Songs of Ourselves:
Employees’ Deployment of Social Identity in Workplace Encounters

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I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.
—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,”
Leaves of Grass, 1980, p. 49

The purpose of bearing witness is to motivate listeners to participate in the struggle against injustice.
—Ruth Behar, The Vulnerable Observer, 1996, p. 27

Research on diversity in the workplace considers the conditions for creating a safe, equitable, and welcoming work environment. Inclusivity is a challenge when visible social identities trigger potentially judgmental and divisive reactions (e.g., Wharton, 1992). A distinct set of challenges arises when employees bring invisible, marginalized, or even stigmatized aspects of their identities into the workplace. Making a social identity visible not only sets the stage for others’ reactions, whether positive, negative, or mixed, it also lays the groundwork for social changes that may reduce the stigma and costs of the social identity. In this article, we investigate the deployment of social identity in the interest of organizational change, extending a concept used by Bernstein (1997) to describe the face-to-face lobbying practices of gays and lesbians in state and local political campaigns for nondiscrimination legislation. We also extend the concept of encounters, through which individuals who identify with a category engage in some self-conscious and intentional performances that announce and enact who they are (Goffman, 1969). This concept has been elaborated for understanding the micromobilizing moments of social movements in broader societal contexts (W. A. Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1982). We examine how employees deploy their social identity in the workplace in ways that they hope will advance social

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change projects that are like workplace instances of micromobilization. We found that employees not only engaged in advocacy in their workplace encounters but also used the simplest form of claiming their identity in everyday conversations as a political moment. Taken together, encounters may be pivotal moments in a larger process whereby beliefs about and attitudes toward an identity are mediated and altered and discriminatory workplace policies and practices are challenged and, in some cases, changed.

Although the concept of encounters can be especially helpful for understanding the broad spectrum of social identity dynamics in the workplace, our focus is on a particular dynamic, the deployment of identity. Thus, our interest is not proximally about how individuals come to relate to a social identity, for example, how a perception of shared fate emerges (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) or how a shared sense of entitlement is triggered (Deaux, 1996; Lansberg, 1989). Instead, our theoretical concern focuses on those who choose to be political, active spokespersons for an identity in the workplace—sometimes after careful forethought in staged encounters, sometimes through choices that arise in the moment when individuals are put on the spot—and what they do in such instances. Social identity not only is made visible and familiar by face-to-face encounters or what Collins (1981) calls microevents but also is strategically deployed in such encounters. Second, we are interested in how what they do has feedback effects that clarify, reinforce, and even celebrate the social identity itself, challenging and reducing the marginalization and stigma. After discussing these aspects of encounters, we conclude with a discussion of how the singular moments we identify might be isolated encounters, encounters that must be ritually repeated, or moments that gather momentum and enable subsequent encounters that forward the projects of valuing diversity and effecting organizational change.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In workplace settings, people have the everyday opportunities and the local, nuanced understandings of the situation to experiment with moments of social activism (Scully & Segal, 1997 or 1996?) and signals about their social identities. The stakes are high in the workplace because it is where people receive lesser or greater shares of resources in ways that may be tied not only to their social group memberships (Baron, 1984) but also to how they hide or display various social identities. The workplace is characterized by numerous group memberships and boundaries that take on meaning and influence how people conduct their work (Kramer, 1991). There are risks associated with revealing membership or allying with a marginalized social identity group, but there are also potential gains in making the identity recognized, understood, and even valued. Making social identities fully social is significant for employees as it enables them to move beyond the life of the classic, impersonal incumbent of a role (Weber, 1949 or 1946?) and bring their whole self to work. For the organization, employees who can enact their authentic selves are likely to spend less time and energy managing their invisibility and guarding against stigmatization and thus might contribute more fully to the workplace. In the interim, as they try to craft such a workplace, the small cadre of employees who take such risks must creatively handle their misalignment (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). Deploying their marginalized identities in self-conscious, intentional encounters is one way to do so.

We focus specifically on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) employees’ deployment of identity. At the same time, our focus is not on the coming-out process, which includes taking on the identity internally and communicating it to significant others (although it warrants more study in its own right; for an insightful study of gay men’s experiences with being out in the workplace, see Shallenberger, 1994). Although coming out may be a part of the exchange during an encounter, we situate coming out as a purposive piece of a broader process. Claiming an identity during an encounter involves the self-disclosure of coming out, but it is distinctive in that personal references, even mundane ones inserted into a conversation, are deployed in a way that has political significance for GLBT employees. Through encounters, GLBT employees deploy their identities to claim membership in a social category and to educate people about their experiences of domestic relationships and shared human dilemmas. They also discuss prejudice and workplace discrimination—for example, addressing the what-does-sexual-orientation-have-to-do-with-work question—and advocate for both specific policy changes and a more welcoming workplace.

We should note that the term GLBT itself reflects such an evolution in the articulation of social identity.
The term signals the distinctiveness of these identities in the midst of their commonalities. In our study, most GLBT employees used the term GLBT in a casual and apparently taken-for-granted way, whereas some used it with a conscious positive nod to its inclusivity, and a few hinted that they graciously added the B and T but thought it went too far. The parallel academic project has been to invite the queering of our view of social institutions to appreciate complexities, refractions, and misalignments. This example of GLBT people’s rejection of stereotypes is but one instance of a more general process faced by members of any marginalized group, what Deaux (1996) describes as balancing the culture-down social representations or shared beliefs about what it means to be a member of a particular category with the individual-up creation of meaning with regard to identity.

Although our research focuses on the experiences of GLBT employees, we suggest that encounters offer a lens on critical incidents in the enactment and mobilization of other marginalized social identities in the workplace as well. For example, some identities that are invisible in the workplace are ones that are stigmatized and illegitimate in society more generally, such as people with invisible disabilities like epilepsy or people struggling with alcoholism. Others are only made invisible or downplayed in the workplace because they depart from the legitimated image of the modal worker. Mothers in the paid workforce are only recently getting more comfortable in making their family commitments visible, rather than downplaying that identity for the sake of fitting the image of the committed professional. Pregnancy can still involve coming out as a sexual being in the workplace and thereby dealing with social taboos (Martin, 1990). Fathers increasingly wrestle with identity claims in deciding whether to take parental leave. The legitimacy of each of these identities in the workplace is tied to broader societal discourses and agenda. Some of these identities are not, or not yet, social identities in the classic sense. Some may be marginalized in the workplace even if they are not considered marginal in another setting. Although these identities may trigger social reactions, their social status is still often ambiguous, generating debates over whether they are legitimate, deserving of special attention or care, and relevant to the workplace. In this sense, they bear some relationship to emerging GLBT issues in the workplace and are fruitful instances for advancing an understanding of encounters.

Our use of encounters as the critical workplace context for the deployment of social identity extends earlier work in the social movements literature (Bernstein, 1997; W. A. Gamson et al., 1982; Taylor & Raeburn, 1995) that has explored face-to-face meetings as the microevents (Collins, 1981) out of which the macrosocial phenomena of social identity, legitimacy, and social arrangements emerge. W. A. Gamson et al. (1982) have used the concept of encounters as the focal setting for their theory of micromobilization, which attempts to augment resource mobilization theory by considering how long-term mobilization is mediated and altered by face-to-face encounters. In this article, we adopt their definition of encounters, which in turn is rooted in the work of Goffman (1961). Encounters are focused gatherings that differ from other face-to-face interaction in that (a) they have a single focus, (b) “there is a heightened awareness of the mutual relevance of each others’ acts,” and (c) they have a clear beginning and end, often marked by ritual or ceremonial expressions (Goffman, 1961, as cited in W. A. Gamson et al., 1982, p. 10).

Social mobilization can take years, and theories of revolution adduce broad macro forces (e.g., Skocpol, 1978). In a move toward a richer account of local processes, micromobilization theory has developed more recently and emphasizes the importance of critical incidents such as “encounters leading to a sudden, discontinuous change in the capacity for collective action—either an increase or a decrease” (W. A. Gamson et al., 1982, p. 5). In most social exchanges, the belief system that underpins the status quo is unchallenged, such that “those acting in authority roles assume the right to define the penumbra of social expectations that surround the primary framework” (W. A. Gamson et al., 1982, p. 15). One feature that can turn a conventional social encounter into a critical incident of micromobilization is the mutual adoption of the belief that the unimpeded operations of a social arrangement or system of authority would result in an injustice. Such reframing leads to a challenge to, and perhaps ultimately the replacement of, a dominant belief system that legitimates the status quo. Thus, face-to-face encounters can be the context for critical challenges to social definitions and expectations that shape the microfoundations of macrosocial arrangements (Collins, 1981).

Bernstein (1997) has offered an instructive example. She found that through face-to-face meetings with state and local representatives, gay and lesbian constituents dispelled myths and stereotypes. Their
actions in these encounters, and even the interactional structures of the encounters themselves, did not frame the political contests as a culture war about gay lifestyles or even about abstract principles about discrimination but situated the contests in the experiences of the speakers themselves. The people themselves became the “contested terrain” (Bernstein, 1997, p. 550). Thus, such deployment of identity has the principal effect of politicizing the personal. Because her research suggests that the type of identity deployment may vary across settings and types of political contests, she argued that research is needed with regard to the impact of diverse institutional arrangements on “the creation and deployment of identities” (p. 543).

