**Title:** “God loves you and It Gets Better”: Ideology, deixis and agency in an anti-homophobic bullying viral campaign

**Abstract:** The ‘It Gets Better Project’ (IGBP) is an online anti-homophobic bullying initiative directed at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. To date, 50,000 user-generated IGBP videos have attracted over 50 million views. In this critical discourse analysis of IGBP videos in the “Faith” category, I note how the projected ideologies therein overlap with and depart from conservative Christian rhetoric in surprising ways. I ask what gets better, for whom, and how might that happen? I then compare messages uploaded by laypeople and spokespeople of religious institutions. I argue that neoliberal assumptions are frequently evident in laypeople’s emphases on individualism, economic success, urban spaces and heteronormative conceptions of time. Spokespeople, conversely, tend to emphasize community-based opposition to homophobia in the here and now. This ideological struggle highlights barriers to “it getting better” in the present but also creates space for politics of redistribution and an unexpected queering of societal norms.

**Keywords:** *neoliberalism, faith, homophobia, youth, bullying, internet, deixis.*

**1. Introduction: It (nearly) got worse**

In September 2010, prompted by a spate of teen suicides linked to homophobic bullying, sex advice columnist Dan Savage and husband Terry Miller posted a short video online telling young people experiencing harassment at school that “it gets better” (Savage and Miller, 2010). In the video, Savage and Miller recall their own high school experiences, each marked by homophobic persecution, before detailing the happiness they found after graduation and later through a family life together. Savage pleads with viewers to “tough it out,” promising: “your life can be amazing…[but] you have to live your life so that you are around for it to get amazing” ([Savage & Miller 2010](#_ENREF_37)).

Members of the public, celebrities and politicians began to post videos of their own in response, replicating the direct-to-camera format of the first film and echoing the “it gets better” message. The number of uploads grew rapidly, prompting newspaper and magazine coverage particularly when Lady Gaga, the cast of the television series *Glee* and later President Obama joined a host of other notable figures in contributing clips of their own. Within a few months, “It Gets Better” became a viral sensation.

Subsequently and to date, more than 50,000 “It Gets Better” videos have been uploaded to YouTube, attracting over 50 million views between them. In October 2010, with support and administration duties assumed by The Trevor Project[[1]](#footnote-1), the official, trademarked It Gets Better Project (henceforth IGBP) was founded. A moderated website, tie-in books and a MTV documentary have followed, all ostensibly cementing the success and popularity of the project.

The IGBP website states its aims as follows:

The It Gets Better Project was created to show young LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans] people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach—if they can just get through their teen years. The It Gets Better Project wants to remind teenagers in the LGBT community that they are not alone—and it WILL get better. (<http://itgetsbetter.org/>)

While undeniably popular, IGBP has attracted criticism as well as praise. Soon after its launch, academics, journalists and bloggers presented notable analyses, observing how gender, race, and class privileges inform many IGBP messages ([Puar 2010](#_ENREF_32); [Quiet Riot Girl 2010](#_ENREF_34); [Tseng 2010](#_ENREF_39)). My aim with this paper is to contribute another critical voice to discussions of IGBP, albeit one seeking to explore the nuanced differences of opinion presented within a particular section of videos, rather than stressing only what is seemingly absent or underrepresented in the body of clips taken as a whole. In doing so, I hope to highlight a struggle that persists within IGBP over how best to challenge homophobic, and possibly other prejudicial discourses and oppressions. I also intend to caution against the idea that the homophilic discourse of IGBP necessarily promotes diverse ways of being, by questioning the assertion that “it gets better” for everyone—regardless of race, gender, class, or ability.

I was prompted to explore IGBP eighteen months after the first video upload, as the Republican Party presidential candidates debated their opposition to same-sex marriage, and the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell[[2]](#footnote-2) in nationally televised debates. Arguably the most outspoken and eye-catching candidate to share his views on homosexuality was former-Senator for Pennsylvania and staunch Catholic Rick Santorum. Santorum has a history of stoking the ire of gay rights advocates, notably with his well-publicized equating of gay marriage with adultery, polygamy and bestiality in 2003 ([Loughlin 2003](#_ENREF_26)). As a result of Dan Savage’s well-publicized admonishment of Santorum at that time[[3]](#footnote-3), IGBP shot back into the public eye during the primary debates.

While political analysts predicted that Santorum’s homophobic pronouncements would ultimately derail his campaign ([Michaelson 2012](#_ENREF_27)), wins in Primaries or Caucuses in Tennessee, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Alabama implied that his religiously inflected homophobic rhetoric held appeal, particularly in the South and Mid-West. In this context, gay rights campaigners rallying against Santorum regularly highlighted his religious views as problematic; the source of his anti-gay stance ([Donaldson 2012](#_ENREF_7); [Johnson 2012](#_ENREF_20)).

Having worked with open and affirming churches in the U.S., I was intrigued to see what pro-LGBT Christian sentiments might feature in IGBP videos, potentially to contest or interrupt the messaging of the Christian right. Upon discovering a category of videos entitled “Faith” on the IGBP website, I decided to expand my outlook to consider more broadly defined faith-based messages, rather than those limited to Christian sources.

I thus began the analysis of videos uploaded to the IGBP website that I discuss in this paper. In undertaking this research, I had hoped to identify potential avenues of resistance and contestation of the conservative Christian rhetoric frequently voiced from within the Republican Party. Yet, in watching the videos, I found more pressing initial questions regarding the core assertion: Frequently, it was unclear *what* gets better for *whom*, and *how* that might happen.

In this paper, I present a linguistic analysis of IGBP Faith videos to show that divergent ideological outlooks inform the conclusions drawn by spokespeople for faith-based organisations and laypeople as to what “gets better,” and how. I argue that laypeople frequently betray neoliberal assumptions in their faith-inflected messages, evinced by their emphasis on individualism, economic success, urban living, and erstwhile heteronormative conceptions of time. This position, I argue, can emphasize a limited and exclusive conception of what “better” entails.

Conversely, and as also distinct from the rhetoric of conservative Christian politicians and organizations ([Ong 2006: 2](#_ENREF_29); [Peterson 2010](#_ENREF_31)), spokespeople are more likely to contest such neoliberal perspectives by emphasizing the importance of community-driven, active opposition to homophobia in the here and now. While the religious framing of these messages might not appeal to all viewers, their perspective suggests that more diverse and accessible conceptions of “better” are possible. I conclude first that homophilic discourse might prove problematically limiting where it echoes other, established social prejudices and hierarchies. Second, I argue that, alongside outright rejection of conservative Christian rhetoric, open and affirming faith-based discourse might offer a useful riposte to institutionalized homophobic attitudes in U.S. politics and society. In keeping with my outlook as a public anthropologist, I believe both conclusions can contribute to on-going efforts to oppose not only homophobic, but also intersecting forms of oppression faced by LGBT youth.

