

Flirting and ‘normative’ sexualities

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In this article I explore the effects of heteronormative assumptions on the interpretation of interaction. I consider two pieces of data that, based on the kinds of alignments shown, might be seen as flirting. However, through both perception experiments and discourse analysis, I show that these are rarely considered to be flirting if they take place for ‘same-gender’ interactions. These results demonstrate the power and effect of ‘background knowledge’ about sexualities on the interpretation of talk.

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1. Rationale and goals

The vast majority of work in Queer Theory (Cleto, ed. 1999, Sullivan 2003), and Queer Linguistics (Cameron & Kulick 2003, Leap & Motschenbacher 2012, Livia & Hall, eds. 1997), has been understandably built on observations of deliberate challenges to normative sexualities, and readings of those challenges. While outside such academic discourse there has been some movement towards an understanding of the social world along queer lines, the everyday life of the vast majority of the ‘industrialized world’ has not accepted a queer perspective of gender and (hetero)sexuality. In addition, much of the critique of heteronormativity, especially within gender studies and feminism, has been based on arguments about whether or not heterosexuality is inherently oppressive to women, beginning with Adrienne Rich’s (1980) arguments around compulsory heterosexuality. What makes these observations important is that many of the people who do the ‘heavy lifting’ of heteronormativity or compulsory heterosexuality — those who daily police and reinforce heterosexual norms — have not been discussed in reference to Queer Theory. There are of course some studies of normative individuals and groups (DeSantis 2007, Kiesling 2002), but these are generally not mentioned in the Queer Theory canon, and they are vastly outnumbered by the type of work mentioned above. That

Queer Theory researchers should focus on Queer people and groups is of course expected and necessary, and there are no doubt also many social and even aesthetic reasons for this focus on the part of researchers in Queer Theory.

But Queer Theory logically leads to the observation that normative practices, seen from a Queer stance, should show how the work of creating and maintaining the normative, hegemonic discourses of sexuality and desire continue. The important point here is that the focus on the role of compulsory heterosexuality in women, and in cross-gender sexual relationships, loses sight of the importance of naturalizing heterosexuality among men. One might assume that men are simply essentially heterosexual and dominating and therefore one need not look at how they construct their normativity. But of course this perspective undermines the idea that gender and sexuality are constructed. So it might be asked how men create, reinforce and police desire for heterosexuality, and not only in relationships with women.

A further question that follows from the discussion above brings assumptions of heterosexuality into focus. How do speakers/listeners identify desire-infused speech activities based on the perceived gender identity of the interactants? While many studies show how interaction helps to construct heteronormativity (for example, by orientation to heterosexual categories or practices), it is also possible that assumptions of heteronormativity structure how interactions are interpreted, especially if these interactions are infused with desire. In this article, I evaluate two interactions that could be seen as flirtatious on the basis of the structure of the conversation, but which are interpreted as falling into this speech activity category depending on the perceived gender identity of the speakers. I show that flirting is unmarked for 'opposite' gender interactions. While the idea that context affects the framing of speech is far from new, it is worth pointing out that in such situations the knowledge of a person's gender has an overriding contextualizing power that is difficult to overcome.

My data will focus on interactions in a college fraternity, and two interactions which show discursive evidence of the American speech activity of *flirting*. Fraternities, and so-called "Greek societies" (because they use Greek letters for their names) are specifically gender- and sexuality-normative in the sense that they are usually gender-segregated and tend to have as members exemplars of hegemonic gender categories. DeSantis (2007) shows how this is true especially for sexual practices and for body image; one therefore expects language in these communities to also be ripe with normativity and the policing of heterosexuality.

In this essay I explain why I have found that, while talk is certainly used to create normative sexualities in Greek letter societies, the fact that talk is occurring in these societies (or at least in particular constellations of gender and presumed sexualities) colors the understandings interactants have of that talk. That is, it affects

the frames or activities I tend to 'find' or 'discover.' In my first example, I show that whether an interaction is deemed to be an instance of flirting depends on the assumed genders of the interactants. In the second example, I show that conversational strategies found to be present in successful speed dating encounters seem to be exhibited by two apparently heterosexual men in the fraternity during a 'rush' event. My method is eclectic; I am adhering to no single approach to discourse analysis and social science, and am investigating both production and perception.

2. Language, sexuality and desire

It is important to have a clear sense of the terms sexuality and desire and their relationship to each other. This clarification is needed in part because of current theoretical discourses and debates about their use and usefulness, but the discussion is also important because they both bear on the question of what it means to take a queer analytic stance when looking at a normative community. Cameron and Kulick (2003) argue that the study of language and sexual identity should be separated, at least to some extent, from the study of language and desire. They argue that the study of language and sexual identity is about creating identity categories and is not the same thing as studying the language of people who find people of the same sex erotic. They have a point: a man does not talk differently just because he has sex with another man. Rather, it is arguably only when a man decides to align himself with a particular category of men who have sex with men, and specifically adopts certain recognizable practices (performatives) that he becomes 'gay.' And of course within the gay community there are all kinds of practices, including linguistic practices, to do 'gay man.'

