

## CHAPTER 20

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# ACOUSTEMOLOGIES OF THE CLOSET

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ONLINE video games in recent years have increasingly supported voice-chat functions that enable players to speak with one another using microphones connected to computers and consoles. Vocal communications greatly assist collaborative and competitive gaming by offering a quick and hands-free means of verbal exchange. But even with its obvious utility, voice-chat has been denounced by some players and critics as an unwelcome development in game design. As media researcher and designer Richard Bartle puts it:

If you introduce reality into a virtual world, it's no longer a virtual world: it's just an adjunct to the real world. It ceases to be a place, and reverts to being a medium. Adding reality to a virtual world robs it of what makes it compelling—it takes away that which is different between virtual worlds and the real world: the fact that they are not the real world. Voice is reality. (2003)

In August 2007, the introduction of voice-chat into the online communities of *Second Life* incited protests from various residents who worried that the sounds of live human voices would undermine the pseudonymity of this virtual world. Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff explains that what “made debates about voice [in *Second Life*] particularly impassioned were questions of presence and immersion that implicated the boundary between virtual and actual. Some residents felt voice would facilitate greater intimacy, [but] other residents felt that voice would damage a border between the virtual and actual that they wished to maintain” (2008, 114; see also Wadley and Gibbs 2010, 192). Detractors of voice-chat pined for *Second Life*'s prelapsarian days, for an era when it had not yet been possible for the grits and grains of human voices to fold excessive reality into their online world. Many inhabitants feared that the implementation of voice-chat would lead to a mass exodus of disillusioned individuals from *Second Life*, or, at the very least, create an irreparable schism between populations willing to embrace voice and those refusing to do so. Among the outcries were predictions that voice-chat would

bring about the end of this virtual world by violating what made the world *virtual* in the first place.

At stake in disputes over voice-chat in *Second Life* were concerns about the power of voices to carry identifying information that one might wish neither to divulge (as a speaker) nor apprehend (as a listener). Journalist Clive Thompson, for example, describes an instance of rude awakening he once experienced while playing the online game *World of Warcraft*:

Recently I logged into *World of Warcraft* and I wound up questing alongside a mage and two dwarf warriors. I was the lowest-level newbie in the group, and the mage was the de-facto leader.... He [the mage] seemed like your classic virtual-world group leader: confident, bold and street-smart. But after a few hours he said he was getting tired of using text chat—and asked me to switch over to Ventrilo, an app that lets gamers chat using microphones and voice. I downloaded Ventrilo, logged in, dialed him up and... realized he was an 11-year-old boy, complete with squeaky, prepubescent vocal chords. When he laughed, his voice shot up abruptly into an octave range that induced headaches.... Oh, and he used “motherfucker” about four times a sentence, except when his mother came into his bedroom to check on him. (2007)

The wizard (or mage) behind the curtain revealed himself, in this case, as a potty-mouthed child whose prior demonstration of gaming expertise made him seem older than he actually was. Thompson goes on to explain: “There’s no doubt that hearing each other’s voices abruptly changed our social milieu. He seemed equally weirded out by me—a 38-year-old guy who undoubtedly sounds more like his father than anyone he recognizes as a ‘gamer.’ After an hour of this, we politely logged off and never hooked up again.” The ability of disembodied voices to betray bodily identities—however vaguely—gave rise here to an exchange that was apparently too close for comfort. “With voice,” concludes Thompson, “the real world is honking in your ear.” In virtual worlds, this awkward tale suggests, we speak, and therefore, we suddenly are.

Yet questions of who we *are* in virtual worlds—and what it means to (co)exist in these spaces—are confounded by popular conceptions of video games as playgrounds where performativity and plural identities prevail. Our avatars, ourselves: where do we draw the line? The pseudonymous nature of online interactions promotes and authorizes role-playing and polyvocality. It is in this authorization that gamers, grievers, and Internet users in general can take refuge. As Ken Hillis argues, online communications constitute a mode of “ventriloquism [that] can serve as a defensive strategy, one that seems to project the source of the message to somewhere or something else other than the sender” (2009, 147). To *say* that one *was speaking* in a different voice comprises a double speech act, a manner of free indirect discourse that skirts liability via slippages between impersonation and authentic expression. Players *qua* ventriloquists who displace voices onto alternate entities—avatars, trolling personae, and so forth—retain the flexibility to disavow what they say (when under critical fire), and then to take credit for what they *have said* (as soon as it is opportune to do so). Offenders in online games

find safe haven precisely in the ease with which transgressive acts can *pass* as ostensible forms of role-play.

