From one woman to everyman
Reportability and credibility in publicly performed narratives

Erica Rosenfeld Halverson
University of Wisconsin-Madison

In this article, I extend Labov’s narrative analysis of personal experience (Labov, 1972, 1997; Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997) to demonstrate how personal narratives that are taken up and transformed into pieces for public performance work within a reportability continuum that balances the individual storyteller’s perspective while incorporating the voices of the community to which these individuals belong. I use the case of the About Face Youth Theatre, a Chicago-based theatre company that engages lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth in the dramaturgical process, to demonstrate how narratives are transformed from highly reportable, personal narratives, to highly credible, generic adaptations, to performances that result in the construction of positive, public identities that expose normalness without sacrificing particularity. This process can provide adolescents who experience stigma in public contexts with the opportunity to understand how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities and to fit these perspectives together into a more coherent sense of self.

Keywords: identity, narrative, performance, gay youth, reportability

“Understanding a people’s culture,” noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) states, “exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity” (p. 14). It is precisely this balance between “normalness” and “particularity” that characterizes the function personal narratives serve in helping individuals to construct public identities over time. In Labov’s (1972, 1982, 1997) work on analyzing narratives of

Requests for further information should be directed to Erica Rosenfeld Halverson, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1086 Educational Sciences, 1025 W. Johnson St., Madison, WI 53706. E-mail: ehalverson@education.wisc.edu
personal experience, particularity is represented by the reportability of a narrative, that is, the event within the narrative that makes it unique, worth telling and worth listening to. Normalness is represented by the credibility of a narrative, “the extent to which listeners believe that the events described actually occurred in the form described by the narrator” (Labov, 1997, p. 407). Further, these two narrative features are inversely related; that is to say there is an inherent reportability paradox — the more unique the narrative, the less believable it will be to listeners, and vice versa. While the Labovian reportability paradox has proven a valuable contrast for understanding the structural composition of individual, fixed narratives told at a given point in time, the relationship between a story’s reportability and its credibility can play a different, but equally valuable role in guiding the development of personal narrative over time and across representations.

In this article, I extend Labov’s narrative analysis of personal experience (Labov, 1972, 1982, 1997; Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997) by arguing that, in the construction of personal narratives for public performance, the relationship between reportability and credibility is not a paradox but rather a continuum. While other narrative theorists have proposed that the reportability of a narrative is better represented along a continuum rather than as a fixed trait (Norrick, 2005; Ochs & Capps, 2001) their analyses, like Labov’s, focus on static narratives told a single time to a single audience. Here, I use the Labovian framework to demonstrate how the process of transforming personal narratives into pieces for public performance works within a reportability continuum that balances the individual storyteller’s perspective while incorporating the voices of the community to which these individuals belong. Organizations that engage communities of youth in the dramaturgical process — the telling, adapting, and performing of personal stories (Halverson, 2005, 2007; Wiley & Feiner, 2001), facilitate the construction of representations of personal narrative. These narratives begin with highly reportable individual stories that become more credible community narratives of experiences as they are adapted into scripted scenes by the performance community. I use the case of the About Face Youth Theatre, a Chicago-based theatre company that engages lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning youth in the dramaturgical process, to demonstrate how narratives are transformed from highly reportable, personal narratives, to highly credible, generic adaptations, resulting in public performances that expose normalness without sacrificing particularity. This dramaturgical process provides adolescents who experience stigma in public contexts with the opportunity to understand how they see themselves, how others see them, and how they fit into their communities and to fit these perspectives together into a more coherent (and hopefully positive) sense of self.
Public performance of narratives

The public performance of personal narratives is the process by which the construction of a “viable social identity,” (Côté & Levine, 2002) as represented through story, is actualized (Halverson, 2005). In operationalizing identity development as the construction of a viable social identity, the task of development involves actively working with the way we see ourselves (ego), the way others see us (personal), and the way we fit into the various communities to which we belong (social). The resultant public representation of self is one that merges these perspectives and allows individuals to positively engage with these often disparate notions of identity. There are many organizations worldwide that engage marginalized communities in the public performance of their narratives as a means of asserting a positive, public identity in spaces where they are traditionally ignored (Haedicke & Nellhaus, 2001). Members of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, acquire and maintain their identities as recovering alcoholics — both as individuals and as members of a community — through a ritualized public sharing of members’ narrative journeys with addiction and recovery (Swora, 2001). Swora’s work highlights the end state of engaging with identity stories to arrive at the public representation of a viable social identity that merges the ego, personal, and social senses of self. These publicly performed narratives demonstrate the “normalness” of a community without sacrificing the “particularity” of an individual.

What this example does not demonstrate, however, is how these identity narratives come to be; how as Sfard and Prusak (2005) describe, “collective discourses shape personal worlds and how individual voices combine into the voice of a community” (p. 15). In order to understand how this occurs, I turn to research on the “dramaturgical process,” the telling of personal stories with the purpose of adapting these stories into pieces for public performance (Halverson, 2005, 2007; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002). Wiley and Feiner (2001) describe participation in the dramaturgical process as, “opportunities for marginalized or oppressed groups to represent themselves and the world around them as a means of asserting their own identity” (p. 122). The dramaturgical process provides a unique opportunity for those who have struggled to construct a viable social identity. Participants’ personal narratives are taken up by a community and adapted into a mutivoiced account that is more broadly representative of the community. That the community takes up this narrative to share with a public audience demonstrates the narrative’s representativeness of the community as a whole. For example, Bing-Canar and Zerkel (1998) worked with Arab-American women in Chicago to develop a video documentary that would represent their experiences as individuals, as a small community of young women, and as members of a larger community of
Arabs, both in the US and abroad. During the editing process, these young women debated about what to include in their video:

Would “outsiders” or their parents misinterpret what they were saying? If they were critical of the sexism within their community, would that reinforce the stereotype of all Arabs as sexist? The prevailing attitude was that showing “just the good stuff” about their lives would “not be real.” After all, they argued, “Isn’t that why we are doing this — to show something real?” (pp. 740–741).