But while sexual identity and desire can be shown to be two analytically and theoretically distinct concepts, they are in fact inextricably bound together. One reason for this connection is that desire is often structured around identity; that is, if one considers 'man' or 'woman' to be not a biological given, but an identity constructed around particular social practices, then the desire of a man for another man is a desire for a particular identifiable and recognizable identity. Such desire for identities can be seen in the ways that online dating sites and even pornography are structured (see Leap 2011). Cameron and Kulick argue that not all kinds of desire end up being particular identity types, and they refer to fetishes that have to do with objects (shoes, for example). But it is not clear that it is the objects or the people displaying them that are the object of desire. So there are identity categories, coded through social practices and objects, that are the actual erotic objects; separating the fetish objects and the fetish identities may not be as separable as it seems at first.

The point here is not that all desire has to do with identity categories, just that very often it ends up going in that direction. How does desire come into language then? Most obviously it is one way that people manage to create desire in others. One way to accomplish this is to deploy linguistic styles that index identities desired by the other. Hall's (1995) discussion of how gender and sexual identities are performed on telephone 'fantasy lines,' often by people whose 'real world' identity does not match their telephone one, shows that simply using a voice of a desired identity can be used to create desire even if other desire is not the intended outcome. Of course, this identity work is most often (but not always) accompanied by sex talk, whether explicit or not. However, even though the desire in part is created 'directly' by a speaker talking about sex, it is important to remember that the way this talk is articulated, and especially the persona created to be animating it, is crucial to creating the desire that the callers are looking for.

Of course one way that desire can be created in others is when the speaker creates desire and arousal in their own speech. So, 'sexy' voices are often those with voice qualities associated with arousal, such as breathy voice (Graddol & Swann 1989: 36). It is possible that desire can also be done in interaction simply by aligning, or showing involvement, with the other interlocutors. In previous work (Kiesling 2011) I have considered this possibility, but conclude that mere alignment is not enough to demonstrate desire. I argued there that discovering desire in interaction "is a matter of seeing the interactants put work into trying to align and create involvement, work that they do perhaps because they desire the alignment they don't have." (Kiesling 2011: 236)

The question being considered in the present essay is different from the one asked when looking for any desire in interaction. Here I am concerned with how heterosexual desire is naturalized in interaction. I first explain how the organization of 'Greek Letter Society' is itself heteronormative. Next I explain how previous analyses of interactions in the fraternity can be seen from a queer stance. Finally, I analyze two cases informed by a queer stance.

3. The normativity of Greek letter societies

Greek letter societies are for the most part social organizations on college campuses in the US. There are several honorary societies with Greek letter names (e.g. Phi Beta Kappa), but most exist for social and charitable purposes. In general, they are also self governing, and thus arguably provide further education outside the classroom for American university students (it sometimes also lets them engage in questionable practices such as hazing). The most significant aspect of social Greek letter societies is that they are almost entirely gender segregated: sororities

take members who are women and fraternities from men. They are also governed separately for the most part: usually a Panhellenic Council is the body governing the sororities and the Interfraternity Council is for the fraternities. One might assume that this collection by gender is actually not so heteronormative, since it might foster same-sex desire. But the opposite is actually the case. Although these institutions are separate, they are connected by all being 'Greek,' and often have social events together called 'mixers,' in which the idea is to have opposite genders 'mix.' A desired (and common) outcome is for the participants to find heterosexual partners, whether long term romantic partners or short-term sexual 'hook-ups.' This practice and structure of separation followed by mixing in order to allow for heterosexual desire is a version of what is expected to happen on the wider gender and sexual order. From a critical perspective this separation is part of the social structure that creates men and women as different, and which then creates a desire for that which is different, even mysterious. As Jackson (1996: 33) puts it "what is specific to heterosexual desire is that it is premised on gender difference, on the sexual otherness of the desired object." In addition, fraternities and sororities stereotypically recruit members who are highly normatively oriented. That is, they tend to be white (there is often a separate Black Greek system), middle or upper middle class, often conservative in terms of politics, and members often go on to be members of establishment elites such as business and political leaders. Heterosexuality is expected and assumed, and only really noticed when disrupted by sexuality outside a standard script involving a progression of romantic involvement as outlined by Holland and Skinner (1987).

There are many ways these institutions are primarily heterosexual institutions, especially the fraternities. The men spend a large amount of time talking about women (or, as they usually called them in my fieldwork, "chicks"), evaluating their physical attractiveness and potential as sexual partners. All of these arrangements and assumed cultural models about heterosexuality point to a particular kind of heterosexuality that emphasizes the power of the masculine pursuit of "chicks" (a disempowering term in itself, with its connotations of being young and frail). This gender-power-sex connection is an almost textbook example of radical feminist critiques of heterosexuality itself. That is, the separation of men and women creates a desire for the other, and is based on unequal roles in sexual relations. When one starts looking at these practices from a perspective that attempts to take no particular sexuality as normative, one begins to see how much work is going on to structure desire in the fraternity.

