Drag Queens, Drama Queens, and Friends: Drama and Performance as a Solidarity-Building Function in a Gay Male Friendship Circle
Richard G. Jones, Jr.

To date, there has been scholarly research conducted on gay communities, language and performance within certain communities, and gay male friendships. However, scholarly synthesis of these concepts is uncommon. The following essay asks: How are performance and communication used to build and maintain solidarity in the gay male friendship circle? To answer this question, I used a multi-faceted conceptual framework which includes the shared repertoire dimension of a community of practice, friendship as method, and criteria for determining performance and solidarity building strategies as communicative actions. Using friendship as method, data gathered through participant observation of a small gay male friendship circle are analyzed and discussed in terms of the guiding research question. Conclusions are drawn to show that dramatic and performative communication is an important solidarity building function in the gay male friendship community that I studied.

Etymologically, community comes from the Greek term koinonia, which means to make something one and common. Creating oneness and commonness through language helps bind communities together (Depew & Peters, 2001), and marginalized groups, such as gay men, may have unique ways of using language to create such community. This project seeks to explore the fruitful intersections of culture, community, and communication within the context of a small friendship circle of gay men. Using friendship as method, I show how performance based communication acts as a solidarity building function within this small community. Using emergent criteria from the data, I explore how the creation of unique vocabulary, playful putdown, and storytelling are strategically employed by the men in the group to create a shared repertoire of communicative tactics that are indicative of the shared repertoire dimension of a community of practice.

There is an important history of gay and queer studies in the communication discipline that is still vibrant. Gay and lesbian communication scholars have made excellent cases for the validity of their work, especially in the case of language studies and rhetoric. Chesebro’s (1981) germinal edited volume, Gayspeak: Gay Male and Lesbian Communication, included essays from such renowned communication scholars as James Darsey, Joseph A. DeVito, John F. Cragan, and Sally Miller Gearhart. More recently, queer communication scholars have expanded the study of sexuality in the communication field through the incorporation of queer theory, which questions an essentialized identity, connects the personal to
the political, and promotes activist-oriented research through self-reflexivity to challenge traditional views of knowledge and reality (Slagle, 2003, 2006). Indeed, the communication discipline has offered much to gay, lesbian, and queer studies (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003). While I appreciate and acknowledge the contributions of both of these areas of study, the current project is situated between the rhetorical and the critical; as an interpretive study guided by ethnographic methods to foreground performance as a solidarity building function in a particular context. In the following, I build a conceptual framework that addresses previous literature and how the current project fits into an ongoing scholarly conversation by answering the following question: How are performance and communication used to build and maintain solidarity in the gay male friendship circle being studied? Communication, practice, and identity are the foundational building blocks of this framework.

Communities of practice theory is a social theory of learning that focuses on the relationship between practice and identity. Communities of practice was proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) as a descriptor for the process through which apprentices learn a trade from a master through participation in practices. The theory has been used in organizational communication as a constituent part and the totality of a variety of theoretical frameworks (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Iverson & McPhee, 2002; Janson, Howard, & Schoenberger-Orgad, 2004; Kuhn, 2002), and gender and language researchers in sociolinguistics and communication have lauded the utility of communities of practice in various case applications (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999; Stapleton, 2003; Suter, Lamb, Marko, & Tye-Williams, 2006).

There is a theoretical and methodological history of a practice-based approach to identity within communication studies in speech community theory and ethnography of communication research. Speech communities are based on speakers’ shared norms and how their communication practices are observed and evaluated by other speakers in the group (Labov, 1972; Philipsen, 1992). Through this process, group identity is formed and defined in specific contexts and communities (Gumperz, 1971). While speech community theory has demonstrated its utility and heuristic value, gender and language scholars have focused on the usefulness of the communities of practice framework as an alternative or extension to speech community theory, as it opens possibilities for a more nuanced and critical look at difference through its highly conceptualized framework (Bucholtz, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). While ethnographies of communication like Philipsen’s (1975) have provided detailed information about the communicative practices of specific communities, I am more attracted to the use of ethnographic methods in the context of friendship and how those methods can be coupled with the utility of communities of practice as an alternative to speech community theory.
or ethnography of communication research. The genealogy of communities of practice differs in its conceptualization and operationalization but has been used by communication scholars in ways that usefully extend speech community theory and open possibilities for more critical/performative interpretive communication research.

There are three dimensions of a community of practice as noted by Wenger (1998): mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Shared repertoire, which is the focus of my analysis, includes linguistic resources like specialized vocabulary and linguistic routines, or “ways of talking” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, p. 464). These ways of talking are carried out as members of the community of practice share stories, local lore, and inside jokes (Wenger, 1998). I am not trying to prove that the gay male friendship circle being studied is a community of practice; however, given the aim of this project, the shared repertoire dimension of the community of practice framework offers a unique and nuanced way to begin answering the research question posed above. In particular, this project focuses on three types of communicative action that mesh well with the frame of a community of practice: language and community, playful putdown, and storytelling.

**Toward Localized Community and Language as Performance**

Previous research on gay language informs the current project but either does not or only peripherally addresses the general research question or the specific communicative actions mentioned above. Furthermore, much of the research is historically contextualized and is in need of updating. At a time when research on gay language was limited, gay slang was addressed in terms of in-group and out-group labeling, sexual practices, specific word formations, and unique vocabulary (Chesebro, 1981; Hayes, 1981b; Stanley; 1970). Although the broad categories addressed by these researchers are still applicable, one might question the contemporary relevance of the specific communication behaviors over twenty-five years later. For example, references to Bette Davis, Sarah Bernhardt, and Mae West were noted in Hayes’s (1981b) research but are not common today.