**2. Data Collection and Analysis**

The standard format of IGBP videos is direct-to-camera address. The use of animations, titles or other digital elaboration in clips is rare, and the vast majority feature a single speaker, visible from the waist, or occasionally neck up. While some messages appear scripted or rehearsed, the overall tone of IGBP messages is informal.

IGBP videos can be uploaded to YouTube.com or directly to the official website.[[4]](#footnote-4) I have chosen to analyze videos taken from the official website as I am primarily concerned with the official, or at least sanctioned, narrative: The official IGBP site has more stringent removal policies for what it regards as “offensive content” than does YouTube,[[5]](#footnote-5) and uses its own system of categories and tags to organize uploaded content.

I follow Earle and Sharp’s ([2007](#_ENREF_9)) consideration of best practice in online research with regards to consent, data collection and initial analysis. On the issue of ethical research methods and consent, I argue that IGBP videos not only fall into the category of “most publically accessible” online material, but are also “publically disseminated” texts ([Earle & Sharp 2007: 31](#_ENREF_9)). Their makers placed them in the public domain with the explicit intention and understanding that they will be available to all.[[6]](#footnote-6) I have therefore retained the names used by those video makers who publically identify themselves ([see Earle & Sharp 2007: 32 for further discussion](#_ENREF_9)).

In this paper, I compare and discuss twenty IGBP videos, all downloaded on 20 February 2012. As of this date, 2,298 videos were available on the official IGBP website, 203 of which were included in the Faith category. Authors determine which categories their video will be included in when they use keywords in the title, or as “tags” accompanying their clip. Taking a sample size of ten per cent, I selected twenty videos through a process of systematic random sampling.[[7]](#footnote-7) I then transcribed the verbal text of each video, noting the name, profession and any other declared identity markers of the speakers for each clip. This iterative process allowed me to obtain a good grasp of the material before beginning a focused analysis.

The combined transcript of the videos is 16,502 words in length, a suitable size for considering the use of corpus linguistic analysis. Corpus techniques allow researchers to establish an initial understanding of large data sets. A quick search can establish the frequency with which certain words (“nodes”) appear. Presented with concordance lines—the whole sentence or limited number of words surrounding the node word(s)—swift identification of patterns of meaning becomes possible ([Huntson 2002: 39-42](#_ENREF_19)).

I concur with Paul Baker that, as corpora can consist of thousands, occasionally millions of words, corpus analysis “can be used to identify values, beliefs, attitudes and discourses” ([2008: 76](#_ENREF_3)). I used corpus analysis techniques to examine if, and how “faith,” “god” and “religion” were understood by the speakers as directly related to “it” getting better.

While corpus analysis provides initial pointers, I draw on Norman Fairclough’s ([2012](#_ENREF_11)) critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach for interpretation and analysis, namely to explore the ideological assumptions underlying the messages. With Fairclough, I assert that critical and evaluative analysis, as opposed to purely descriptive appraisal, is necessary where the “aim is to change social realities for the better” ([Fairclough 2012: 10](#_ENREF_11)). In doing so I acknowledge that the analysis offered herein is one of multiple possible readings of the data set and is informed, perhaps fittingly, by my own concept of what might constitute a “better” social reality.

**3. Initial findings**

I used corpus analysis for my initial survey, seeking to draw out what was perceived or assumed to “get better” by the speakers collectively, and if and how this improvement might be related to faith.The first node word searched was “better.” It was uttered on 113 occasions (comprising 0.7% of words in the data set). This is arguably unsurprising, considering that the word features within the project title, and that the title acts as the framing device for all video uploads. Frequent repetition of the phrase does suggest, however, that speakers are invested in and feel comfortable reasserting the central tenet of “it gets better” without clarifying “its” meaning. Variations of the phrase are therefore notable, as they reveal how speakers actively depart from the official script. A selection of such variations is presented the in concordance lines below.

*Table One*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 01 | I want you to know that it will get | **better** |  |
| 02 | I promise you, it gets | **better** |  |
| 03 | It does get | **better** |  |
| 04 | It is getting | **better** | all the time |
| 05 | It gets so much | **better** |  |
| 06 | I don’t think shit gets | **better** | than this |
| 07 | Life will get **better** if we make it | **better** |  |
| 08 | …making it | **better** | for everyone |
| 09 | …sometimes, before it gets | **better** | it gets worse |
| 10 | …hard work has made things | **better** | for them |

In *Table One*, Lines 01, 02, 03, are examples of assertive variants of the IGBP core message. These are common, with “I promise” and “I can tell you” making particularly frequent appearance. In such cases, despite the apparent certainty of the speaker, the passive voice and the future-orientated verb tense remain. Present or present continuous verb forms, conversely, make only rare appearance in variations of the phrase “it gets better.” Examples of these formations are found in lines 04, 07 and 08. Lines 07 and 08 are spoken in the active voice, another infrequent occurrence. The caveat of “if” in Line 07, and the caution of Line 09 are strikingly different from the norm of unaltered restatement of the phrase.

A search for a second node word, “God,” returned just 62 instances of use (0.4%). Considering the category title, the infrequent appearance of “God,” and another node word, “faith” (which was used just twelve times), is surprising. Of utterances of the word “God,” a third were made within the concordance line: “God loves you.”

*Table Two*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 11 |  | **God** | loves you |
| 12 |  | **God** | created you |
| 13 |  | **God** | doesn’t make mistakes |
| 14 | You’re the way you are, the way | **God** | made you |
| 15 | May | **God** | bless you all |

The use of the present tense here is noteworthy, as it contrasts temporally with the other salient message within the data set, the future progressive proposition: “it gets better.”That the guarantee of god’s love might be unconnected, or ineffectual with respect to “it getting better,” is an unexpected finding in a category of IGBP films entitled Faith. In fact, upon closer examination, I found that those using the term “God” as in the concordance lines in *Table Two* were also far more likely to add caution or caveats to their “it gets better” statement. Moreover, many of the speakers do not use the term “God” at all, whereas others litter their messages with them: Gene Robinson, for example, says “God” eleven times over the course of 391 words (4%).

This quite stark variation prompted consideration of the individual speaker’s identity, established by the self-descriptions provided in their video or short companion text. Leaving the compiled transcripts aside and referring to these self-descriptions alone, I identified two sets of speakers: *spokespeople*—who hold some official position within a faith-based organization, and *laypeople*—who, while potentially referencing membership to a congregation, did not hold official positions within them. Separating the groups and linking names to transcripts, I saw that spokespeople, who do indeed use the word “God” more often, also seemed more likely to regard “it gets better” as action-dependent and open to possibility, rather than as given. For example, it is a Reverend, Meg Riley of the Unitarian Universalist Church, who states: “life will get better *if* we make it better,” as in Line 07 above.

