GAYDAR: EYE-GAZE AS IDENTITY RECOGNITION AMONG GAY MEN AND LESBIANS

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This paper examines eye-gaze associated with identity recognition among gay men and lesbians. Eye-gaze is argued to be crucial to forces that either trigger or reinforce one gay person's perception of another person's gay identity during social encounters. "Gaydar" is the folk concept used within the gay and lesbian culture to name this identity recognition device. An ethnography on Gaydar conducted over a period of three years reveals that eye-gaze in relation to Gaydar includes two different variations of visual contact, the direct and the broken stare. These types of gaze can be accentuated by the presence of other forms of nonverbal communication such as posture, gestures, and smiles. Consciousness in relation to eye-gaze is also discussed to be a distinct trigger and reinforcer of gay and lesbian identity recognition.

Gay identity lacks defining phenotypical characteristics. As such, gay and lesbian group affiliation is ascertained on the basis of the participative behavior around shared systems of meanings among group members. Along with verbal communication, non-verbal behavior acts as one of the primary tools of identity recognition within the gay community. The folk concept used within the gay community to name the recognition of verbal and non-verbal behavior associated with gay identity is "Gaydar."

Originating as a pun borrowed from the term "radar," the tag Gaydar suggests that members of the gay and lesbian culture along

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with straight people *familiar*[1] with gay/lesbian culture have an innate remote detector that picks up the behavior of individuals within a specified range. If the behavior experienced is consistent with the shared social meaning of identity associated with membership in the gay culture, Gaydar is triggered. The receiver of the stimuli is then of the opinion that the person whose behavior caused the "blip" in Gaydar is gay.[2] Studies that relate to Gaydar are important in the social sciences as such studies explore how humans define their social identity via communication rituals. These studies tell us that identity is, in Mead's (1934) terms, *interpreted* within the interaction. I treat Gaydar in this paper as a folk concept used by the cultural milieu around and within the gay, lesbian, and bisexual community to name the interactive process within which recognition emerges. In other words, Gaydar is simply used to label particular social meanings around an organization of behavior. Gaydar is created, named, and reified by the gay community within the interactive process.

Communication scholars had long expounded on the importance of eye-gaze as a communicative force of identity, recognition, or objectification within the gay community (Darsey, 1981; Majors, 1992; Ringer, 1994), yet little or no work had been done to measure its significance as a social identity recognition tool. My intention here is to explore how gays and lesbians use eye-gaze as identity recognition. The purpose of my report is twofold. First, I investigate the existence of eye-gaze in relation to Gaydar in general and second, I discuss the results of an ethnography which concluded that eye-gaze is indeed associated with Gaydar use. I use the term "Gaydar Gaze" to reference eye-gaze related to identity recognition within the gay and lesbian culture.

In the first section of the paper I present a brief overview of the development of gay and lesbian identity recognition studies within the communication field, followed by a discussion on the nature of Gaydar. A report on studies related to eye-gaze and how it may relate to Gaydar research is also supplied. I continue with a discussion of the findings of the ethnography on Gaydar operations in relation to eye-gaze. In this report, I include a discussion on gaze types such as the direct or broken stare, the levels of consciousness

that operate as trigger or reinforcer of Gaydar, and the manner in which the Gaydar Gaze operates with other nonverbal communication cues for identity recognition. In the conclusion I show how these findings support earlier work by nonverbal communication scholars (Ellsworth & Langer, 1984; Kendon, 1967; Patterson, 1973; Rutter, 1984). Further research in relation to Gaydar and Gaydar Gaze is also recommended.

Queer[3] Culture in Communication Studies

The creation and maintenance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual cultural identities has garnered much attention in academic research. Traditionally, the studies that have been conducted primarily address these identities as gender roles that stem from etiologic or social origins. Much of this work describes identity construction from a biological, sociological, psychological, critical, or political standpoint (Bailey & Pillard, 1991; Bernstein, 1997; Bohan, 1996; Butler, 1991; Cass, 1979; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Cruikshank, 1992; D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001; Dank, 1971; DeCecco & Parker, 1995; Fernbach, 1998; Greenberg, 1988; Hamer et. al., 1993; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002; Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Leap, 1996, 1999; Liang, 1999; Nardi & Schneider, 1998; Risman & Schwartz, 1988, Troiden, 1988; Vicinus, 1988).

Although scholarship on gay and lesbian identity and recognition is bountiful within the social sciences, its growth within the communication field is fairly recent (Majors, 1995). Until the last couple of decades, little research related to communicative phenomena regarding identity and/or recognition among the members of the gay community emerged from the communication discipline.

Chesebro's (1981) *Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication* proved to be the seminal piece that reported on the gay and lesbian culture without exoticizing gay and lesbian behavior. This work augmented gay and lesbian communication studies to include a focus on social responses to homosexuality instead of homosexual behavior itself. In the years following Chesebro's work, scholarship within the communication discipline branched out to embrace various aspects of communicative phenomena within the

gay and lesbian culture. Much of this undertaking included issues of identity and/or recognition in specific situations. Some of these cases included gays and lesbians in the military, gay and lesbian marriages and domestic partnership agreements, and lifestyles of gay people in traditionally heterosexual social establishments such as the Boy Scouts (Slagle, 1995).