Deborah Cameron (1997) also analyzed a conversation among fraternity members, in which they discussed another man, and cooperatively wonder aloud about his sexuality. Cameron shows that the men are evaluating another man in ways that, if they were evaluating a woman, might be taken to be evaluating desirability

(in this case negatively), but in fact the men are aligning against the man being gossiped about by framing him as “that really gay guy.” Parts of this conversation, if taken out of context, might be thought by speakers of American English to be spoken by women or gay men. But in the particular context the remarks in fact reaffirm the men’s heterosexuality because they are evaluating the style of the man as ‘gay,’ which in the topic at hand is negative. Cameron assumed (based on specific knowledge of these men) in her analysis of this conversation that the participants were heterosexual and that assumption confirms the ‘queerness’ of their speech. Had she not taken their heterosexuality for granted, the ‘queerness’ of their speech would not have been so obvious. In this situation, heterosexuality is assumed, and this assumption is invisible.

5. Two flirts

5.1 Flirting: The basics

As implied above, the expectation of normative narratives causes interactants to see and hear things in particular ways. One of these turns out to be flirting. In this case, how speakers think about what is happening depends on who is in the interaction. That is, not only the recurrent interactions support and reinscribe the default assumption of heterosexuality, but the definition of the speech event itself is changed because of such default assumptions structured by ideologies and discourses. In my first example, I show that whether an interaction is deemed to be an instance of flirting depends on the assumed genders of the interactants. In the second example, I show that conversational strategies found to be present in successful speed dating encounters seem to be exhibited by two apparently heterosexual men in the fraternity during a ‘rush’ event. I turn first to the issue of flirting itself. Flirting is notoriously difficult to define; it seems to fall into the “I know it when I see it” category. I will offer a simple definition, and then try to expand a bit, but the goal here is not really to arrive at a definition of something that people may disagree about, but to outline some recognizable features of the activity. I will define flirting as an off record negotiation and recognition of interpersonal desire. “Off record” here is meant in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987), such that if someone were told to ‘stop flirting,’ they could deny that they were doing so. Perhaps flirting has resisted definition so much because as a speech activity it is inherently *cooperative*, which psychological and intention-based models of interaction cannot easily handle. That is, there is no ‘flirting’ speech act in the sense of Searle (1969). One can try to flirt with another but it cannot really happen unless that other person cooperates and together an intersubjective activity of flirting is negotiated. Of course,

one person can be trying to flirt while another resists. The possibility that attraction and desire could be one-sided is perhaps why flirting is useful: one can make a 'flirt bid,' but if it is not picked up, it is not as face-threatening as being turned down after asking for a date. Korobov (2011), in an analysis of speed dating interaction, finds that "affiliation and compatibility may reflect the extent to which participants are able to create a unique and idiosyncratic connection through coordinated resistance to gender conventionality." (Korobov 2011:483) To the extent that these interactions are like flirting, one might suspect that flirting also needs to contain some level of transgression to gender conventionality (here Korobov is referring to gender stereotypes such as body size and shape or emotional demeanor and not, apparently, to sexual identity, although there is no reason why such transgressions would not work as well for same-sex flirting).

5.2 Is it flirting?

I have suggested in two articles (Kiesling 2001, 2011) that the following example is an instance of flirting. I have no further examples like it, as my focus was normally on the men's interactions and this one came about through a fortunate accident. One can imagine that acquired authentic flirting interactions are rather difficult in ethnographic work such as this (although in situations such as speed dating it is more likely). I formed the impression that this was flirtatious at the time the conversation was recorded, when I was present. The example took place in a bar at happy hour one weeknight near the campus the fraternity is associated with. I had been sitting at a table in the bar with Pete, a member of the fraternity, and Dan, who is a friend of another member who was visiting the campus while he was on spring break. Jen, a woman whom Pete previously met and may have had some romantic relationship with (Pete nor any other member would ever be specific with me), arrived in the bar and walked to another table with female friends for about 10 minutes, and then walked over to our table and pointedly sat next to Pete, creating space near him and ignoring an open seat at the diagonal corner of the four-person table. As she walked over, Pete said, "Now I gotta watch what I say." The following is the beginning part of the conversation after introductions and recording disclaimers had been made.

Excerpt 1

- 093 Jen: God I haven't been here=
 094 in a long time.
 095 Um, what time do you have to leave?
 096 Do you really have to go to class?
 097 Pete: |Yes.

