialogues are useful resources, ones that take into consideration the trial and error, the learning from experiences, and the unarticulated meanings behind each man’s relationship. I am going to argue that this inquiry will be one way that young gay men can address the concerns of the skeptical public, by applying their situated knowledge to the assumptions people have about what these relationships actually are. Mothers often worry about their children and see gay relationships as promiscuous, and straight friends often view alternative relationships as a choice that involves a lot of unnecessary decisions. Young gay men see these as problems, and can articulate that their relationships contain more than limited observations surrounding one traditional image; rather they are mutually supportive, constructed relationships each articulated in a unique way. This inquiry will begin the attempt to talk across these differences, placing them in the open, so as to build more diversely informed, multi-vocal meanings (Flower 42, 2003).

Before the unpersuaded public begins to hear from these dissenting voices, it seems necessary to point out that in listening to and entering into dialogues we are unfamiliar with, we all run the risk of carrying an attitude of resistance. Many times, the public is resistant to hearing what other people have to say. Skeptics offer up walls of resistance to ideas they think of being alternative or too different from what they consider to be traditional. Usually, the resistance they feel forces them to oppose not just the concept of an alternative, but also the discussion itself. When we stand for something, unlike engaging in a critique, we are certain to have gotten (at least part of it) wrong. But we usually learn most when we attempt, fail, regroup, revise, and move forward again (Flower 129, 2008). This is just what men within the discourse of alternative relationships do. Listening to the stories they share should not be taken as a teaching lesson, since this is not a fully adequate basis for reflective action. Rather, given a situation like a relationship, a person actually has a lot to learn from voices of those they often tend to overlook and under-represent, like those of young gay men. The academic work going on here will demonstrate that in forming an alternative discourse around relationships, those within the larger public and those in the counterpublic of alternative relationships can all relate to each other. Maybe those of us inside the alternative will be acknowledged, or perhaps we will even be seen as equals.

By deliberately forming this inquiry around the premise that difference is not a problem, but rather a valuable tool for “constructing more grounded and actionable understandings,” readers can use this inquiry as a working hypothesis (Flower 42, 2003). Beginning to navigate through a discourse requires active

participation from everyone. The public must be open to negotiating its identity; not only this, but young gay men must also partner together to express their views and form a working identity.

The literate achievement in this discourse can be attained when you can articulate a specific model of a relationship that works for you. You find it possible to speak for what personally fulfills you. This type of achievement is built around the shared goal of inquiry and literate action, and your role in that partnership. Indeed, if the paradox of a working theory is that socially shared, broadly significant questions have personally constructed, locally situated answers, the paradox of identity was that it, too, seemed to be made, not found (Flower 117, 2008). The public offers up some ready-made roles for how individuals should participate in relationships: the husband, the wife, the boyfriend, the caregiver, etc., but if we engage into a larger discussion, one that encompasses more choices, then we will most likely realize that these societal roles are ones that we may not want to actually live. Therefore, in beginning the path to understanding alternative relationships, your identity is not something you bring with you; “it is not about who or what *you* are.” Instead, your identity is defined by the relationships you create and want to develop around you.

Each of us must construct a working theory of a relationship that will carry through for us. Young gay men identify that coming to terms with what they may want or need within a relationship is a difficult process, yet they also acknowledge the value in pragmatically exploring the meanings behind different types of relationships and the consequences each one entails. Dewey would call this an



experimental way of knowing. A preliminary goal of this inquiry is to place value on this type of activity. The method developed here will continue to stress an open-ended, flexible, and experimental approach to problems of practice and a critical examination of the consequences of means adopted to promote them (Dewey 1944). Young gay men will work together to develop a toolkit for seeking out rival interpretations of alternative relationships and challenge the attitudes the public attributes to their marginalized voices. The transformed understandings that will result from drawing out situated knowledge and conversing across differences should lead to views and actions about relationships that transcend the grounded and limited ones the public has. The “end-in-view” here is finding someone who can communicate back to you and help construct a fulfilling relationship.

## Chapter 4: Exchanging Dialogue within Discourse Communities

“A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.” –Gloria Anzaldua

Many young gay men identify that they feel as if they are living in a borderland, one in which that they are trapped between two distinct cultures, gay and straight. For these men, the struggle of straddling this border is something they have dealt with all of their lives. Admittedly, this is not a comfortable place to live in: it is full of contradictions and hardships as one navigates through multiple identities. Not only this, but words from either side offer up hateful and unwelcoming words, words that fence in these men so that they can never enter in

safely to either side. On one end is the gay community saying that these young men do not know what it means to be truly “gay;” on the other is the straight community saying that the same men do not belong because they are “different.”

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua offers up an intimate weaving of histories, legends, languages, and her own accounts to create a psychic borderland, physically situated between Mexico and the southwestern United States and present in the identities of many of its residents. This borderland both separates and unites a multitude of identities: Tex-Mex, Aztec, lesbian, gay, rich, poor, Indian, white, straight, and more. What is important to the discussion here is how Anzaldua does more than just stand at this border. In a very real sense, she is the borderland, with all of its contradictions, memories, and dreams. By using several voices (ethnographer, queer activist, Latina, poet, etc.) and by switching languages (Spanish, English, Nahuatl, Tex-Mex), she shows that the elements that comprise her identity are not in peaceful coexistence, but nevertheless live together in one person as well as within a society.

Much in the same manner that Gloria Anzaldua identifies herself as a border woman, caught living between the Texas-Mexican border, young gay men also experience similar feelings living as mestizos trapped in a land outlined with barbed wire.

In many ways, our cultures form our identities and our beliefs. The fact that the ideas adopted by the dominant cultures shape and predefine our identities is a harsh reality. These concepts exist as unquestionable, unchallenged, and are transmitted to us through the culture (Anzaldua 38). For many young gay men, the

best ways in which they can leave these ideas is to rebel and remove the façade that does not allow them to reflect behaviors true to themselves. Within these forms of rebellion, however, they also carry other identities that they must grapple with and decide to include or not include. For example, being raised Catholic and also coming to terms with one's sexual orientation is not a simple process, but it is a process nonetheless. This path to self-knowledge allows these men to more closely identify what it is that forms the core of their being. Many gay men cannot leave the spirituality they obtained from being raised in a religious family. However, some men explain that the values and morals they learned from going to a church helped instill in them a particular way to live out their gay relationships.