Communication studies addressing gay and lesbian identities where recognition factors come to bear include the "Coming Out" process (Dank, 1971; Jandt & Darsey, 1981), computer mediated communication (Phillips, 2002; Shaw, 1998), cruising (Majors, 1992), gay language(s) and linguistic patterns (Baker, 2002; Chesebro, 1980; 1994; Leap, 1994, 1996; Livia & Hall, 1997), proxemics and spatial interactions (Corey, 1996; Tieu, 1999), clothing and materialism (Corey, 2002; Rudd, 1992), and performance and camp (Corey, 1996; Darsey, 1981). Ringer's (1994) *Queer words, queer images* provides a compilation of essays that showcases how the communication discipline addresses issues of gay/lesbian sexuality including gay/lesbian identity. I find that while many of these writings address issues surrounding the notion of identity or recognition, they do not address identity recognition specifically. Further, little work in nonverbal communication in relation to identity recognition comes to bear.

Gaydar: A Critical Overview

In his discussion on stigmatized identity, Goffman (1963) provides a distinction between discredited and discreditable identity by showing how group affiliation is manufactured through the visibility or invisibility of bodily characteristics. A discredited identity is one that is both devalued and marked by obvious physical characteristics (e.g. male/female, black, Asian). A discreditable identity is also devalued but may be hidden due to the lack of biological distinctions. Homosexuals (and bisexuals) stand apart from many other minority cultural groups (e.g. racial) because of their discreditable identity. As such, members of the gay community show group affiliation through a shared system of meaning involving specific sets of behaviors.

Gay cultural affiliation, based on Goffman's (1963) model of stigmatized identity, is assumed to be somewhat invisible because group membership is not ascertained by physical characteristics. An ontological basis for Gaydar operations, therefore, is that gay and lesbian identity recognition processes thrive in societal contexts where "invisibility" dominates as the norm for gay and lesbian cultural affiliation. Gaydar is, in a sense, somewhat reliant on an environment of heteronormativity, which is to say that it is within such spaces of domination[4] that identity recognition devices for marginalized groups are necessary. Gaydar is used as a "survival strategy"; a way to function within the heterosexual standard. Yet it is also important to note that gays and lesbians' ability to be "invisible" is linked to the lack of physical or phenotypic characteristics usually used to make distinctions about cultural or group membership. As such, while I contend that the increase of gay and lesbian visibility may lessen Gaydar operations generally, I also note that communication devices resembling Gaydar may still function to simply discern identity and cultural memberships due to deficient biological distinction.

Plummer (1981) states that homosexual identity formation is a process of evolution, wherein one is a constant process of "becoming." This process of "becoming" can be translated to be the constant development of cultural competency displayed by the individual when establishing an identity as a member of a specific group or culture. This act of "becoming" is felt through the participation in a shared system of meaning regarding behavior associated with the group (Plummer, 1981). The meanings of these behaviors are born out of social interaction and evolve through the interpretive process of the individuals taking part in each behavior. In order to provide a distinct cultural identity affiliation, gay people participate in behavior based on the meanings that the behavior has for them. This process is easily analyzed and formulated in the terms developed by symbolic interactionists (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Plummer, 1996). Verbal and non-verbal behavior that arise out of interactions among gay people are the actions that carry and modify a shared social meaning of what it takes to be classified as a member of this cultural group. The manner in which gay people

recognize other members of their community is manifested through the display of clearly recognized meanings behind demonstrated verbal and non-verbal actions (Majors, 1992).

The interactionism perspective used to understand the act of "becoming" accentuates the role of social contact[5] in gay and lesbian socialization. Gay and lesbian socialization involves meanings "interpreted" within different social interactions, many of which may or may not emanate from gay subcultures. Dank's (1971) seminal work on "Coming Out" processes, for example, identifies non-gay social contexts within which meanings associated with having a gay identity are negotiated. More recently, the proliferation of gay and lesbian culture in popular culture and the media (Gross, 2002; Seidman, 2002) have created avenues for integrating gay texts into the wider mainstream culture.

Gaydar: Identity Recognition or Attribution

Gay men and lesbians habitually enact behavior that displays involvement in a shared system of meaning in order to be recognized as members of the gay and lesbian community. Yet, as Leap (1999) and Liang (1999) remind us, meanings from behavior arise from the subjectivities of both the message sender and receiver. As such, Gaydar may easily also be triggered by people who do not want to be recognized as gay or who unconsciously behave in such a way that they are identified as gay. In such cases, Gaydar not only operates as a device for identification but also of identity attribution. While identity recognition and attribution may be two separate phenomena, in Gaydar's case, one can easily be an extension of the other. That is, a gay identity is ascribed to the person whose behaviors are recognized by Gaydar, regardless of the (message) sender's intention. I explore this argument further in the next section.