While this work is useful in understanding the process as a whole and how overall participation contributes to the merging of ego, personal, and social identities/stories, the mechanism by which this process is enacted through the transformation of story remains a black box.

The reportability paradox in narrative

As a way of unpacking the black box of dramaturgical process, we must understand how the narratives themselves are originally told and then re-represented as pieces for public performance. In order to do this, I turn to a structural approach to understanding narrative that defines stories through the relationship between the formal properties of narrative structure and the intention of storytellers (Labov, 1972, 1982, 1997; Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997). Labov and Waletzky proposed to understand both the temporal flow of a narrative as well as the teller’s evaluation of events and participants through a careful examination of the relationship between the story’s narrative clauses. The goal of this work was to “relate the formal properties of narrative to their functions” (p. 3). This structural approach to understanding narratives of personal experience has been taken up, criticized, and reframed as narrative theorists have analyzed the complex relationship between stories and their tellers (for a review of the impact on Labov’s contribution to narrative analysis and the many directions theorists have taken his work, see Bamberg, 1997).

Labov himself (1997) added complexity to this initial argument by considering how individual structural elements, such as, “reportability, credibility, objectivity, causality, and the assignment of praise and blame,” (p. 397) allow researchers to make sense of narratives of personal experience. Labov created a structural analytic approach to personal narratives that assigns each narrative clause to a type. Three of these clause types, viewpoint, reportability, and credibility, are especially relevant in describing how narratives change over time as a result of their change in representational medium from personal story to public performance piece. I will describe each of these elements in more detail below, while also noting how other narrative researchers have taken these concepts up in their analyses of narratives of personal experience.
Viewpoint. The viewpoint of a narrative marks the relationship between a storyteller and their story. Labov (1997) states that a narrative of personal experience is told only from the teller’s point of view:

One feature of oral narratives of personal experience that distinguishes them most sharply from literary narrative is that in literature, one can switch viewpoints, take an impersonal viewpoint, and enter into the consciousness of any or all of the actors. In oral narratives of personal experience, there is only one option. The events are seen through the eyes of the narrator (p. 411).

Stories originally told through participation in a dramaturgical process almost always reflect Labov’s insight about viewpoint. As a story is taken up and transformed into a piece for public performance, however, the viewpoint of the story shifts from a narrative of personal experience toward a new representation that reflects the perspective of the participating community. Worthman (2002), for example, summarizes this shift in viewpoint in his work with the TeenStreet program: “What ended up in the script was the aesthetic representation of many teenagers’ lives, capturing not one particular experience, but a multitude of experiences and the teenagers’ understanding of those experiences” (p. 54). This shift in viewpoint is traceable through the various representations of an individual story, especially between the original narrative and the final script.

Reportability. The reportability of a narrative, also referred to as tellability, describes the feature (or features) that marks the narrative as unique and worth telling (Ely, 1997; Georgakopolou, 2006; Labov, 1972, 1982, 1997; Linde, 1997; Norrick, 2005; Ochs & Capps, 2001). Labov (1997) describes how stories told from the teller’s point of view, narratives of personal experience, contain events that make the story distinctive. He defines the reportability of a narrative as a function of the work it does for the teller: “A reportable event is one which justifies the automatic reassignment of the speaker role to the narrator” (p. 406). Engel (1997) describes the sensational nature of tellable narratives as, “aesthetically dense and filled with human drama that makes them worth studying in the first place” (p. 230). Certain events such as death or sex and certain themes such as independence naturally fit this criterion and are highly reportable (Ely, 1997; Norrick, 2005). These generally cause listeners to pay attention.

Ochs and Capps (2001) describe three ways in which narratives of personal experience are tellable: (1) the sequence of events described in the narrative are sensational; (2) the rhetorical devices used by the teller cause listeners to pay attention or; (3) the events in the narrative are significant to the interlocutors. Given that reportability is, in part, dependent on interlocutors, the degree to which a narrative is tellable is determined by interaction with an external context. This context can include the culture of the narrator, the make-up of the audience or the
situation in which the story is told (Georgakopolou, 2006; Labov, 1982; Norrick, 2005; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Schiffrin, 1997). “Thus,” as Norrick (2000) describes, “the tellability of a story is a matter for negotiation” (p. 106).

Reportability can be seen as a scalar feature of narrative (Labov, 1982) where the scale ranges from “a highly reportable breach of expectations and its eventful consequences,” to “relatively ordinary events,” and from “an orientation to narrative as performance to an orientation to narrative as dialogic sense-making” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 76). Norrick (2005) also sees tellability as scalar but adds an upper-bound dimension. His description of the lower bound of tellability is equivalent to other definitions: “tellability requires newness, reportability, uniqueness and/or humor — or at least the prospect of co-narration” (p. 323). Tellability, however, is not just about uniqueness; there is an upper boundary where stories cross over into inappropriate, overly graphic, or too personal. According to Norrick, “it is within the work of the lower boundary and the upper boundary of tellability that narrators are free to construct their individual identities” (p. 323).

Labov’s (1997) definition of a most reportable event is a useful mechanism for operationalizing the reportability/tellability feature of personal dramaturgical narrative:

A most reportable event is the event that is less common than any other in the narrative and has the greatest effect upon the needs and desires of the participants in the narrative and [is evaluated most strongly]. A narrative of personal experience is essentially a narrative of the most reportable event in it (p. 406).