#### 4.1 Rebellion and Fear of Coming Out

Anzaldua tells us that the rebellions we decide to carry out also bring with them a sense of fear. Often times choosing to engage in a gay lifestyle at a young age invokes feelings of fear: afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, or the race, for being unacceptable, faulty, and damaged (Anzaldua 42). What outsiders usually perceive of decisions like these is that individuals are making a choice, one that is going to bestow a lot of problems on them. Mothers often do not understand these sorts of decisions from their gay sons, and whether they are choices or not, does not matter. Something as fundamental as a relationship preference is difficult enough as it is for most people, but for young gay men, there are also added pressures in dealing with how to actually live out their relationships and communicate their feelings to those outside of their discourse.

For obvious reasons then, many young gay men are convinced that if they tell their communities, families, and/or friends, then they will be completely rejected. To avoid rejection, many of us conform to the values of the culture, and push the unacceptable parts into the shadows (Anzaldua 42). Many young gay men often confess that they are not “out” to certain individuals. These people could be anyone from parents and family members to friends, or even the entire public. Even though they know inside where they stand, these men find it easier and more comforting to avoid rejection.

Leaving the unacceptable parts of ourselves in the closet still leaves the fear that we will be found out. This is true for many of us. To avoid this confrontation, young gay men in particular often find themselves projecting what they have learned from heterosexual males into their own identities. They conform and fit into the mainstream by utilizing words and actions they know as being acceptable to the general public. One gay man said that when he felt like he needed to act a certain way to avoid being labeled as gay, he found himself changing the way he talked and also the way he dressed. Similarly, when he would hang out with gay individuals, he found himself adapting to his surroundings in a different way. What is interesting in this distinction is that this man explained how in *both* circumstances, he felt like he was conforming. He certainly did not want his straight friends to think he was gay, but he also wanted his gay friends to treat him as a gay man. Though this illustrates an extreme example young gay men find themselves in, it adequately proves the point that these men search for and act out different literate and social practices based on where they are.

## 4.2 Mushfaking

James Gee would identify these acts of conforming as “mushfaking.” Though these young men find themselves involved in a process of taking up different discourse positions, this process also places them into a vicious cycle where they must deal with conflicting identities. These positions combine practices, values, and forms of language in recognizable “ways of being” in the world (Gee). It is the changing of identity when attempting to take up membership in a straight or older gay community that constitutes a “mushfake discourse.” Young gay men would agree that these discourses are “fake” insofar as they never feel fully part of the discourse of gays or straights, even though they may have all the tools necessary to make both believe that they are. However, they also combine this awareness with metacognition- recognizing the ways they deal with the dominant culture and then reflecting on their actions. David Bartholomae would argue that if these individuals speak with authority and assert themselves so that others believe that they are like them, then they are general members of that discourse.

Anzaldua takes the discussion one step further to say that these individuals become “aliens” in the dominant culture; thus, some young gay men can feel so alienated from either side that they resort to mushfaking to feel safe. Here no one is really safe, but rather petrified- they cannot respond, and they are again caught between “the space between the different worlds they inhabit.” (Anzaldua 42). This liminal consciousness young gay men find themselves in prevents them from engaging fully in either discourse, the straight or the “experienced” gay. Moreover, blocked from entering into either discourse, these men are left to deny themselves

and surrender. They resort to feeling like victims, with someone else calling the shots and remaining in control.

### 4.3 Constructing a Safe House

#### *Shared Discourse*

Navigating through these different discourses, young gay men actively search out ways to legitimate their own identities. Whether it be “mushfaking” their ways through the public or constructing a identity that mixes characteristics of gays and straights, these men are actually constructing the basis for a new reality. Each voice in this discourse is special, and serves as the grounding for individual liberation (Anzaldua).

This discourse of alternative relationships seeks to validate these individual voices and join them together to rewrite the dominant culture, bringing something ignored or misunderstood into “the consensual reality.” The voices of these men do not assert themselves in all the same ways. Some men find solace in blending into the mainstream, while others take a much more public approach, emerging from the enclave of young gay men and actively try to change the dominant culture. Literate practices and events helps us see that both the internal and public voices from these men contribute equally to the discourse. The various goals, constraints, and conventions employed by each demonstrate that these men are juggling and wrestling with the challenge of making meaning out of their situations. The dialogues and texts within this discourse help its members discover the ability to address conflicts from different angles. Not only this, but it also helps guide an

inquiry into an open discussion. As one man Curtis applied a quote from one of his favorite scholars to the young gay male community, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences." Curtis identifies himself as a man who does not feel comfortable making a public display of his identity, but he sees an immense potential in showing support for those who do. By first acknowledging differences within the discourse surrounding identity strategies, these men can give a fuller presence to their discourse, as something worth negotiating.

*What is a safe house?*

The way to begin a talk across differences is for this discourse to create a safe house, a place where these men can talk how they want to talk and seek out ways to challenge the mainstream in order to make their arguments acceptable.

Professor of literature and composition Suresh Canagarajah uses the idea of a safe house when he investigates what motivates individuals to learn a language and negotiate competing subject positions in conflicting discourse communities. In the spirit of Mary Louise Pratt, he defines them as social and intellectual spaces where groups can constitute themselves as horizontal, homogeneous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, and temporary protection from legacies of oppression (Pratt 40). The discourse among young gay men is very similar, and discussions like this one enable these men to converse freely, away from surveillance or criticism.

Canagarajah points out that minority communities have always collaboratively constructed sites of community underlife wherein they can celebrate suppressed identities and go further to develop subversive discourses that inspire resistance against their domination (Canagarajah 121). He uses examples of the African American community adopting a double life- convincing slave owners that they were fulfilling their expectations as slaves and also sharing a different identity with other slaves, in ways that would restore their feelings of dignity and humanity. For the disempowered who realize the difficulties of challenging the might of dominant groups directly, their patterns of resistance are simple acts in their everyday life for gaining a measure of control over their lives (Canagarajah 122).