Gaydar: How It Works

The gay community relies on the tacit knowledge that recognition through Gaydar is possible. The ontological grounding of this

belief is simple: Gaydar is possible because gay people believe that it is possible (Painter, 1981). Ponse (1978) highlights the complex relationship between sociocultural texts available in identity trajectories[6] and identity attribution, noting an underlying basis of essentialism in the way in which gay identity is negotiated in gay culture. Specifically, gay people believe that identification is possible because of a belief in an intrinsic or innate gayness; however, the behaviors related to accessing this information about one's gayness (Gaydar along with its cultural meanings) are implicit cultural knowledge that is learned, expressed, and modified through human communication.

In a study of lesbian identity behavior, Painter (1981) propounds that identity recognition is an interpretive procedure, yet based on a measure of "awareness" of a (gay) identity. She claims the following conditions to be necessary for such Gaydar detection:

> One must believe unquestionably that identification is possible. Either cues must exist that can be interpreted as evidence to support the identification, or cues that would normally be interpreted to deny the identification must be missing. One must possess an intuitive sense or feeling of familiarity concerning the individual that works reflexively to provide a context in which the cues may be interpreted (p. 69).

All three contingencies germinate from the idea of having an awareness of one's state of being. The level of awareness coupled with the interpretation of behavior familiar to the individual allows that individual the ability to explicate group association (Painter, 1981).

Painter (1981) discusses Garfinkel's (1967) consistency proposition to further her argument of the impact of self-awareness. According to Garfinkel, X will always be X, although it can be mistaken for Y. Painter states:

> When a lesbian (X) mistakes herself for a non-lesbian (Y), this mistake occurs because she is unaware of her X-ness. Awareness is crucial for viewing oneself as a lesbian, because members view a lesbian as having always been a lesbian (p.70).

Regardless of whether the person turns out to be gay or not, the opinion supplied is easily epistemologically justified due to the

shared social knowledge of "awareness" working as a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the individual remains in a straight lifestyle, she is not "aware." If she comes out of the closet, the stimulus received by Gaydar is correct. The idea of awareness associated with Gaydar is reinforced and maintained. This discussion also shows that Gaydar may operate in varying levels of an individual's awareness of his/her sexual orientation.

Awareness is a necessary support to the implicit understanding that gay people can recognize other gay people to be members of the same culture. The shared group meanings behind the behavior observed (when Gaydar is alerted) is manifested as a cultural reality that defines identity and group membership.

Gaydar as Cultural Competency

The level to which cultural reality is experienced is contingent on the measure of *cultural competency* associated with the behavior displayed. Four categories of cultural competency derived by Wieder and Pratt (1990) are used to explain the underlying assumptions of these phenomena:

(1) The appropriate verbal and non-verbal behavior as displayed by the sender.
(2) The acknowledgment of the meaning behind the sender's behavior by other members of the group.
(3) The awareness that verbal and non-verbal behavior is used as an organized ritual to establish identity.
(4) The recognition of such behavior, by the receiver, as actions particular of the identity of the group.

Wieder and Pratt's (1990) model of cultural competency shows how individuals within the gay and lesbian community can recognize group membership by participating in behavior which accentuates the organized rituals that establish meanings related to gay identity.

Yet it is important to note at this juncture that cultural competency, as Wieder and Pratt's (1990) model suggests, is variable. Measures of cultural competency differ based on how interactants

"manage" the four criteria listed. Differing measures of cultural competency, including levels of "awareness" (see previous discussion by Painter), can be based on various contextual and psychosociological considerations.[7]

Cultural competency associated with Gaydar is not limited to members of the community who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Cultural competency is based on the ability to well demonstrate the four categories of competency earlier discussed. As such, while levels of cultural competency tend to be positively related to a person's affiliation with the culture or community in question, a person does not have to be a "particular type of member" (homosexual or bisexual) of the gay/lesbian community to be involved in the workings of Gaydar. Heterosexual people who participate in gay culture, or have high levels of gay cultural competency may also have access to Gaydar processes. Queer theory's contribution to gay and lesbian cultural studies (Jagose, 1997; Turner, 2000) shows us that the cultural milieu around queerness reaches far beyond the act of sleeping with a member of the same sex, thus, reframing what we classify as gay and lesbian cultural membership. In short, due to his and her close affiliation or familiarity with gay culture, a heterosexual person may easily display high measures of gay cultural competency. Further, this person may also consider himself or herself a member of the queer community.

In my research on Gaydar in general, I investigated different forms of verbal and nonverbal communication used for identity recognition. Interestingly, I noted that eye-gaze was reported (by my informants) to be one of the most powerful forces that propels Gaydar. As such, eye-gaze was selected to be the singular nonverbal code isolated for exploration in this paper.