Baker argues that corpus analysis can provide stronger evidence of an ideological discourse than analysis of a single word, or phrase might provide ([2008: 76](#_ENREF_3)). Indeed, by encoding passages with demographic information about the speaker, I was able to identify two sets of speakers promotingdifferent types of messages via a categorization that was not otherwise immediately apparent. This comparative approach is of course possible using other categorizations, for example one could fruitfully examine how gender, age, or geographical location may each inform speakers’ word choice and message. This study is however limited to a comparison of laypeople’s and spokespeople’s messages, and highlights just one struggle over meaning among many likely evident within the body of IGBP films.

While further node word searches are possible, I do not rely solely on a corpus approach, and agree with Baker’s obvious but necessary caveatthat: “computers can only take researchers so far” ([Baker 2008: 83](#_ENREF_3)). I believe thatthere is pressing work to do beyond identifying and categorizing difference. More nuanced and indeed intuitive linguistic analysis is needed to examine how these different speakers might variously contest the homophobic discourses of the religious right, and potentially create space for a more just and accepting U.S. society.

I follow Fairclough in viewing “social reality as ‘conceptually mediated,’ such that the ‘objects’ of critical social analysis are simultaneously material and semiotic in character” ([Fairclough 2012: 10](#_ENREF_11)). I use CDA to ask searching and evaluative questions of IGBP texts because they assert a claim—that “it gets better”—that is open to normative critique as potentially false. It is also open to ideological critique. because this reassuring promise, in obscuring why, how and for whom it may not “get better” for some people at all, may help sustain an unjust and inequitable social order. In sum, I do not take for granted that the homophilic discourses of IGBP will be diametrically opposed to homophobic ones found in broader U.S. society. In adopting and delineating this outlook, I acknowledge my own ideological position and willingness to present a subjective reading of IGBP, rather than an ostensibly objective or purely linguistic analysis.

In order to parse out and interrogate the multiple tacit assumptions underpinning IGBP—asking exactly what gets better, how, and for whom?—I focus on the differences, or the struggles over meaning evident between spokespeople’s and laypeople’s messages. For each, I question the ideological assumptions being set forth in their IGBP videos. Finally, I consider speakers’ understanding and “commitment to truth” ([Fairclough 2003: 204](#_ENREF_10)), taking into account use of the epistemic modalities where IGBP is asserted, but not explained. These three issues are addressed through the following consideration of deixis, agency, time and space as linguistic markers of ideological assumptions.

**4. Anti-bullying videos as ideological texts**

Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. ([Althusser 1971: 162](#_ENREF_2))

Following Louis Althusser, I regard ideolog*y* in general as the eternal motivator of all action, informing all beliefs, conceptions of duty, and practices. As such, it is almost impossible properly to recognize or measure the effects of ideology ([Althusser 1971: 159](#_ENREF_2)). Or, as Irvine and Gall put it: “there is no ‘view from nowhere’, no gaze that is not pointed” ([quoted in Ahearn 2012: 274](#_ENREF_1)). This occurs because even recognition of ourselves as subjects relies on the ideological assumption that we existed, a priori, as subjects: the mere naming of “I” and “you” must be understood as acts of ideological recognition.

Ideolog*ies*, however, and the particular practices they engender can be historicized, analyzed and critiqued (albeit and necessarily through an ideologically informed lens). This is as true, though perhaps not as easy, with regards to dominant as well as competing ideologies, as none are instantaneously installed, but rather develop over time and space ([Althusser 1971: 185](#_ENREF_2)). The task at hand, for Althusser and in this analysis, is the recognition of elite ideological positions where they have become, or maybe in the process of becoming, dominant: their common-sense and taken-for-granted positions of course serving the interests of the ruling class. I argue that IGBP Faith videos, while invariably asserting an anti-homophobic discourse, variously demonstrate markers of both a dominant neoliberal ideology and possible contestations of it.

Neoliberalism as political ideology derives from neoclassical economic theories which argue for the free hand of the market as the best guarantor of growth, wealth accumulation and prosperity for all ([Harvey 2005: 19](#_ENREF_18)). Popularized in the 1970s and 1980s by Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and embraced by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as the catch-all solution to economic woes of poor countries ([Graeber 2009: 84](#_ENREF_14)), neoliberal policy favors small governance, market deregulation and the privatization of industrial, agricultural and public services ([Leitner *et al.* 2003: 1](#_ENREF_24)). Its critics note that, in no instance where neoliberal policy has been entrenched has the result been prosperity for all. Indeed, in such instances the gap between rich and poor has only widened ([Harvey 2005](#_ENREF_18)).

Yet, as David Graeber argues, “[n]eoliberalism is seen as the dominant ideological force in the world” ([2009: 79](#_ENREF_14)). This dominance is not limited to the level of governance. Politicians’ rhetoric has seeped into the mind-sets of citizens wherever neoliberalism has established a firm grip in government ([cf. Leap 2009](#_ENREF_22)). As Leitner, Sheppard *et al.* note:

A neoliberal subjectivity has also emerged that has normalized the logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism, equating individual freedom with self-interested choices, making individuals responsible for their own well-being and redefining citizens as consumers and clients. ([Leitner *et al.* 2003: 2](#_ENREF_24)).

Tracing the history of the gay rights movement, Lisa Duggan ([2002](#_ENREF_8)) argues that adoption of a neoliberal position prompted a shift of advocacy aims away from collective gains and public engagement towards individual rewards and private access to prosperity. Consequently, Duggan asserts, “homonormative,” rather than socially progressive discourses now predominate within gay communities and organizations that, for example, reify conservative institutions like marriage as the most viable pathway to social equality. Duggan defines homonormativity as:

[A] new neo-liberal politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption. ([Duggan 2002: 179](#_ENREF_8))

The concept of homonormativity remains influential in queer studies, although of late scholars have increasingly tended to warn against any easy dismissal of gay rights campaigns or lifestyle choices as purely regressive in their embrace of erstwhile heteronormative values ([Boellstorff 2007](#_ENREF_4); [Brown 2012](#_ENREF_5)). For example, it may be that homosexual relationships have become more socially acceptable in general as a consequence of the gay marriage movement. Conversely, or perhaps concurrently, single parent or alternative family units may be further maligned where marriage in general is conceptualized and presented as central to social acceptability and well-being*.* Productive debate over the usefulness of homonormativity continues apace in queer theory, in particular but only with reference to same-sex marriage (cf. [Brown 2012](#_ENREF_5); [Rosenfeld 2009](#_ENREF_35); [Vitulli 2010](#_ENREF_40)).

Rather than definitively argue the merits or shortfalls of homonormativity as a concept, the analysis offered herein suggests that struggles over ideological emphasis are on-going within mainstream LGBT advocacy movements, for example the IGBP campaign. I argue that neoliberal subjectivity is frequently endorsed in IGBP Faith videos posted by laypeople yet it is also regularly contested in those posted by spokespeople. This is evident in their differential emphases on the individual versus the community, on urban centers rather than rural locales, and on future success over present acceptance, positions that promote notably different response to homophobic bullying.