Through this research, we have discovered several modes of identity deployment that respond to and creatively use various institutional features of the workplace, ranging from hierarchical relationships and formal styles to informal socializing and off-site meetings like diversity workshops. As we asked what is distinctive about these workplace encounters, we discovered that these micro-level encounters operate as moments in a larger process that appears to span levels of analysis. Local encounters confront, each in their own way, the taken-for-granted frameworks that undergird broader based discrimination. They are not merely instances of individual-level expression but forms of situated political agency that challenge the legitimacy of social arrangements and can ramify from the interpersonal to the institutional. The researchers’ challenge in hearing about individual encounters is to guard against the tendency to be either too reductionist in focusing only on the personal psychological aspects (and missing the broader landscape) or too grand in asserting that local moments add up in any simple way to a macro-level social movement (and missing the individual courage required or the possibility that the moment is just the moment and a hodgepodge of moments might contain many detours, not straight paths, toward social change). We return to these cross-level themes in closing. Because the discovery of encounters came to us as a surprise during an inquiry about institutional-level change, our view of the data continues to hold this dynamic interplay between local moments and social movements.

METHOD

In the past decade, GLBT activists have made enormous strides toward creating a safer, more inclusive workplace through making themselves more visible in the workplace. For example, domestic partner benefits (DPBs) are diffusing among companies to a degree that would never have been anticipated a decade ago. However, no clear social consensus, much less an institutional norm, has emerged with regard to DPBs or, more broadly, to workplace nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Whereas at the national level, supporters and opponents of gay-friendly employee policies are locked in an overt contest over the legitimacy of GLBT people’s claims (and the Employment Non-Discrimination Act languishes), at the organizational level, GLBT employee advocates have continued to work to create local environments in which their claims to standing and fair treatment can be heard.

Our research began as an inquiry into the dynamics of institutional change. In 1996, to understand better the micro-level dynamics behind the diffusion of DPBs, we approached a network of GLBT employees, the Minnesota Workplace Alliance (WPA), which was the most advanced GLBT group of groups in America according to the Human Rights Campaign, America’s largest GLBT political organization. The WPA provided a list of contact people at 24 Twin Cities employers (ranging from private foundations to Fortune 100 companies). Most were the leaders of GLBT employee groups within their organizations, whereas some were lone voices in workplaces that lacked formal GLBT employee groups. By using two common convenience sampling strategies—snowballing (i.e., obtaining names from a contact) and recruiting (i.e., letting the contact find willing informants before divulging a name to us)—our sample grew to 66 GLBT employee advocates, their allies, and the targets of their advocacy. Thus, our multicase qualitative research taps the experiences of employees in several organizations and industries.

Sample

 Convenience sampling—generally acceptable for a single qualitative study that has as its goal discovering the details of lived experience rather than generalization—is characteristic of research on GLBT workplace issues because of the twin difficulties of gaining access to and building trust with populations whose members may be at risk by being identified (Croteau, 1996). However, in the body of research on GLBT workplace experience, the widespread use of convenience sampling has meant that “phenomenological information
is available about only a limited range of workers in the GLBT population” (Croteau, 1996, p. 202). To a degree, our sample shares this limitation; that it is limited to a network of activists and allies who are visible enough to be snowballed makes it appropriate, however, for understanding the nature of what activists do during a workplace change effort that makes visible a hidden, stigmatized identity.

Nonetheless, the limitations of convenience sampling do alert us to a class bias in our data. Our sample of predominantly middle- and upper class professional employees frequently cited how difficult it was to be out in blue-collar settings. This might be true and could explain why our sample has only two blue-collar workers. On the other hand, GLBT networks, like many social networks, may include mostly within-class linkages. Kadi (1997) reminds us that being out in working-class contexts may not be as horrible as upper class stereotypes of the working class suggest. In either case, this limitation bounds our work to the discourse and styles of white-collar workers.

Within this sample, we have variance on the dimensions of gender, race, occupation, and sexual identity that inform the range and style of encounters and are discussed explicitly when we later consider the intersections of identities. Across our multiorganizational sample, we have both men (n = 33) and women (n = 33), although within some organizations, employee groups were either predominantly gay men or predominantly lesbians. There were 7 people of color in our sample, and their experiences in particular reveal how employees navigated dual and triple memberships in nondominant identity groups. Among our interviewees were machinists, attorneys, various medical and public health professionals, accountants, bankers, engineers, R&D scientists, librarians, social workers, and middle managers and executives from several functional areas. Our sample also includes 2 transgendered employees who self-present as men at work and as women outside work; one identifies as being a lesbian, and the other identifies as being straight. No employees in our sample identified as being bisexual. The GLBT employees in our sample shared a range of shades to their identities, including whether they were biological and/or adoptive parents or grandparents, formerly or never in a straight relationship, always gay or recently out, and single or partnered. In sum, our sample reflects intragroup diversity among GLBT employees, even around their experience of sexual orientation, the dimension that unites them; it is important not to lose sight of the intragroup diversity beneath the collective but homogenizing labeling that can mark identity politics.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our semistructured interview protocols were designed to gain insights into the history of the GLBT employee group at each of the sample organizations, including their successful and failed efforts in advocating the adoption of inclusive human resource (HR) practices; the role of key organizational advocates, opponents, idea champions, and networking in this advocacy; and the nature of the discourse used to explain and justify action or inaction with regard to policy changes and the legitimacy of controversial policies.

Through this process, we heard many stories of how people risked bringing the often invisible and stigmatized aspects of their social identity into encounters in order to effect change. Thus, although our initial concern was for how legitimacy contests unfold and underpin the macro-level diffusion of controversial policies like DPBs, we gained a more micro-level perspective on the enactment of social identity. From our earliest interviews, we were struck by GLBT advocates’ frequent use of one-on-one talks with potential allies and targets of advocacy in a way that mirrored micromobilization processes (W. A. Gamson, 1992; W. A. Gamson et al., 1982; McAdam, 1988). Although these encounters often entailed the advocates’ disclosing of their sexual orientation, the underlying motives went beyond what Shallenberg (1994) found were the most common reasons for coming out in the workplace—such as making a statement about “who I am” or investing in meaningful relationships; they also seemed more self-consciously instrumental than simply “mak[ing] a political statement out of a sense of responsibility to the community” (p. 131). However, one clear implication of our activist sample and our change-oriented protocols is that the stories of enacting GLBT identities gleaned from our interviews were offered to us in light of our focus on grassroots change efforts. Thus, even though coming out inevitably figured in these employees’ advocacy, these data are not appropriate for theorizing at the individual level about the experience of being closeted or coming out at work.

After culling from the interview transcripts stories of our advocates’ face-to-face encounters, we viewed these texts iteratively to discern if the two types of
identity deployment employed by gay and lesbian advocates in political contests—identity as education and identity as critique—were manifest in the workplace (Bernstein, 1997). In this manner, we discovered how styles of encounters in the workplace are similar to and different from those in the greater political arena. These stories informed our theoretical understanding of the purposeful deployment of social identity in the workplace. Based on our analysis, we defined three kinds of encounters, claiming, educative, and advocacy encounters. Claiming encounters, put simply, involve stating and owning an identity, sometimes indirectly, as through the inclusion of a personal detail during an everyday encounter. They can normalize a stigmatized identity through their casual matter of factness. An educative encounter explains to the listener some aspects of identity and experience that they might not have known or might have misunderstood. It invites questions. An advocacy encounter illustrates and names an injustice, perhaps a microinequity (Rowe, 1990) that makes everyday life more difficult for the speaker. It suggests or invites suggestions about new attitudes or policies that would remedy the injustice.

We do not claim that sharp boundaries divide the three kinds of encounters. Our illustrations show the distinct flavor of each, but they can also blur into one another as an encounter unfolds. We also do not imply a hierarchy whereby advocacy encounters take mobilization the furthest, with educative and claiming encounters the midway and simplest steps, respectively. Advocacy encounters may most evidently push policy changes. However, sometimes the simple act of a claiming encounter represents the greatest breakthrough, with education and advocacy encounters advancing a conversation that might not otherwise be underway without the claiming breakthrough. Activists can and do use all three types, repeatedly and in different settings. Our focal project is to give substance to encounters as they emerged from our data. The discussion section addresses how they may link into chains of change.

**Reflexive Social Science:**

**Encountering Encounters**

While we were working to enhance our empirical understanding of encounters and the deployment of social identity, we could not escape the fact that the experiences and the words of our informants did not simply have an intellectual impact on us as social scientists. Beyond analyzing encounters culled from the transcripts, we also had to consider both the encounters that happened in the very process of activists’ telling us their stories and those that happened during our later reading of the interviews as texts. For example, we had to consider the impact of our professional identities as researchers from well-known university schools of management. Many took our interest in their stories as further validation of their change efforts. We were taken as experts even though we were there to learn. Stories of encounters were at times presented in a way that invited our real-time assessment of their tactical strengths and weaknesses.