Other scholars have focused on more localized and regional forms of gay language. Farrell’s (1972) investigation of Polari, a quasi-pidgin language spoken by some gay men in the UK, illustrates how localized groups of gay men can develop their own language. Cox and Fay (1994) illustrate this by providing transcribed Polari conversations that require translation to English to be understood by native English speakers. Baker (2002) provides the most recent and in-depth scholarship on Polari, which he calls the lost language of gay men due to its recent decline in usage. While this type of in-depth research into localized and regional gay language in the United States is lacking if not missing, some scholars have addressed the ways in which performance and communication are uniquely related in some gay
communities. The performative, dramatic, and theatrical nature of much gay communication persists through humor employed by a campy communication style that Hayes calls “a vast metaphor of theatre” (1981a, p. 47). Just as gay men in these previous studies frequently mentioned celebrities of stage and screen that were popular or iconic at the time, many gay men I know today frequently discuss celebrities and popular culture. The metaphor of theatre, be it stage or screen, seeps into the everyday communication and performances of these men.

The examples noted above built a crucial foundation for more recent research, which also rests on a foundation of social interaction theory, or the notion of self-presentation and performance derived from Goffman’s (1959) work. While symbolic interactionism, as with speech community theory, has demonstrated its utility and heuristic value in the communication field, I seek to move to a more performative critical space. A space that does not presume one’s identity shifts the way it performs itself vis-à-vis communication in various contexts; rather, that one’s identity is constituted vis-à-vis communication and discourse (Butler, 1990).

Here, I move beyond notions of performance and dramatism in self-presentation and acknowledge the constitutive relationship of gestures, enactments, discourse, and identity (Butler, 1999). The body is performative in two senses. One, it dramatizes through “doing” or engaging in everyday talk. Two, it reproduces meaning and is meaningfully reproduced through discourse (Butler, 1990). The scope of this project focuses on performance in terms of the dramatic “doing” of everyday talk while acknowledging the power and importance of performativity. In both senses, performance creates a dynamic reality for others and ourselves that may or may not build the community and oneness mentioned earlier. The relationship between performer and audience is important in this context, as it is the responsibility of the performer to communicatively highlight the process of communication, taking it to a higher level of signification than the referential (Bauman, 1986). In the group being studied, the verbal wit, play on words, and dramatic storytelling all exemplify the power of communication to move beyond symbols and grammar to a place of engagement and entertainment that builds community. Langellier (1989) discusses how the power of storytelling and everyday talk, as a frame for culture and identity, creates possibility for speaker and audience. The possibility created in the group being studied is for the building of solidarity and community, which occurs through competitive performative dialogue. Shields and Coughlin (2000) discuss competition and “performative dialogue” that is collaborative and builds “bonds of sisterhood, communality and community” (p. 184): or what I refer to as solidarity.

Solidarity, or closeness and shared beliefs, attitudes, and values between friends, is important to maintaining relationships. Hay (2000) describes strategies used by group members to promote solidarity. The four strategies
are: to share, to highlight similarities or capitalize on shared experiences, to clarify and maintain boundaries, and to tease. While all four of these strategies are employed by the group of friends, I target teasing as a solidarity building strategy through playful putdown as performance. While the putdowns are not malicious, they serve a rapport building function, as does sharing personal narratives.

Many of the previous studies on gay language discussed the gay community in a macroscopic sense, often in opposition to the heterosexual community. The focus on opposition, politics, and resistance was important, as some gay people were gaining visibility; however, the interpersonal dynamics of smaller gay units such as friendship or social circles were not salient. Research on gay male friendships became visible in sociology with Nardi’s (1999) book, which addresses a wide range of topics including the familial nature of gay friendships. Many gay men are ostracized from their families and communities so fictive families are constructed. Many times, familial terms such as sister, mother, or auntie are used to label those fictive kin, creating smaller family units within the community. Although Nardi’s findings are relevant to my project, communication was not central to his analysis. More recent research has centered language use in particular gay communities through the lens of performance.

Drag queens are a central part of some gay communities and have been the focus of scholarly research on performance and performativity (Barrett, 1995; Butler, 1999). Johnson (1995) explores drag queens, drama, performance, and language through an interrogation of what is called “SNAP!” This term is used along with other terms like dishing, reading, throwing shade, and dissing. These communicative practices, performed mostly within African-American communities but often appropriated by effeminate white gay men, serve several functions. One is to resist the out-group through an exaggerated performance that rejects the society’s notion that gay people should remain hidden and silent, and adopts feminine characteristics placed on gay men to “queer” them in a very public way. The performance can also protect or save one’s own face or attack another’s, which Johnson calls cracking someone’s face. Drag queens earn their fierce reputation and are quick to use their verbal wit as an alternative to physical violence when negotiating outside the safety of their inner community. Other than self-protection or other-attack, this ritual insult communication behavior functions to build solidarity through what I call playful putdown.

Building on the sense of performance as the dramatic “doing” of everyday talk, I developed some criteria to guide my research. In the first instance, unique names and labels are ascribed to members of the group, casting them as characters. Unique vocabulary is also created and added to an existing pool, which can be drawn from and used in communicative scripts. In the second instance, dramatic language such as exclamations, exaggerations, jokes, and insults are used in playful putdown as performance.
In the final instance, performative storytelling engages a speaker/audience relationship. All three types of performances are engaged by the characters in pursuit of laughter, attention, or status increase as a reward. Langellier (1989) notes that a performance is evaluated by the audience in terms of what the story adds to the cultural values of a group. Within the context of the friendship circle being studied, cultural values of entertainment, camp, humor, sexuality, and risk are important for both performer and audience, as will be evident in the analysis.