The extent to which disembodied voices evoke human bodies necessarily depends on the varying capabilities of individuals to deploy and to decode these voices as timbral, registral, and phonetic indices of appearance, age, sex, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, class, (dis)ability, and other physiological and cultural identity categories. This chapter explores the social ramifications and critical conversations that have emerged from the coming (out) of voice in online gamespaces. What happens when players of online games drop their masks and introduce their own voices into a virtual space? How do the sounds of these voices influence players' actions and relations? What factors bear on the differing proclivities of players to speak out? And what new masks—new fictions of identity—might materialize when voices of players conjure ambiguous, multiplicitous, or duplicitous identities? By extending metaphors of the prosthesis and the closet, I show how technologies of voice-chat in video games foster practices of assimilation, repression, deception, and revelation. In doing so, I interrogate traditional characterizations of voice as a site of authentic, agentic expression. I conclude with insights into the sexual politics of voice-chat in the audibly male-dominated communities of online first-person-shooter games.

## BEHIND THE CURTAIN

What's in a voice? For neo-Barthesians, self-proclaimed opera queens, and theorists of corporeal feminism, there's one answer that says a lot: the *body* is in the voice.<sup>1</sup> As an oral signature, the voice is, as Emily Wilbourne writes, “[c]onditioned by and yet fragmented from semantic meaning . . . the sonorous remnant of speech, an unwieldy synecdoche for the body” (2010, 5). The voice, in other (or its own) words, can already say much even when its speaker is not trying to say anything at all. In online gameworlds, voices of players accentuate the porousness of the real-virtual divide by registering as objects of phenomenological and somatic excess. These voices, in short, can ring false by telegraphing too many truths about the speaking body.

Unlike the animated gestures and canned sounds that players of games can perform with their avatars—say, a wave of the hand, a gunshot, a taunt—a player's own voice is in no way restricted by a game's preprogrammed audiovisual palette. As noted by telecommunications scholar Edward Castronova:

Much of the immersive effect of the [virtual] world occurs because everything you see and *hear* in the worlds conforms to the designer's theme. If it is a medieval world, all the buildings look medieval, the music is medieval-sounding, and the animals and trees look like they were taken from fourteenth-century France. . . . The failure of user communication to conform to the world's atmosphere is not much of a problem when it is confined to a small chat box. With a voice system, however, everyone will hear the modern-day babbling of others all the time. (2005, 89, emphasis in original)

The very performability of an avataric gesture or sound underscores it as a technically sanctioned behavior within a game. The fact that an action is *possible* (and can be executed by all players) mitigates, to an extent, its deviant potential. It is for this reason that live voices—with their spontaneous, unscripted expressive capabilities—are so often highlighted by players as palpable embodiments of human difference in otherwise disembodied environments.

Sounds of players speaking through avatars render these simulated bodies legible as surrogate living entities. An avatar is a prosthesis, serving as a “bodily appendage-cum-psyche extension and therefore as an actual (if not material) part of the person” (Hillis 2009, 132). But a player’s voice in a game also inversely functions like a prosthesis *for* an avatar by fulfilling a purpose that is at once compensatory (enhancing the perceived aliveness of the spoken-for avatar) and intrusive (submitting a *too*-human sound into a virtual space).<sup>2</sup> Insofar as prostheses are meant to fill correctional roles, they simultaneously normalize bodies—(re)making them whole (read: wholly human)—while pointing up the contrivances of human normalcy. The standardizing agenda of a visible prosthesis implicitly reproduces its own ambivalence by virtue of the appended body that is perceived as almost normal, but not quite.<sup>3</sup> Prostheses unsettle holistic ideals of corporeality and facile distinctions between nature and technology. They not only draw attention to their own artificial status, but also expose human identity as a mutable cultural invention—an arbitrary assemblage of signifying parts prone to physiological as well as epistemic alteration, extension, fracture, and substitution.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars in recent years have come to treat voice as a kind of discursive prosthesis. As Vivian Sobchack observes, the “theoretical use of the prosthetic metaphor tends to transfer *agency* . . . from human actors to human artifacts. . . . The animate and volitional human beings who use prosthetic technology disappear into the background—passive, if not completely invisible—and the prosthetic is seen to have a will and life of its own” (2006, 23, emphasis in original; see also Kurzman 2001, 378–382). Characterizations of voice as an autonomous, subversive force appear perhaps nowhere more prominently than in feminist and queer scholarship on opera and song. Writers have insisted on the power of the lyric voice with relation to the erotic cult of diva-worship, the sonic interstitialities of castrati and cross-dressed performers, and extralinguistic utterances such as the scream (Friedheim 1983, 63–70), the cry (Poizat 1992), and laughter (Bronfen 1996; Huebner 2006). Questioning Catherine Clément’s ([1979] 1988) emphasis on women’s victimized roles in opera, Carolyn Abbate offers a counter-narrative wherein singing heroines could be heard to exist “as sonority and sheer physical volume, asserting themselves outside spectacle and escaping murderous fates” (1993, 254). Voice is salvaged here, (so) to *speak*, as a way of affirming a virtuosic female presence that rages against opera’s pandemic of undone prima donnas. She sings; therefore, she survives, transcending corporeal fate and living on through the vibrations of her miraculous voice. The catch with this hermeneutics of material vocal triumph is how it’s enabled precisely by voice’s relative *immateriality* and definitional promiscuity. Just as music is often cited for its nonrepresentational and ineffable qualities, so voice is frequently invoked, in the words of Michelle Duncan, as “a place-marker for something