There were the encounters that unfolded in the context of the research itself. In each interview, we experienced encounters and the deployment of identity in an immediate way and were called on to reciprocate; we each had to come out at various times and to various degrees as gay, straight, feminist, partnered, and so forth. Throughout, we were struck by the unusual degree of the spiritedness, openness, and vulnerability of our interviewees. In the evening, each researcher debriefed the team on his or her interviews, and discussion moved back and forth from more theoretically rooted comments on the data to expressions of our emotional responses to the people and their stories. Without having heard the term, we had become what Behar (1996) has labeled **vulnerable observers**, taking an anthropological stance in which the researchers allow themselves to become instruments of the research and in which their human responses to the human endeavors they explore become a facet of the data demanding understanding. Thus, we present some of our encounters at the end of the following section.

**ENCOUNTERS AND SOCIAL IDENTITY IN ORGANIZATIONS**

**Claiming Encounters in the Workplace**

[In the past] I had to make some one-on-one decisions, and I just decided, I’m not going to hide. I’m not going to wear my lavender L [for lesbian] or whatever, but when appropriate, the conversation just naturally slips to one’s personal life, and I just make it clear that I have a partner, her name is Jean.

For most heterosexual people, the casual mention of one’s husband or wife, boyfriend, girlfriend, or part-
ner in a workplace conversation is a taken-for-granted act. Even in settings in which employees are pressured to downplay family obligations and, say, be ready to travel on a moment’s notice, simply saying a gendered name does not repeatedly pose a difficult choice point or represent a personally risky act for straight people. The tacit disclosure of heterosexuality is done in the workplace without thought on a daily basis; referring to a spouse or companion rarely poses a reputation risk. This is not the case for GLBT people in most workplaces because stigma brings sexual orientation, as a discreditable but often invisible attribute, perceptually to the foreground (Goffman, 1963; Plummer, 1975, 1996). In the workplace, this means for the GLBT person that managing both the complex dynamics of interactions with nonstigmatized individuals (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) and the perception of sexual identity become “the central projects of his [or her] career” (Woods, 1994, p. 30). Indeed, Woods (1994) has argued, “Gay lives and careers are characterized by a preoccupation with self-disclosure and skill in the management of sexual identity. . . . Few decisions are a source of such intense recurring concern” (p. 29). Therefore, choices like this lesbian’s decision simply to name her same-gender partner in face-to-face encounters in a way that mirrors the casual conversations of those around her represents a potentially risky, powerful, and personally empowering act. Saying a name, or just using a pronoun, surfaces and challenges what has been an enduring social stigma. More than opportunities for self-expression, however, claiming encounters are perhaps the first step in staking a claim to legitimate social standing.

Claiming might be better understood by contrast with the concept of passing or presenting oneself as having a different social identity than that one privately holds. Passing and its consequences are familiar from popular culture. For example, a mixed-race woman passing for a White woman is the focus of Showboat. Throughout the history of the Jewish Diaspora, many Jews have had to mask their identities in response to violent anti-Semitism. In politics, the executive order known as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell is an attempt to enforce passing as an institutional norm for the military. Although these examples of passing have features in common, each also has culturally and historically distinct features. In all of their various manifestations, claiming encounters involve an active choice not to pass (Garber, 1995; Ostfeld & Jehn, 1998).

Claiming encounters take many forms, which can vary with the individual’s other identities and settings, but their essence is a person’s acknowledgment of an often unseen aspect of his or her social identity. With most GLBT people closeted to some degree in the workplace, what should be the easiest of claiming encounters—coming out even just to another GLBT person—is hindered by two common consequences of the closet, a purposeful invisibility and an unintended isolation. In one organization, chance effected an enabling change when an openly gay man transferred from Chicago to the Twin Cities corporate headquarters of a Fortune 100 company only to discover that there was no GLBT employee group. Deciding to start one, he called the few GLBT coworkers he had learned of from outside connections, who also called friends. (Snowballing is indeed a common practice for nonresearchers as well.) At the first lunchtime meeting, 1 10-year veteran employee said he went from knowing 2 or 3 GLBT employees to knowing 13 in 1 day. At the time of our interviews, e-mail linked about 75 GLBT employees worldwide at that firm. Nonetheless, that same 10-year veteran, by then the point person in a campaign for DPBs, did not see himself as out, despite the fact that the campaign had required countless meetings with decision makers in benefits and HR and repeated efforts to get on the calendars of senior-level executives. He described himself as follows:

Not out out. I mean I’m obviously out to some of the highest management [at work], but not out. I don’t know how I would go about coming out. I mean I have a rainbow triangle on my car, but nobody knows what it means—unless I start wearing “I am gay” T-shirts or something.

A leader in his group, he has repeatedly, albeit selectively, deployed his social identity over time for advocacy purposes. Goffman (1963) has described this selectivity as a central challenge in the management of social identity. He found that even when individuals can mask some stigmatized aspect of their identity, they are faced with the tension between being secret about their social identity with some classes of people, such as predictably hostile people, and needing systematically to reveal themselves to other classes of people, such as people who “sing in the same choir” or potential allies. As Goffman suggested, the issue is not so much managing the tension of social interaction as managing information about one’s social identity: “To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where” (p. 42). Thus, Goffman claims that encounters are a variegated phenome-
non—dynamic, socially embedded processes that defy a single depiction.

Claiming encounters will be affected by power dynamics, such as the relative organizational positions of the parties to the encounter. Some of the GLBT employees in our sample experimented with claiming encounters with trusted peers before going to superiors. Ironically, it appears it is sometimes safer to enter into encounters with top managers who, as keepers of a corporation’s espoused commitment to diversity, know they must listen and symbolically enact this commitment (Pfeffer, 1981) or because of the greater reputational consequences, are more apt to guard against the risk of appearing prejudiced (Crocker et al., 1998). For example, the veteran leader quoted above had had countless meetings with executives but did not see himself as out with his peers in engineering; his workplace claiming occurred only in the context of advocacy with HR managers and senior executive decision makers.

The architecture of power within a claiming encounter is complex. From one vantage point, the GLBT person is the teacher and the listener is the learner, with the attendant teacher-learner dynamics empowering the GLBT speaker. The GLBT speaker is bicultural (Bell, 1990) and can speak both to the invisible identity and to the knowledge of the dominant identity necessarily gained by learning to pass, whereas the monocultural hearer does not have as rich a cross-cultural understanding. In some of our cases, straight people reported on the humbling and enlightening experience of being party to encounters. Conversely, the dynamics of a claiming encounter can cast the GLBT person as supplicant and the listener as the person with the power to grant legitimacy to the identity through his or her reaction. Having legitimacy blocked by a listener with high status in the organization can be more consequential for subsequent encounters.

For GLBT people, claiming encounters are often recurring events; for many GLBT people, the dynamics and challenges of such encounters, their efficacy, and their emotional and professional consequences remain perennial concerns. Rarely is anything taken for granted. One lesbian at a Fortune 50 company related that although her experiences had for the most part been positive, she still found herself grappling with the decision of how to claim her identity when she moved to a new department. Both straight and GLBT colleagues with whom she was already out asked her about how she did it.

They say, “Wow, what was it like when you first came out?” Or now I’m in a new division . . . [since last] December, so I had to make a decision, “How do I do my coming out process here,” and people ask, “Well, how was it?”

Her choices hinged on her beliefs about what simply claiming her identity meant for herself and others in everyday business conversations:

To have people meet someone who is out is the best way for people to have a chance to get beyond their fears, and then perhaps to that point of acceptance, and then maybe even beyond—tolerance, acceptance, and actual respect . . . That to me is the way that I make it good here at [my workplace].

The idea of emphasizing familiarity and likeness was important for the GLBT group at Consumer Products Company, a Fortune 500 company. The transition from an informal social group to a social identity group seeking official sanction as a member of the corporate diversity council entailed articulating a vision. The group devoted a good deal of effort to crafting a mission statement and choosing a name for their group, Grandma’s Family, and the motto, “There is a little of Grandma in all of us,” to capture its collective sense of identity as a group of GLBT people who were also loyal employees. Grandma is a reference to the firm’s marketing icon, a female figure who appears on most of its packaging. A 5-page piece, “Who We Are,” introduced Grandma’s Family, articulated what they were looking for, and presented the case for why their agenda was important to the firm. From this group, we learned how claiming encounters can be collective, as well as individual, and in writing, as well as face to face.