**Friendship as Method**

As a participant in the gay friendship circle being studied, I have years of personal knowledge to supplement the data I have collected. For this study, fieldnotes of communicative themes and approximately four hours of audiotaped conversations were collected over a three-month period. Transcription and fieldnotes revealed communication themes such as sexual humor, storytelling, unique vocabulary, and playful putdowns, which fall into the context of drama and performance as described by the criteria listed above.

Due to the close and long-term nature of the relationship of the participants, there is a great deal of preexisting trust. I am interested in building on friendship as method as an explicit methodological concept that was introduced by Tillmann-Healy (2003), as I believe this method is worthy of more utilization and operationalization particularly when used to illuminate the experiences of marginalized groups. By researching friendship as method (Brooks, 2006; Tillmann-Healy, 2001, 2003), I have found a voice to describe what friendship means to me as a communication scholar. Particularly appealing is the consciousness-raising potential for friendship as method when friendships develop across social groups and these friendships take on political dimensions (Tillmann-Healy, 2003). In my case, I consider myself a member of the social group I am studying, gay men, but I also consider myself a member of the scholarly community. My preexisting membership in both of these communities builds on established ethnographic methods that inform friendship as method. The notion of the “indigenous ethnographer” highlights the multiple positions that a researcher may hold, especially when they “[enter a] culture where they resemble the people they are studying and writing about” (hooks, 1996, as cited in Alexander, 2003, p. 108). As a member of the community of gay men being studied, I can foreground my experience and “reflect on [my] membership in a historically marginalized … culture” (Alexander, 2005, p. 423). While I employ ethnographic methods that would be familiar to indigenous or native ethnographers, I also connect to feminist methodological notions of rapport, intersubjectivity, and reflexivity in the research process since the social context of friendship plays such a salient role in this project (Lather, 1986, 1988). Combining our academic knowledge and everyday knowledge by
tapping into our interpersonal relationships as further sources of knowledge, gives us the ability to create scholarship that bridges the sometimes real and sometimes perceived gap between the academic and “real” worlds. Furthermore, indigenous ethnography and friendship as method open possibilities for people from historically marginalized communities to challenge the white, heterosexual, male, academic hegemony by privileging subjective, relational knowledge.

**Language and Vocabulary in the Community**

The core group of participants, or characters, consists of four self-identified gay men ranging in age from twenty-two to twenty-seven, with relationships that have spanned at least five and at most ten years. Having recently moved from the south east to the western part of the United States, I can see that the social interaction taking place has a decidedly southern flair. The men featured in this study are also white, from working to lower-middle class backgrounds, and were raised in rural to semi-rural conservative Christian homes. All the participants were accustomed to performing their identities differently in particular contexts. Having to be reserved while with family, in church, or away from the college environment, creates a longing and absence that is sometimes flamboyantly unleashed when in a safe environment. This contextualized performance is common in the experience of many sexual minorities socialized into conservative communities (Taylor, 2000).

We all met after a life-changing event — going away to college. During my first year as an undergraduate, I had opportunities to meet gay people, which I did not have growing up in a small town. The main characters in my study were all part of the inner circle that developed throughout my undergraduate years. These main characters are named Andy, Arthur, Walt, and Oscar, and as our relationships have grown, we have developed unique ways of communicating. It is important that one be able to speak this language in order to be a main character.

Some of the vocabulary from the script functions to give the characters new identities within the group, which adds to the dramatic nature of communication interaction. As was mentioned earlier, familial names are common, as is pronoun reversal. For example, Andy and Arthur frequently refer to each other as sister or sis and almost always call each other girl, as can be seen in the following examples.

(A long dramatic exchange is taking place as Andy and Arthur get ready to go out the gay club. Andy is ready and Arthur is getting distracted, which is frustrating Andy. The dilemma is finally solved when Andy lets Arthur borrow one of his shirts.)

Arthur: Ok. What are we doing?
Andy: You’re getting ready bitch.
Arthur: I know, but what am I going to wear? I was going to wear the black tomorrow night. (Pause. Looking in the mirror with satisfaction.) I’ll just wear it tonight. I mean, I hardly ever look shi shi here, I am always “sporty spice.”

(Arthur gets distracted again, listening to the music and half-dancing around the room.)

Andy: Girl! What are you doing?

Arthur: Girl! I am finishing my water! Ga-had! All up in my bizz-nass!

(Andy finds a shirt Arthur can wear to fix the earlier crisis and be able to save the black shirt for the next day.)

Arthur: God! I am feelin’ it! Thank you so much sis. You are such a savior. I have to iron this though. God, I love you. I really do! Because I was stressing for a second. (Pause. Looking in the mirror and posing.) Rude Jude! Rude Jude with an attitude! (Now looking at Andy.) Make a cocktail bitch.

The use of sister and girl are important, as they signify that one is truly a member of the group. Bitch is also used playfully and affectionately in this scene. Since Andy and Arthur have known each other the longest, these terms are used more frequently between them than other characters. Girl is used frequently in addressing the main characters, but is rarely used when addressing extended friend networks or acquaintances, as it represents closeness between friends.