**4.1 False deixis and the “dummy it”**

*Example One*

Spokesperson:

“You know, **life** will get better if we make **it** better. And that’s why I’ve given my life to work with all kinds of people who are oppressed: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, but also other people who suffer: poor people, disabled people, people without the right kind of papers to be walking around the United States today. So, here’s the thing: I need you to live so you can help make **it** better for everyone.”

* Reverend Meg Riley, Unitarian Universalist, Church of the Larger Fellowship

Layperson:

“I promise you, I promise you **it** gets better. **It** gets so much better, **it** really, really does. I wanna just say **it** gets better a million times in a row to prove to you somehow and ingrain in your mind how much better **it** gets, because **it** really does. Umm, and now I’m 27. I live in New York City, which is my favorite place in the entire world. I have amazing friends, I’m doing what I want to do for a living, I have a great job.”

* Chris

Deixis is a demonstrative linguistic phenomenon occurring where the meaning of a word is dependent on context and demands interpretation on behalf of the listener or reader ([Levinson 1984: 54-57](#_ENREF_25)). Deictics, words that serve this demonstrative function, commonly reference time or place, such as: “this,” “then,” or “there.” Julia Penelope notes that, in general, a speaker employing deictics assumes that their meaning will be understood by the listener, although misunderstanding is possible ([Penelope 1990: 130](#_ENREF_30)).

More of interest to Penelope, and of relevance here, is the notion of false deixis, used to describe a deictical term that points to nothing. False deixis such as “the dummy ‘it’” can arise as a consequence of linguistic ineptitude or be employed by speaker as a rhetorical device, requiring the listener supply their own information to give meaning to the dialogue ([Penelope 1990: 130](#_ENREF_30)). In either circumstance, the use may not be intentional. Yet Penelope posits that we may be inclined to use the veil of the dummy it to make vague reference to difficult thoughts and feelings. She proposes: “Maybe…we don’t want to be understood at some level. Or, maybe we don’t understand ourselves what we mean or want to communicate” ([1990: 135](#_ENREF_30)). Following Penelope, I draw attention to uses of the (potentially dummy) “it” of “it gets better.”

In *Example One*, Spokesperson Reverend Meg Riley, makes explicit from the outset that the “it” of “it gets better” indexes “life.” Once this is established, she can specify the obstacles, as she sees them, to life being better: the oppression and subsequent suffering of certain “types of people.” She then suggests how the improvement of life might occur, appealing to listeners to help make “it [life] better for everyone.” Reverend Riley asserts a collectivist attitude towards addressing oppression in its multiple guises, and points to a specific socio-political cause of suffering as she sees it: lack of rights. It follows, then, that by directly addressing oppression and unequal rights specifically, “we” can make “it” better for “all kinds of people who are oppressed.”

Layperson Chris, in contrast, relies heavily on the dummy it as he fails to specify a precise referent. After a string of assertions, all highly committed epistemic modalities, Chris pauses as he considers what, indeed, gets better. Eventually, he lists his age, location, popularity and profession as apparent sources of personal pleasure. While it may be that Chris also takes “it” as indexing “life”—albeit a particular kind of life—this is not explicit. It is implied, but ultimately unclear whether he regards these circumstances as constituting “better.”

Of course, and as with the high incidence of the node word “better” within the corpus as a whole, speakers’ use of “it” can be explained in part as an intertexual reference to the project’s slogan. Yet allowing “it” to remain ambiguous while vehemently asserting, “it gets so muchbetter, it really, really does,” implies that Chris has felt confidently able to relate to Savage’s largely couched meaning, message and examples. Chris therefore either presupposes that listeners will instinctively understand what they are talking about, or employs false deixis when repeating without specifying what “it” signifies.

I argue that, by remaining ambiguous, laypeople are able to obscure the difficult question of *how* “it gets better” for someone else, relying on their own narratives as proof of fact. Consequently, they flounder when pausing to consider what “it” getting better might entail. Chris, as other laypeople in the sample, cites his being a young, educated adult, living in an urban center, and career success, tropes which imply individual material prosperity is key to the “better” life, a central tenant of a neoliberal ideological perspective.

Stephen C. Levinson notes that, “it is generally (but not invariably) true that deixis is organized in an ego-centric way” ([1984: 63](#_ENREF_25)), because the unmarked anchorage or referential points are assumed by the speaker to be themselves, as well as when and where—both geographically and socially—they are situated when speaking. By simply making more frequent and assertive presumptions as to what “it” entails, laypeople appear to emphasize the primacy of the “I” in their messages. Spokesperson Meg Riley organizes her speech in less egocentric manner, not only evidenced by her lesser use of deixis, but also through her recognition of listeners’ agency, as I now discuss through further examples.

**4.2 Agency and individualism**

*Example Two*

Laypeople:

*“****I’ve*** *been where* ***you*** *are before.”*

* Andrew

*“…****you*** *get through it [high school],* ***you*** *get to move out,* ***you*** *get to go somewhere where it is a non-issue, where people don’t give a crap that you’re gay…”*

* John

*“When* ***you*** *come out, when* ***you*** *admit that you’re gay, when* ***you*** *own it, it’s so much better.”*

* Chris

*“So um especially* ***if you’re*** *in the West,* ***if you’re*** *in America,* ***if you’re*** *in Canada,* ***if you’re*** *in London, don’t be afraid to be yourself. Don’t be afraid of your parents, your family.* ***I would*** *hope and guarantee that they would respond kindly.* ***I can’t promise****,* ***I’m of a specific situation****, but* ***I think*** *it’ll all work out from the best.”*

* Anonymous B

Spokespeople:

*“****I’m*** *here to talk to* ***those of you*** *who are gay, or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, who are feeling like* ***you’re*** *in a really dark place right now. […]* ***Maybe you’re*** *growing up in a Roman Catholic household, and* ***you*** *hear from* ***your*** *church that* ***you*** *are intrinsically disordered. […]* ***God*** *loves* ***you*** *the way* ***you*** *are, and* ***God*** *doesn’t want* ***you*** *to change…* ***You’re*** *the way* ***you*** *are, the way* ***God*** *made* ***you****, and the way* ***God*** *loves* ***you****.”*

* Gene Robinson, Bishop of New Hampshire Episcopal Church

*“****I*** *direct the faith work at the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce. And* ***we’re*** *here to say it gets better. And* ***we want you to know*** *that there are people of faith in every single religious tradition: Jews, and Christians, and Muslims, and Hindus, and Baha’i, and Pagan, and every religious tradition across the world, that love* ***you*** *and believe that in the core of* ***your*** *being, God loves* ***you****.”*

* Reverend Rebecca Voelkel, United Church of Christ, Program Director, Institute for Welcoming Resource at the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce.