Eye-gaze in Communication and the Social Sciences

Experimental studies on visual signaling began in the early 1960s. Rutter (1984) claims that the literature on eye contact is divided into three main areas: (1) The pattern of looking, (2) contextual cues, and, (3) the function of the gaze. The pattern of looking involves the nature of the gaze or simply, what constitutes "normal

and/or mutual looking" patterns. Argyle and Cook (1976) contend that the gaze is determined by motives, which are different for men and women. Exline (1963) states that the purpose of the gaze is to facilitate information flow during conversations. Personality types and mental states were also included in the literature of non-verbal communication in the pattern of looking (Argyle & Cook, 1976; Harper, Wiens, & Matarazzo, 1978; Mischel, 1968; Rutter, 1984). More recently, Goodwin (2000a) explains how conversation analysts and ethnomethodologists find eye-gaze to be meaningful in the way its entrenchment in humans' daily activity is used by participants to make sense of their realities.

The literature's account of contextual cues is one that augments studies of eye-gaze to other stimuli associated with audio and physical presence. Studies have found content, communication style, and outcome to be effected by contextual cues (Rutter, Stephenson, & Dewey, 1981; Rutter, 1984, Goodwin, 2000a, 2000b). In the determination of the "function" of a specific behavior, there is some reliance on the content of the message, the communication style of the participants, and the expected outcome. Kendon (1967) suggests that gaze serves three main functions in social interaction—an expressive function, a regulatory function, and a monitoring function. Central to the expressive function of gaze is Argyle & Dean's (1965) intimacy model, which delineates the influence of eye contact as part of a system within which intimacy in relationships is communicated. The regulatory function is concerned with the manner in which visual signals are used to open and close communication encounters, synchronize speaking transitions between dyads and manage feedback (Kendon, 1967; Guerrero, 1997). In further development of the functions of gaze, Patterson (1981) noted that the effect of eye-gaze was linked to arousal or a sense of involvement with another person. Patterson's work is mirrored by Ellsworth and Langer (1984), who also argue that the stare elicits a stimulus either to approach or avoid, depending on contextual circumstances.

Taken together, the literature on eye-gaze clearly shows how eye contact could be utilized for identity recognition. Certainly, motivation and/or information (regarding identity) sought could be argued to be the reason for gaze as a function of Gaydar. Members

of gay culture may be motivated to participate in a shared system of behaviors so that they may appear culturally competent. Further, seeking information through eye-gaze may be considered a form of extralinguistic discourse affirming identity affiliation.

My goals in this research were to explore the relationship between eye-gaze and Gaydar. The research questions driving the study were:

1) Is eye-gaze used in the gay and lesbian community for purposes of identity recognition? If so,
2) What are the types of eye-gaze used?
3) Is eye-gaze used as a trigger of Gaydar or as a form of reinforcement (affirmation) of a different Gaydar trigger?

I selected ethnography as I felt this method was most appropriate for investigating a phenomenon of which little work has been done. This form of qualitative research would be able to provide rich textual descriptions of the different elements studied. I used this research method because it would also allow for easier admittance into a community that is largely closeted due to a history of marginalization.

Research Design: Elements and Methods

The ethnography was carried out from Spring 1999 to Fall 2002. I participated as a member of the group studied and reported my findings on the basis of my observations. Collaborators accompanied me to the data collection locations. These assistants were also in-group members and were able to serve as informants on the basis of their group membership.

Thirty-five formal and informal interviews were collected while I acted as participant observer. Field notes were taken at the primary observation sites to document informal interviews. Formal interviews were conducted in different locations (e.g. homes of the interviewees). I tape-recorded these interviews. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to obtain participants for the interviews. Members of the gay community I encountered while out in the field were asked to serve as informant/interviewee.

An analysis of media and cultural material was also used to inform the ethnography. I included this form of analysis in the research protocol to capture (gay community) behavior as documented within the same community's cultural artifacts. Items such as gay newspapers, magazines, and video I obtained as part of a literature search or while in the field were used to this end. Over 40 copies of media publications and 20 film and video pieces considered germane to the research at hand were analyzed. Manifest and latent message content related to the topic studied were archived as part of my field notations.

Location

The ethnography took place in two main geographic locations: Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and Chicago, Illinois. While accessibility to the location's gay community played an important role in my selection of research sites, both cities were also deemed appropriate for other reasons. Carrying out the research in at least two geographic areas enhanced the generalizability of the findings, especially when attempting to draw conclusions about the gay culture at large. Chicago is very different from Oklahoma in terms of its demographics and experiential culture. This difference provided the variability that strengthened the premise of my research.

I am a resident of Oklahoma and I have access to many members of the community as well as gay cultural events in this location. Having previously lived just outside of Chicago for six months, I am also quite familiar with the city's gay district and geographic territory. This acquaintance allowed ease of travel and passage into Chicago's gay community.