The switching of pronouns is used contextually when referring to main characters and others. For the main characters, referring to each other with feminine pronouns is similar to calling each other girl, as it is a term of endearment and signifies one’s membership. However, when a stranger or acquaintance is referred to in the feminine, it is often in a catty way.

(At lunch, Arthur’s phone rings but he does not answer. The others at the table ask who it is and find that it is a former lover of Andy.)

Andy: Rude! You told her that you were coming into town this weekend didn’t you? (Addressing the rest of the group for support.) They still associate!

Arthur: We don’t!

Andy: (Still addressing the group.) They associate, they associate! Why is she blowing up her phone? Talkin’ about some, “You gonna go out tonight?”

In this case, the pronoun reversal on the part of Andy shows that he is not happy with Arthur or the caller because they continue to talk after the affair between Andy and the caller ended.
Rhyming or alliterative compound names are often given to a main character who is displaying a certain characteristic. The first example of this I remember hearing is Chatty Cathy, which may derive from drug language in referring to someone who is high on cocaine, as they tend to be quite talkative. Arthur, especially, would create and/or use compound rhyming or alliterative names and the practice caught on in the community. Some of the more common examples are Paranoid Patty, Busy Betty, Skinny Minnie, Rude Rita, and Rude Jude, all of whose meaning is self-explanatory. Recently, the usage of compound names has become much more common and has taken on a competitive nature, especially between Andy and Walt who often try to make a compound name out of any descriptive adjective, sometimes with a humorous result. More recent examples are: Flaming Filimena, Dramatic Debby, and Negative Nancy. This name calling also draws upon a particular history of camp within gay communities and drag culture of creating dramatic stage names for the purpose of exaggerated, staged performances (Brouwer, 2005).

The types of naming and labeling listed above take on a dramatic and performative nature as they ascribe an alternative identity based on exaggerated language that exists solely within the confines of the main characters’ inner sanctum. By ascribing to each other and adopting for oneself these labels and names, the main characters are participating in the drama of their friendship. These names and labels are then incorporated into the larger script or vocabulary pool and can be pulled from at any time when engaging in conversation. The quick wittedness and skill that come with being able to create a unique and humorous name for someone creates a sense of competition between the main characters. For example, if Andy and Arthur are at the gay club together and Andy had been paying attention to a potential hook-up and following him around all night, Arthur might show his disdain for Andy’s actions by calling him Busy Betty. Quick-witted Andy might retort by calling Arthur Nosy Nancy or Jealous Jezebel. This type of competition and light teasing serves as a solidarity building function within the relationships.

Looking at the previous examples, it is obvious that the pronouns, references, and nicknames are all feminine. I acknowledge the misogynistic nature of this language and do not wish to ignore or deny the violent ways in which it can be employed. Language that has politicized citationality, like misogynistic language, can be used to resist or reinscribe the domination. However, the communicative acts and the social conditions must be examined in context and not solely ascribed to the human actor (Butler, 1990). While it is not within the scope of this project to justify the language used by the participants, I encourage scholars studying gay or queer communication, myself included, to explore the use of feminized language, particularly by gay men, in order to excavate the deeper meaning and politics associated with such language use.
Gay language and gay slang have been studied in the past, but language changes over time; although, much of the gay slang used to describe someone’s sexual preferences, mannerisms, or sex in general is still in common usage. Words like top, bottom, bear, twink, nelly, cruise, and trade are all examples of such words. However, newer slang words and phrases are in use in the gay community. One influence on language among my group of friends has been the comedy of Shirley Q. Liquor. Chuck Knipp, who portrays Shirley, is a white gay male comedian who assumes the persona, through blackface and costume, of a black, heterosexual, Texas-dwelling, poor, mother to 19 “chirrin’,” welfare queen. The malapropisms frequently used by Shirley often make it into the vocabulary of the group. For example, it is very common for us to say, “chirrin’” (children) and “how y’all durrin’?” While I cannot deny the influence that Shirley Q. Liquor has had on the language of the group, I must also be reflexive about the political implications of this influence. In particular, blackface and minstrelsy have a racist legacy closely tied to the geography of the south, where the men in the study live. Very recently, the debate about Shirley Q. Liquor has become mainstream with strong support (Rupaul, 2002; Strausbaugh, 2006; The New York Blade, 2007) and criticism (Daniels, 2007; GLAAD, 2007). Chuck Knipp, who performs Shirley Q. Liquor, has stated that his performance is an homage to African American women that influenced him while growing up in the south and the stereotypes in his performance are meant to push discussion about racism (De La Torre, 2007). One of Knipp’s most vocal critics, Jasmyne Cannick, says that minstrelsy will not help racism and that Knipp is financially motivated (Cannick, 2007). While it is clear that the gay men being studied, and the many other people who have made Shirley Q. Liquor successful, are uncritically consuming racist materials, I am not attempting to blame or exonerate them here.

The malapropisms of Shirley Q. Liquor only represent a small part of the overall unique vocabulary of the group. Much of the unique slang comes from Arthur, whose sayings become known in our group as “Arthurisms.” Since Arthur is a native of Hillsville, which is considered a “show town” given its importance on the drag circuit, many of these sayings are introduced and influenced by drag queens and their groupies. The particular words and phrases I am going to discuss are tish, jerked, rotted, chronic, rude, and “work a root.” Tish and jerked are representative of slang words that were popularized in the Hillsville area and have made their way to common usage in my circle of friends. They are also both examples of words that have grown to have multiple definitions and/or ways of usage. The original meaning of tish and jerked both revolve around cocaine. Tish refers to a small amount of coke. For example, “I just need a little tish to pick me up and get me through the night.” Jerked in its earlier meaning, referred to the feeling that one gets after doing any kind of speed. For example, “Girl, I was so jerked last night all I could do was sit and stare at people.” Interestingly, the meanings of both of these words have expanded, as tish is now used to refer to a small
amount of anything from vodka, to rice, to money. *Jerked* has also adopted many meanings. One’s eyebrows can be jerked, meaning overly plucked or one’s face can be jerked, meaning they have had too much plastic surgery, as the following two examples illustrate.