In a narrative of personal experience, Labov argues that the narrator’s reason for telling the story is the most reportable event; this event is the most important to the teller and the reason they decided to share their story. By operationalizing reportability into the most reportable event, I am able to trace the core events of a narrative as its representation shifts across the dramaturgical process.

Credibility. Labov (1997) describes narrative credibility as “the extent to which listeners believe that the events described actually occurred in the form described by the narrator” (p. 407). Credibility refers to how the teller persuades the audience that the story is true. Since narratives of personal experience are, by definition, true-life experiences, clauses of credibility sequence events and add detail to demonstrate the authenticity of the events on which the story is based. Unlike fictional narratives, a key marker of a “serious” narrative is the teller’s success in convincing the audience that the story really did happen, “in roughly a form corresponding to the verbal account” (Labov, p. 407). According to Ochs and Capps (1997), credibility is determined by, “the plausibility of a chain of objective events and whether they can be corroborated” (p. 83). The narrator accomplishes this primarily through the development of a causal argument that involves assigning
praise and blame to all actors in the narrative, including the narrator herself (Labov, 1982, 1997).

Reportability Paradox. Labov (1997) asserts that there is an inherent “reportability paradox” between the reportability and the credibility of a narrative: the more unique the story, the more reportable the events contained within, the more difficult it is to make the story credible. Labov frames the relationship between reportability and credibility as an inverse correlation between two opposing concepts. Simply stated, “as reportability increases, credibility decreases” (p. 408). I argue that when these concepts are applied to a storytelling process, the reportability paradox becomes a developmental continuum with reportability at one end and credibility on the other. While Labov takes these two features of a single narrative and places them in opposition, I take a developmental perspective on narrative and reframe this opposition as two ends of a continuum.

The concept of a continuum as a way to describe features of narrative is not new (Norrick, 2005); Ochs and Capps (2001) identify narratives based on where they fall along a series of continua, including tellability. The difference, then, between this use of continua to describe narrative features and the analysis I propose is a shift from summarily judging narratives as finished products to understanding storytelling as a developmental process where multiple tellings of the same story lie at different points along the reportability/credibility continuum. Even narrative analyses of plays (e.g. Burton, 1980) focus on the script’s dialogue as a fixed entity to be understood as an artistic conversational narrative. The dramaturgical process is one way to understand narrative from a developmental perspective; the telling, adapting, and performing of personal stories affords individual youth the opportunity to tell their narratives of personal experience to a group of sympathetic listeners who then take up this narrative and adapt it into a community piece that represents the group’s perspective. This new narrative is then performed for an external audience that cannot be assumed to know anything about the storytellers and therefore must find both reportability and credibility in the performed narratives in order for the show to be successful.

In the analysis that follows, I will show how the dramaturgical storytelling process involves three stages along the reportability-credibility continuum. First, the telling of personal stories emphasize highly reportable narratives of personal events. Then an adaptation process transforms these stories to highly credible representations of more generic youth characters. Finally, the performance phase of the dramaturgical process provides representations of personal experiences that maintain their credibility without losing the most reportable events. Cycling through the dramaturgical process helps develop stories that span the reportability-credibility continuum to in order to, as Geertz (1973) describes, expose normalness without sacrificing particularity.
The reportability continuum in action: The About Face Youth Theatre and the AFYT Groupie

The construction of publicly performed narratives as representations of viable social identities can serve a particularly important role for adolescents who feel marginalized from mainstream institutions. While adolescence is generally considered a time for trying on different selves, for exploring different ways of being and becoming, many youth of color experience adolescence as a time when possibilities for the future are restricted or cut off altogether (Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995). The same can be said for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) who often do not find support for identity exploration and the formation of a viable social identity from traditional support structures such as families, schools, or religious organizations (Herdt, & Boxer, 1993). The opportunity to engage with personal experiences, community history, and external perception in order to arrive at a public representation of self that captures all of these features is rare for groups of youth where these multiple perspectives are often at odds. The About Face Youth Theatre (AFYT) gives LGBTQ youth the opportunity to engage in the dramaturgical process as a means to explore and construct positive identities (Halverson, 2007). Specifically, the dramaturgical process engages LGBTQ youth with community-relevant developmental issues such as coming out, and exploring assumptions of heterosexuality and homosexuality (Halverson, 2005) — all of which contribute to the formation of a viable social identity that includes a positive construction of what it means to belong to the LGBTQ youth community.

In the sections that follow, I will describe the changing relationship of one AFYT storyteller, Cari,2 to her story as it was transformed from an autobiographical story to a scripted scene for performance. Cari’s story, “the AFYT Groupie,” chronicles her experiences coming out as a lesbian at the age of nine and her attempts to be accepted into the AFYT program. Using Labov’s framework (1997), I documented and analyzed the five primary versions of her story, from the first telling to the final script. While narratives of personal experience are told across a variety of contexts from solicited interview-style stories to spontaneously-told conversational stories (Norrick, 2000), the interview context lends itself well to tellable stories, particularly when interviewees are specifically asked to tell stories with highly reportable content (Schiffrin, 1997). The mechanisms AFYT staff employed for eliciting stories were not traditional research-style interviews. However, staff often gave youth specific prompts and created an, “organization of tellership” (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 36) that afforded them the opportunity to construct re-

2. All names given in the text are pseudonyms.
portable personal narratives. These types of storytelling contexts lend themselves well to the Labovian structural analysis of narratives.