In her discussion of language, power and agency Laura Ahearn draws attention to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to argue that “we are *predisposed*, not *predetermined* to act, think and speak in certain ways” ([2012: 266 italics original](#_ENREF_1)). Following Bourdieu, Ahearn argues that it is the responsibility of the dominated classes to kick back against those taken-for-granted assumptions, or *doxa*, that shore up current alignments and structures of power ([2012: 268-270](#_ENREF_1)). It therefore falls to the dominant class to assert and defend *doxa*. I understand the ability to do either as agency, “the socio-culturally mediated power to act” ([Ahearn 2012: 278](#_ENREF_1)).

For the speakers in this data set, agency is differentially recognized and attributed. The acknowledgement or suppression of agency, I suggest, reveals salient assumptions as to how “it gets better”—or more precisely *who*, if anyone, has the capacity to ensure that such a change occurs. Three agents recur in the data: “I,” the speaker; “God,” and “you” the imagined viewer. “You,” however, variably indexes “I” the speaker as well as “you” the listener, particularly in laypeople’s speech, an example of deictic projection ([Levinson 1984: 63](#_ENREF_25)).

In *Example Two*, John and Andrew each speak about themselves while explicitly projecting their own experiences onto viewers they imagine as necessarily similar to themselves. It is notable that both John and Andrew, like the majority of speakers in the data set, are Caucasian men.[[8]](#footnote-8) The primacy of their subjectivity is taken for granted, as their employment of false or ambiguous deixis suggests, and forms the basis for the assertion that “it gets better,” universally. The use of “you” when talking from a first-person perspective implies, following Stuart Hall, that the speaker is assuming that their meaning, and thus ideological stance, will be inevitably understood and shared by an audience able to decode their message ([Hall 2001: 169](#_ENREF_17)). This is a perspective borne of privilege. Anonymous B(*Example Two*), the only Muslim and one of only two non-Caucasian speakers in the data set, does not share such assumptions to the same extent, but rather litters his speech with caveats and is explicit in his conclusion: “I can’t promise, I’m of a specific situation, but I think it’ll all work out from the best.” The tendency of laypeople to speak in assertions from a privileged position is cut through by other determinants of social status.

Yet neither do spokespeople, all of whom in the data set are Caucasian, generally assume that they can talk for everyone, or suggest their own experiences afford them insight into the possible circumstances of imagined viewers. Where “you” is used, it is directed to, and acknowledges the agency of future viewers. Bishop Gene Robinson (*Example Two*) hedges with “maybe,” noting the diversity of his future listeners.Reverend Rebecca Vogel (*Example Two*) stresses that “you” the imagined viewer could potentially belong to, or find support within any and all religions**.** Furthermore, in appealing to viewers to “help make it better for everyone” (Reverend Meg Riley, *Example One*), and accentuating the process of “it is getting better all the time” (Reverend Debra Haffner, *Table One*) spokespeople recognize audience members’ potential for taking an active role in making such a change occur. Viewers are also reminded, by spokespeople, that welcoming communities are waiting to work with and support them in taking action (Reverend Debra Haffner, *Example Four*; Doug, *Example Four*).

Laypeople, in contrast, rarely advocate for action or acknowledge the listeners’ ability to enact change. There is one single exception to this trend, a specific action which is either advocated for or taken-for-granted as inevitable by all laypeople in this sample, regardless of gender, ethnicity or faith: coming out. For Carlos Decena, “coming out” has shifted in the past thirty years from signifying and belonging to a “project of social transformation” to being “an act of individual self-realization” ([2008: 339](#_ENREF_6)). Yet being “out” is not, Decena stresses, similarly valued or meaningful across cultures. It is rather viewed with suspicion by those falling outside of the dominant socio-cultural formation of middle-class, white gay identity ([Decena 2008](#_ENREF_6)).

Decena’s argument has been supported by other scholars, who have noted how a tacitly understood, or wilily revealed homosexuality serves many marginalized people better than being explicitly “out” ([Leap 2010: 561](#_ENREF_23); [Santiago 2002](#_ENREF_36)). In such a light, Chris (*Example Two*), can be read as actively erasing the agency of those for whom being “out” may have potentially damaging, or simply unwanted repercussions. Similarly, where coming out is understood as a final and definitive act, multiple and shifting queer identities, including but not limited to bisexuality, may be subsumed under the rubric of a definitive and rigid homosexuality.

This attitude towards being “out” is echoed in the official IGBP narrative, as the title of the first IGBP book—a collection of essays inspired by IGBP and edited by Savage and Miller—suggests: “It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living.” Here, an individualistic act is declared as the first and necessary step toward the creation of a singular “life worth living,” while bullying should be “overcome” rather than addressed or challenged. This messaging devalues broader social change as a worthy aim, while underscoring the fallacious neoliberal representation of U.S. society as meritocratic: anyone can transcend their circumstances—provided they work hard enough.

**4.3 Fight or flight?**

*Example Three*

Laypeople:

*“…you will graduate high school […] It may seem like an impossibly far away time. But you will* ***get out of there****. You’ll* ***get out of the town you live in****. You have to* ***go away to college. Go to the nearest urban area, the nearest blue state, the nearest campus*** *that’s accepting of the LGBT community. You have to have faith that it will get better. […] As soon as you* ***get out of your hometown and into the real world****, you’ll find amazing and loving people ready to accept you for who you are.”*

* Andrew

*“Once I graduated high school* ***I left and went off to college****. I’m like,* ***‘Get the fuck outta Dodge!’****”*

* Misty Eyez

Spokespeople:

*“It’s very very difficult to deal with bullying in isolation […] In fact, many people come to faith communities precisely because they’re going through difficult times in their lives, and* ***through the power of community, they find the strength*** *to face their challenges and to find healing. … there are many highly progressive faith communities* ***across America*** *that are welcoming and supportive places for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.”*

* Doug, Welcoming Committee at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah

*“…we are not the only church like that. There are churches* ***all over the United States*** *that love gay Christians, who don’t make you choose between your sexuality and your spirituality, because they know that God loves you just as you are.”*

* Anonymous C, Spokesperson for McKinley Memorial Presbyterian Church

Galey Modan succinctly defines “moral geography” as “the interweaving of moral frameworks and geographical territory” ([Modan 2007: 88](#_ENREF_28)). For Philip Thomas, building on the work of Eugene Walter and Edward Casey, such interweavings are “the product of historical and personal experience…both constituted by and constitutive of peoples’ senses of place, their understanding of who and where they are” ([Thomas 2002: 368](#_ENREF_38)). Moral geography in evident in speech where connections of subjects to places are expressed and legitimized through identity markers ostensibly shared by both. This frequently relies on the creation or sustenance of binaries, which ultimately serve to include or discount people from belonging to a place ([Modan 2007: 106](#_ENREF_28)).