Young gay men similarly construct individual safe houses for themselves throughout the public: at work, in school, in social settings, even at home. In fact, the rise in popularity of social networking sites greatly adds to the possibilities that these men can share a world with each other that cannot be taken away or amended by a more authoritative voice. As these safe houses become more widespread and accepted, it will be likely to assume that all young gay men will continue a safe house construction so as to develop a group culture and validate their alternative identities.

### *Safe house Strategies*

Much in the same way that Canagarajah says that students are different from minority communities because they do not have a history of well-tested strategies for negotiating conflicting identities, young gay men also do not have this advantage.



The rise in public acceptance for gay lifestyles has enabled men to take advantage of possibilities they had not foreseen a generation ago. As we will see from their conversations, there are problems as well as benefits for not being able to borrow on a history of community practices.

In thinking about the benefits of critical literacy for students, the same is true for young gay men. Critical literacy helps individuals examine their ongoing development, to reveal the subjective positions from which they make sense of the world and act in it (Shor 2). Students should be encouraged to go beyond adopting the normative textual conventions and learn to negotiate them, to develop a text that favors independent and critical thinking. But they are faced with two evils: to either follow slavishly the established rules of writing in a genre or not grapple with the conventions at all so that they can enjoy a freedom of expression (Canagarajah 132). Young gay men, therefore, can either follow the established ideas of relationships or not struggle with the ideas at all, so that they can be free to pursue and express a relationship that they want. Foucault argues that both extremes lead to forms of silencing. The former leads to the suppression of a voice in favor of dominant structures, while the latter is idealistic in believing that voice is possible without following any conventions whatsoever. We have begun to appreciate now that voice is developed in the interstices of discourses and rules (Foucault 215-237).

Canagarajah asserts that safe houses enable these individuals to position themselves strategically for an independent and creative voice. Not only this, but by allowing them to retain their heterogeneous discourses and speech acts, they help in the development of multivocal literacies (Canagarajah 132). Anzaldúa would

help us understanding a safe house with the phrase “entering into the serpent,” which she uses to convey a search for a deeper meaning, the creation of a meaning toward emancipation out of oppression. Within this process, she introduces the idea of a sixth sense, referred to as “la facultad,” which is the ability to identify oppression and seek a way to protect oneself from its negative effects. These are the types of strategies young gay men attempt to develop outside of the mainstream; every time they negotiate and live out a relationship that is alternative to the mainstream, they are “entering into the serpent.”

Safe houses, like the discussion here, lay out a way for young gay men to begin talking about their differences and negotiate alternative relationships with a fair share of critical distance from the public. Like any worthwhile discussion, however, dialogue cannot only take place within the confines of a safe house. At some point, these marginalized individuals must plunge back into the fray. Anzaldua points out that the process of healing the split between mainstream and marginalized understandings is complicated. It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging conventions ... At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once” (Anzaldua 100).

## Chapter 5: Alternative Relationship Frameworks

The emerging discourse surrounding gay love recognizes a growing way to talk about love and relationships. Due to a lack of marriage possibilities or even a

precedent that categorizes a majority of gay relationships, gay men identify a desire within themselves to create a relationship in a form that is more meaningful to them, given their position outside of the mainstream discourse. With each man searching for something unique and personal, this generates a large diversity of opinions and desires. This diversity, however, also demonstrates useful patterns that allow us to interpret their differences.

Gay men identify that alternative relationships within the gay discourse have a dynamic of power that is contradictory to straight discourse. Gay men within a relationship do not have to assume specific gender roles. There is no precedent that assumes one individual must be a “male” and the other be a “female.” Thus, gay men can have more equality. Young gay men argue that no one in a relationship has to feel as if they are going to be taken advantage of. Instead, the power dynamic within the relationship is much more fluid. And yet, because there is no constant power dynamic, there is not a clear model of how to create a domestic lifestyle. Since the existing model does not provide a template that gay men can follow, it tacitly relies on traditional patriarchal domination of a relationship.

Many young gay men also assert that a conventional relationship carries an outmoded set of assumptions, the greatest example being that love can only exist within a monogamous relationship. Conventional views do not account for other alternatives like gay marriage, open relationships, serial dating, or even promiscuity. Within each relationship, the concept of personal fulfillment forms the basis regardless of what type of alternative relationship it is. After recognizing that they are no longer constrained by conventional relationships, young gay men set out

to find a relationship that is personally fulfilling to them.

The true meaning of an alternative relationship goes beyond just sex and friendship. The complexity within each example of such a relationship reveals a deep connection to the self. The individuals I encountered for this inquiry see their relationships as ways they can legitimize a form of love that is going to make them happy. The alternative relationships are a way to ensure that the innermost desires we have can be achieved through our relationships.

In each alternative relationship, commitment and caring are still a part of love, but in different forms. Individuals can have different versions of how they define love and how strongly they demonstrate commitment to the other person. Thus, the discourse here is highly individualistic. All forms of relationships are valid within the discourse of alternative relationships. There is no judgment because all of the young gay men interviewed agree, "If your relationship works for you, then it is valid."

## 5.1 Relationship Types

### *Promiscuous Sex*

One example of an alternative relationship involves promiscuous sex. Some men find personal fulfillment in sex with strangers. They can frequent their favorite bar or belong to Internet sites that allow them to meet men to "hook-up" with, which could mean anything from watching a movie and cuddling, to kissing, to engaging in every sexual fetish.

*Friends with Benefits*

Some gay men also identify a similar but more moderate practice with their “friends with benefits.” This relationship usually takes place within a particular friend group, a college crowd, drinking buddies, etc. Friends with benefits are different from mere hook-ups because there is a long-term connection with the person. The individuals know each other through a common ground and act on their sexual attractions. Young men prefer this type of arrangement because they do not have to seek out strangers for sex; rather, they can engage in sexual practices with someone whose company they enjoy and someone they identify with on some sort of intellectual or emotional level. Not only this, but some gay men admit that a friend with benefits is much more preferable to a complete stranger, because the risk of contracting a sexual transmitted infection (STI) is reduced. These men feel that friends are more likely to confide in one another about STIs they could have; strangers might not feel the need to readily discuss such an issue.