Grandma’s Family successfully got on the senior management’s radar screen. Sexual orientation was quickly added to the equal employment opportunity statement, but equally quickly, the group was told not to ask for anything more, such as DPBs, and not to try to speak to the CEO. This initially triggered a campaign of strongly written letters followed by unproductive meetings with the head of HR and labor lawyers and nearly led to the demise of Grandma’s Family. In addition, the group was chastised by some executives for their reference to Grandma, which for many group members was especially poignant because of the many levels on which the name and motto were meant to work—using humor not only to announce themselves as loyal employees but also to
leaven the seriousness of their claim to standing with playful allusions to gender and family. For some, it signaled that they were indeed not part of the family after all. Their experience illustrates how claiming encounters can be at once both positive, resulting in a more inclusive policy, and negative, leading metaphorically to renewed ostracism.

Some claiming encounters are primarily negative. Founding members of corporate GLBT groups who publicly identified themselves as contact people or group chairpersons were often subjected to harassing voice mail and e-mail. In two different organizations, instances of hate messages led HR managers to provide the two lesbian GLBT group leaders with escorts to their cars at the end of the workday.

Claiming encounters can at times also involve subtle mixes of claiming and disclaiming. Claiming as a way to reduce stigma is partly about claiming common ground, demystifying stigma, and showing likeness, even in simple things. At the same time, truly speaking about an identity is also to highlight its distinctiveness. This mix of sameness and difference might be a search for optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991), with enough similarity to enable connection and enough difference to preserve the spirit of claiming a distinct identity. Recognizing that sameness alone is incomplete, a lesbian leader of a Fortune 100 company said,

I try to reach out to the commonalty: “I’m more like you than you think. You have a stereotype of how different, how weird, and how deviant I am, and guess what, I’m more like you than you think.” There are downsides to that. I’m not trying to deny the diversity of our own community or say that this is a white wash where everybody has to be the same. . . . We need to make that first step, and then perhaps after that, you can appreciate the richness of the diversity: “Guess what, I’m not exactly like you.” We need that commonality as the first step to get beyond the barriers, fears, stereotypes.

In summary, this section shows how claiming encounters involve chance, selectivity, recurring instances, collective and individual engagement, and a range of responses. They entail rejecting historical stigma, enacting taken-for-granted privileges like naming loved ones, and challenging the untempered branding as other. At the same time, they lay the foundation for a more nuanced enactment of difference alongside the proclaimed sameness. That one veteran activist did not see himself as having fully come out at work after years of advocacy with senior management suggests that claiming, despite clear common ground, differs in some ways from coming out. GLBT employees, through repeated claiming encounters, seek to make their standing and experiences taken for granted. Thus, in many instances, claiming encounters seem to be examples of the “particularized talk” that in Collins’s (1981) view plays a crucial role in constructing and reproducing social organization and lays the foundation for “taking for granted particular people’s rights” (p. 1000). If so, claiming encounters may differ from coming-out experiences in the degree to which the personal is consciously or accidentally made political in order to initiate a challenge to the social status quo.

Educative Encounters

It was apparent that this is an issue that I needed to pay attention to. I didn’t understand it. . . . I think the breakthrough was, “How is it that I can see the needs of all these other groups?” On the gay and lesbian side of the equation, [it was], “This is a personal issue.” That was part of the learning. From there [Maria, a lesbian employee activist] was very instrumental and very helpful in walking me through that. I asked a lot of questions, and she was very blunt and candid in explaining things.

—Tom, senior vice president of human resources at FinCo

Since the late 1980s, FinCo, one of the oldest corporations in the Twin Cities, has had what many insiders and outsiders alike described as a strong diversity initiative as part of its corporate strategy. Yet, there was no organized GLBT group until January 1993, when a series of unrelated events catalyzed two unacquainted employees to start the Gay, Lesbian, and Friends Network. For Dean, a gay man, it was an exercise in a team-training session, in which participants were asked to write the name of a celebrity dream date on a card; as a team-building exercise, they would make a game of matching cards to participants. Faced with the choice of coming out on the spot or hiding, he left the card blank and was later chastised for not being a team player. (In later educative encounters, he used this story to answer the frequent question, “What does sexual orientation have to do with work?”) For Maria, a lesbian, the catalyzing event was watching the telecast of Pat Buchanan’s speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention. She decided to act locally to
resist the aspersions on her group more widely. Unacquainted with each other, Dean and Maria were brought together by two middle managers in HR with whom they strategized about forming a group. On January 1, 1993, Maria was named the new group’s contact person in a blanket e-mail to FinCo’s 10,000 domestic employees.

The group’s first official act was a formal request for DPBs. The senior vice president of HR, Tom, turned down their initial request in a letter, the hostile tone of which disturbed many members of the GLBT group. Maria counseled patience to the group but wrote to Tom indicating that although the group recognized that the issues were not easy, members felt that they were very important. She emphasized her availability as a resource, and she proposed lunch. A few weeks later, they had lunch one-on-one: Tom, a White, heterosexual senior executive in his mid-40s (and the man quoted at the opening of this section) and Maria, a Latina lesbian accountant in her mid-30s. She related,

[We had] never met before. . . . I was there to have lunch with him to allow him to ask questions. It wasn’t a pitch. It was strictly to allow him to ask questions. . . . We talked about all the things that people aren’t. . . . [and] don’t have the resources to go to sometimes or don’t have that person that they can be able to ask that question in a safe place.

Tom said the opportunity to hear Maria’s story and ask questions he had been unable to ask when growing up on the south side of Chicago was a catalyst for his coming to see the group’s concerns as legitimate workplace issues and for his dealing with his own biases and “baggage”: “My kids all think. . . . and my wife will tell you, it was like this personal transformation took place, and I say I just dealt with the fear.” Very quickly, he became a crucial ally. Maria recounted her experience:

I thought, how lucky . . . to be given the opportunity to do this. It was the whole “What was the reason I came out?” If I’m going to change anyone’s mind, well what a great mind to change, somebody who was in a place where he could have a huge influence on the lives of gay and lesbian employees at our company.

Although claiming encounters often play an educa- tive role by enabling coworkers to meet someone who is GLBT, the story of Tom and Maria’s lunch illustrates how what we call educative encounters are both more intentionally educative and more broadly instrumen- tal than claiming encounters appear to be. Bernstein (1997) has found that in state and local political contests, identity as education was deployed in encounters expressly engineered to explain GLBT identity and to change non-GLBT people’s perspectives. In the case of the employee advocates we spoke with, they often entailed the telling of a personal story, in settings ranging from one-on-one chats behind closed doors to the sponsoring of speeches by GLBT luminaries. Despite the intentional instrumentality, the one-on-one stories retained some of the expressive quality of the personal claiming stories. In some instances, assuming the role of instructors and entering into the encounter was itself an episode in an ongoing claiming process. As with both coming out and claiming, entering into educative encounters seems to be a matter of where, how far, and with whom.

When the telling of personal stories provides the opportunity for the listener to ask taboo questions, it seems especially effective at reducing fear, erasing stigma, and enhancing empathy for both the teller and the listener. It is apt to be personally transforming for teller and hearer. Furthermore, stories of the encounters can themselves be retold, attaining the status of folklore that is shared within and across organizations. For example, the story of this encounter has been retold not only by Maria and other GLBT employees at FinCo but also by other GLBT employees at other companies and by Tom in public addresses on managing diversity initiatives.

Educative encounters—especially when one-on-one—often employ common ground as their setting and also share commonality as their theme. One lesbian employee who has been active in both the women’s and the GLBT networks at her Fortune 50 company emphasized the mundane humanity of her home life as a way of countering stereotypes of lesbians:

I think you make great strides by people hearing that my partner has a 19-year-old son that she has had some difficulty with. Lots of other people have had troubles with their teenage sons. We’ve got a problem. Think of something mundane. We mow the grass, we call in Roto-Rooter for plumbing.

Yet, some of the stories that were most often circulated and retold emphasized not common ground but inequality or workplace hostility. Educative encounters use tactics like inverting the scenario to make their point or to elicit an instinctive “aha”—such as the feminist
reframing, “would that happen to a man.” An oft retold story in the Twin Cities—the story of when Dolores’s husband had a cold—operates at two levels. At one level is the content of the story, which pertains to a gay man’s being refused family leave by his manager to attend to his life partner in the hospital, whereas his coworker got to stay home with her husband, who was much less seriously ill. At another level, it is a story of what it takes to be heard. The Dolores story was first brought to light by the president of a GLBT employee group during his carefully calculated public remarks at a luncheon celebrating the workplace diversity programs of his company. Essentially, all of executive management was on hand to hear how denying soft DPBs, such as family leave, created inequities.

Although the circumstances surrounding the telling of the Dolores’s-husband-had-a-cold story reveal the potentially sharp edge of such encounters and the term *educative encounter* itself might evoke images of reluctant students, in many cases, we found instead that educative encounters evoked an enhanced empathy. Many executives understood the significance and courage involved for GLBT employees in coming forward, as illustrated by this description of a CEO’s first meeting with his company’s GLBT employee group:

> I had to walk into a conference room bigger than this with a long table... and all those people were coming out at one time before me, the chairman and CEO of the company... Basically, that was a statement of trust that everybody had to make that day because they had to invite me in and close the door. We talked for about two and one-half hours.