Thomas argues that the rural-urban contrast he identifies in Madagascar, as in other postcolonial contexts, is imbued with moral understandings of the rural as representing tradition, and the urban, modernity. In this rendering “[geography’s] moral dimension takes the form of an ethical contrast between doing for oneself and doing for others” ([Thomas 2002: 368](#_ENREF_38)). Thomas’ perspective is instructive here, to consider the moral geography of neoliberal ideology.

Leitner, Shepard *et al.* posit that the city is “at the forefront of neoliberalization” ([2003: 2](#_ENREF_24)). They describe the neoliberal urban center as characterized and fuelled by entrepreneurialism, innovation and creative energy, and populated by responsible, autonomous individuals ([Leitner *et al.* 2003: 2-5](#_ENREF_24)). Laypeople’s insinuations as to what defines a better life appear to conform to this imaginary, pathologizing the “town” the listener is presumed to inhabit as a homophobic locale in contrast to the accepting and “urban area” (Andrew, *Example Three*). Misty Eyez (*Example Three*) echoes this sentiment, albeit in a more direct manner, evoking the notoriously violent frontier town Dodge City as stand in for rural U.S.A.

Spokespeople conversely emphasize the importance of finding support within imagined listeners existing communities. They do not advocate leaving or moving home, emphasizing instead how a commitment to community building and transformation can be action towards it getting better across the entire country:“across America” or “all over the United States.” Whereas Andrew and Misty Eyez textually position the threatening and intolerant “there” in contrast to the accepting, urban “here,” spokespeople discursively reject this moral map of the U.S., specifying instead that pockets of acceptance can be found anywhere, albeit perhaps only within certain faith-based communities.

Judith Halberstam draws attention to the erasure of rural gay experience that results from the “essential characterization of queer life as urban” in popular culture and campaigns for gay rights ([2005: 15](#_ENREF_16)). Rural and small-town U.S. is actively mythologized as “sad and lonely,” Halberstam argues, noting further that “rural queers might be thought of as ‘stuck’ in a place that they would leave if they only could” ([2005: 36](#_ENREF_16)). Following Halberstam, Mary Gray draws particular attention to the framing of “queer-youth sexualities and genders as ‘lacking’ or ‘incomplete’” which emerges through popular understandings of the rural as “gay America’s closet” ([Gray 2009: 9-10](#_ENREF_15)). These perspectives are evident and frequently asserted in laypeople’s messages. For Andrew (*Example Three*), his imagined, rural-dwelling listeners’ hometowns do not even belong to “the real world”; life there simply does not count.

The consequences of this construction are threefold. First, the message of escape usually promoted by laypeople disregards the possibility of rural life being a desirable or viable option for their viewers. Second, it closes up any possibility of addressing homophobia or transforming attitudes outside of urban areas and college campuses, spaces that are notably inaccessible for the educationally and economically marginalized.Third, and perhaps most troublingly, it obscures the existence of homophobic prejudice in urban spaces, as well as on college campuses. It is particularly important to consider this point with reference to Tyler Clementi, one of the five teen suicides cited as inspiring the first IGBP video posting. His suicide has been attributed to the actions of two Rutgers University classmates, who had set up a video link to watch Clementi kissing another man in his dorm ([Foderaro 2010](#_ENREF_12)). Clementi was living on Busch Campus, in Piscataway, New Jersey when he travelled to and leapt from the George Washington Bridge, which connects the state directly with New York City. The symbolism of Clementi’s journey, as Jasbir Puar notes, “is painfully apparent” ([2011: 151](#_ENREF_33)).

As Lawrence Knopp notes, “the forging of identities through the economic and political colonization of territorial spaces (and the related creation of gay-identified spaces) is facilitated by race, class and gender privilege” ([1998: 159](#_ENREF_21)). Indeed, the reification of urban enclaves as queer safe havens erases the processes of gentrification, commodification and privatization that have invariably flourished in gay villages and “ghettos” across the U.S., as elsewhere, to the exclusion of non-white, poor and transgendered populations. In his analysis of gay men’s endorsement of a demolition and building project in Washington DC, configured as “urban renewal,” William Leap details how:

[T]he discursive construction of moral geography [Modan 2007:90] strengthens connections between (homo)sexual privilege and the goals of urban planning at the expense of urban residents whose lives are disrupted by restructuring agendas. ([Leap 2009: 203](#_ENREF_22))

If disruption is understood as metaphorical as well as physical, such a conclusion seems relevant here: The reification of the neoliberal city simply precludes the existence of anyone who does not meet the (white, male, middle-class, out and proud) urban queer stereotype. As Thomas concludes, the rivers and roads that demark the rural-urban divide “do not speak of the success of this modernist project. Instead, they speak of the experience of marginality and privatization” ([Thomas 2002: 383](#_ENREF_38)). So much, it seems, may also be true of conceptual divides.

**4.4 Good things come to those who wait?**

*Example Four*

Laypeople:

*“Just* ***tough it out****.”*

* Anonymous A

*“It gets so much better, so* ***hang in there****, be smart”*

* Melissa

*“I’m two blocks away from the Hudson River Park where I go on a sunny day and see* ***gay couples*** *of all shapes and sizes and colors* ***with their children****, bringing their children out to the park, which really shows a hopeful future for our country, and people like us specifically, and* ***what we can grow up to be****.”*

* Anonymous B

Spokespeople:

*“To my colleagues out there… I urge you, I implore you to* ***use your pulpit to speak out*** *against homophobia, to speak out against discrimination and violence and bullying, and to* ***say to young people****, it gets better, and that they* ***are loved****, they* ***are accepted*** *and welcomed and included into your community.”*

* Reverend Debra Haffner, Executive Director of The Religious Institute (Unitarian Universalist)

*“While it’s true that time and life experience and hard work help immeasurably, I wanna add to that conversation by talking about* ***things you can do now to start making things better now****…”*

* Doug, Welcoming Committee at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah

*“God does not make a mistake. God loves you and has created you* ***the way you are****.”*

* Reverend Weatherford, McKinley Presbyterian Memorial Church, Champaign, Illinois

Halberstam, discussing how ideology might dictate the way in which time is experienced and understood, argues:

[I]n Western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation […] respectability, and notions of the normal on which it depends, may be upheld by a middle-class logic of reproductive temporality ([2005: 4](#_ENREF_16)).

Halberstam contrasts reproductive time with “queer time,” other possible conceptions of temporality that subvert or contest dominant notions of lifespans and are experienced by those living out of sync with “normative” ways of life, or “living outside the logic of capital accumulation” ([2005: 10](#_ENREF_16)). In the IGBP videos here analyzed, laypeople tend to reify the “paradigmatic markers of life experience” ([Halberstam 2005: 2](#_ENREF_16)) of reproductive time as necessarily passed during an inevitable journey towards a better life. As Savage stressed in his original video, and the laypeople above echo, adolescent viewers should only “hang in there” and “tough it out” in the present, and only in the future does “it gets better.” Spokespeople, however, frequently foreground viewers’ present abilities and opportunities to improve their circumstances in the now. In doing so they assert that the promise implicit in “it gets better” is in fact not guaranteed, which justifies passivity, but rather must be obtained through action.