Field research took place in an area designated to be Oklahoma City's "Gay Neighborhood." This area in Oklahoma City houses several bars and dance clubs, along with other gay owned establishments, institutions, and gay, political, and health centers. Queer, homosexual, and heterosexual people frequent this place. This location was selected as it represents a place where gay people feel safe to enact behavior compatible with group identity. The inclusion of non-gay folk in the social establishments of this locale al-

lowed for the employment of "Gaydar" to determine in-group membership. My primary locale for participant observation was a dance club patronized by both gay and straight (heterosexual) people and a lesbian-owned restaurant with a mixed gay-straight clientele.

The research conducted in Chicago took place in Chicago's Lakeview & New Town District. This area houses Chicago's gay district. The ethnography was conducted in areas where the general population appeared more or less substantially mixed in relation to the heterosexual-homosexual ratio. Most of my observations and interviews were done in the establishments situated along these following streets: Clark Street, Belmont Avenue, and Halstead Street.

The data were compiled, coded, and analyzed for invariable behavior trends. These behavior were later accordingly categorized. The following section provides a report on the findings of the ethnography in relation to one such category—the Gaydar Gaze.

Results: The Gaydar Gaze as Identity Recognition

An important point to make at this juncture is that when eye-gaze is employed during Gaydar activation, the gaze typically serves a specific function. The function could be one of several: To question a person's orientation, so as to verify the Gaydar occurrence; show interest in the person because of the possibility that that person could be interested as well, which implies tacit recognition; or to acknowledge that this person was recognized as possible member of the same in-group. Two variations of the Gaydar Gaze found in-situ were the direct and the broken stare.

The Direct Stare

One of the main behavior types that was reported present during Gaydar occurrence is direct and prolonged eye-contact between the person whose Gaydar was activated and the person who triggered the recognition. At least one of the people involved in the gaze interaction is aware that he or she is performing the function. A lesbian informant reports:

> We were at The Libation [name changed] having drinks. We were just talking when I noticed a group of women walk in [pause] ... it was a narrow path to the booths, like a galley, so they walked towards our booth in a single file. They ended up sitting a couple of places in front of us.... The first one came by, "bamm" [she raises her hands and point two fingers directly at her eyes] ... stare for a few extra seconds. The second one, same, another long stare. The third one was messing with her coat so she did not really look at me. The fourth one, another long stare. It was like they all did the same routine and then they just sat down. They knew we were lesbians.

When questioned about the type of stare employed in this occasion, the informant noted that the stare was direct and long, much longer than an ordinary look. She claimed that they were looking at her that way because they probably wondered if she and her friends were gay. She smiles gleefully and tells me that because she stared back, she probably "informed" them that she was "family too."[8]

Another informant provides this account of "the stare" as used to indicate one's gayness. In this account, the direct stare is associated with the amount of time spent looking at one particular person while conversing in a group. The stare is included in this category due to the prolonged level of visual involvement encountered within the dyad.

> My company is looking into a 401(k) plan. The salesman who was trying to sell the plan to us spent sixty percent of the presentation talking to me. He used excessive eye contact ... and only 40 percent of the time talking to the three other members of my company. I was not the decision maker on this one! I tell you, he was one cute guy, and I found it difficult to keep my composure, but I managed to suffer through it. [grin] We knew what was going on but others in the room had no idea. He made a point to go out of his way to say goodbye to me when he left. As I never mix business with pleasure, that was the end of it but I know he is one of us.

This measure of length observed in this instance can easily be translated as a measure of "directness" or intention. Intention as a measure of consciousness is discussed in later portions of this report.

Munt (1998) claims that the gay stare is a refined language of engagement. She notes that the use of various looks (which includes those that are lingering, direct, frequent, and oblique) illustrates the groundwork of an initial interaction. The stare, according

to Munt, occurs when the eyes are "held by a stranger fractionally longer than decorously necessary" (p. 6). Such forms of gaze initiate a brief and secret kinship, much akin to our understanding of recognition of cultural competence behind a demonstration of a shared cultural identity. In Dillallo and Krumholtz's (1994) *The unofficial gay manual*, the authors advise on the stare technique as a way for a man to show (sexual) interest in another:

> Versatile beyond cruising, the gay stare could tame Medusa's locks, or, with a bit of fine-tuning, turn ex-lovers into pillars of salt. The approach is simple. Lock into the eyes of your intended like a cruise missile. Imagine your gaze boring holes right through, enabling you to see the cute blond standing behind him. Don't even *think* of blinking. If he looks down, he's afraid of what you (or he) might do if he returns the stare. If he looks to the side, he is either not interested or feigning indifference. If he returns the stare, you've got a live one.... (p. 40).

The presence of such data within a gay "pop manual" only serves to reinforce the notion that the employment of the Gaydar Gaze is part of an organized ritual of cultural competency manifested by the gay and lesbian community as a measure of identity.

The direct stare holds a person's attention, signaling that there is a reason the stare was employed. Ellsworth and Langer (1984) explain that the stare increases levels of arousal. The stare creates a situation in which the subjects are forced into a dyadic involvement. The stare receiver may then cast about for an appropriate response. If none comes to pass, the receiver's state may rise and remain at a high level until he or she is able to be released from the gaze. If the subject translates that the stare should have a suitable response, the subject can perform that response and reduce levels of stimulation. Based on this reasoning, it would be easy to say that the stare does not provoke flight but solicits access or approach, as deemed by the situation.