Another example inside this type of relationship involves one large group of friends with benefits, in which everyone is single. Within this group, individuals are able to build up relationships with each other, be they emotional, intellectual, or purely sexual, without having to “date” anyone, and deal with the associated “commitment baggage.” Many times, young gay men who are already in a relationship will explain that the couple has friends with benefits. This means that the couple is sexually open with particular friends of theirs.

### *Serial Daters*

On the other hand, there are other young gay men who look for a single man to provide them all of their needs. Their ideal relationship involves a man who can provide them with complete fulfillment, the physical, the emotional, the intellectual, etc. However, young men who search for this type of ideal often categorize themselves as serial daters. Serial daters often times find they are not completely fulfilled with the man they are currently dating; which leads them to continue the dating process indefinitely, always hopeful that they will find the man that satisfies their personal needs.

One man likened his experiences to a chemistry experiment. When an individual first finds someone he likes, there is a lot of chemistry. In the process of getting to know the new partner and finding out what he has in common with the individual (or different from him), there is joy in the exploration. In chemistry terms, he sees how the relationship “bubbles” or “fizzes.” After the initial sparks subside and the chemistry between the two individuals stabilizes, he notices that the other person does not satisfy all of his needs. As a result, the man becomes addicted to the first part of the relationship, the part with all the sparks and bubbles. He continually starts different relationships so he can experience again and again the fulfillment he obtains from the initial connections. Searching for a never-ending honeymoon, he gets bored with the relationship and passes it up to find another man to possibly connect with in another fulfilling way.

### *Open Relationships*

Young gay men also talk a great deal about open relationships. There are many different types of open relationships, yet they all demonstrate again how individualistic these young men are in choosing a relationship. In this type of alternative relationship, the young men talk about what they are able to accept within the relationship. There is always some sort of exception or deviation from the traditional rules of a monogamous relationship. For example, many young men admit that should they become intoxicated and meet someone physically attractive that they end up having sex with, it would not harm their relationship.

Key words like “cheating” and “flirting” that carry so many negative connotations within a traditional relationship do not have the same meaning within the discourse of these men. Instead, “cheating” and “flirting” can be perceived as natural human emotions that in no way affect the love they have for their partners. Words like these are still used within this discourse; they just carry different meanings. Rather, when we look at the activities of cheating and flirting from these men in the discourse, they are both acceptable means of interaction with other men. Some men actually believe that by opening their relationships to the acceptance of cheating and flirting, the relationship can be stronger emotionally. They forget about sexual expectations and concentrate on the emotional and personal aspects of their relationship.

The expectation of loyalty does not carry the same weight within alternative relationships. Some young gay men in open relationships describe their relationship as a way to ease the burden they are facing in life at the moment. They

admit that the pressures of college, exams, job world, family life, friends, living away from home, etc. all add to the stress and anxiety of their current situation. These gay men more fully understand that adding more burdens from a relationship will only contribute to their stress. Something like an open relationship, for example, can relieve the burdens a relationship would place on an individual because it does not tie any man down too tightly.

The freedom of the relationship attempts to alleviate any potential burdens. These young individuals acknowledged that heartbreak often happens in traditional relationships because couples expect undying loyalty from partners, and they realize they are unable to keep that up those expectations. Young gay men articulated that open relationships, for them, work on the principle that the partner is free to see other people, and that this takes care of the expectation of loyalty. They believe that the freedom from expectation might make partners want to stick with their chosen partner anyway. "When no one is demanding that I be loyal, and when the relationship is completely free and voluntary, I see no reason to want to stray."

Both partners in this discourse understand that they have a unique bond between them that does not rest on either partner's fidelity. Meeting new people that they are attracted to does not infringe on their love for each other. Indeed, some gay couples will remain in an open relationship for the long-term. These men affirm that the expectations surrounding sex are not represented as the end-all to a relationship. In their open relationships, they identify their partner as someone that has certain qualities they admire. For example, perhaps the partner "makes me feel



safe, has goals in life, and has a great body.” This couple sees a great deal of potential within each other, yet they understand that they do not satisfy every personal desire. This same gentleman may end up having a serendipitous encounter with someone at a bar. The person he meets may be completely different than his partner because, maybe, he “has a great sense of humor and paints for a living.” In this circumstance, perhaps the connection is not physical; it may be purely emotional or intellectual. Getting to know this man is not “cheating” in an open relationship.

#### *Adaptation of Mainstream Monogamy*

Finally, there are young gay men that classify their relationship as the adaptation of the mainstream. These men are either in a monogamous relationship with a man, or they only date monogamously. These men have found someone they identify with and their personal fulfillments have been met from one person. The young gay men in monogamous relationships describe their partner as someone that has the same interests and stimulates them physically, emotionally, intellectually, etc.

These men also admit that there is a blurry line between a monogamous relationship and serial dating. Many of these men, like the serial daters, are looking for “the one,” and enter into series of relationships in hopes of finding that person. Therefore, those in monogamous relationships run the risk of serial dating.

Monogamy is not viewed the same within gay culture as it is within conventional society because it is not the standard. Young gay men who do not

think about monogamy and those who do not want to practice it argue that it is not natural. They contend that human beings are naturally non-monogamous and are controlled by the mainstream. The conventional discourse is somehow brainwashing young gay men to think of monogamy as the ideal. It is an “artificial artifact of modern civilization.” Everything from movies to novels begs young men to ask if he is “the one,” and to remain hopeful for true love. These types of water-cooler conversations have been heard over and over, yet even in the alternative relationship discourse, it is still just as difficult for young gay men to have a monogamous relationship as straight couples. Young gay men note, however, that since they have so many options of alternative relationships, they have a better chance of being well-informed enough to make a choice that works for them.