*(Arthur is doing something to his eye area in the mirror as he and Andy are getting ready to go out)*

Andy: Girl, it looks like you’re putting mascara on. *(Pauses and realizes Andy is plucking his eyebrows)* Girl! Are you gonna leave any on there?

*(No answer)*

Andy: *(Louder)* Are you gonna leave any eyebrows on there?

Arthur: *(sarcastically)* I don’t know, should I?

Andy: Or are you just going to jerk ‘em all off?

*(The group is talking over lunch about some of their favorite late 80s early 90s movies, one of which is *She-Devil* starring Roseanne Barr and Meryl Streep.)*

Walt: Meryl Streep looked so young.

Andy: Well, I think she might have been jerked already then.

*Rude, rotted, and chronic* are used to describe something or someone that is ugly, mean, or generally unpleasant. *Rude* is the most benign and can be used to directly comment on a person or thing, or to react to a situation. Whereas in normal usage, *rude* would be used only to describe a person — for example “Arthur was rude to me last night!” — *rude* can also be used to describe a thing or reaction. For example, if Oscar were to recount a story to Arthur about how he was supposed to get a promotion at work but did not, Arthur might only respond with, “Rude!” The word *rotted* has the same general rules for usage but is more degrading than *rude*. When someone or something is referred to as *rotted*, there is likely a history of dislike or negative experiences backing up the label. For example, Arthur had the following exchange with a popular drag queen in Hillsville with whom he held some animosity.

Drag Queen: I have to go to rehearsal.

Arthur: Oh, are you doing a drag show tonight at the club?

Drag Queen: *(bitchy)* Yes.

Arthur: *(in a patronizing tone)* Oh, is it going to be another rotted one?

Drag Queen: *(seemingly un-fazed)* No, it’s going to be another e-rotic one.

In this situation, *rotted* was used appropriately given the history between
Arthur and the drag queen. The verbal play on words between rotted and erotic is also illustrative of the quick witted retorts used in playful putdown. *Chronic* is the last and most degrading of the three. When something or someone is chronic, there is no hope for repair. To make it to the state of chronic, there must be an extreme hatred and or a long history of disdain.

“*Work a root*” is one of my favorite expressions because it really captures the essence of its literal meaning, and I have been told it has ties to Voodoo. The phrase means to get to someone’s core, dislodge them from where they are, and put them in their rightful place. For example, if Oscar sees a former lover’s current boyfriend at the bar, he may say, “The bitch is always looking at me cross-eyed and talking about me with her friends. The next time I see her I am going to work a root on her!” While this phrase is most often used in reference to another person, I found another form of usage in the transcription.

(Arthur is in the midst of getting ready to go to the club. He is frantically trying to decide on an outfit and is upset that Andy is not also getting ready.)

Arthur: You’re making me nervous because you aren’t getting ready.

Andy: You know it doesn’t take me long to get ready.

Arthur: *(examining his seemingly unwrinkled shirt.)* God, do you have an iron?

Andy: Yes.

Arthur: It’s my OCD, it’s working a root on me. I know I don’t really have to iron it, but I feel like I should. *(5-second pause)* I should not have eaten that pizza nor that quesadilla earlier today! Girl, it is working a root on me too! God! Can I just throw it back up? *(5-second pause)* Ok, where’s your iron at?

In this situation, a new rule for usage of the term was shown. Not only can I “work a root” on someone, but obsessive compulsive disorder or greasy food can “work a root” on me.

The previous examples all deal with the unique vocabulary in the community of friends being studied. Whether the words are from gay slang of the past, comedic personas like Shirley Q. Liquor, or from the queens of Hillsville, they represent the unique vocabulary that forms the script one must learn in order to be a member of the community. Whereas naming and labeling vocabulary connect with the throughline of performance by ascribing unique characteristics to members of the community, the unique vocabulary often originates from people who perform as part of their lifestyle. Comedians and drag queens use language in staged performance that is adopted by the characters and performed through everyday talk in
their friendship circle. The notion of specialized terminology connects to the shared repertoire dimension of a community of practice, and the practice of using this unique script creates in-group identity, which helps to build solidarity.

**Playful Putdown as Performance**

Ritual insult, dissing, or *calling someone out* can be used in a playful way between friends. I extend this notion of playful putdown between friends to show that the competitive and performative nature of this type of communication serves as a solidarity-building tool in the gay male friendship circle being studied.

In the same way that siblings often have a rivalry and a relationship that is marked by teasing and putdowns, many gay males, given the familial relationship discussed earlier, have a similar relationship. Even though jokes and humor may be disguised as personal attacks, there is a close bond that remains intact. All four of the main characters engage in this type of behavior on a regular basis and the ability to make a witty and insulting comment and to retort quickly when attacked is rewarded through laughter and respect. This potential reward embeds the communication practice in the context of a competition. No topic is off limits once the competition starts, and jabs range from comments on weight and physical attributes, to age, to sexual habits, and beyond. Unlike playing the dozens where a routine, back and forth, show down pattern is common, this type of insult can come anytime the potential arises. A skilled player may retort immediately should a creative comeback be available, or he may lay in wait for the next opportunity to attack, never forgetting the last comment made.