I use Gee’s (1991) linguistic model of narrative analysis to break down all five versions of Cari’s story. The building block of this analytic approach to personal story is the stanza, “a group of lines about a single topic; each stanza captures a single 'vignette’” (Gee, 1991, p. 23). Gee goes on to clarify: “Each stanza represents a particular perspective, not in the sense of who is doing the seeing, but in terms of what is seen; it represents an image, what the ‘camera’ is focused on, a ‘scene’” (pp. 23–24). Stanzas are comprised lines, generally four to a stanza, and can be understood as what we generally view as sentences. Lines are further broken down into idea units, distinguished from one another by the introduction of a new piece of information. I also engaged Cari in semi-structured interviews (Ginsburg, 1997) at multiple points throughout the process: three times during the workshop series, once during the rehearsal process, and twice during the performance time. In these interviews I asked Cari questions about her story and her perceived relationship to this story and whether and how this relationship changed.

Focus on reportability: Cari’s version of the story

2003 marked the fifth anniversary of the About Face Youth Theatre program. Beginning in the early planning stages of the production, AFYT staff talked at length about incorporating their five-year history into this year’s production. The show was performed at the Goodman Theatre, one of the nation’s premiere regional theatres, giving AFYT a high profile platform to tell their collective story. The concept of “history,” AFYT history in particular, figured prominently in staff meetings and whole group discussions throughout the process as a potential theme for the production.

Participating youth were led through a 14-week workshop series where they had the opportunity to tell the stories of their lives; during the 2003 season, youth produced approximately 275 unique narratives. All the stories told on a particular day cohered around a theme pre-chosen by AFYT staff; at the pre-workshop staff meeting on the day that Cari first told “AFYT Groupie,” the staff discussed the importance of history to this year’s show:

[The Director] turns to today’s workshop. She’s thinking about what the story questions should be. History is implicit, integral to our 5th year anniversary. We can give our history a little perspective. This group has fewer agendas less of a need to define who they are. It used to be about defining “queer youth” and what that means to them. Now they’ve established a stereotype and, “it’s not us”. (Excerpted from field notes, 4/19/03).
In this discussion, the staff emphasize the importance of AFYT history as contextual back-story for their future audience. In addition, they hypothesize that this history will help contextualize how individual youth perspectives have changed over that time — AFYT has moved from defining “queer youth,” to flouting stereotypes with more complex narratives. The task of this performance, then, is to represent this perspective through their art.

Cari’s original story was written during a 10-minute, free writing exercise. Youth were asked to write stories about the memory that was most important in making them who they are. While this was a private writing assignment, the youth were well aware that any writing they submitted via the drop box would be read by AFYT staff and could possibly be made public if the staff decided to share the story with the rest of the group. During this time, Cari wrote the following story:

I had been going to About Face since I was 10 years old. I had seen every show. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t be a part of that. Did I not have my own stories to tell? Was my life and the experiences of my life not worthy enough to be up there with those others? For years I wondered about these things. When we asked About Face why I could not participate, they said that I was too young, that the age limit was 14–20. Was it not called About Face YOUTH Theater? You couldn’t get much more youth than me. I knew that they weren’t rejecting me. Over the years I came to accept the fact that they weren’t rejecting me because I wasn’t good enough. It was simply because they didn’t know me. As hard as it was to just sit there and have to accept that, I did. Although I did put a good amount of pressure on them. I made sure to go to see every show and buy a shirt from them as well. For 4 years I had tried to get into About Face but couldn’t. this year that all changed. They agreed to me. They gave me an interview and they accepted me into the workshops. When I handed in my parental and participant consent form. I knew my life would never be the same.

Using Gee’s (1991) linguistic model of narrative analysis, this story can be broken down into three stanzas, each one tracking the same series of events, each time told with additional detail: a) the most reportable event; b) evaluation of that event and; c) time passing. The final stanza includes two additional parts: d) resolution and e) coda. While Labov’s unit of analysis has traditionally been the narrative clause, I employ lines and stanzas as the fundamental units of story.

Stanza 1

1A: I had been going to About Face since I was 10 years old. I had seen every show.

1B: I didn’t understand why I couldn’t be a part of that.

3. The drop box was literally a black box in which youth placed their written stories, interviews, and comments at the end of each workshop.
1B2: Did I not have my own stories to tell? Was my life and the experiences of my life not worthy enough to be up there with those others?

1C: For years I wondered about these things.

As Labov describes, a narrative of personal experience often begins with the teller’s decision to report the most reportable event. Cari’s original telling of “AFYT Groupie,” is consistent with this idea, as illustrated by the first line of her story. This initial line is a fairly abstract version of the most reportable event; she gives no details, only her broad statement of what happened to her. This most reportable event is followed in the narrative by two evaluative statements, the first without an assignment of blame, the second placing blame for what happened to her outside of herself. Though she does not name the party at fault, her rhetorical questions imply that there is someone not giving her what she feels she deserves. The final statement in this stanza marks the passage of time, a dominant theme for Cari in her relationship with About Face Youth Theatre. In fact, this non-action, the waiting to be allowed into the group is the action of this story. In this first stanza, her waiting is powerless; she does not know what to do to become part of the group.

Stanza 2

2A: When we asked About Face why I could not participate they said I was too young. That the age limit was 14–20.

2B1: Was it not called About Face YOUTH Theater? You couldn’t get much more youth than me.

2B2: I knew that they weren’t rejecting

2C1: Over the years I came to accept the fact that they weren’t rejecting me because I wasn’t good enough. It was simply because they didn’t know me.

2C2: As hard as it was for me to just sit there and have to accept that, I did.

In the second stanza, Cari returns to the most reportable event, this time with more details surrounding her inability to participate in this program. She also returns to a series of evaluative statements and to the theme of time passing, though in this round, both she and About Face play a more active role. Rather than her simply wondering what to do, she describes how it felt to have to wait through these years to be allowed into the group.

Stanza 3

3A: Although I did put a good amount of pressure on them. I made sure to see every show and buy a shirt from them as well.