### *Experiencing Multiple Forms of Relationships*

It is interesting to point out that with so many options, many gay young men switch in and out of these different forms of relationships. As they progress within the discourse, their willingness to try and/or relate to different relationship strategies increases. For example, one man summed up a common theme found among other young gay males. He admitted that initially, he thought he was going to date and try to find someone he was going to spend the rest of his life with monogamously. As he dated, he realized that it was a lot harder to find a soul mate than he had previously thought. Experiencing such difficulty convinced him that such a relationship form might not be possible. Encountering such a difficulty led him to explore other relationship types that might more fully fit the reality he is in.

Since the discourse is so based on personal fulfillment, understanding one's own personal fulfillment is an achievement within the discourse.

## 5.2 Technology and Online Discourse

With the advancement of technology, the ability to meet men is easier than it ever has been. Individuals are able to identify not only internet sites, but also smart phone applications that can put them in touch with men in their vicinity, only by clicking a button. Here again, men can use sites and applications like these for a variety of purposes, each one having to do with personal fulfillment. Some men look for company and potential relationships, while others look for one-night stands. Arenas like chat rooms and club scenes are easy outlets through which young gay men can seek personal fulfillment. For example, if two men want to meet up with no strings attached, their needs can easily be fulfilled and both of them understand that a relationship or a second date will not necessarily result from their meeting.

### *Hard to Read*

Word choices within online arenas often times need to be specific. More often than not, young gay men point out that in conversing with strangers, the first thing asked of them is "what they are into." This usually helps clarify any misunderstandings upfront whether someone is looking for sex, looking for a date, looking for a partner, etc. However, some men are actually very critical of men who use these places to search out actual relationships, and vice versa. Those who want

long-term relationships become annoyed when someone asks to hookup late at night, while those who are looking for something temporary become irritated when someone asks about favorite movies or employment.

Whatever the case may be, profiles within these sites allow these men the opportunity to take refuge within a space that only gay men have access to; profiles list pictures and any information they wish to disclose, and this does not mean that everything has to be completely “true.” Online forums allow these men to hide behind walls of anonymity, taking on roles and forming an identity they choose to define with the strokes of their keyboards. As such, motivations and identities are not clearly defined, and this can be overwhelming for some individuals.

One man, Tim, who works long hours, explained the difficulty of searching for a man to start a monogamous relationship with online. “Often times, I would like to find a quality date, but really I don’t even know why I bother.” Men must constantly reflect on their personal intentions and often times, this is accompanied by a great deal of frustration because they cannot find what they are looking for. In the case of Tim, for example, he becomes discouraged trying to convince another man that he is looking for a monogamous relationship after he tells him how many hours he works. Even after telling men that he wants someone to settle down with, they usually end up thinking that Tim is probably only looking to have sex and travel on to his next work destination.

A popular perception from the public of these types of online communities is that, for the most part, that they are fake and unaffectionate places where nothing substantial can result. Men are said to exist within these spaces for the sole purpose

of being seen. Yet, there are some young gay men who would disagree with these sentiments based on their own personal experiences. For example, Tim says, "What remains to be classified as substantial or meaningful depends on the person and whatever circumstance he finds himself in. Only he can decide whether it was a positive experience or not."

### *Trauma*

These online interactions often result in feelings of trauma for these men. Another man, Sean, said that many times he feels as if he is "treated like a body, divorced from a thinking person." He said that his worth as a person corresponded to his body image. The online discourse is enacted differently because words are not the only way to characterize oneself in a virtual community. Pictures and profile set-ups are often weighed more heavily than the words a man uses to describe himself. Thus, it can be traumatic for individuals facing rejection at the simple click of a button.

Queer scholar Ann Cvetkovich argues for the importance of recognizing and archiving accounts of trauma that belong as much to the ordinary and everyday as to the domain of catastrophe. In her book, *An Archive of Feelings*, she constructs a framework through which it is possible understand trauma, invulnerability, and unfeeling in an alternative light. Cvetkovich contends that the public often sees gay individuals as consciously separating themselves from the public, in ways that make themselves seem untouchable or incapable of having any feelings at all. By operating within a different discourse, the public could hold an elitist perspective

that does not understand true reasons why gay individuals might want to separate themselves from the dominant discourse. Cvetkovich suggests that the lack of feeling the public sees is instead an excess of feeling that looks like no feeling at all, citing the myriad traumas of queer life as a cause (48). The invulnerability and desire to create a discourse independent from the mainstream, even if it is online, is a performative reaction to an overwhelming hurt that gay men experience on a regular basis from the public.

Cvetkovich urges the public to see the ways in which gay life can be looked at as a part of the larger public sphere, where trauma is an everyday occurrence, affecting not only the space itself, but those living in it as well. She calls the experience of trauma both welcoming and difficult, and hence profoundly transformative.

### *Benefits of Rejection*

At the risk of rejection is also the prospect to see through a man's body and into his true personality. Some men actively seek out ways to move into a more sensitive conversation, those often looking for more long-term relationships and friendships. These spaces, therefore, are not what the public might think of as an open space for negotiating sex. This inquiry surely does not insist that sex is not a part of these sites. However, even within the smallest sexual encounter to the mere talk of setting up a date, these men demonstrate a deeply vulnerable side of themselves. With the public divided on their tolerance of gay relationships, these online safe houses help young gay men negotiate their feelings with other men. One

can surely imagine that these negotiations are not easy. As Jim explains, “It’s actually a terrifying experience. It’s hard enough feeling that you can’t be yourself in a conservative town. Then you go online to find a community where you start to try to see what it’s like to be yourself, but sometimes all the community does is mess with your self-esteem, making it even harder to live as a gay man at this age.”

And yet, community orientation is so important to these men, especially the ones who feel rejection from the public. The quest for legitimization and a way to sort out understanding their relationships and identities sometimes leads these men to a online community. Sometimes these online communities can actually take precedence over an actual physical relationship, and the needs of this community supplant the needs of being in any real relationship. What seems to happen, however, is very similar to what happens in the physical relationships. These men find that at their best attempts to protect themselves, hurt and heartbreak are inevitable, even online.