Eye contact associated with Gaydar is direct, prolonged, curious yet purposeful. The assumptions behind the "direct stare" is that eye-gaze is maintained for a period of time that is considered longer than what would be customary in a social context. If the interactants are moving in different directions, then, the body or head would turn to accommodate the eye-gaze.

The Broken Stare

The second "type" of Gaydar Gaze is the broken stare. Two variations of this form of gaze were observed. The first to be discussed is the "stare-look-away-stare-again" action. This behavior occurs when one or both of the interactants "break" the gaze due to either trying to be polite, paying attention to someone else, or being embarrassment due to the possibility of behaving inappropriately. After taking a few steps away or waiting a few moments, the person looks back or begins the staring again to acknowledge Gaydar occurrence. I observed the following example one evening when out in the field:

> A man was standing on the corner of a street in the Chicago gay district. He appeared to be waiting for a female friend who was talking to someone else. He stood about ten paces away from her and was leaning against a lamppost. Some of the men who walked by seemed to be "checking him out." One older gentleman in particular, walks by this man. The older man looks directly at him. The man standing at the lamppost returns his gaze. The older man holds the gaze for a second, and then breaks it. He looks away, in the opposite direction over his other shoulder. His pace appears to slow down a little. The older man turns around and the both of them lock gazes again. They briefly smile and the older man goes on his way.

This incident shows how gaze disengagement followed by re-engagement becomes a primary force of identity recognition. By re-engaging in visual contact this participant indicates he is paying specific attention to this other person for a reason. If there were no purpose behind the act, there would be no need for re-engagement. The purpose of re-engaging the gaze could range from merely identifying that this other person is gay as well or as a way to show sexual interest or attraction. Both situations points to an assumption that the other person is also gay. In other words, the assumption of gay identity tends to act as a precursor to actions that show sexual attraction.

The next variation of the broken stare observed is the "peek-a-boo" type behavior where quick intentional looks are given out of the corners of one's eyes. The starer looks at the subject out of the corner of his or her eyes, looks away, looks back again, and looks away again, and so on for a brief period. For the most part, this

gaze type utilizes a lot of eye movement. The eyes move back and forth as the gaze is used. This gaze type may not appear as direct at first but usually ends as a full direct gaze, if the response is positive.

This type of gaze usually occurs when at least one interactant is in the middle of some sort of activity such as talking to someone else, reading a book, or eating a meal. The people who were observed to be employing this form of gaze appeared to be usually (acting or seriously) preoccupied with something or someone else at that time. When a "potentially gay" subject is introduced to the person's gaze, he or she uses the back and forth eye technique to show recognition. Eventually, a longer gaze is used or the gaze is discontinued altogether.

Many other types of gazing were observed in the field. Some of these other gaze types include sweeping looks (when one glances at the whole room in a sweeping motion), quick glances (a gaze that does not linger in one place for more than a fraction of a second), and the preoccupied gaze (looking at someone yet noticeably thinking about something else). These other types of gazing did not occur as often as the direct or broken Gaydar Gaze. Furthermore, few or no informants linked any of these other gaze types to Gaydar occurrence.

Conscious Gazing: The Gaydar Gaze as Trigger and Reinforcement

The Gaydar gaze has two primary purposes: As a trigger that activates Gaydar or as a form of reinforcement that validates the existence of Gaydar occurrence. The Gaydar Gaze may be employed at different levels of awareness or involvement. The levels of arousal may be different or the same for the dyad (message sender and receiver) interacting with the Gaydar Gaze. In my evaluation of the data, I found that differing levels of arousal may cause the Gaydar Gaze to adopt a discursive take:

1) X recognizes another person he or she believes to be gay and begins to employ the Gaydar Gaze. This other person (Z) notices the gaze. Z's levels of involvement become heightened. If Z is culturally competent

as a gay person and recognizes the shared meaning system addressed in the eye interaction, Z would return the gaze. In this example, X's Gaydar could have been triggered by forces other than eye contact. When X's Gaydar was triggered by Z's behavior, X was the message receiver. However, X, in his/her responses with stare actions then acts as the message sender. Z, noticing the gaze becomes the message receiver. When X and Z perform mutual gazing, they both become message sender and receiver.

2) X is looking aimlessly around and happens to catch Z's eye. Without intending to stare, X looks at Z longer than he/she realizes. Z's level of arousal gets heightened and engages in the Gaydar Gaze. X is a culturally competent member gay culture. The gaze triggers his/her Gaydar and his/her level of involvement also heightens. Both X and Z now hold the Gaydar Gaze. Both X and Z take turns acting as message sender and receiver.