Some GLBT employees also found varying degrees of enhanced empathy in the process. One GLBT leader, whose personal efforts to win DPBs at his Fortune 50 company had failed to that point, described the struggle to hold onto empathy. In this quotation, he used coming out metaphorically to describe the process of overcoming homophobia that both GLBT and straight people must go through:

> As with gay employees or lesbian employees, there’s a fairly significant coming-out process. Probably [there is] an impatience with the straight community having their coming-out process... It is only fair to give others a reasonable coming-out process, too. I think that even the more tolerant amongst us are finding the time frame to be excruciatingly frustrating. No action... is interpreted as no support.

This risk of frustration may be especially great in encounters in which the hoped for symbolic and instrumental outcomes go to the core of the employees’ sense of standing as a human being, for example, DPBs and the implicit symbolic recognition of the sanctity of same-gender partnerships.

Despite this frustration, many GLBT employees willingly entered into educative encounters and recognized the importance of understanding the opposition for engaging a productive, rather than a combative, dialogue. Beth Zemsky, a well-known GLBT educator in the Twin Cities, opens many workshops with the telling of a personal epiphany that increased her understanding:

> There had been a murder of a gay man... a hate crime... I was invited up there to talk to a group of religious leaders who... wanted to do something to respond to the murder, but they didn’t know what... The minister of [a] Black Baptist Church... said, “I want to believe what you say about your life. I want to believe, and I want to do something. I want to be able to understand your life the way you present it. You need to know that I learned about you from people that I loved and trusted. For me to even engage in this discussion with you, I need to believe the people I loved and trusted somehow did not tell me the whole truth. They did not have my best interest in heart, they somehow lied to me when they talked about homosexuality.”... I got tears in my eyes, and I said, “You are right... This is a struggle because people you loved and trusted said something else to you than I am going to say to you today.”

Beth’s story illustrates many important features of educative encounters. Crocker et al. (1998), in a discussion of interactions between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals, have highlighted many of these features. First, to a great extent, such encounters challenge the legitimating myths that sustain existing social hierarchies and worldviews by enacting nonstereotypical behavior and pointing to social injustices. Even for well-intentioned people, like the Black minister, interaction with stigmatized individuals is apt to trigger deep, interpretative frameworks based on learned stereotypes that are often at odds with both the listener’s self-concept as a nonprejudiced person and his or her aspirations for the encounter. The resulting interpretative ambiguity of the situation, coupled with the possible fears of failing to act appropriately or of appearing prejudiced, increase the psychological risks for the listener. For the stigmatized person, there is likewise the fear of being stereotyped.
and of failing to effect a successful encounter. Thus, Beth’s willingness to enter such encounters has entailed naming these challenges.

As researchers, we cannot claim to have fully comprehended Beth’s lesson despite our repeated readings of, perhaps even encounters with, her interview. Like the epiphanies of folklore and scripture, hers has a harrowing character. In the wake of the recent murder of Matthew Shephard, when for us, as for many people, the violent capacity of two young men in Montana is something alien and terrible, the significance of Beth’s chosen opening story is at once gripping and frightening. Stemming as it does from the uncertain efforts of people of good will in the wake of a similar crime, it dramatizes the urgency and the scope of a shared struggle. For most people, GLBT and straight alike, those first lessons usually stigmatized GLBT people as more or less dangerous, untrustworthy, morally condemnable, and perhaps even deserving of whatever they get. If the processes of coming out and claiming represent moments in GLBT people’s struggle with their own internalized homophobia, then to a degree, Beth’s naming the nature of the shared struggle resonates with the idea underpinning the earlier comment that it is “only fair to give others a reasonable coming-out process, too.” The social nature of an encounter involves two-way sense making. Opening workshops with such a story highlights the struggle involved in unlearning the lessons of prejudice for all parties.

The story must also be viewed at the level of a drama, in its own right. The unfolding, confessional character reflects educative encounters’ potential for mutuality. The telling of personal stories appears to reduce the social distance between people with different social identities, while making the issues that confront the teller and the listener accessible to each other. When successful, educative encounters create the context for a sequence that in many cases propels itself from risk to reciprocity to respect. Participants encounter their own identities in encountering the other, be it in the form of recognizing why they came out in the first place, confronting mutual fears, according the other his or her own coming-out or discovery process, or acknowledging the roots of one’s distrust and fear. Such mutual discovery enables the enactment of new social identities and even empowers people in the creation of social institutions, or in this case of a hate crime, their healing.

To share a powerful story, GLBT groups sometimes invited outside speakers. At a large industrial company, the newly formed gay and lesbian employee group began sponsoring events under the rubric of the officially sanctioned diversity council. Its strategy was to issue personal, face-to-face invitations to other organizational members, particularly executives. At first, more often than not, invited executives did not attend, but then the executive vice president of HR, Cathy, accepted a personal invitation from a GLBT employee to hear a guest speaker, Karen Thompson. Thompson is a lesbian whose 8-year legal battle against her in-laws for the right to take care of her life partner, who had been seriously injured in a car accident, has been widely documented in the press and in a book (Thompson & Andrzejewski, 1988).

Listening to Karen, the executive vice president imagined herself precluded from caring for her husband in a similar situation.

[Her speech] was a breakthrough moment. She said this isn’t about homosexuality or what happens in a bedroom, it’s human rights. Something went off in my head, yes! It really changed me. . . . I thought a lot about it. I talked a lot about it. It was very powerful for me. . . . I took the domestic partner benefits issue on just as a personal thing for myself because I believed so strongly in it.

A married, heterosexual woman, Cathy championed DPBs both inside and outside her organization. In addition to persuading her own CEO to become a champion of DPBs, Cathy created a luncheon group, known as the magic circle, in which a small coterie of Twin Cities HR executives strategized ways of advancing inclusive policies such as DPBs while minimizing the risk of backlash.

Like one-on-one educative encounters, staged third-party events provide a mechanism for a compelling story to be told. However, as an outsider, the storyteller does not face the same concerns about the potentially negative consequences of deploying a GLBT identity in the particular workplace where the event is taking place. Whether the person’s testimony is greeted with civility and understanding or hostile judgment, the storyteller can walk away—having posed no risk to his or her livelihood. This both enables the outsider to take the heat as a spokesperson and establishes the significance of the issues. In what might be called a vicarious deployment of social identity, the outsider’s telling of his or her story can create greater standing for GLBT insiders.

Such staged educative encounters do not always involve outsiders, however. In many settings, they
have been institutionalized in the form of GLBT speakers bureaus. GLBT employees can practice their remarks and embolden others in the audience. In addition, straight friends, as allies in combating homophobia, can speak with the relative safety of outside speakers. A few straight friends in our sample referred to the risks of being seen as odd, touchy feely, preachy, or closeted, but most spoke of the importance of using their privilege for good. Interestingly, privilege itself is often an invisible identity (McIntosh, 1990) made powerfully visible in testimonials of support during speakers bureau encounters.

GLBT advocates saw speakers bureaus as providing a mechanism for entering into relatively rehearsed educative encounters that combine features of staged encounters with the greater intimacy of one-on-one encounters, but in the form of smaller group interactions. The most well-developed speakers bureau in the Twin Cities was at FinCo. It was staffed by trained volunteers from the Gay, Lesbian, and Friends Network (over half of the network’s approximately 200 members did not self-identify as GLBT). Members ranged from entry-level employees to very high level executives. The bureau typically sent three people to each engagement: a gay man, a lesbian, and a straight friend. On one occasion, the event featured a local transgender activist, specifically requested by one manager who had an employee going through a gender-change process. Part of each speaker’s responsibility has been to explain why he or she is part of the bureau; GLBT speakers explained why they came out and described their experiences in the workplace. Friends explained why they are coming out as straight allies and, in effect, modeled personal reflection and understanding. According to Maria, the head of the network, in the first 6 months of 1996, the bureau had made over 200 invited presentations, each to approximately 15 to 30 people. She explained,

We didn’t wait for diversity trainers to come in and do diversity training for employees. It just wasn’t gonna happen fast enough, and besides that, diversity trainers aren’t necessarily gay or lesbian. The exposure, even though it was good and we’re talking about the issues, is going to be totally different than if a gay and lesbian employee came and talked to a group.

Network members attributed the bureau’s success in great measure to its apparently positive reputation and to the effect of combining different voices with the opportunity for interaction. Bureau members preferred to present to about 15 employees. “They don’t want it too large or you lose some of the impact [during] the questions [segment].’’ The presentations, according to one member of the bureau, also had had such a powerful impact that there was a waiting list for engagements and there was a large number of friends willing to be on the speakers bureau. One lesbian speaker added that the support made such an encounter safer:

That right there is your validation. Among these friends are people that make the workplace a safe environment. They’ve been the driving force behind this network. I think a lot of it is [that for] a lot of gay and lesbian employees, there is still some fear to be out there in the front and to be a friend and supporter, though that takes a lot of risk too. So many of them have just been right out there.