- 098 Dan: |Can we have another glass?
099 ((to waiter))
100 Jen: You do?
101 Dan: No rush.
102 ((as if to waiter, who had left))
103 Pete: What time is it?
104 Jen: I'm parked over there is that OK?
105 (?)
106 Six twenty-five
107 Pete: Forty five?
108 Jen: Twenty-five.
109 Jen: What time do you have to leave?
110 Pete: I have to leave by seven.
111 Jen: No:. Seven fifteen. (.)
112 Do you have a test in your class?
113 Pete: Yes.
114 Jen: Oh well then OK (?)
115 Pete: I'll leave at (.) ten after.
116 Jen: Greta's coming here too.
117 Pete: Greg?
118 Jen: No.
119 Y'know what-?
120 Pete: Greg was s'posed to come.
121 Jen: Alex called, was like
122 Can you tell Greg to um
123 he owes us a hundred and=
124 twenty dollars for his bills.
125 I was like
126 he doesn't live here now.
127 (3.1)
128 Pete: (Guess that's Greg's problem.)
129 Dan: You want another one?
130 Pete: Yeah I want another one. Huh.
131 (3.7)
132 Dan: I told him to get you a glass.
133 Jen: (I got kicked outta here one time)
134 Pete: Why? Were you being=
135 obnoxious and rowdy?
136 Jen: Oh: my God.
137 I can't tell you how drunk I was.
138 Don't even remember anything.

- 139 Pete: Shouldn't drink so much.
 140 Jen: Are they gonna card me? (.)
 141 Pete: Huh?
 142 Jen: Are they gonna card me?
 143 Pete: Pro|bably.|
 144 Jen: [I'm] nervous. he ha
 145 Pete: I wouldn't worry about it too much.

(In line 140 Jen is asking if the waiter will request identification to verify that she is over 20; 21 is the legal drinking age, which she is not.) There are several aspects of the interaction to notice. First, Jen tends to be the one who asks the questions (seven to Pete's four), and Pete's questions are mostly not first pair parts but repairs (107, 117, 141). Pete tends to answer Jen's questions in very short, rather unemotional ways. The intonational patterns are similar; Jen has a wide intonational range and Pete hardly has any at all. In general, Pete creates a calm, confident, and 'in-control' stance to Jen's uncertain and 'chatty' one. They address only each other (except when Dan asks Pete a question), even though there are two other people at the table. Is this flirting? What does the fact that the two main participants are a man and a woman have to do with that impression?

I have used this discourse in my Language and Gender courses for some years in various ways. In general most students have agreed that the activity was flirting. In addition, most students find that Jen is 'annoying' especially because of the way she creates a 'weak' femininity, by trying to convince Pete that he should stay and by expressing her nervousness. The topic of Jen being really drunk and becoming 'obnoxious and rowdy' (lines 133–139) could be seen as aspects of non-stereotypical transgression cited by Korobov, as the dominant script for femininity is arguably one of refinement and sobriety rather than out-of-control drunkenness (see Landrine, Bardwell & Dean 1988; my observations of the attitudes of the men in the fraternity support this idea as well). In the Fall 2011 Language and Gender course, the students raised the question of whether the view of this interaction as flirting would change if the gender configurations would change. In posing this question, the students were noticing potential heteronormative assumptions: How much is this assumed to be flirting because this is a man and a woman who it is assumed are both heterosexual? The students devised a survey in which all respondents saw the interaction, but the genders of the interactants varied: The names in the transcript were replaced by 'A' (originally Jen) and 'B' (Pete), and there were thus four possibilities of combinations; each student was required to obtain surveys, randomly varying the gender combinations and making sure to survey 12 men and 12 women. Each survey respondent thus saw only one version. They were asked what they thought was going on in an open-ended question, and

then asked to rate the likelihood that the speakers were flirting on a scale of 1 to 5. Finally, they were asked why they thought the activity was flirting or not. The most straightforward result was that interpretations of flirting were significantly more likely in the original condition, both in the open-ended questions and the ‘likely to be flirting question.’ I show these results in three different ways. Table 1 shows the average rating of the “Could they be flirting?” question. Note that even though the original configuration (in italics) is the most likely to be flirting, on a scale of 5 it is still interpreted ambiguously. This is seen clearly in Table 2 and Figure 1, where the interpretations of flirting are distributed fairly evenly across each rating. This ambiguity is a good thing: it leaves lots of possibility for an effect of the gender configuration — if the interaction is too obviously flirting, then the gender configuration might not make so much of a difference.

Table 1. Average rating of flirting depending on gender of speakers. (Note: The authentic condition is represented in italics.)