3C: For 4 years I had tried to get into About Face but couldn’t.

3D: This year that all changed. They gave me an interview and they accepted me into the workshops.

3E: When I handed in my parental and participant consent form, I knew that my life would never be the same.
In this final stanza Cari skips her evaluations and moves straight to the passage of time. She marks time passage in the third stanza very specifically. Cari then returns to the most reportable event, this time focusing on a different detail. At the end of her story, she subverts the A-B-C stanza format and moves to a resolution, “the set of complicating actions that follow the most reportable event” (Labov, 1997, 414). In this case, the actions following her years of waiting and not being allowed in results in her entry to the AFYT program. Cari sets up the resolution with a comparative phrase, reminding the reader that her getting an interview and being accepted was different from all prior years. She completes her narrative with a coda, “the clause or clauses that bring the narrative back to the time of the telling, so that the question, ‘what happened then?’ is no longer appropriate” (Ibid). While she has already revealed that she has been let into the program, she does not give us a sense of closure through what finally being accepted means to her until the final clause.

Of particular interest in this initial telling is Cari’s decision to report the most reportable event at the beginning of every stanza (part A). From this story, Cari seems to be clear what makes her personal narrative worth telling: she is an individual who felt she deserved membership into a group that continually rejected her. Additionally, she makes clear what was not crucial to making her who she is, namely what brought her to AFYT in the first place. The decision to choose her attendance at AFYT as the orientation clause means Cari’s audience is not invited to see the details outside of her life as causal in her decision to attend AFYT. An interview with Cari immediately following the day’s workshop triangulated her repeated lack of acceptance into AFYT as the narrative’s most reportable event. The interview was conducted before anyone had the opportunity to read the story Cari had written so she was asked to respond to a general question on her thoughts about the day’s activity and writing exercise:

I wrote about ABOUT FACE? Actually. Yeah, I wrote about how, um, like, they DIDN’T, um, how like, I’ve BEEN/ to every single ABOUT FACE SHOW? And like, EVERY SINGLE YEAR/ I asked them to LET ME IN and THEY WOULDN’T? And then, like, I was like, YEAH/, “the day I handed in my, like, PARENTAL/ and like, PARTICIPANT FORM, I knew that like, MY LIFE WOULDN’T BE THE SAME.”

While Cari’s core story (Labov, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1988) remains the same across these two contexts, in the interview version she leaves out a key part of the reportable nature of her original story: that she was only ten years old when she first attempted to be accepted into AFYT. Generally, we do not expect someone so young to address their sexual identity nor do we expect them to want to belong publicly to a group like AFYT. Though Cari did not highlight this factor in her core story, when I asked her to elaborate, she continued by defining herself in opposition to the characters in her story. The characters include the AFYT staff, adults in general, and other youth who are participating in the program, highlighting her age as the primary factor in discrimination against her. She constructs what Mishler (1999) refers to as a relational identity, “a dialectic of opposition where one’s claim for positive identity may be justified by contrasting it with another’s negative identity” (p. 36).

The way Cari perceives she has been labeled as a “youth” in the traditional, stereotyped sense of the word serves as the basis for her to talk about herself as completely different from the way she constructs others’ perceptions of her. Over the course of our interview, she draws on other episodes from her life both independent from, and connected to her experiences with AFYT in order to build this relational identity. After a series of these stories, Cari returns to her original, specific reportable event; that she could not be a member of AFYT:

And it’s funny. It just like, it ALWAYS/ like, it was HARD FOR ME/, to DEAL WITH THE FACT THAT I COULDN’T BE IN HERE,
because if I knew that if they SAT IN A ROOM WITH ME FOR THREE SECONDS, that they’d be like “oh, oh, ok. You’re DIFFERENT THAN all the other people.”
But they WOULDN’T EVEN/ like, they DIDN’T EVEN give me the chance. You know?
And so it was ALWAYS HARD FOR ME because I felt like, they, and I WROTE THIS IN MY STORY,
I felt like they were like, “MY STORIES AREN’T IMPORTANT ENOUGH YET”.
I haven’t, you know like, I DON’T KNOW MY TRUE SELF YET, or something.
And I’m just like, OKAY. so in four years, this like, SELF/ will, REVEAL ITSELF TO AND I’LL ABLE TO BE IN YOUR THING NOW? Like, I dunno.

This interview, which was conducted prior to my reading her original, written story, solidifies Cari’s use of an oppositional stance in the construction of a strong, relational identity. Through this interview, it is clear that AFYT represents one of the many institutions to which she has built this opposition; she has built her psychological sense of self based on the idea that she is unlike everyone else her age. She repeats this theme throughout our interview first in relation to AFYT, then in relation to society as a whole, and finally, back to AFYT. She sees herself
as an advocate for youth, “the real youth,” who she represents through her unique maturity.

Focus on credibility: The AFYT version of the story

The AFYT youth and staff saw Cari’s story as a prime candidate for adaptation into a scripted scene for public performance. Her story was representative of a broader class of narratives common to LGBTQ youth: “coming out” stories, which describe the developmental process by which LGBT youth both acknowledge their sexual identity and convey that identity to others (Committee on Adolescence, 1993; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). In earlier work on the adaptation process, I found that youth who adapted others’ stories incorporated sexual identity as a relevant and important feature of their script, regardless of whether the original narrative focused on the teller’s sexual identity (Halverson, 2007). Stories that are, at their core, about sexual identity are therefore attractive to AFYT youth and staff who make decisions about which stories to adapt. The AFYT staff also felt a public performance of Cari’s journey could be situated in the context of AFYT history, as well as LGBTQ history more broadly. Her story of waiting to become a member of AFYT, seeing every show, and buying every t-shirt paralleled five years of the organization, and made Cari’s story a good candidate for a credible performance.