*(Andy and Walt are walking down a major metropolitan street. Walt is about to walk over a steel grate that is often seen covering an air vent for an underground transit system)*

Andy: Hey Walt, you better be careful walking over that grate.

*(The reference that Walt’s enormous weight might break the grate and send him crashing through is not lost on Walt as he quickly replies.)*

Walt: Yeah, I am so skinny that I might just fall right through.

Andy: I know your fat ass wouldn’t fit through that small hole, but your dick definitely would.

Another interaction between Andy and Walt involves the issue of weight.

*(Walt mentions that his personal trainer might be gay and alludes to the fact that he may provide the trainer with sexual favors to see if he will reduce the fee.)*

Andy: You need to work off that fat not work down that fee.
Walt: Blunt!

Andy: I am just saying you have got to be motivated.

Walt: Just because you have lost eleven pounds!

Andy: I am just saying... You need motivation. If you call yourself a piggy in the mirror sometimes it helps.

Comments on another’s physical attributes are also common. In the following examples allusions are made to Andy’s promiscuity in the first and to Oscar’s small endowment in the second.

*(Andy has just sat down on the sofa)*

Andy: I can’t find the remote control.

Walt: It probably got sucked into your cavernous asshole when you sat down.

Walt: Andy, touch Oscar’s penis again!

Oscar: NO! *(laughing)* He didn’t touch my penis anyway!

Walt: Well he didn’t have his tweezers with him so…

These are just a few examples of how playful putdown manifests itself in the conversations of the main characters. The performative nature lies in the potential to gain the attention and/or laughter of the other people present. The competitive nature of this communication practice builds solidarity in the friendships because it is a shared activity that shows off one’s skills and creative wit without really damaging another’s self-esteem.

### Storytelling

The most performative of the communicative actions is the act of storytelling. Friends and relatives keep and share stories as a means of building and maintaining a history around which community is formed. In the friendship community being studied, stories as personal narratives are central in creating a shared meaning. Some of these personal stories may be considered sacred stories as they are retold frequently in certain situations. Many stories are recounted collaboratively with overlapping speakers. In most of the stories that I documented, themes of experiences with men (sexual, near sexual, and fantasy sexual) and experiences at clubs and bars (usually recounting how “fucked up” someone was) prevailed. The following story starts with Arthur seeing actress Andie MacDowell at the mall where he worked that is close to her house in North Carolina then transitions to sexual experiences. The group frequently merges discussion of celebrities and popular culture into their everyday talk, and in this particular lunch conversation I counted almost 20 references to celebrities ranging from Willie Nelson, to Pink, to Selena, to the Pointer Sisters.
Walt: So tell me about this whole Andie MacDowell coming in the store, looking rotted, with pimples, and you just looked at her and turned around.

Arthur: I didn’t say she looked rotted with pimples!

Andy: Yes you did! You said her hair was askew. You said her face did not look good.

Arthur: She looked okay. No, I had just come back from my lunch break. I went and punched in and came out, and there she was with her sister; bustin’ up in my mall! (pause) Actually, I think it was her daughter. I knew who she was, I had seen a picture. My friend David took a picture of her with her daughter.

Andy: David with the hot body? Oh, no, the other David, the older David. Not dirty David.

Arthur: But older David has a hot body too. But dirty David is dirty (“dirty” is used in a positive sexy way).

Andy: Dirty David is hot! He’s a hot topic.

The following is an example of a collaborative storytelling style involving a close encounter with a man in a big truck. Although this story does not deal with sexual past or celebrities, it is indicative of the dramatization of everyday events.

Andy: We were tearing up…

Arthur: (interrupting) We were being pursued by this…

Andy: … Main Street.

Arthur: … huge Ford Truck.

Andy: No it was a Dodge.

Arthur: It was hilarious because he was listening to gay circuit music.

Andy: Like pumping, with the windows down.

Arthur: It was hilarious.

Andy: He looked like one of those big masculine redneck guys who tries to pretend he’s straight but is really gay.

Arthur: We just passed him and we were gawking at him. And so he decided to follow us.

Andy: He like jerked, I looked in the rearview mirror, and he jerked out of traffic and was speeding up. And it was a humongous truck, and it was kind of scary, and we were screaming and trying to go through all of the lights before they turned red.
Arthur and Andy were recounting this story to Walt as they were having lunch. By filling Walt in on the exciting drama that happened on the way to the restaurant, they are including him in an experience he would not have known about otherwise.

Stories that involve sex and/or international travel often have a way of becoming sacred stories.

Walt: I am so fortunate to never have had an STD.

Andy: I am so fortunate to have only had three. (Walt and Andy laughing)

Walt: (To Arthur) Have you ever gotten one?

Andy: No.


Andy: That counts!

Arthur: Yeah, I know it’s from that guy who stole my money in that sex bar. But you know what it could have been. Remember two weeks later I had a kidney stone too. My penis, it burned really bad when I peed. So it could have been that or urethritis. But they told me it was urethritis at the health department. And mother found my pills!

Andy: I remember that, God!

Arthur: Drama!

Andy: And since his mama’s a nurse she knew what they were for!

This is but one of several examples of stories that are repeatedly told by the main characters, which speaks to the shared repertoire dimension of a community of practice. Through all of the examples above, community is built by sharing one’s close encounters with men and celebrities, by sharing one’s knowledge of gay pop culture iconography of past and present, and by sharing everyday experiences through storytelling. The speaker/audience separation, use of dramatic language, and competition also make this type of storytelling a performance.