Members of the FinCo speakers bureau have also offered workshops for would-be speakers both in the Twin Cities and at national GLBT activist conferences, sharing actual past questions (some benign and friendly, some unwittingly offensive, and some openly hostile) and strategizing responses that could further successful educative engagements (Gay & Lesbian Community Action Council [now known as OutFront Minnesota], 1996).

In all of these illustrations of educative encounters, empathy and self-encounter appear as fundamental aspects of GLBT employees’ grassroots campaigns. More generally, Fligstein (1997) has suggested that if social actors are to be successful agents of institutional change, they must have “a basic social skill,” which he describes as the ability “to imaginatively identify with the states of others” (p. 398). Educative encounters not only help members of an identity group to know, share, and celebrate their identity, dulling the sting of stigma, but also often provide an opportunity for imaginative identification. In addition, educative encounters are moments in an ongoing change process. Whereas claiming encounters get additive force from their spontaneous simultaneity here and there, like disorganized coaction (Martin & Meyerson, 1998), educative encounters are more concerted, purposive, and staged. They make the ground fertile for the more forcefully persuasive advocacy encounters.

Advocacy Encounters

We didn’t go and beat up on [Tom] and say, “We want this and we want this.” We worked with them.

—Maria, GLBT leader at FinCo
At FinCo, Maria described how an insider’s understanding of the corporate culture informed their choices, including her approach to her lunch with Tom, the senior vice president of HR:

We didn’t want to burn any bridges and to be in people’s faces because we didn’t think it was the way to go. From what we found out, it’s not the way to go, at least at [FinCo]. We knew the atmosphere, we knew the culture.

Their insider’s approach appeared to have enabled the enacting of educative encounters like the lunch, even when the content of the encounter was, in Tom’s words, “very blunt and candid in explaining things,” and included exploring his own personal fears. Their successes in winning such executive allies as Tom and the CEO of FinCo enabled subsequent, more advocacy-oriented encounters that were beyond their power to enact alone.

For example, to help sell the idea of DPBs, Tom, with the CEO’s approval, set up a dinner in the executive dining room, an encounter that mirrors Maria’s and Tom’s lunch. At the meal were the chairpersons of the other sanctioned diversity council networks (e.g., the women’s and African American networks), senior executives, and board members who would be debating the DPBs decision.

So, we were allowed to sit at the dinner table and talk about issues. And fortunately, I [Maria] was in between two of the executives and Dean [the gay male cofounder of the GLBT group] was on the other side. And we joked [with one executive] about having him trapped [between us]. He stayed after the dinner and talked to us.

In contrast, at MegaManufacturing (Mega), a Fortune 100 concern, organizational decentralization created difficulties in enacting advocacy encounters, even though the firm officially sanctioned its GLBT group. For example, top management had positioned the firm as being committed to the inherent dignity of all its employees, whatever their social identities. Yet, at the time of our interviews, there was still no company-wide policy on family and bereavement leave, despite a recent out-of-court settlement of a lawsuit brought under the Minnesota Human Rights Act by a gay former employee who received neither family leave before nor bereavement leave after his partner’s death from AIDS.

GLBT employees described Mega in a variety of ways—ranging on one hand, from stalling, middle of the road, Midwestern, conservative, and never the first in its group of 16 selected benchmark organizations to, on the other hand, a company poised for some changes on GLBT issues and a great place to work. The lesbian employee advocates—apparently more successful than their gay male colleagues with claiming, educative, and advocacy encounters—remained optimistic about the potential for successful advocacy around GLBT workplace issues.

In contrast, the gay male employees’ accounts focused on failed encounters and on how the issue of DPBs had bounced between HR and benefits, with neither division wanting to take responsibility. Getting beyond the gatekeeping of the executives in these areas, to be heard at the top, had been a repeatedly punishing experience for the gay man leading the campaign for DPBs. Once, when he successfully scheduled an advocacy encounter with a senior executive, the senior executive angrily interrupted the presentation because he felt that it should instead be directed to the benefits department. In fact, benefits management had directed the man to this executive. He recounted feeling dispirited and seeing his advocacy as failed. Nonetheless, the group’s highest ranking straight ally, a woman in charge of the corporate diversity program, argued that this man’s getting bruised in that encounter nonetheless represented progress. In her view, the issue of DPBs was still on the agenda and now on a more senior executive’s radar screen.

The examples of FinCo versus Mega point to some observations. Perhaps most obvious is the fact that advocates can be straight allies or friends whose commitment, despite their non-GLBT social identities, suggests that the oft-cited link between social identity and the individual’s perception of oneself as “psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group” may be too simple (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Second, successful claiming and educative encounters may or may not lead to successful advocacy encounters, notwithstanding the apparent mutability of these forms of encounters suggested by the idea of the progressive politicizing of the personal.

Thus, the examples of FinCo and Mega, and more broadly this research, advance the project of understanding how microphenomena lay the foundation for macrosocial structure without suggesting that they are causal or determinative. In particular, this examination of encounters points to how the mechanisms of
“particularized talk,” reciprocity, and self-encounter—seen in the claiming and educative forms of encounter—lay the foundation for the acceptance of marginalized social identities in organizations and for “taking for granted people’s rights” (Collins, 1981, p. 1000). Employees’ advocacy encounters may be informed by societal political movements, but we found that in effective advocacy encounters, employees did not simply push the organization from a radical or external standpoint. They engaged their insider identities as loyal members and good corporate citizens, even while fighting stigma and marginality with the conviction of advocacy (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Advocacy encounters were also affected by whether the organization had a diversity mission statement, particularly one that included sexual orientation, and a formal diversity office or employee diversity council. Appealing to these formal statements, employees could emphasize their insider status and their hopes to fulfill what the organization already claimed to value. This advocacy task is very different from trying to make the case for an altogether new organizational value. Where formal diversity initiatives exist, the associated positions and councils help carry some of the burden of risk for GLBT employees engaging in advocacy encounters and back up their efforts. Although such dedicated resources clearly made advocacy easier, we also found variance between organizations that do have such resources, demonstrating that they were not a simple moderator of advocacy encounters. For example, in our sample, the focus of the incumbent in formal diversity management positions mattered. Many of these positions were held by African Americans and/or women, whom GLBT employees described either as having empathy for GLBT issues as the latest wave in a common civil rights struggle or as distancing themselves from the stigma of these issues in order to advance the diversity cause more broadly and less controversially. We found examples of each of these approaches.

In the organization with the most well-developed and multipronged approach to GLBT issues, the African American director of diversity came to understand that without formal recognition as an employee group, GLBT employees would be perpetually second-class participants, who are always “[going around to the] backdoor” and who “would never legitimize who they were as part of the organization.” In another organization in which the GLBT group dwindled pretty much to the efforts of one person, that person explained that the new diversity manager “is an African American woman, which is great, but I think she is way over our heads as far as dealing with our issues.” Although the GLBT spokesperson felt that his group had basic and local concerns, the diversity manager appeared to be focused on “a broad vision” and was “putting together this global diversity council.” A small but significant signal for the GLBT employees who mostly lived and engaged in political work in the city, where they felt more comfortable, was that the diversity director “lived in the outer suburbs. . . . She seems a little distant from our group.” So despite the diversity-oriented resources, this group was almost at more of a loss in advocacy encounters than groups that were agitating for the creation of more diversity resources or trying to get a more sophisticated understanding of diversity into place. Even when the position and the sophisticated understanding existed, their advocacy work was temporarily stalled. Thus, it is important to continue to probe the more nuanced and situated ways in which organizational factors moderate how encounters unfold in organizational contexts.

**Singing in More Then One Choir**

The majority of the members [of the GLBT employee group] are White. I am half Asian. . . . I think that has made me frustrated in a way because I know that to be gay and to be a person of color, that is just double the complications and challenges.

—Woman who is the lone advocate in a manufacturing setting

In the above examples, employees spoke of their GLBT identity and illustrated the process of making visible a particular, significant social identity. At the same time, their identities as GLBT employees were complex and varied because the GLBT category is so broad; queer theory reminds us of the multiplicity and sometimes celebratory ambiguity of gay identities. Employees’ GLBT identity also intersected with other social identities, both their own and those of other diversity advocates. In this section, we examine how the overlay of multiple social identities invited employees to use encounters to signal their belonging and their uniqueness.

Claiming encounters may look different when multiple identities are in play. Indeed, the common injunction to honor the complexity of multiple identities and break down totalizing claims (e.g., Nicholson, 1990) remains an abstract addendum until the combining of
multiple identities is fully illustrated and integrated in a real person speaking during a claiming encounter. A Black lesbian who is over 40 explained, “I am rarely a single-issue voter, I can’t afford to be because I have too many issues when everything you are [race, gender, age, orientation] is protected by law. You have to balance that. It is a major factor.”

She referred to the categories “protected by law” in equal opportunity statements, which are protected precisely because each carries a history of discrimination. (Sexual orientation is legally protected in 10 states, including Minnesota.) These categories are usually rattled off sequentially, but in the telling of her stories, they came together simultaneously as one person lived them. She carefully chose her battles among these identities and weighed others’ expectations of her as a spokesperson for each and for all of them. Not all her work was delicate or onerous. She also playfully described her own inconsistencies in some more enjoyable claiming encounters: “wearing red nail polish and hiking boots” and “being the only Black or gay person I know who is not too cool to like country western music.”