The adaptation process transforms the original narrative into a credible story of AFYT youth (and more broadly LGBTQ youth) experience. In large part, adaptors work toward the construction of a highly credible adaptation by incorporating their own personal stories and perspectives into the scripted scene. Research on the dramaturgical process has documented how individual narratives of personal experience are adapted and re-represented as collective negotiations of identity among the group’s members (Halverson, 2007; Heath, 2004; Wiley & Feiner, 2001; Worthman, 2002). In “AFYT Groupie,” Sidney, the name of the character that represents Cari’s experience, is much more than Cari’s story. In fact, other youth’s voices figure directly into Sidney’s scripted scenes. Additionally, AFYT as an organization is interested in constructing positive representations of LGBTQ youth and using these representations as a means to, “catalyze youth-led civic dialogue and action within schools and communities” (About Face Youth Theatre, n.d.). Individual narratives of personal experience are made more credible as adaptors consider what representations of AFYT youth would be appropriate for an external audience that is likely unfamiliar with LGBTQ youth culture.

In constructing a credible adaptation of Cari’s story, a fundamental change was made in the narrative: in the final production, the character of Sidney was played by a biological male. The stated reasons for this were practical. First, there were
twice as many males as females in the cast and the play therefore had to contain significantly more male roles. This speaks to the capacity of this narrative to represent the community of AFYT youth who participated in the production. Second, the only cast member other than Cari who was under the age of 16 was a biological male. The staff felt it was important that the character of Sidney look like one of the youngest people onstage and since cast members typically do not play themselves, this young man was the natural choice for the role. In the case of “AFYT Groupie”, Cari’s age was a more relevant social feature than her gender in maintaining the most reportable event of the narrative. In another narrative performed in this same production, a character’s gender (female) was preserved in order to keep the relationship between her and another young lesbian at the forefront of the performance (Halverson, under revision).

*Shift in viewpoint.* Transforming Cari’s story into a narrator-character fundamentally shifted the viewpoint from which the story was told. By specifically creating a character that chronicles personal experience alongside the five-year history of AFYT, the resultant story incorporated much more than Cari’s viewpoint. Recall from the original version of the story, Cari describes her attempt to be included in AFYT and the way she felt when she was rejected:

> When we asked About Face why I could not participate they said that I was to [sic] young, that the age limit was 14–20. Was it not called About Face YOUTH Theater? You couldn’t get much more youth than me.

In the first draft of the script, adaptors created a dialogue between Sidney (the Cari character), Sidney’s parents, and Bill (one of the AFYT staff members). Dialogue is one of the tools a playwright can use to express multiple points of view by simply giving characters other than the narrator an opportunity to speak. This transformation from one person’s voice to a dialogue of many voices does change the viewpoint of the scene. However, in this initial draft, Cari’s viewpoint is also maintained as the Sidney character uses Cari’s exact words to express his opinion. While this dialogue offers the audience multiple characters with which to empathize, they are also given the opportunity to understand Cari’s perspective through Sidney’s words. In this excerpt from a script draft, dated two months prior to the final script, the adaptors have imagined a scene that could have occurred as Sidney and his parents try to get him involved in AFYT:

> Sidney: Dad, just call and ask them.
> Bill (an AFYT staff member): AFYT, this is Bill.
> Sidney’s dad: Hi! I have an eleven-year-old son who-
> Bill: The program is for kids fourteen to twenty years old.
> Sidney’s dad: Yes, I know.
> Sidney’s mom: Honey, it’s for kids fourteen to twenty years old.
Sidney: Is it not called About Face YOUTH Theater? You can’t get much more youth than me.
Bill: Sorry, it’s nothing personal. Those are the rules.
(Up Until Now, June 2003).

While this scene incorporates multiple voices, Cari’s viewpoint is maintained through the inclusion of her exact words from her initial telling. Subsequent drafts of the script represented additional changes to the story’s viewpoint. The Sidney character delivered five different monologues throughout the final version of the script, as an introduction to each of the five years of AFYT’s history. Each of Sidney’s monologues began with the year and his grade or age, (e.g. “It’s 2001 and I’m in seventh grade”). To separate these years into distinctive time periods — using the Sidney character as a means to name significant events in his life and in LGBT history in general shifts the viewpoint further away from Cari. By having Sidney convey this information to the audience, the character is constructed as a more omniscient, generalized narrator. For example:

Sidney: It’s 1999. This is the year after Matthew Shepard was murdered and people are still talking about him. They still march and hold vigils and talk about being shocked. This is the year Britain lifts its ban on gays in the military and even though Clinton says that “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” is a disaster, he doesn’t do anything about it (Up Until Now, July 2003).

Through these statements, Sidney becomes a narrator-character who is removed from the story’s events in a way that Cari is not and chronicles historical events in parallel to the events of Cari/Sidney’s life. In an interview with Cari at the end of the rehearsal process, I asked her how she saw the relationship between her original story and this final script:

Cari: There is none.
Interviewer: Right.
Cari: Which I’m kind of upset about.
Interviewer: How come?
Cari: Because like, my story is a good story. I’m not, like a timeline. And, they make me look like a huge nerd that reads the newspaper every five seconds and like, knows all the news things and like, “September 27th, 1986, like, this happened.” Like, what the hell? (Cari, 7/31/03)