**Conclusions**

In this study, I have examined several aspects of community and communication using a multi-faceted conceptual framework. Previous research on language, friendships, and performance provided a throughline and a foundation for this framework. I stated the limitations and possibilities for expansion in these three areas and began to address them through the synthesized frame used to analyze the data. By discussing the gathered data and giving specific examples, I have shown that the friendship community
studied employs linguistic routines conceptualized in the shared repertoire dimension of a community of practice. Connecting concepts from the shared repertoire dimension of communities of practice theory to methodological and theoretical discussions of performance, I discussed the relationship between linguistic/performative practices and identity. As was noted earlier by Langellier (1989), everyday talk and storytelling frame identity and create possibility. Shields and Coughlin (2000) also note the bond-building nature of performative dialogue. In the friendship circle being studied, everyday linguistic routines are drawn upon and dramatized through performative communication. The pre-existing friendships are strengthened as individual members pivot between the roles of performer and audience member and draw from existing stories, scripts, and linguistic routines that are most meaningful to the group and create new ones in the process. Bauman (1986) and Butler’s (1990) theorizing, as cited earlier, of the power or performance can be seen phenomenologically in the friendship circle being studied. These communicative acts move beyond the referential and begin to (re)constitute the individual characters’ identities and the group’s identity. Through listing criteria for labeling communication as performance and defining strategies for building solidarity, I have shown how performance based communication acts as a solidarity building function within the community being studied by specifically looking at creation and use of unique vocabulary, playful putdown, and storytelling. Further examination of solidarity and solidarity building functions in gay communities is warranted.

Further grounding of community of practice theory in communication studies is warranted, because of its potential heuristic value and fresh way of investigating communication phenomena. In particular, the role of identity creation through communicative practices seems to fit well within the community of practice framework. Furthermore, using the communities of practice framework as an extension or alternative to speech community theory may offer new insight to scholars who are interested in language practices and identity formation of marginalized groups. While I have only used one dimension of communities of practice in my conceptual framework, future researchers may find heuristic value in other dimensions or use communities of practice solely as the conceptual framework.

Further utilization and operationalization of friendship as method is also needed and warranted to expand the scant research currently available. When I have mentioned friendship as method at colloquia, conference presentations, or in manuscripts submitted for publication, the question of research ethics has inevitably arisen. Tillman-Healy (2001, 2003) discussed potential ethical concerns in her germinal texts introducing friendship as method, and I would like to supplement this methodological discussion with my personal experiences. As a qualitative researcher, I have employed ethnographic methods in sites where I did not have preexisting relationships with participants but sought rapport and in sites where I have had preexisting
relationships, as was the case in this study. In the latter situation, my research ethics were kept in check by my participants who were neither intimidated by my “status” as a researcher nor willing to let me off the hook when I flashed my researcher license. If research can take place in the context of preexisting relationships, there is already a system of checks and balances within the interpersonal history between researcher and participant – friends hold friends accountable. I believe this methodological approach is in need of more exploration in new contexts to further explore the heuristic value of this intersubjective approach that “demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying them to studying us” (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 735).

Due to the localized focus of the research, the findings are limited to the group of people being examined. Thus, more research into localized gay communities and gay male friendships is needed. Future researchers could pursue more in-depth research into communicative practices such as use of humor, sex talk, storytelling, unique language, and performance in a wider variety of geographic and demographic contexts. Although this study was grounded in phenomenology and interpretation, theoretically and methodologically, this particular combination of communities of practice, performance-based communication, friendship as method, and identity has potential to create possibilities for more critical or queer approaches to interpretive human communication research. A more critical read of this project could illuminate the gendered and racial implications of performance in this and other communities by focusing on performativity more than performance as dramatic language, in order to critique essentialized views of identity while connecting phenomenological data to larger political discourses.

Author

Richard G. Jones, Jr. is a doctoral student in the Department of Human Communication Studies at the University of Denver. Earlier iterations of this project were presented at the Carolinas Communication Association Conference in 2004 and the National Communication Association Conference in 2005. Richard’s research interests include studying “everyday” performances of marginalized people and groups using intersecting participant-oriented research methodologies in order to illuminate the ways in which these performances resist and reinscribe dominant ideologies. The author would like to thank his friends for enduring his scholarly pursuits, Elizabeth “Jody” Natalle for her invaluable guidance and mentoring over the past seven years, Bernadette Marie Calafell for her continuing support, and Editor A. Lynn Zimmerman, Tony E. Adams (Reviewer), and an anonymous reviewer for challenging and strengthening this piece.
References


Kuhn, T. (2002). Negotiating boundaries between scholars and


friendship across sexual orientation. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.

Appendix

Glossary

Auntie – a familial term used between gay men (no longer in frequent use). Most often refers to an older gay male mentor who is not quite as influential as the mother. Ex. “Celeste is my mother and Fantasia is my auntie. She was also influential in my drag career.”

Bear – a larger, stocky, muscular, usually hairy gay man. Ex. “It must have been bear night at the club last night. There were tons of hairy daddies in leather!”

Bitch (work bitch) – 1) used to refer a gay male friend. Ex. “What’s up bitch?” 2) used to refer to another gay man in a negative way. Ex. “God! She is such a bitch!” 3) used to refer to a drag queen or other performer in a positive way as praise. Ex. “You better work bitch!”