Laypeople, including the Anonymous speakers above, repeatedly emphasize that the passing of time is the not the obstacle but rather the means through which “it gets better.” Andrew (*Example Three*), Chris and John (*Example Two*) all detail how life improves with each passing stage: after high school, college will be a transformative experience that will prepare viewers for a “better” life as an adult. Laypeople not only repeatedly construct high school as a challenging life stage that nonetheless must be endured, but they frequently draw attention to the reward—the implicit “better” that awaits listeners—of a college degree (John, *Example Two*), enjoyable career (Andrew, *Example One*), city life and a nuclear two-parent family unit (Anonymous B, *Example Four*).

Maturation is here figured as both a necessary and inevitable aspect of “it” getting better. This maturity is frequently implied to include self-acceptance, which in turn is only fully realized through coming out, with college years apparently the optimum time to exit the closet. Here again, the assertion that “out” is “better” gives credence to Decena’s suggestion that the act of “coming out” has been subsumed into the rubric of dominant, homonormative values that increasingly mimic the linear life stages of heteronormative reproductive time. These laypeople’s positions thus rely upon and promote values that, Halberstam proposes, are countered—or queered—through the notion of a “stretched-out adolescence” ([2005: 153](#_ENREF_16)).

Moreover, these laypeople’s words echo the neoliberal stance that an industrious attitude and willingness to pay your dues, rather than rock the boat, is the safest route to prosperity. Tacitly, they assume theirlisteners both desire and have the ability to attend not only college, but specifically a campus-based college far from home. The gainful employment and purchasing power that is projected by laypeople as necessarily following deny very real barriers erected through pervasivestructural class, race, able-bodied and gender privileges in job, housing and commodity markets. When Savage and Miller discuss their happiest family moments, they respectively choose watching the sunrise in Paris and seeing their son learn to ski (Savage and Miller 2010). Such luxury experiences, here presented as rewards for “tough[ing] it out,” are accessible only to the privileged few, and thus act as hollow promises of how it assertively does get better for all.

Spokespeople, in contrast, tend to emphasize action and acceptance in the present, while adding caveats to their “it gets better” statements. As well as explicit calls for viewers to take action now for themselves (Doug, *Example Four*), spokespeople also urge allies and community members in general to create supportive environments for others (Reverend Haffner, *Example Four*). While the potential to transcend abuses suffered does, and primarily in a theological sense, underpin spokespeople’s messages, emphasis is placed on collective, or social, rather than an individual overcoming of oppression. Spokespeople are thus more likely to use the present and present continuous, rather than the future tense, when discussing “it” getting better. After all, as “you are the way God made you” (Gene Robinson, *Example One*) and “God loves you” right now, it seems counter-intuitive to suggest that individuals must change, even through a process of maturation, in order for their lives to improve.

Discussing various conceptions of “queer temporality” including Halberstam’s, Tom Boellstorff ([2007](#_ENREF_4)) notes that all conceive of time as ultimately linear. Such thinking replicates, he argues, the normative Western framework of “straight time,” an “[e]volutive, teleological, apocalyptic paranoid…nothing less than a millenarian temporality” ([Boellstorff 2007: 231](#_ENREF_4)). Straight time, Boellstorff notes, forms the basis of both Christian conservative and progressive queer temporalities. In seeking alternative conceptions of time that might truly “queer” taken for granted linear, or straight time, Boellstorff offers the example of “coincidental time,” which allows for a coevalness of entities that straight time, “unable to conceive of copresence without incorporation,” denies ([Boellstorff 2007: 243](#_ENREF_4)).

*Example Five*

*“God loves you* ***and*** *it gets better”*

* Rachel

While Boellstorff links straight time to “a fundamentally Christian metaphysics of time” ([2007: 238](#_ENREF_4)), the seamless yet paradoxical simultaneity of present and future tenses in the phrase, “God loves you and it gets better” arguably “queers” straight time: Those uttering this phrase understand the spiritual and material realities of the listener to be out of sync; co-incidental. Thus they can present an unwavering constant, the always already true statement that “God loves you,” in parallel with the future anterior promise, “it gets better.”

Notably, Boellstorff, in his analysis of the millenarian temporality of straight time, concludes:

Because co-incidence is seemingly impossible on this linear course (not a field or a network, for instance), the presence of the present of straight time—its “here and now”—is depoliticized, not an immediacy. […] Agency must thereby inhere in a cataclysm to come, a moment of “liberation.” ([Boellstorff 2007: 232](#_ENREF_4))

In light of this analysis, those arguing “it gets better” is an action-contingent possibility co-incidental to the guarantee that “God loves you” appear to be presenting a somewhat queer conception of time. Yet while spokespeople more frequently state: “God loves you and it gets better,” the same refrain is also used by a number of laypeople in Faith IGBP videos. Rachel (*Example Five*), a layperson, also states that: “before it gets better, it will get worse,” refuting the notion that improvement of life circumstances is an inevitable by-product of maturation. Rachel, in leaning away from certainty, offers a reminder that the categories of ‘laypeople’ and ‘spokespeople’, while here serving an analytical purpose, are neither rigid nor discreet.

In fact, there are multiple themes in common between laypeople’s and spokespeople’s films. Most evident, and perhaps the ultimate aim of all IGBP video makers, is the desire to convince potential viewers that “you have to live your life so that you are around for it to get amazing” ([Savage & Miller 2010](#_ENREF_37)) or, as Reverend Debra Haffner states more explicitly in her message: “suicide is never an option.” For Puar, this position, which underlies the IGBP as a whole, reifies normative temporal understandings of life and death by positioning suicide as “the ultimate loss of life” ([Puar 2011: 152](#_ENREF_33)). In this light, “God loves you and it gets better” is only a partial queering of time.

Puar argues, drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “slow death,” that understanding suicide as both exceptional and objectionable obscures the profitable, “slow death” that befalls populations under neoliberalism, where bodily capacity is demanded of subjects simultaneously exposed to “the debilitating ongoingness of structural inequality and suffering” and the medical industrial complex is wedded to finance capitalism ([Puar 2011: 149](#_ENREF_33)). It is beyond the scope of this article to grapple with the powerful and challenging question Puar raises, but her analysis presents a stark reminder of how normative, and thus increasingly neoliberal values may be suffused, in subtle forms and different manners, within the ideological propositions of laypeople and spokespeople alike.