In the first example eye-gaze could have been a form of Gaydar reinforcement for X. Something else could have triggered Gaydar (e.g. posture or the presence of gay-related symbols on clothing) but eye-gaze was utilized to validate its existence. Eye-gaze was, however, the activator of Gaydar for Z. In the second example, eye-gaze was the Gaydar trigger for both X and Z. These examples show how the Gaydar Gaze can be used both as a trigger and reinforcement of a message signaling gay identity.

Intention (by the message sender) may also be briefly displayed in the look. When the Gaydar Gaze is triggered by any one person, he/she may either do so intentionally (Example 1), or not intentionally (Example 2). However, some level of intention tends to be displayed in the discursive nature of the Gaydar Gaze when the dyad interacts. Intention may be considered a subset of "awareness." In order for one to have an intention of a specific behavior, one must first be aware of its existence and meaning, yet, "meaning" may be construed on many different levels. In some cases, Gaydar may be alerted by someone who is not aware that he or she is sending out a particular message (see the earlier discussion on identity recognition vs. attribution). The manner in which one behaves in a culturally competent way (Wieder & Pratt, 1990) is an indicator of one's association with a set of behaviors to its culturally ascribed meanings. In other words, intention may not be nec-

essary for Gaydar activation but can be a function of Gaydar validation.

The Gaze, Nonverbal and Contextual Cues

Although the Gaydar Gaze in itself appears to operate as, what Ekman and Friesen (1969) would call an emblematic[9] nonverbal behavior, it is often accompanied by other verbal and nonverbal behavior. Facial expression and hand or body gestures all serve to regulate[10] or illustrate[11] the Gaydar gaze. Although nonverbal characteristics as regulators and illustrators have long been associated with the verbal code (Ekman & Friesen, 1969, Goodwin, 2000a), kinesic behavior in this case serves as regulator and illustrator of other nonverbal emblems such as the Gaydar Gaze. A raised eyebrow may be used in conjunction with the gaze to indicate a questioning stance, simply—"are you gay?" or "are you interested in me?" The latter comes with the assumption that the person is possibly gay (or bisexual) because he or she could be interested in the message sender of the same sex. A smile could provide affirmation to the gaze by indicating that indeed, the person's gay membership was acknowledged. One of the interviewed participants states:

> There's one look in someone's eyes when you're talking to them, there is another one when you hold their gaze with kinda *an assured smile*, like you know, I know who you are, you know who I am, and they notice.

Any type of verbal or nonverbal cue could be used to accentuate the gaze. A person may sigh, release a non-word sound, or may mutter "hello" to someone else while incorporating the Gaydar Gaze to stress the implication of that gaze. The turning of the head to follow a stare is indicative of attention paid to the subject of the stare. This person did not just happen to come into the starer's vision. By turning the head so that the gaze remains unbroken, the starer makes it a point to show that he or she is acknowledged by the subject. Posturing also brings something into the mix. A lean forward while meeting someone's gaze shows heightened attention. If a person straightens up as if in alertness while he or she gazes at someone who just walked into the room, the message

sender's posture illustrates the message sent out via the gaze: I am paying attention to you or, something about you makes me pay attention. The "attention" may be the levels of stimulation that come about when Gaydar is triggered. A gesture may also be used to this end: When a person engages in a stare with another, this person raises a hand in an outward gesture, palms facing toward the subject or by raising an object such as a glass or a cigarette to indicate that recognition has transpired. The following account describes how kinesic cues work collectively to set off Gaydar:

> My Gaydar was very strong with a number of men who stood by the bar area. They faced each other and paid close attention to each other when conversing. However, when any one of them broke away his focus from the group, he would turn around to check out the scene and, almost always, to flirt or cruise. The look toward the outside of the group at that point in time was very pointed. Sometimes the body faced the group but the shoulders and head were turned to the object of attention. Long gazes at certain people of the same sex (were used), staring, assertive looks, somewhat "flirting" on occasion using small smiles and batting the eyelids when the other person responds.

A collection of nonverbal cues such as posture, smiles and movement were used with the Gaydar Gaze to accentuate the action of identity recognition. There was an obvious "breaking point" when this one person separated from the group to employ Gaydar interactions.

It is necessary to note at this juncture that the context within which eye-gaze is used also plays an important role in Gaydar negotiations. Although I focus on the operations of eye-gaze in this manuscript, my research on Gaydar in general has also identified various other behaviors and contextual situations that stimulate Gaydar operations. I labeled these behaviors "Contextualized Cues." Contextualized cues consist of a collection of verbal and nonverbal behavior that produces a particular behavioral "slant" which is recognized by Gaydar (for an in-depth explanation on Contextualized Cues, see Nicholas, 2003). Contextualized cues consist of gay personas (campy behavior, gay attitudes and stereotypes), masculine and feminine performance (transgression, butch or femme binaries), and relational involvement (gay spaces such as territories, events and activities, and gay relationships such as partnerships

and cruising). Contextualized cues can intermingle with Gaydar Gaze operations in such a way that a more lucid or nebulous message regarding identity affiliation comes about. Similar to nonverbal cues, contextual information can also serve to regulate or illustrate the Gaydar Gaze.