Some employees spoke of the additive or multiplicative challenges that are created in bridging multiple, marginalized identities. One Asian American lesbian told a story of frustrated links to the women’s group at her company. Reaching out both as a woman and a representative of the GLBT group, she proposed cohosting an event on women and health. She felt subverted by a straight woman in her attempt to connect on the dimension of their shared womanhood:

[This woman] calls me up and was like, “We are not going to have [the GLBT employee group name] in any of the title, and we are not going to have any reference to lesbians whatsoever, and by the way, how many people are in your group?” and I was like, “Oh my God.” She totally changed everything, she was totally homophobic. In the 5 minutes that I sat down with her, my blood was just racing.

When multiple identities are in play, claiming encounters are made more complex when others claim to be keepers of a social identity (here, being a woman) and choose to exclude some people who have that social identity in combination with a stigmatized identity (here, being a lesbian). The GLBT employee in this encounter felt incomplete as she faced how one identity seemed to preclude another, when both were part of who she was. Multiple identities can make claiming encounters sometimes playful occasions for subverting stereotypes and sometimes experiences of frustration and loneliness.

Taking multiple identities into account can change the tenor of educating encounters. The social identity literature has emphasized the shared aspects of group membership, including the finding of a social space and a recognizable, visible identity for a group (Brewer, 1995; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The group acquires meaningful boundaries and iteratively reinforces the significance of membership. At the same time, the breakdown of negative stereotypes often requires showing how varied, rather than how interchangeable, the group members are. When one GLBT group had a chance to meet with the CEO and introduce themselves, a gay man talked about being a grandfather. The CEO reacted animatedly from his own experience because this provided a safe, familiar dimension of connection in a potentially awkward meeting, but the grandfather recalled that the CEO also subtly signaled his surprise at finding a grandfather among the group. Precisely the connection and the surprise made the gay man recall this educative encounter as successful.

Workplace advocates might have to look outside the workplace to find social activists who are beginning to look at the intersections of identities within GLBT groups as integral to the success of a movement against oppression. In the words of Urvashi Vaid (1995), a lesbian woman of color who is a prominent activist and educator, people like her have to educate and speak their experience:

Without ignoring the hundreds of gay and lesbian activists who do “get” the need to work on racism, sexism, and homophobia all at once, I do believe that most gay and lesbian people neither understand nor value the importance of multi-racial and multi-issue politics. . . . Their failure to grasp it is the responsibility of people like me, we have not communicated. . . . Perhaps there are fourteen camps or forty degrees of distinction among us on race and gender. My point is that the complexities of racial prejudice, sexism, and homophobia require an equally complex response. (pp. 284-285)

Following her injunction, when our theory takes multiple identities into account, we can more readily see how the goals and accomplishments of claiming, educating, and advocacy encounters themselves become more complex and intertwined.

Inside the workplaces we studied, such intragroup dimensions had not been fully engaged because just
putting the GLBT groups on the social map was a complex project, undertaken in different ways and degrees than in the societal context. More efforts had been made to build across-group links to other groups working on diversity issues than to probe within-group diversity. For example, links to straight African American allies who attested to understanding scorn and stigma from their own experiences were crucial. Such cross-group linkages created the boundaries and relationships needed for GLBT to become a distinctive social identity. At the same time, several of the Black GLBT people in our sample pointed to how this cross-group alliance, although politically valuable, accidentally defined gays as White and African Americans as straight.

Gay African Americans occupy a boundary position, which the few in our sample spoke of as being both an integrative and ambassadorial role and an ostracized and multiply marginalized role. It was a gay African American man in our sample who spoke the most about within-group variation in the GLBT community, in contrast to cohesion through alikeness. He explained that he emphasized varied presentations of self within the gay community as part of his educative encounters to gain professional legitimacy for himself. He wanted to portray the GLBT community as a big tent with room for different people like himself, while also being clear about who he was and subtly distancing himself from some parts of the community. He shared his reasoning:

If you go to a gay PRIDE Festival, the first snapshot that you usually see on TV is either a drag queen or somebody that is obviously lesbian or very butch looking. Those are stereotypes that are fostered. I think what the GLBT community, middle-class community, is trying to do is to not focus on the stereotypes that people have already built up in their mind about GLBT people, but let them know that there are also people that aren’t cross-dressers or who aren’t always flamboyant. We are also bankers, lawyers, doctors, research assistants, whatever.

In this article, we have adopted the widely used acronym, GLBT, which has recently begun to take on a life of its own as a marker of this social identity. However, this label itself lumps together many very different identities and experiences. Perhaps most readily apparent, gay men and lesbians have different experiences. We found that GLBT groups at several companies were composed predominantly of either gay men or lesbians. In either case, the members would wonder aloud where their counterparts were. Lesbians would speculate that it was safer for them to be out because gay men have to deal with straight male homophobia and the social construction of masculinity in the workplace (Collinson & Collinson, 1989; Collinson & Hearn, 1996). Gay men would speculate that it might be safer for them to do the political work of the group because as White men (which they mostly were), they had greater access to power and resources. These very conversations, especially when shared in public forums and spaces, educate GLBT and non-GLBT employees alike about the complexity of the GLBT social identity. They also begin to bring to life the powerful links between sexism and heterosexism, still referenced more in theory (e.g., Nicholson, 1990) than in action.

The B and the T in the GLBT acronym were more often silent. We interviewed one transgender activist, who demonstrated her willingness to answer questions about everything from her partner’s sexual preferences to her parents’ reactions to her wig in tireless and gracious educational encounters. Our sample included no self-identified bisexuals. Perhaps this identity is the most problematic among the variegated within-group distinctions because it poses the possibility of blurring the very in group–out group boundaries between gay and straight. This possibility redirects the social identity project in ways potentially unwelcome both to gay and straight people (Garber, 1995). Both groups own a social identity on one end of a taken-for-granted polarity but are jarred out of what is familiarly comfortable about this dichotomy when bisexuality is raised (Chodorow, 1994). Both the members of the dominant group and of the group seeking legitimacy may feel better about retaining distinct social identities and learning to work increasingly warmly across firmly maintained boundaries rather than rethinking the boundaries. Boundaries, however, may themselves be socially constructed. It is a problem for identity-based politics that identities are historically and culturally situated and that just as one social construction begins to give them meaning, another social construction can reconfigure the lines of social identities (Kaplan, 1997). Claiming, educating, and advocacy encounters about bisexuality could be threatening, hence the silence on bisexuality. Organizational scholarship drawing on postmodernism (e.g., Martin, 1990) suggests that both the deconstruction of false dichotomies and the sound of silences in this data can yield important and telling insights.

In summary, recognizing multiple identities are in play, even as one focal identity is being brought into
the social milieu, is important for several reasons. It brings into tension the shared features of group membership and the significant within-group differences. More subtly, it can even continue to problematize the very creation of in-group and out-group distinctions around the emerging social visibility–enhancing encounters.

**Recounting Our Encounters**

The process of doing this research not only led us to discover three forms of encounters in the workplace but also took us through the three types of encounters in our own ways. We not only had our own encounters with some engaging and brave people during interviews but also experienced the small moments that characterize encounters in our discussions among the research team of the nature and meaning of our data in light of our own identities and experiences.

Our own claiming encounters happened mostly in the interviews themselves. For Doug, as a gay man, claiming his identity in the interview felt like the inverse of his typical experience in professional settings; being out with our mostly gay and always gay-friendly contact people at the 24 organizations was assumed, accepted, and comfortable. Nonetheless, the decision to claim identity was not always easy in an interview. Doug wondered, for example, if making his identity known elicited greater candor from the GLBT interviewees, while perhaps eliciting more socially acceptable responses from the straight interviewees. In addition, although all of the interviewers reported what seemed to be unusually easy and strong connections with interviewees, Doug wondered if what he was experiencing was somehow a more privileged insider’s view that is not necessarily accessible to his straight research colleagues; he came to see this concern as more a reflection of his own need to be an insider than of any barriers to his straight colleagues. Finally, he worried that making his identity known might compromise his credibility as a researcher. Thus, especially at first, his choices about claiming were not automatic.