Condition	Average rating
A-female B-female	1.629
A-male B-male	2.299
A-male B-female	3.042
<i>A-female B-male</i>	3.308

Table 2. Numbers of respondents rating. (Note: The authentic condition is represented in italics. Chi-square (12, 363) = 27.1, $p < .0001$)

Condition	1	2	3	4	5	Total
	Not flirting			Definitely flirting		
A-female B-female	54	17	15	3	0	89
A-male B-male	32	18	21	11	5	87
A-male B-female	16	21	24	13	22	96
<i>A-female B-male</i>	12	12	26	18	23	91
Total Result	114	68	86	45	50	363

It is the two heterosexual configurations that are the most likely to garner a flirting response, and it is only these two configurations in which the majority of responses are 3 or higher. So there is a strong negative effect when respondents think the speakers are both men or both women. The results of the survey thus show how important the understood identity of the interactants is for an interpretation of flirting (and desire), and how strongly the expectation of heterosexuality is. The least likely to be thought to be flirting by far are two women, which suggests that talk that may be seen as containing romantic moves in general is less likely to be heard that way for women than men. In fact, this same-sex-female effect was

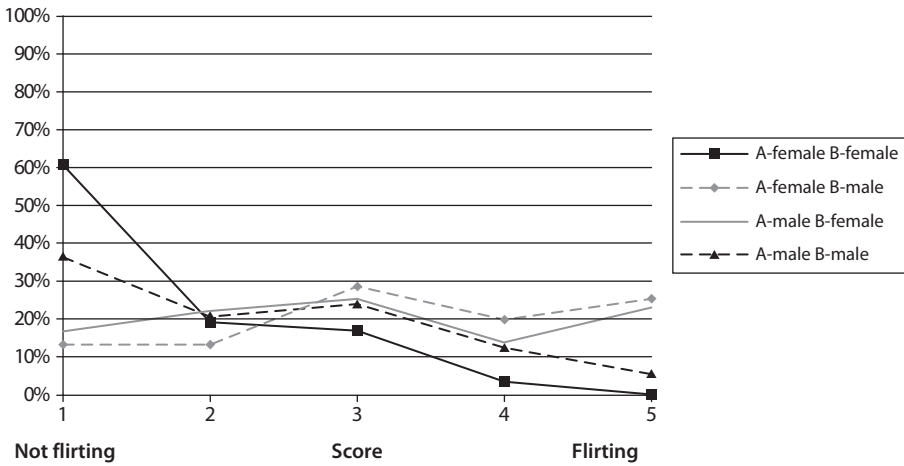


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents choosing each flirting rating by gender combination

the strongest in the survey. Figure 1 and Table 2 both show that the 'A-female, B-female' condition had the most number of the lowest flirting score possible; over half of the respondents for this category said that the interaction could in no way be an instance of flirting. It seems, then, that it is not just same-sex vs. cross sex interactions that make a difference.

There are at least two related reasons for this same-sex difference, based on cultural expectations for men, women, and sexual identity. First, women are stereotypically expected to be less likely to be sexually interested (in men or women) whereas men are stereotypically always thinking about sex. Gay male flirting is also more often portrayed in the media than lesbian flirting (different from representations of kissing or other acts of desire, which arguably heavily favors lesbian portrayals; also although there are lesbian acts portrayed, there are arguably fewer high-profile lesbian characters); in other words, gay male interactions seem to be more visible to the non-queer culture than lesbians — perhaps even more normative, or at least less non-normative. In addition, if women are stereotypically less likely to be thinking about sex, then 'friendly talk' will be less likely to be thought of as sexual interest, even when aspects of flirting are present. It must be noted that this sample is not a random sample of American culture; it was gathered through the networks of young adults (college undergraduates for the most part). Moreover, as students in a course on language and gender (some of whom were also enrolled in a Women's Studies Certificate Program) they are more likely to have queer friends or be queer themselves (four out of the five men in the class volunteered that they were gay). But if this is taken into account, then one comes to a conclusion that the differences found are probably more muted than for the wider culture. That is, even among a population in which same-sex desire is not

unexpected nor stigmatized, without other information there is still a lack of a default expectation for the creation of intimacy and desire for same-sex pairs.

While overall this result may seem unsurprising, the strength of the effect even in this community is surprising. Why is the interaction seen as flirting or not? The most common reason given by respondents was that A (Jen in the original) is trying to get B to stay. This is a straightforward expression of desire for another's company. Interestingly, it is the two conditions in which a woman (A) is trying to convince the other to stay that are the conditions when this reason is most cited, while the A-is-male conditions are precipitously lower in having the reason for flirting being trying to stay (see Table 3). If flirting has to do with "coordinated transgression," then perhaps it is this overt expression of desire on a woman's part that fills that criterion. Alternatively, flirting may just need expression of desire, and asking someone to stay longer fits that criterion. For the same-sex situations, the second most common reason for thinking the interaction was flirting was the reference to being 'so drunk' the last time A was at the bar. In fact, the only case in which this reason was not the second-most important was when A was male and B female. As mentioned, being drunk (and obnoxious) is arguably more stereotypically accepted for men, so this difference may have to do with the fact that there is no transgression going on (although one could argue that the woman using the rather patronizing "Were you obnoxious and rowdy" is a somewhat transgressive stance from a gender stereotype perspective). In any case, the numbers for reasons for everything but the desire for B to stay are quite low, so any differences are merely suggestive.

Table 3. Percent of respondents citing "A wants B to stay" as a reason for saying that the speech event is flirting. (Note: The authentic condition is represented in italics.)