In her response, Cari mentions twice that her story is serving as a timeline and no longer reflects the story she told. The shift in viewpoint is marked by the transition from personal narrative, to dialogue scenes, to a timeline-like structure and makes Cari feel removed from her story.
Despite Cari’s claims that she herself is different from other youth in her capacity to handle mature topics, Sidney’s voice is much more that of a generic “young person,” one who may not be able to manage the challenges that Cari has prided herself on handling. As described in the analysis of Cari’s original story and subsequent interview, she has constructed a relational identity built in opposition to About Face and its members — a large part of how Cari has learned to manage stigma and move toward the construction of a viable social identity. By building an identity in opposition to others, she creates an aura of strength around herself; she triumphed despite the obstacles that lay in her path. This relational identity, however, was taken up in the creation of the Sidney character. Just like Cari, Sidney had to fight for five years to be accepted into a group that he knew he belonged in. The result is a character who resolves this relational identity as he is accepted into the AFYT program, highlighted in this excerpt from Sidney’s closing monologue:

This is the year I turned 14. And my waiting is over. I guess, you know, historically it’s kind of a new thing that someone who is nine and a half years old would say out loud, “I like boys” and his dad would say, “okay.” But it really did happen… I think I’m still trying to figure out what else I am. Besides gay... And I feel myself changing. And I’m figuring out my life story... And I don’t need to wait anymore, for my life to start somewhere else, somewhere down the line, you know? I just have to live it (Up Until Now, July 2003).

The script incorporates Sidney’s coming out with the reportable events in Cari’s life. Audience members witness Sidney come out to his father during the opening scene, and we see him struggle with the social stigma of homophobic classmates. Sidney’s attempts to join AFYT each year are chronicled, and the audience sees his rejection each time. Thus, Cari’s most reportable events are merged with the more general purpose of AFYT: to allow LGBTQ youth to participate in this public, coming out ritual.

**Incorporation of multiple youth narratives.** Over the course of the adaptation process, youth and staff constructed three different versions of the “AFYT Groupie” script before arriving at the final, performed version. Throughout these versions, the voices of several youth are actively incorporated into the Sidney character through the narrative transformation process. The following excerpt from the second of three versions of the 2003 production script was spoken by Sidney in the final scene of the play:

And I’m 14 years old and I’m ready to begin the next chapter in my great life story. I’m not afraid. And I think that when this novel that is my life nears its conclusion, I think that this story, the story of this moment, will be my dedication page (Up Until Now, July 2003).
While the 14-year-old character reflects Cari, the words belong to Adele, another member of the AFYT cohort who wrote a story during the workshop sessions. She describes the experience of having her words included in Cari’s story in a journal entry:

There was a day this year when I wrote a long submission for AFYT about how about face has provided some punctuation for the run on sentence that is my life story, and that when this novel of my life nears it’s conclusion, my thanks to about face will be on my dedication page.

Sounds familiar? The closing of the show this year has a lot of me in it, although it’s very much so changed from the reality of my thoughts and actions to fit into the plotline (Adele, 8/3/03).

Here, Adele’s words are ventriloquated through Sidney, giving the sense that they belong to the same 14-year-old character who came out at age ten. At the same time, Sidney begins to represent much more than Cari’s experience — rather, he becomes an AFYT youth character, one that includes the voices of multiple youth.

In addition to other youths’ words, the new narrative transforms the unique, reportable events of Cari’s life into Sidney’s more credible experiences that represent AFYT themes. An introductory scene that originally presented a dramatized version of something that Cari described in her original story, was replaced by a monologue and an anecdote about a homophobic classmate and a teacher who refused to get involved:

Sidney: It’s 2001 and I’m in seventh grade. It’s September, and things aren’t going so well. I have this math teacher. And he seems really cool, and everyone talks about how cool he is, but I don’t think he likes me at all. And there there’s this girl, Alice. And there was this thing that happened in class (Up Until Now, July 2003).

This monologue is told strictly from Sidney’s perspective, giving the impression of representing a single viewpoint. This single viewpoint, however, belonged to someone else in the cast; the homophobic incident enacted after this monologue was originally told by a different AFYT member. In a later interview, Cari herself reflected on the inclusion of others’ stories into her overarching narrative:

And like, I’m glad that I can, that I brought part of that to it, you know? Whether, because like, certain stories, like I found out that the story, the like, faggot story? Was Alex’s story really? And so like, it’s been influenced by different stories, you know what I’m saying? (Cari, interview 8/17/03).

In this way, the scripted version of “AFYT Groupie,” includes others’ narratives — the case of the homophobic teacher — as well as others’ words, as in, “my dedication page”.

Discussion: The reportability continuum in the dramaturgical process

As I described earlier, Labov (1997) proposes a paradox found in narratives of personal experience where the reportability of a narrative is inversely correlated with its credibility. In documenting the transformation of Cari’s story over time I propose that this inverse correlation can be used to understand storytelling as process. Here, the relationship between reportability and credibility functions more as a continuum than a paradox, where different representations of personal narrative sit at various points along this continuum. Cari’s original narrative was highly reportable, documented by the repeated use of “the most reportable event,” clause in her original narrative and by her almost identical repetition of that event in an interview immediately following her story writing. The scripted versions of Cari’s story resulted in a shift in viewpoint from solely Cari’s to the AFYT community as a whole. However, the relationship between Cari’s original story and the resultant Sidney-character does not seem paradoxical as Labov’s framework might suggest. Rather, the story moves along a continuum from highly reportable to highly credible, with the final scripted and performed version in the middle of this continuum — representing both the reportable aspects of Cari’s narrative and the credible aspects of a community narrative that captures LGBTQ youth for the public. In Figure One, below, I outline several dimensions specific to Cari’s story that highlight the reportability continuum across the different representation of Cari’s story. For example, Cari prides herself on being different from peers her own age and laments the transformation of the Sidney-character into a typical young adolescent. The final script, however, reflects a combination of Cari’s difference and Sidney’s regularity.