The challenge to seek out anything from sex to a monogamous relationship is much more meaningful to these men because they “opened themselves up to others like them” -- they opened themselves up to touch, to sympathy (“he’s just like me”), to rejection, to love, to relationships, and actually came away more experienced.

### 5.3 Acknowledging Conflict

The set of multiple identities young gay men find themselves in makes it even more important for them to be articulate about what the roles and values are behind

these relationship options- articulate to both partners and to the wider public. The following excerpt is a letter that a man named Paul wrote to an old acquaintance. After asking him about how he dealt with communicating his relationships preferences with another man, Paul directed me to this letter, which he published on his blog. He begins the blog post with a question the other man posed to him, and proceeds to write his extended answer. Paul uses this as an opportunity to reflect on his feelings from a year before, only to find that he still faces the same problem:

“You’re not looking for anything serious?”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t know if I’m looking for anything serious either. I like my freedom. I like speaking to whoever I want, whenever I want. I like having time to spend elsewhere, and on more important things. But right now, I like being with you. I like hearing your voice. I like touching you. I like the excitement of seeing you and I like the way that your hand feels in mine. I’m not obsessed with you. I’m certainly not insinuating that you should be my boyfriend. I don’t even know if I would want that. So what do you expect me to do? How do you want me to act? Where do I draw the line between keeping my distance and getting too close? Do you want me to let you know when I’m thinking about you? Do you kick yourself when you let me know that you’re thinking about me?”



As of this weekend, it's happened again, just with a different person. I don't need to add or subtract anything from what I've already written and what I've already felt, because I still feel the same. But this time around I'm not heartbroken. I'm just tired of being treated like a child who doesn't know how to take no for an answer, when I know what I think and I know where my boundaries lie. I still fail to see where going on dates means I want to marry a person, or where wanting to see or talk to someone equates to wanting them to be my boyfriend, or where I don't know what a friend with benefits is and I don't know how a friend with benefits works. There has been a serious gap between actions and words in both of these situations, and I end up feeling embarrassed and stupid because I convince myself that maybe I've taken things further than they were meant to. I feel embarrassed and stupid again. I know that I was responding to the signals that they were giving me, which were not that of a quick hookup or a simple friendship, and just because I don't think I want to be in a serious relationship right now doesn't mean it doesn't hurt to be lead on in that way. The difference is, I'm a year older and a year smarter.

Not every young gay man associates sex with a personal relationship. Instead, young gay men like Paul are much more introspective about what they want. Living on the periphery of the mainstream public discourse, they observe that

most straight people will not question what form their relationships take. As opposed to a “this is how it is done” approach, which obeys conventional standards, alternative relationships do not have the same endpoint as conventional relationships. Instead, these men see an opportunity to approach their relationship thinking, “I do not have to do the same thing as him and her.” Their relationships can take on different forms.

What Paul acknowledges here is that his relationship preferences are liberating, but at the same time are also challenging. Notice how Paul is acknowledging the feelings he has toward one man while also realizing he has been in the same difficult position before. Whereas most gay and straight relationships manifest emotions and struggles with feelings, Paul points out another problem, one dealing with the disconnect between actions and words. Being able to say what type of relationship he wants brings with it its own set of difficulties, but subsequently acting true to that description complicates matters further for him.

The future of conventional relationships occasionally relies on whether the individuals like each other and connect on all the traditional attributes of a relationship: the physical, the emotional, etc. More often than not, if one person is not totally into the other, the relationship will end. Alternative relationships inquire about what would happen if the conversation did not end there. Paul is confronting another layer of questions and situations. Not only is he wondering whether another man “likes” him, he is also questioning what form this relationship could take. Perhaps he knows that he does not want a traditional relationship with

another man at this point in time, but he is left to wonder what the other man's intentions are (and vice versa).

What is also fruitful for discussion is the way Paul negotiates with himself within the discourse. He lists the things he enjoys from another man, but realizes that in admitting he wants to be intimate, he also has to confess that he wants freedom. The men within this discourse feel very strongly about being true to themselves. Therefore, with the array of choices before them, if they choose to enter into a relationship that obviously does not fit what they would be comfortable with, then they cannot feel right being a part of it.

## Chapter 6: Confronting Rival Hypotheses

This inquiry makes voices and opinions like these men's matter. In the spirit of what John Dewey would call an "experimental way of knowing," knowledge is a hypothesis, open to change and different perspectives. This sort of thinking is useful here because when we can finally acknowledge that what we know or think is open for reinterpretation, incorporating rival hypotheses becomes necessary to guide an inquiry that tests and reworks our assumptions about reality, and more specifically, about what constitutes a relationship. The act of rivaling then will involve seeking out alternative interpretations and possible solutions, and then testing these hypotheses by considering rivals to them. In the spirit of philosophical pragmatism, Dewey believed that even our best ideas or strongest beliefs are hypotheses waiting to be tested (and probably altered) by not just thinking, but by experience.

Seeking out rival hypotheses for ideas held on firmly by tradition or expertise does not mean tearing down and reinstating a new worldview. Rather, the views regarding alternative relationships work with other competing views by actively locating themselves in experiences, and the consequences brought on by actions. We have relied on the literate tools that these men use to make sense of the world they inhabit. Inviting these views to the table of the mainstream public allows both these men and the readers to see alternative ways to solve problems or overcome personal struggles. Thus, situating these practical approaches with philosophical worldviews that are open to reflection opens the door to the possibilities for action and understanding.

Rivaling makes this inquiry a multi-voiced discussion, in which those coming from an elite discourse can learn to appreciate the marginalized views of individuals like these young gay men, and vice versa. In our “quest for certainty,” as Dewey calls the drive behind pragmatic inquiry, we must acknowledge that within any discourse, the methods and words are constantly evolving and changing (Flower 65). In fact, in analyzing and reflecting over these young men’s responses, we actually end up noticing that our world is better interpreted as a changing reality, which may not hold on to logical theories and principles, especially in the confines of our relationships.