Condition	Percent cited
A-female B-female	64.3%
A-male B-male	55.1%
A-male B-female	57.2%
<i>A-female B-male</i>	68.2%

Given that the male-male situation was more likely to be seen as flirting than the female-female one, one might ask if gay men are more transgressive than lesbians. Perhaps, but the reason may only be that desire among women is not as transgressive as men who desire men. On the other hand, it could also reflect a pervasive cultural view that stereotypical feminine traits — such as desire for men — are less valued than stereotypical masculine ones.

This exercise has taken a normative (if not normal) interaction and asked some people to look at it from a queer stance. The first thing learned is that even for a likely non-homophobic population this was not an easy task. The second is

that it is not simply a matter of same or different gender pairs but also whether the pairs were both male or female, and in the cross-gender pairs who was seen as a man or a woman. This asymmetry should not be entirely surprising given the asymmetries in gender arrangements generally. That is, men and women are not evaluated the same, and actions that may be transgressive for women may not be for men and vice versa. In fact, female affection and even sex seems culturally much less transgressive than men's same-sex desire. In the next section, I will consider whether an interaction of the creation of same sex desire, when looked at from a queer perspective, might be flirting.

5.3 Homosocial flirting?

The following transcript is from an interaction at a rush party, which is one that the fraternity holds in order to interact with potential members in order to evaluate their possible membership and at the same time try to attract them to the fraternity. In a sense, a conversation between a member and a non-member in this context can be seen as potential homosocial flirting, although it is not seen as flirting given that in this community everyone is assumed to be heterosexual. In the following analysis, I consider how the talk of a rush conversation has aspects of flirting, but also how the interactants orient to each other and the talk so that it steers away from flirting.

There are two interactants in the conversation, Mick and Luke. The excerpt begins as Mick, a senior member of the fraternity and currently the president, walks up to a rush named Luke and begins to engage him in conversation. Mick was wearing a wireless lapel microphone.¹

Excerpt 2

- 01 Luke: hey wh|at's up
 02 Mick: |Luke
 03 hey you doin' man
 04 Luke: you called last ni|ght
 05 Mick: |yeah how=
 06 you doin'?
 07 (0.5)
 08 Luke: you see you woke me up
 09 cause I was like
 10 who the fuck is this
 11 and you're like this is Mick
 12 an' I was just like
 13 (1.1)
 14 Luke: and I was like w:hat=

- 15 fraternity you're like
16 Gamma Chi Phi
17 and I was (?) oh yeah: he
18 (0.7)
19 Mick: so how's everything goin man=
20 you like this place or what
21 (1.2)
22 Mick: goin' good?
23 you still livin' at home=
24 though right?
25 (0.7)
26 Luke: Yeah
27 (0.3)
28 Mick: That'll make it a little=
29 rough I'm sure
30 (0.6)
31 Luke: guess I'd say I try to stay away=
32 from there as much as possible
33 (0.4)
34 Mick: are your parents pretty=
35 lenient with that shit
36 like they'll let you go out=
37 and drink |and (??)
38 Luke: |well see my Dad=
39 doesn't live with us
40 (0.3)
41 Mick: oh
42 (0.4)
43 Luke: a:nd my mom she works from=
44 eleven o'clock=
45 till seven thir|ty
46 Mick: |ah:: so you can=
47 come in trashed the whole time=
48 you want
49 Luke: actually I don't drink I just=
50 |(??)
51 Mick: |oh you don't
52 (1.3)
53 Mick: that's good actual|ly dude
54 Luke: |yeah so=
55 Mick: I stopped myself

- 56 (0.8)
 57 Luke: okay goo|d
 58 Mick: |I've been goin on like
 59 (2.8)
 60 Mick: weeks
 61 (1.7)
 62 Luke: te he |he
 63 Mick: |no wait I'm thinkin'=
 64 there's more than a week
 65 yeah right it was more than a=
 66 week
 67 it was a week
 68 (0.9)
 69 Mick: no it was
 70 (0.6)
 71 Mick: yeah it was
 72 it was a week
 73 (0.6)
 74 Mick: it was two weeks on Thursday

There are aspects to this interaction that are reminiscent of flirting. First, one might assume that speakers who try to align with each other are flirting. In this case, Mick is working harder than Luke to align. The conversation moves from a greeting, in which Luke acknowledges Mick's previous phone call (line 4, *you called last night*), to Mick's inquiry about Luke's living situation (line 14, *you still living at home though right*). In this first segment (lines 1–14), the two participants begin to align to one another, but not smoothly. First, while Luke aligns to Mick and shows recognition of him and a connection to a previous interaction, he does not return a preferred second pair part for a greeting, which is another greeting. Furthermore, Luke notes that he could not remember the fraternity that Mick is a member of in line 11 (*I was like what fraternity*). This lack of memory could be taken as lack of interest (Luke is likely rushing several fraternities, who are competing for his membership). Moreover, after Mick asks if Luke *likes this place* in line 12, all Mick gets in response is 1.2 seconds of silence, which is another move of non-alignment. Mick then reformulates his initial question in line 13 with *goin' good?*. Both Luke's lack of memory of the fraternity and his initial non-response to Mick's question about the fraternity indicate a possible lack of desire on his part for this fraternity, since one would expect him to remember the name of Mick's fraternity and to respond to Mick's question if he were interested in the fraternity. There are other explanations (such as he just could not remember having met so many men and fraternities, and that he may have been distracted), but the conversation