A major change was made to the script just prior to the opening night performance that made explicit the need for a balance between reportability and credibility: A final monologue was added to the end of the play where Cari self-identifies as Sidney. Cari describes this addition as, “I tell the audience that it’s my story and that everything really happened” (Cari, 8/17/03). Here, Cari has the opportunity to reclaim her narrative for herself and for the audience, creating a

![Figure 1. The reportability continuum in action in AFYT Groupie.](image-url)
situation that builds both the narrative's reportability (a unique person in a unique situation) and its credibility (the audience can see the storyteller and is therefore more inclined to believe the story is true). In an interview following the completion of the performances, the Artistic Director explains the effect on Cari of this scripted act of self-identification: “And it was like the missing piece, I think for her, of like, ‘it’s ok take [my story], take it, take it, take it, but let me claim it’” (Molly, 8/31/03). This relationship between “taking” and “claiming” is at the heart of the relationship between credibility and reportability in the dramaturgical process, specifically in the performance part of the cycle.

Cari herself is able to reflect on the value of presenting a credible character to a public audience who is unfamiliar with the specifics of individual stories and the lives of LGBTQ youth:

Now that people are coming up to me a and saying, “Oh, that changed my life,” it doesn't matter if it's my story or not anymore…it influenced them in a way that I’m sure my story would influence them in a completely different way (Cari, 8/17/03).

Cari comes to understand the value of credibility in drawing an outside audience into the world of the story, allowing them to receive its broader message. Many audience members approached Cari after the show to tell her how her story had changed them. Making the character accessible to the audience is one of the ways that the theatrical medium allowed the story to have this effect.

Cari recognizes the value of creating a hybrid character that reflects the experiences of the AFYT community, rather than just the experiences of an individual. As in the quote above, she begins to articulate the difference in purpose between a personal narrative and a public performance. In this article, I described a scene in the play where Sidney is harassed by a homophobic classmate and goes to his unsympathetic teacher for help. Initially, Cari objected to this scene, claiming she would never respond to a homophobic attack in this way. When Cari learned that this story belonged to another member of the group, and that the Sidney character represented a hybrid of multiple AFYT members, she discussed instead how proud she was that her story, “brought something to the table…like I could at least help somewhat” (Cari, 8/17/03).

In addition to a specific awareness of the value of creating a hybrid, credible character to share with an audience, Cari also developed a broader sense of the different purposes that different representational media serve in storytelling. Throughout the process, she was eager to tell her story, to explain that her real life was much different from, and much more sophisticated than that of her alter-ego character, Sidney. In her personal interactions, she was able to explain this difference, by communicating one-on-one with listeners, providing them with the
reportable details of her life. The theatrical medium, on the other hand, does not serve this same purpose. The public performances of her story served to share with a broad audience the story of a young person struggling with queer identity at a young age. Cari highlighted this difference during my final interview with her, finally coming to terms with the differences between her story and the character’s. She says:

I guess it’s just like, it has influenced peoples’ lives and so it doesn’t really make a difference, like, cuz I mean if they really want to I could sit down and tell them my life story and they could have a different view (Cari, 8/17/03).

Other youth who I interviewed throughout the process also came to see the performance pieces as representative of the AFYT community, rather than as direct retellings of their personal experiences. In a journal entry, Adele summarizes the general function she thinks AFYT serves: “I think that the show this year expresses a lot of important messages and tells many stories that would otherwise remain untold” (Adele, 7/30/03).

Conclusion

Over the adaptation life of Cari’s story, the narrative viewpoint shifted from belonging solely to the original teller, to incorporating viewpoints other than the teller around the same series of events, to incorporating others’ narratives into the character’s viewpoint. The final product conveys a single viewpoint to the audience (Sidney’s) but in reality represents multiple viewpoints of AFYT members, an amalgam of experiences represented by a single, more generic LGBTQ youth character. Labov’s analytic framework shows how, as the story moves from an oral narrative to a scripted performance, the story moves from a highly reportability personal narrative to a credible character that represents the experiences of AFYT youth in a more generic, and potentially palatable way. In Cari’s original story, many of its details are unique to her, and paint a picture of a young adolescent who does not behave according to most definitions of a prototypical young adolescent. These details of her life are, in Cari’s opinion, what makes her story unique and worth telling. However, the end result is not an individual telling a story to another individual, but a play whose audience is broad and unknown.

The notion of a reportability continuum is potentially generalizable to other activities where personal story is used as a teaching tool. People initially tell the stories of their lives precisely because there is a unique event that makes them worth telling; in order to make these stories palatable to a broader audience, however, these stories have to be adapted to maximize impact on an unfamiliar, and
possibly unfriendly, audience. This is particularly true when stories serve to teach, to convey a message beyond the specific events. In the case of “AFYT Groupie,” the original narrative is compelling to listeners and important to Cari precisely because of its reportable events. However, as the story is transformed into a performance piece that must represent AFYT and the LGBTQ youth community to an outside audience, the credibility of the narrative is emphasized so that the audience can “buy in” to the story.

It is precisely in this space — the development of a narrative representation that contains both the original story’s reportability and the scripted story’s credibility — that the development of a viable social identity occurs. The final representations capture the way youth see themselves (their original story), the way others see them (scripted versions), and the way they fit into the communities around them (the story as situated in the broader AFYT story). While youth are not always happy with the results — cries of, “this is not my story!” were common in interviews I conducted with youth who had their stories adapted — the publicly performed narratives provide a means by which LGBTQ youth can demonstrate the merging of these dimensions of identity in a positive, constructive environment. For youth who experience stigma both on a personal and on an institutional level, the opportunity to construct such a narrative, to play with the reportability continuum, exposes normalness without sacrificing particularity.

References


Copyright of Narrative Inquiry is the property of John Benjamins Publishing Co. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.