The Gaydar Gaze is one of the primary tools used to propel Gaydar activation and/or reinforcement. Together with other cues such as gestures, body movement, and facial expressions, and information available within particular contexts, the gaze becomes a powerful identity recognition tool among the members of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual culture.

Conclusion

The results of the ethnography attests that the Gaydar Gaze is experienced at varying levels of awareness and is heavily reliant on measures of cultural competency. These levels of awareness and competency allow the gaze to be utilized both as a trigger and reinforcement of identity recognition. Direct and prolonged eye contact between the person whose Gaydar was activated and the person who triggered the recognition is reported to be present during Gaydar occurrence. Breaking and re-engaging the direct gaze, either as a one-time action or as a series of behavior also represents a type of gazing related to Gaydar. The presence of other verbal and nonverbal cues along with utilization of the Gaydar Gaze gives way to better regulation and illustration of Gaydar occurrences.

The findings of this research support earlier research by communication and language scholars whose work addressed issues related to gay/lesbian identity negotiation or the use of eye-gaze in interaction. Leap's (1996, 1999) research on how gays negotiate "ways of talking," or how gay adolescents are socialized (via language) into gay culture, for example, draws similarities with my conjecture of how gays/lesbians negotiate eye-gaze. Goodwin's (2000a) research on eye-gaze in face-to-face interaction also corroborates some of the findings reported in this paper. Goodwin concludes:

> visual phenomena become meaningful through the way in which they elaborate, and are elaborated by, a range of other semiotic fields—sequential organization, structure in the stream of speech, encompassing activities, etc,—that are being used by participants to both construct and make visible to each other relevant actions (p. 179).

Such support from earlier research addressing similar issues helps validate the findings of this ethnography. Having parallels with other research endeavors also helps generalize the findings of this ethnography beyond the scope of its data.

Although queer scholarship within the communication field is growing at an expeditious pace, little erudition in communication studies seems to address non-verbal aspects, primarily eye-gaze, in spite of its significance as an identity-recognition communication event. This study of the Gaydar Gaze will not only contribute to the growth of gay and lesbian literature in the social sciences in general, and the communication field specifically, but establish a body of work that will allow the scholarship on identity and recognition within the gay culture to be further substantiated. These steps are essential to encourage further academic application.

While the ethnography on Gaydar acknowledges that eye contact is one of the primary non-verbal tools that either activate or reinforce the occurrence of Gaydar, further research specifically on eye-gaze can isolate the influence of one factor (activation vs. reinforcement) over the other. Follow-up research on the use of eye-gaze within the gay and lesbian community can also strengthen or question some of the findings of this ethnography. Additionally, research on eye contact using other traditionally disenfranchised cultural groupings (e.g. Wicca or Goth culture) may provide insight as to how this type of nonverbal communication is used within other co-cultural groupings.

This research is certainly a stepping stone towards increasing the number of studies within the small corpus of communication scholars who focus on eye-gaze as a communicative means by which group identity may be ascertained. The primary utility of this research however, is to provide an academic focus on two areas of study that have received little attention in the communication discipline: the use of eye-gaze and identity recognition within the gay

and lesbian community. After all, the concept of identity recognition in the gay and lesbian community is too large a communicative event to be treated any less.

Notes

1. Familiarity refers to the knowledge of or access to gay/lesbian cultural behavior that involves gay/lesbian identity(ies).
2. See discussion on identity recognition vs. attribution in later parts of this manuscript.
3. The term "queer" reflects the theoretical poetics of the gay culture which currently attempts to provide an ontological challenge to dominating labeling philosophies. Queer is used to label all who identify as non-heterosexual. This classification includes, among others, people who are bisexual, transgender, transsexual, homosexual or people who do not classify themselves according to traditional sexual preferences.
4. Based on the idea of "the closet" (see seminal work by Sedgwick, 1990, and more recently Brown, 2000) as the oppressive normative context for non-heterosexual behavior.
5. Such contact is a way to obtain knowledge (Dank, 1971) about the gay world.
6. Ponse (1978) uses five principles to explain the gay trajectory: 1) A subjective sense of "dissimilarity" from heterosexuals, 2) Understanding the "homosexual" significance of those senses, 3) Acceptance of those senses/feelings as an inference of gay identity—such as in the "Coming Out" process, 4) a community around the new gay identity is sought, and 5) involvement in a sexual/romantic relationship.
7. For example, Gaydar operations in the United States may be attentive to different criteria compared to similar operations in Europe; the social texts that stimulate Gaydar may be different from one occasion to another due to social class, power structures or levels of individual socialization; and, different gay/lesbian sub groupings (such as Latin gays, leather communities or gay activists) may use different measures to influence Gaydar workings.
8. "Family" is a folk term used by members of the gay community to refer to other members of the same community.
9. The nonverbal action substitutes a verbal message.
10. The nonverbal action directs the verbal message.
11. The nonverbal action emphasizes the verbal message.

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