nevertheless begins somewhat one-sided in the expression of desire, as expressed in the asymmetry of alignment. That is to say, it is clear from Mick's turns that he is showing interest in Luke and a desire to attract him to the fraternity, especially in line 12 (*you like this place or what?*), but that enthusiasm does not seem to be shared by Luke, as seen by his lack of alignment. This lack of alignment leads to silence and a lack of involvement.

This show of interest in Luke by Mick continues as Mick asks about Luke's living at home in line 14. While Luke does not come out and say 'I hate living at home,' he indicates that he avoids home in a rather long and wordy answer: *guess I'd say I try to stay away from there as much as possible*. Mick forges ahead, using moves that seem to attempt to create connection and involvement by showing interest in this personal topic (as Tannen 1984: 54–58 argues). This interest does not elicit the desired involvement, as shown by Luke's responses to Mick's inquiries, which are disaligning. Mick's main question creates a stance that affiliates with Luke's experiences, in that Mick shows he remembers that Luke is living at home, and that this situation may not make it so that Luke is *goin' good* (line 13), as shown by Mick's *though* in line 14 (*you still livin' at home though right?*). Since *though* creates an implication that a previous assertion is partially or completely false, it suggests that living at home falsifies the possibility that things are *goin' good* for Luke. As noted, Mick seems to be correct in this assumption.

In line 18, Mick asks a question that pries more into the situation, presuming that Luke has similar concerns as Mick would if he were also living at home. In this case, Mick suggests that, even if Luke lives at home, his parents may give him some freedom to *go out and drink*. Luke first cancels one of Mick's presuppositions, that he lives with more than one parent. Mick's single, short acknowledgment token — *oh* — is evidence that he was not expecting this kind of response (see Schiffrin 1987: 89), and Luke's prefacing his second pair part with *well* suggests that he also considers his line 19 to be a dispreferred response (see Schiffrin 1987: 102–127). These are both indicators of non-alignment, and continue an asymmetry of apparent desire in this conversation.

Once Luke volunteers some more information about his home life in line 21 (*my mom she works from eleven o'clock till seven thirty*), Mick tries again to show affiliation and alignment by enthusiastically noting that his mother's schedule gives Luke more freedom than most children living with their parents. Note Mick's *ah::* which begins before Luke finishes his turn. Goodwin and Goodwin (1992: 159) show how a move almost exactly like this shows alignment toward an 'assessable' in conversation, and it is clear here that Mick takes Luke's description of his mother's schedule as an assessable, and proceeds to find grounds to positively assess it. That is, Luke can come home drunk (the meaning of *trashed*) whenever he likes. This assessment is positive in that it negates the restrictions on Luke's freedom

imagined by Mick (which Mick presumes is one of the problems with living with one's parents). Yet again, however, Luke stops him cold, negating a presupposition — that Luke likes to get drunk. In line 23, again using the dispreference marker *actually* (Clift 2001). The knowledge of not drinking goes against the normative practice of the fraternity — drinking alcoholic beverages, and 'binge drinking' in particular, are highly valued practices for the fraternity members, so this revelation is probably surprising for Mick. It certainly goes against the assumptions he made in both lines 18 (*your parents let you go out and drink*) and 22 (*you can come in trashed*).

But after an acknowledgment in line 24 similar to the *oh* of line 20, and a 1.3 second pause, Mick in a sense pivots his stance in order to affiliate with Luke, producing a positive assessment: *that's good actually dude*. This pivoting is evidenced in Mick's *that's good*, which explicitly assesses Luke's non-alcoholic practices positively, although the *actually* suggests that there was an expectation that Mick would assess such practices with the opposite polarity. In addition, *dude* provides alignment through its indexing of solidarity, as shown by Kiesling 2004. Note however that Kiesling (2004) also claims that *dude* indexes non-intimacy, so the use of *dude* here also shows that Mick is not orienting to this interaction as flirting in the sexual sense. In the rest of the excerpt Mick then supports his claim by giving evidence that he has been practicing alcoholic abstinence recently as well, creating affiliation not only through a positive assessment but also by a shared practice, and an alignment by expanding the topic.

Clearly Mick is trying to build involvement and trying to align and affiliate himself with Luke, but having trouble doing so at many points. Nevertheless, these verbal gymnastics suggest that Mick is working hard to make this interaction a good one, with a goal of involvement and solidarity. In some cases, this alignment work could be seen to be flirtatious, but here it is clearly not.