Flower points out that in the context of inquiry, Dewey asks us to shift our attention from knowledge (as object) to knowing (as action), and from causes to conditions and consequences (64). Listening to the perspectives these men offer helps open up doors to profound questions traditional relationships may not

encourage or care to incorporate within their discourse. These questions range from issues of personal fulfillment, to ways of avoiding pain and dealing with conflict.

As this inquiry confronts and engages with rival hypotheses, it also demonstrates how our beliefs and theories are only as meaningful as the outcomes and contradictions they necessitate. Knowing is an experimental search that is looking not for a single governing principle to be unearthed through reason or intuition, but for the relations our directed intentional activities can reveal (Dewey 99). This inquiry reflects the real diversity and plurality of relationships by looking at how these men make meaning out of their relationships and actively search out rival ideas, options, and outcomes.

A strong rival hypothesis stance embraces multiple visions. An inquiry focused on alternative relationships does not simply look at relationships that differ from the mainstream; instead, it collaboratively incorporates different perspectives by locating the ways in which these young gay men confront voices other than their own.

## 6.1 Value Judgments

One important rival that this inquiry needs to consider is the role of value judgments in talking about alternatives. Depending on the type of relationship, most of these men find it easy to ignore them, on the basis of a highly relativistic assumption that the standard of judgment is fully individualistic. For each young

gay man, searching for and negotiating a relationship with another man must satisfy his personal needs. And yet, there are always two people in a relationship. These men are ultimately faced with the task of balancing their individualism with the inevitable tensions of a relationship that could compromise personal fulfillment. Certainly, values of mutuality are not absent; as we will see, they are manifested in different ways.

When confronted with this rival, one of the first things that young gay men stress is the importance of communication for their relationships. With multiple positions inside this discourse, relationships can become complicated quickly. The language for articulating what type of relationship they want to be in and the signals they utilize are not clear to everyone within the discourse. Although the public in the discourse of straight relationships could certainly pick up on flirting cues from another individual, the signals are often not as clear with young gay men in this discourse. In a straight discourse, men have the opportunity to act as if they are more interested in commitment with a woman, but eventually, the woman can decipher the signals and catch the man in his lie.

In this discourse, young gay men have an extremely difficult time deciphering the reality of a relationship and the true intentions of another person. Figuring out what part of the discourse one will participate in is hard enough; realizing that the other man in a relationship may not be interested in commitment, for instance, is even harder. A college student David described how easy it is to mistake the practices of someone looking for a friend with benefits with the same practices of someone looking for a long-term relationship. Both types of men initially search out

for quality individuals they feel a strong connection with, and most men who are looking for friends with benefits will admit that they are not opposed to a long-term relationship. Thus, without active communication, these men would be left with the task of sorting out these practices on their own.

Whether they are looking for a one-night stand or a significant other, these young men expect reciprocity. To avoid potential conflict, the terms of a relationship are viewed as a contractual agreement, following the idealistic belief that “he will not change or he will not want anything different from me.” In trying to get away from the traditional, this discourse often confronts feelings of hurt because of the complexity, and the inability for their desires to be met by another person.

“From a practical standpoint, I feel like I just need to examine what about my perception and behaviors is leading me to get hurt easily, and figure out how to change it. At one point in my life, I used to get all excited about every new boy that came along, and would inevitably become disappointed (with a side of self-loathing) when things obviously failed to work out.”

In the quote above, a young man Carl discusses how his views of relationships have evolved from being overly positive to becoming more cautious. The rhetorical stance Carl takes is part of a larger attempt of these men to frame their identities and interpret the different roles of other young gay men, which often are in conflict with their own. Even though Carl wrote his story through emails, it

becomes very clear through reading more of his prose that his negotiations and his thought process stand out in his text.

When asked how he saw the ways relationships evolve and are interpreted by young gay men, Carl chose to spotlight his own experiences; he felt that they spoke true for many others like himself, navigating in an out of multiple “friends with benefits” scenarios and confronting feelings of hurt.

“At a certain point, though, I was just kind of like, oh yeah, you can’t actually like these people because most of the time, you don’t know them well enough to have that insight yet. They’re the flavor of the week, so you’d be better off just enjoying them for what they are. Making that conscious decision and then putting the idea into practice wasn’t always a clean process. It can be difficult to distinguish visceral from emotional feeling, and there are still times I get confused about what exactly people are to me and what the possibilities associated with them are.”

Carl takes note of the conflicting realities within this discourse, and tries to tell himself that he will not personally invest himself in another person. As one could guess, however, this is not as easy as it sounds. Carl hints at one solution these men employ to deal with their emotions, that being the conscious effort to appreciate the men for what they are. The values that these men place on their



relationships are very much tied to the type of relationship that they choose, as well as the context of the relationship.

“For years, especially when I was living in New York, and was surrounded by so many types of men, I just embraced being young and exploring. Now that I’m in a smaller city, I’ve become more open to the idea of a relationship, though I don’t even know how to begin to navigate those waters.”

Perhaps because Carl moved to a smaller city, he was surrounded by more individuals seeking a traditional relationship. Living in such an environment has the possibility of indirectly imposing a more commonly practiced relationship onto others, even if they are not actively looking for it. Carl talks about the authority traditional relationships carry within the confines of a smaller city gay life, but his writing demonstrates how his own identity mixes into the discourse.

“I was kinda-sorta dating this boy and in the process I realized I didn’t know how to behave when I wasn’t considering someone as being somewhat disposable or part of temporary relationship. The prospect of having some sort of future beyond “ok, we’re just friends,” was kind of confusing and scary. Anyways, my final thought is that being open to a relationship is not the same thing as ‘looking for one,’ and I can’t

imagine how awful the process of looking and continually being disappointed must be.”