Bottom – sexually submissive person in a same sex relationship. Ex. “Yes, that muscular boy over there is really cute Arthur, but he’s a power bottom. What are you going to do, rub your asses together?

Calling someone out – loudly and/or blatantly pointing out a flaw (attitudinal, appearance based, or social faux pas) of another, in the company of other people, to embarrass. Ex. “Girl was wearing a pair of jeans that were just way way too small for him. He thought he looked good wearing those out to the club. I held it in for as long as I could, but I had to clock him before he got out the door or those queens would have called him out at the club”


Chronic – refers to a person who is exceptionally rude, very disliked, extremely negative, or very physically unattractive. Ex. “That guy dancing in the mirror over there is chronic. He stinks, has a small dick, and dances like a Soul Train reject.”

Cracking someone’s face – delivering a singular witty or creative put down that is so well timed that the receiver most often cannot
respond. Ex. “That drag queen had been running her mouth about me all night. I just walked up to her and said ‘Your nylon wig is rotted, them crooked teeth are rotted, your fat rolls are hanging out of your dress, and I could see your penis tape up your skirt while you were doing your show.’ She just stood there and looked at me. Girl, I cracked her face good!”

Cruise – to look for a gay sex partner. Occurs in public places like gay clubs, malls, bathrooms, parks, etc. Ex. “Before the cops started patrolling, we cruised the cage all the time looking for trade.”

Dishing – gossiping or talking about people. Often takes place in the presence of the person being talked about but out of ear shot (at a club or party for example). Ex. “I hung out with Doug at the cocktail party last night and he was dishing it out about everyone that walked through that door! Just like Clairee, I say, “if you don’t have anything nice to say, come sit next to me!”

Dissing – being rude to someone or cutting someone down. Ex. “Eric dissed us last night. When we went up to say hello to him, he just turned and walked away.

Durrin’ – doing. A pronunciation popularized by drag persona Shirley Q. Liquor. Ex. “I see we got some old people up in here today…How y’all durrin’?”

Girl – term used to refer to another gay male friend, usually a close friend. Ex. “Girl, you just saved my life by pulling me away from that rotted guy who was trying to dance with me.

Jerked – 1) high on coke or any kind of speed. Ex. “That boy that was talking to me at the bar last night would not shut up! He was jerked to Jesus.” 2) pulled back (as in someone’s face being pulled back by plastic surgery). Ex. “Joan Rivers has a face that has been jerked to high heaven.” 3) plucked (as in eyebrows). Ex. “Ryan Seacrest’s eyebrows are jerked! And he tries to tell people he’s straight.”

Mother – a familial term used between gay men (mostly drag queens now). Most often refers to an older gay male who guided or mentored a younger gay man (the daughter) through their entrance into the gay community. For drag queens a mother (or drag mother) guided their entrance into drag performance. Ex. “I love Celeste because she’s my mother. She taught me everything I know about drag.”

Nelly (nelly bells) – a feminine gay male. Ex. “I called the guy I’ve been chatting to online for a week. Girl, he said he was masculine in his profile, but when he answered the phone and I heard his high pitched voice, I knew he was a nelly bells.”

Reading (reading someone’s beads) – confronting someone with witty and creative language that serves to cut or put someone down. Ex. “She came in my house and was trying to disrespect me. I read her beads and told her to get the hell out.”
Rotted – refers to a person who is rude, generally disliked, negative, or physically unattractive. Ex. “That drag queen is so rotted. She needs to get that snaggletooth, butterscotch smile fixed.”

Rude – 1) refers to a person who is negative or unlikable. Ex. “That girl is rude, she never acknowledges me when I say hello to her.” 2) exclamation used when one is surprised by another’s remarks. Ex. Speaker 1 “Seth called and said he can’t drive us to the club tonight because he’s already fucked up.” Speaker 2 “Rude!” 3) exclamation used when something is not working properly. (someone is trying to start their car which keeps stalling out) “Rude!”

She/Her – pronoun used by gay men to refer to other gay men. Ex. “Did you see who she was with?”

Sister/Sis – a familial term used between gay men. Usually reserved for very close friends who have years of shared history. Ex. “We would never hook up with each other. We’re sisters! It would be incest.”

Throwing Shade – giving someone the cold shoulder or indirectly insulting them with gestures, looks, or actions. Ex. “After he found out I used to work as an escort he doesn’t talk to me anymore and all his friends just look me up and down at the bar. They are all throwing shade.”

Tish – a small amount of something. The term originally referred to a small amount of cocaine but can now refer to anything. Ex. Speaker 1 “Would you like a martini?” Speaker 2 “Yeah, but just put a tish of vermouth in it, because I like it dry.”

Top – sexually dominant person in a same sex relationship. Ex. “I did a search on Manhunt last night and found 40 bottoms and 7 tops in my zip code. Everyone’s a receiver these days.”

Trade – sexual encounters with a male who lives his life as a heterosexual (someone who is not out of the closet or just experimenting or curious). Ex. “I went to that frat party down the street last night and got me some hot trade with a cute drunk boy after everyone left.”

Twink – a young, slender, usually hairless-bodied gay male. Ex. “That guy shaves his arms, he is such a twink.”

Work a root – 1) to use confrontational put down language to dislodge someone from their position and “put them in their rightful place.” Ex. “If she doesn’t stop looking at me, then looking at her friends and whispering, then looking back at me, I am going to go over there and work a root on her.” 2) to generally annoy or make uncomfortable. Ex. “All those liquor drinks I had at the bar last night really worked a root on me this morning, I thought was going to puke.”