Korobov (2011) also argues for transgression as part of flirting, and this is present although not in a sexual way. Luke and Mick are collaborating to transgress expectations of stereotypical fraternity members. For example, in line 29 Luke does not mitigate his confusion about who Mick was when he called (*I was like who the fuck is this*). Mick does not really orient to this, but at least does not show offense. Rather, he pivots to ask about the fraternity (*you like this place or what?*). The second transgression is about living at home: In line 23 Mick asks *you still livin' at home?*; in lines 28–29 he suggests that *it must be a little rough*. This comment about it being rough suggests that it is not what a stereotypical college student or teenager desires, and in fact Luke collaborates in lines 31–32 by noting that he tries to *stay away from there as much as possible*. The largest transgression from a stereotypical fraternity member is that Luke then reveals that he does not drink alcohol. Since fraternity members are stereotypically focused on binge

drinking (as Mick orients to as he assumes in lines 37 and 47, where he assumes Luke wants to *go out drinking* and *comes home trashed*), not drinking at all is very transgressive. But, Mick then moves to transgress in exactly the same way. First he says *that's good actually dude* in line 53, and then claims to have stopped drinking himself in line 55. So given that this interaction is in a sense to create some kind of desire (so that the rush wants to join the fraternity and the fraternity wants him to join) this could be characterized as a flirting interaction. But as was shown in the previous section, most American English speakers would not classify this as flirting, except in the metaphorical sense, simply because these are two men. In addition, Luke and Mick are not transgressing stereotypes in the same way as Pete and Jen, and the result is a more homosocial desire rather than a homosexual one. That is, they are transgressing more in terms of age and fraternity member expectations than strictly gender ones. Not drinking is not particularly feminine in the way that getting obnoxiously drunk and rowdy. So, they are doing or saying nothing particularly feminine in order to achieve the transgression. (Luke was successful however and gained a bid to join and eventually did, and perhaps this homosocial flirtation was part of the success.)

This analysis suggests that although queerness involves transgression, transgression by itself does not make a queer interaction. If modulated the correct way, it is actually normative. In the case of Luke and Mick, this modulation avoids feminine stereotypes. What transgression would make this interaction queer? Most obviously would be something like compliments on Mick's or Luke's appearance (for example, "look at those big muscles!"), or even asking about his own appearance (for example, "Do you think these pants make me look fat?"; see Holmes 1995 on differences in expectations about compliments, patterns supported by further research by language and gender students). Now, there are ways that Luke and Mick could do such things in such a satirical way that it would not be taken as gay flirting (and the context of the fraternity makes it less likely as well). Although one might see same-sex desire of a kind in this interaction by taking a queer stance, that does not make it queer in the sense of actual same sex relationships. Furthermore, just creating alignment between speakers is not enough to be seen as flirting, especially in same-sex interactions. This suggests that when identifying a speech activity like flirting, speakers take into account both sociocultural knowledge about what kinds of relationships are possible before deciding how to proceed.

6. Finishing off flirting

This article has explored the ways in which assumptions of normative sexualities affect the ways that speech events are interpreted and framed by interactants. As I

first approached this project, I had thought that the picture would be quite simple: that normative sexuality (which I naively thought of merely as heterosexuality) was as constructed as queer sexualities and identities (again at first conceived of as visibly crossing the correlations between practices and biological sex). Although this view is not exactly wrong, I discovered that there is much more going on than at first one might assume. Most important is the role of those normative discourses not only on my own analyses but presumably on many other researchers as well. Researchers will look for something different when they start to analyze a conversation between two people of different genders whom they know are heterosexual than when they look at, for example, two presumably-heterosexual men in conversation. This logic continues as the permutations of identity categories expand, and our particular knowledge of each person deepens. In some ways this might vindicate the argument that one should not take context beyond the participants' words and actions as influencing our analysis, but it also shows that speakers make all kinds of assumptions that do not necessarily get overtly oriented to in conversation. On the other hand, though, these analyses show how pervasive and instinctive our reaction to such knowledge is (and presumably this is true of the interactants as well). Perhaps it is better to know, and acknowledge, this 'other context'; my argument here suggests that it is so important to people's understanding of an interaction — even when the details are the same — that if one tries to ignore it, one is missing something important. In fact, if we try to deny these assumptions too readily, we in fact miss the normative construction.

Note

1. Mick wore the microphone throughout approximately half the rush party. All of the fraternity members had previously given consent to be recorded. At the party, I followed Mick and when a new participant joined who had not given consent I explained that Mick had a microphone on and what my study was about and asked for verbal consent on tape. Everyone asked gave consent.

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Appendix: Transcription conventions

text=	utterance continues on next line with no break in rhythm
te xtB	two utterances overlap; the text in lines is overlapped
textA	
(0.2)	Silence in seconds
((text))	Transcriber comments
No:	Extended vowel
(?)	Speech not transcribable
(text)	Uncertain transcription

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