Carl ends the above with a glimpse into why he and others might strongly avoid entering into committed relationships. Instead of actively searching for a committed relationship, he engages in relationships that he feels comfortable with, so as to avoid personal investment. Taking a more individualistic stance, however, does not mean that he is ignoring the thoughts and feelings of the other men he meets. Rather, Carl demonstrates the degree to which he negotiates value judgments through his discussion of his own personal uncertainties. Taking a cue from the mainstream discourse, he sees how hurtful traditional relationships can be for individuals, so he informally decides for himself that he will proceed with caution and be open to the potential of what another man could bring. Trying to avoid hurt for himself also attempts to avoid hurting someone else in the process.

Carl obviously does not have a clear idea of what he is looking for, but he sees the significance of not closing himself off to definitions of relationships before he even experiences them. Thus, a common theme from many young gay men engaging in friends with benefits or other open types of relationships value not only their own preferences, but also the potential of other men.

## 6.2 Personal Fulfillment

Robert Bellah and his team add on to this discussion of forming value judgments out of personal interests. For many individuals, including the men here,

there is simply no objective criterion for choosing one value or course of action over another. A young gay man's personal preferences are his own justification because they define his true self.

These men hold very strongly to the belief that a rigid moral standard promoted by conventional discourses actually interferes with personal freedom and overall enjoyment of life. "Every man that enters into my life is not an absolute," says one individual. These men's values and their personal fulfillments operate within a curve that is fluid and open to change; they are working hypotheses. Often times, outside of relationships, the public constantly adapts value systems depending on the context and the issue at hand, yet they are not changing who they are. Through our literacy tools, we have similarly seen that these young gay men are adapting the way they act and the way they talk, but are very conscious of their identities.

If the individual self must be its own source of moral guidance, then each individual must always know what he wants and desires or intuit what he feels (Bellah 77). Young gay men try to act in ways that produce the greatest satisfaction of their wants or express the fullest range of their impulses. Morality and values flow from the self, which becomes the center for evaluating right and wrong. In the process, however, as we have seen from this data, it becomes hard for them to juggle their feelings and beliefs, especially when they come into conflict with one another.

Moreover, the degree to which these men are sure that their relationship choices are the right ones, when they have the potential of compromising the feelings of others, is important to consider. If they conform to the wishes of another

man, then they compromise their inner selves and their personally fulfillments are not fully met. Bellah says that when tackling this problem, individuals first seek to work out what makes them happy, and then create a goal out of pursuing whatever it is that has that effect.

Young gay men agree that their desires are personal, but at the same time, they are very much interested in creating relationships with other men. After successfully identifying what would fulfill them personally in a relationship, these men actively seek out ways to achieve their happiness. However, this self-made definition of personal fulfillment leads them into a world of vulnerability and negotiation that transfers their content views of personal fulfillment to more shaky ground.

In searching out ways to carry out a relationship, these men look to the dominant culture and observe how individuals conduct themselves and try to enter into relationships. As we have already established, young gay men see that they do not fit in themselves, so they try to change the discourse by forming one of their own.

This discourse of alternative relationships starts out as way to build relationships that are personally fulfilling. The young gay men here do not agree on what that is going to be, but they each attempt to construct a working hypothesis for themselves that speaks true to their personal desires. We saw how these men identified possible problems within the dominant discourse: undying loyalty, heartbreak, pain, divorce, etc. And in this identification, these men decided that to avoid these types of emotional injuries, they must stick true to their inner selves.

This inquiry demonstrates that when looking closely at the literate practices and events, the discourse is set up as a way to work around these feelings of pain. It tears down boundaries and restrictions that more conventional relationships enforce, and thinks about new strategies to bring to the table.

When these men actually go out and create relationships with others, they open themselves up in ways that make them very vulnerable, in ways that are similar to traditional relationships, but also in ways that are very different. For example, we heard from some men who explained the difficulty in deciphering a man's intentions and figuring out if the two of them were both looking for the same thing. Because they want personal fulfillment, the only way to ensure complete fulfillment is to expect reciprocity from another man and engage in a mutual discussion. They want a man that expects the same thing from them, one that takes their desires and goals for a relationship seriously.

A lesson both the reader and these men can notice is that if individuals yearn to be emotional with someone, then they are ultimately going to experience trauma. When personal fulfillment reaches the shaky ground of vulnerability and cooperation, it shifts in ways that seem to contradict its original intentions. The discourse here helps these men uncover ways to negotiate these contradictions and ends up giving us a variety of perspectives of what personal fulfillment means to them.

What emerges from this discourse - from the reflections, the texts, the conversations, and the interviews - is that in their quest for individualism and personal fulfillment, these men have demonstrated that their own frustrations,

heartbreaks, and let-downs prove how much they still value being with another person. Personal fulfillment within this discourse becomes a combination of a view of individualism, the deep desire for autonomy and self-reliance, and an equally deep conviction that life has no meaning unless it is shared with others (150).

### 6.3 Vulnerability

The idea of vulnerability helps form a discussion of why these men feel like what they are doing is worthwhile. A young gay man participating in an alternative relationship is willing to invest in something that may or may not work out. Not only this, but the extent to which his choices deviate from more conventional relationships create an added layer of pressure. Thus, his inward struggle to do something with no guarantee is necessary, no matter how hard it is.

Brene Brown, from the University of Houston, echoes much of John Dewey's work when she discusses the power of vulnerability. She identifies people who acknowledge their vulnerability as "wholehearted," because they are able to identify their own feelings and acknowledge that those feelings have an effect on other people. Brown congratulates individuals who are willing to stake their goals on something without a definite ending, and instead of trying to control and predict our outcomes, Brown asks that the public begin to value uncertainty.

Throughout their discourse, young gay men illustrate how vulnerability enters into a relationship, and interacts with personal fulfillment. The inner tensions of alternative relationships result in a case of ambivalence, where

individualism realizes that life requires compromise and an acknowledgment of connections.

This inquiry reveals that these men are actually hesitant to articulate the fact that their relationships involve a give-and-take. The degree that this compromise enters into a relationship can vary. As in the case of a one-night stand, even though the compromise could be almost nothing, we still see someone catering to someone else. The situated knowledge this inquiry sought so strongly to uncover is what helped us recognize that these men actually value and need one another as much as they need to stand alone (Bellah 151).

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