For Maureen, as a straight woman, claiming was a more delicate balancing act. She worried about not being too quick to out herself as a straight woman—which could appear to be a distancing move or a claim to heterosexual privilege—but also about not pretending to be a lesbian or letting that presumption hold as a seamless but unfair path to trust. She worried about her legitimacy or standing as a researcher on this topic, hoping that she would be recognized as an ally but concerned that she might be seen as an interloper. In one encounter, she assumed that the interviewee was a lesbian and thought that the interviewee assumed the same about her. After 45 minutes, the interviewee mentioned she had “talked with my husband about doing this straight ally work,” which had not been framed as such until then. In that evening’s debrief, Maureen tried to figure out why something subtle seemed to shift at that moment in the encounter: Was the interviewee coming out as straight to Maureen, and did she do that to be honest and supportive toward a presumptively lesbian interviewer or was she attempting to forge a connection of sameness with another straight ally who had engaged in the cause? This relational aspect of such conversations often remains unspoken but informs the dance of identity involved in a claiming encounter. Who is the other person? Who am I to them? How do the imagined and real identities interplay in the exchange? Ironically, although it was Doug who was the research team’s own key informant on the personal intensity of claiming encounters, it was Maureen (and John Austin, our straight research assistant) who experienced claiming as sometimes awkward in this research project itself and Doug who experienced the research project as a respite from the usual rigors of claiming in the corporate and academic worlds.

A moment of discomfort for Doug did arise in our interview and subsequent discussion over dinner with Julia, one of the transgendered people in our sample. She used the same ask-me-anything strategy that Maria employed during her lunch with the senior vice president of HR, Tom, in what became for us our defining illustration of educative encounters. Julia was charming and clearly experienced in answering all manner of questions, educating us along the way about the separable dimensions of gender and sexual orientation and what that means in lived experience. As the interview became an ever safer place for all three members of the research team to ask the sort of taboo questions that one-on-one educative encounters sometimes allow, Doug felt compelled at some points to shut off the tape recorder, although it was never at Julia’s request. Doug gained greater empathy for the vulnerabilities of the learner and the speaker in an educative encounter.

Educative encounters happened more often in our research team discussions. A common exchange between Doug and Maureen represents a classic struggle for coauthors of different social identities.
doing work on diversity: figuring out which struggles of which groups are represented in what ways and with what passion, tone, authority, or framing. One passage written by Doug in an early version of this article posed some of the encounters experienced by GLBT people as unique in their intensity and entirely distinct from workplace experiences of heterosexual people. Maureen objected to that polarized framing, which prompted Doug into educative mode, citing data from the sample, from his friends, and from his previous corporate experiences, particularly about how straight people filled their offices with family pictures and GLBT people left their family life at home. Maureen took her own educative stance to venture that members of other social identity groups, particularly women, also leave parts of their identities at home that do not fit at work; for example, she pointed out, after some reflection on what might be a compelling example, that it is illegal to ask women their marital status in job interviews, lest that aspect of their personal life bias workplace decisions. In thinking of other identities, she also noted that even within their own social movement, GLBT people often had to leave some parts of their identities at home, such as one Black GLBT interviewee’s story of not telling her GLBT friends about her involvement in her Black church. These encounters among the coauthors helped in refining our understanding of the phenomenon, often with Doug making sure that the courage of even a simple claiming act did not get lost and Maureen probing analogies to GLBT people’s encounters in the experiences of other social groups and considering how the simultaneity of multiple identities adds layers to encounters.

In terms of advocacy encounters, we found that in academic circles, simply our choice of topic made us appear to be advocates. Even as we carefully marshaled and analyzed our data and used it to advance theory, readers often heard advocacy. A reviewer of an early version of this article explicitly told us, “This sounds too much like advocacy.” We puzzled about the “too much”: Does any glint of advocacy undermine the academic soundness of the project? Are papers on more mainstream topics simply advocacy for legitimated and powerful groups, but their invisible advocacy comes in the sober form of findings and recommendations? We care about and want to highlight (and ultimately correct) the injustices we learn about through our research (in the spirit of the opening quote from Behar), but does being tactical in our advocacy require precisely that we downplay our advocacy, invoking only sanctioned arguments and rules of reason, in order to be heard better? Does that risk the disappearance of advocacy from research, so that we need instead to raise our own advocacy voices in order to bear witness to the advocates’ voices we heard? Like our interviewees’ experiences, our advocacy encounters are sometimes planned, such as rehearsing our remarks on this research project for a presentation. Alternatively, they could be spontaneous; for example, when questioned about our research on the spot, we can often remain safely abstract about the theoretical puzzles, such as legitimacy contests and the dynamics of diversity and change in the workplace, or refer explicitly to the GLBT content of our concerns as not just a handy case study but also a part of the real concern.

CONCLUSION

Locating a process in the workplace emphasizes its instrumental qualities, such as a rational drive for consistency and political strategies for change. We find that encounters, although politically instrumental, can also be expressive. In the workplace, advocacy often seems like a more tempered and reformist subsidiary to a broader, more expressive, and radical movement happening in the societal context (Zald & Berger, 1978). From the encounters we describe, however, we induce a different sense. They are at once instrumental and expressive, both narrow pieces and fully part of the larger project. Moreover, they blur the distinction between reformist and radical social action that is implicitly or explicitly a part of many social movement theories (e.g., Cohen, 1985; J. Gamson, 1995; W. A. Gamson, 1992). Bernstein (1997), for example, distinguishes the more radical identity as critique from the more assimilationist identity as education, two forms of strategic identity deployment found in various instances of GLBT political activism. The tensions between advocates of transformative versus assimilationist social action are often some of the most divisive within social movements, as described in works ranging from classics on the French and Russian revolutions that undergird social movement theory (e.g., Ulam, 1965) up to contemporary works on rage versus assimilation in the workplace (e.g., Bell & Nkomo, in press). The encounters we describe may at first appear to be strictly assimilationist—about belonging as an end in itself—and about identity as education. However, we wish to break down this
polarity and offer a more dialectic integration (Benson, 1977). Small claiming encounters can embed more transformative possibility than they at first appear.

Employees in the workplace are certainly neither using the radical language of queer critique (J. Gamson, 1995) nor dismantling compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). Although GLBT employees do indeed strategically deploy different identities—including such identities as corporate insider, veteran employee, licensed professional, grandfather, and person of color—in conjunction with their GLBT identities, for both expressive and instrumental purposes, the political and institutional conditions of the workplace inhibit the deployment of queer identities as critique. Yet, a close look at the dynamics of their identity deployment reveals that they are nonetheless making more powerful, personally risky, and system-shaking interventions than it would at first appear: “The purposeful and expressive disclosure to others of one’s subjective feelings, desires, and experiences—or social identity—for the purpose of gaining recognition and influence is collective action” (Taylor & Whittier, 1992, p. 110).

By bringing the life world of the victims of discrimination into face-to-face encounters, the speaker hopes to legitimate the presence in the public sphere of discourse of the speaker’s personal experience (W. A. Gamson, 1999), to politicize the personal. For GLBT workplace advocates, politicizing the personal challenges the “penumbra of social expectations” that holds sexual orientation to be a private matter that does not have a place in the workplace and silences discourse on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Woods, 1994). As a consequence, these encounters ultimately target the taken-for-granted frameworks that undergird such discrimination.

Viewed together, these observations point to a complex interdependence between the deployment of social identity and organizational change projects with regard to diversity and inclusivity. There is a power to a certain kind of identity deployment—personal narration, coming out, claiming standing. By telling personal stories—helping a key potential ally understand the issues on a more personal and emotional level—GLBT activists are working on the legitimacy of their personal identities in corporate contexts. This is both a personal expression and a form of political agency. In such identity encounters, success appears to hinge on whether the authenticity of the individuals’ presentations of self may achieve what W. A. Gamson et al. (1982) have highlighted as an essential facet in micromobilization: the narrative fidelity of the frames used in justifying a challenge to the authority of existing social arrangements.

Listeners are won over to challenging and changing the status quo through the increased capacity to “imaginatively identify with the states of others” (Fligstein, 1997). Indeed, such enhanced empathy may be the basis for a new, collective identity. The collective aspect of diversity advocacy tends to emphasize connections between historically oppressed groups such as women, people of color, and GLBT employees as they come to understand one another’s struggles as similar and shared. Thinking more expansively, imaginative identification might broaden the collective to include straight people, the historically privileged group along this dimension, in the quest to understand sexuality, gendering, and identity in ways that more profoundly alter the workplace status quo and widen the range of styles and selves that make sense in the corporation and the community.

Theorists of social change have pondered the puzzle of why people who see and experience injustice do so little to speak up and take action. A growing set of factors has been discovered and by now gives an overdetermined account of political passivity: these range from favorable social comparisons that mask injustice (e.g., Runciman, 1966) to the lack of resources and access that stalls dissent (e.g., McCarthy & Zald, 1978) to oppressive conditions that prohibit action. When one considers the expressive urgency of encounters in the workplace, this apparent passivity becomes a deeper puzzle in two ways. First, the puzzle may be empirically misplaced if it misses the small moments that must surely count as part of mobilization. Second and related to the first, it raises our wonder to new heights at how remarkable it is that people who feel injustice in their bones do not speak out. Yet, when they do, as the individuals in our sample have done, they almost downplay what they have done, explaining that they cannot help but be authentic—that they cannot not help themselves from singing.

My life goes on, in endless song
Above earth’s lamentations.
I hear the real, though far-off hymn
That hails a new creation.
O’er all the tumult and the strife,
I hear the music ringing.
It sounds an echo in my soul.
How can I keep from singing.
—Old Quaker hymn
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