**5. Conclusions**

Writing for British newspaper *The Guardian* on IGBP and broader media attention prompted by gay teen suicide, Puar presents a more easily accessible critique of IGBP as “promot[ing] a narrow version of gay identity that risks further marginalization” ([2010](#_ENREF_32)). In doing so she concurs with and cites a number of bloggers, activists and cultural critics who argue the “upbeat” messaging of IGBP plays down the power and possibility of dissent ([Quiet Riot Girl 2010](#_ENREF_34)), is overwhelmingly dominated by white, gay, liberal, middle-class men ([Diana Cage in Puar 2010](#_ENREF_32)), and plays down the racism, sexism and classism that exists in “urban gay enclave[s]” ([Tseng 2010](#_ENREF_39)). Reflecting on these critiques, Puar asks rhetorically: “How useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?” ([2010](#_ENREF_32)).

Through this analysis, I have attempted to look into the alternative ideological discourses presented within and between IGBP videos to ask: what other responsive reaction might be advocated to the project? I do not believe that an open and affirming theological perspective is the only or the most suitable means through which to counter homophobic discourses. Indeed, comparative analysis of speakers differently categorized and separated might yield further more compelling results. Yet in concluding I want to gesture toward the potential political usefulness, as I see it, of those messages that contest not only the oppressively homophobic positions taken up by the religious right, but also the limiting neoliberal narratives predominantly endorsed by laypeople, and seemingly by IGBP as a whole.

By separating and examining the messages of spokespeople and laypeople in IGBP Faith videos, I have shown that these anti-homophobic bullying messages are frequently steeped in neoliberal ideological assumptions, emphasizing individualist, material success as demarcating a “better” life. For laypeople emphasis is usually placed on the “I” the speaker and, moreover, individuals’ concerns are presumed to be the betterment of their own circumstance, rather than that of the general public. Hence, “being out” is almost everywhere cited as being central to the improvement of life circumstances.

Target listeners are furthermore encouraged to be passive, rather than active participants in “it getting better.” They are told to “tough it out,” at least until they are old enough to move to an urban setting. There is an implicit assumption that life-trajectory will follow a particular pattern (which includes college attendance) that inevitably leads to this eventuality. These speakers stress that youth is hellish and adulthood, simply, “better.” As such, as well as belying a neoliberal ideology, these videos project a moral geographic mapping of the U.S., explicitly associating homophobia with rural settings, and reify the heteronormative conception of “reproductive time” ([Halberstam 2005](#_ENREF_16)). This move disenfranchises those non-urban, non-adult communities actively seeking to tackle homophobia and obscures incidences of anti-gay harassment experienced by adults both within and outside of urban spaces.

In sum, laypeople tend to exhibit values that conservative columnist William Safire, has hailed as: “includ[ing] self-reliance over community dependence, intervention over isolation, self discipline over society’s regulation, finding pleasure in work rather than working to find pleasure“ ([quoted in Ong 2006: 2](#_ENREF_29)). Ong, reading “neoconservative” as now synonymous with “neoliberal,” cites President G.W. Bush as stressing the importance of “making every citizen an agent of his or her own destiny” ([quoted in Ong 2006: 2](#_ENREF_29)). Bush’s seemingly paradoxical conjoining of agency and destiny is analogous to the sentiments expressed by the laypeople examined in this study, which appear to promote a “trickle down” equality that overlooks pervasive social prejudice beyond homophobia as creating barriers to a “better” life.

If Ong is right in asserting that “this neoliberal view of citizenship also has the moral support of evangelical Christian groups” ([2006: 2](#_ENREF_29)), it seems unlikely that the ostensible messages of hope offered by laypeople can really contest homophobic attitudes perpetuated by the religious right: Any appeal or effort to conform to a neoliberal model of the good citizen is doomed to fail on moral grounds since that message is already endorsed by conservative Christian politicians.

However, for those speaking on behalf of faith-based organizations, emphasis is conversely placed on “you” the listener, who is encouraged to be active in the transformation of his or her life circumstances. These speakers are more likely to note other oppressed peoples and agitate for broad, social change rather than individual escapism. As such, they refute neoliberal ideological standpoints while also actively challenging and opposing homophobic attitudes, religiously or otherwise informed. While the theological bent of their argument might not appeal to all target listeners, their advocacy of social transformation towards genuine acceptance of LGBT people, rather than individual escape to an ostensibly gay-friendly environ is notably different. It suggests that the IGBP, and perhaps other mainstream gay rights movement which appear to emphasize, at first blush, social recognition and acceptance of normative LGBT lives over broader social justices, might also create space for a politics of redistribution, a coupling Nancy Fraser ([2000](#_ENREF_13)) suggests is politically necessary, while “queering” societal norms in unexpected ways.

As it stands, the balance between a neoliberal propensity for recognition and a more socially minded call for redistribution of rights, wealth and opportunity is not quite even: in the sample analyzed herein, laypeople outnumbered spokespeople two to one. Yet there is enough evidence to suggest, as Leitner, Sheppard *et al.* conclude regarding contestations to neoliberalism’s near-hegemonic grip, that: “Revolution often occurs when least expected” ([2003: 22](#_ENREF_24)). I agree: this study implies that spokespeople for faith-based organizations might offer an important riposte to homophobic discourses steeped in religious rhetoric, while also potentially creating space for more imaginative and accessible conceptions of “better” than neoliberalism allows. It is a reassuring irony.

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1. ##### The Trevor Project is the largest US organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services—in the form of a hotline, workshops and other resources—to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) was the official U.S. policy that prevented openly homosexual individuals from serving in the military. DADT was signed into law on December 21, 1993, and repealed September 20, 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2003, Savage ran a competition in his nationally syndicated advice column publically to shame Santorum for his comments, calling for suggestions to redefine “santorum” as a noun. The winning entry was: “SANTORUM (pronounced san-TOR-um), *noun*, 1. The frothy mixture of lube and fecal matter that is sometimes the by-product of anal sex. 2. Former Senator Rick Santorum” (blog.spreadingsantorum.com, 2013). To the embarrassment of Santorum’s publicity team, the website promoting the use of the noun, spreadingsantorum.com, continued to be a top ten google.com search result for “santorum” throughout the 2012 primary season. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://itgetsbetter.org [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. YouTube has a notoriously loose policy, stating in its terms of use: “don’t post videos of any bad stuff” (http://www.youtube.com/t/community\_guidelines). Analysis of IGBP style videos posted to YouTube would be undoubtedly revealing, but different from this study. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is no password or registration requirement to enter the site, and the Terms of Agreement are explicit: “User Content that you submit will be made available to the general public” (http://itgetsbetter.org, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I took the sixth video from each page of ten videos listed in the category. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There are twenty-one primary speakers featured across the twenty videos, of which nineteen are Caucasian, one is Latino and one is Pakistani (both men). Seven are women, thirteen are men and one identifies as trans. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)