unarticulated or inarticulable, taking on a rhetorical task in the service of a theoretical argument” (2006, 284). As a chameleonic poster-child of subjectivist critique, voice has traditionally been harnessed to say whatever we—as students of music, poetry, and the humanities—have aimed to make it say.

A strain of romantic idealism runs through the arguments of writers who privilege voice as an acoustic window into the soul. This mindset posits, on the one hand, an inviolable bond between voice and human subjectivity. On the other hand, it displaces agency from the individual onto the reified, prosthetic voice. To conceive of voice as somewhere *out there*—whether as a diva’s postmortem echo or as an autograph of a player’s body in a gameworld—is to call into question the naturalness of voice and its relationship to the human subject. In a study of speech politics, Adriana Cavarero stresses a “vocal ontology of uniqueness,” the idea that “the voice manifests the *unique being* of each human being, and his or her spontaneous self-communication according to the rhythms of a sonorous relation” (2005, 173, emphasis in original). To this point, Jonathan Sterne cautions against “[idealizing] hearing (and by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind of pure interiority” (2003, 15). Questions of uniqueness and humanness aside, what needs to be resisted are blanket understandings of voice (and the speech it may carry) as somehow capable of conveying a degree of agency or sincerity that lies beyond the alternative expressive potential of text, gesture, and other forms of communication. As declared by a *Second Life* resident in an online forum: “I hate voice. I hate it with a passion. I’m a woman and I’m shy. I am a nerdy bookish person and I’m more at home with text. It’s a place where my nasal voice and softness disappear and my ability to write lets my personality *really* come out” (Kathy, March 1, 2007).

Especially with online interactions, it would be presumptuous, even ableist, to think that the articulation of a so-called real, complete, or sincere identity cannot occur without vocal communication. Practices of role-play in online games complicate what it means to speak one’s identity and, consequently, what it means for any disembodied voice to be or to sound authentic to begin with. In daily life, people who speak do so, as a matter of course, in multiple voices—voices that vary in speech content, timbre, register, inflection, affectation, loudness, rhythm, and pacing according to the pressures and affordances of different social situations. Denaturalizing voice—stripping away its association with true identity—opens up conceptual possibilities akin to those extended by notions of gender performativity. One such possibility might involve understanding voice *as* performance, as a socially adaptable construct that acquires the *guise* of coherent, authentic expression (solely) via the repetition of stylized speech acts and learned vocal qualities.

## BENEATH THE MASK

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On Internet forums devoted to debates about the respective merits of voice-chat and text-chat in online games, a proponent of the latter remarked: “If you introduce [voice into

a virtual space] the whole ambience changes: the shy are revealed as shy, and the noisy start to dominate. [But] it is hard to type LOUDER than everyone else in the room” (Owen Kelly, 2007). A concurring forum participant stated: “Text may get messy, but it’s pretty democratic—everyone gets a say eventually” (Ace Albion, 2007). Those who took issue with these views pointed to the online first-person shooter (online FPS) game as a genre that greatly benefits from voice-chat. As one player put it: “Text (and democracy) are slow. In games with tactical situations, speech is the only way to give orders while fighting” (anonymous, 2007). Characterized by graphic simulations of gunplay and team-based combat, online FPS games require players to cultivate quick reflexes and strategic maneuvers. Voice-chat allows players to relay orders to teammates, call for help, and divulge enemy positions in the heat of battle. A team’s chances for victory can hinge largely on the consistency with which players are able and willing to impart pertinent information to allies during a match.

Vocal transmissions tend to be considerably quicker and less cumbersome than typing. Since text messages in most online games appear in minuscule chat boxes near the edges of a screen, they can easily go unread amid a wealth of visual stimuli competing for the player’s attention. The proper use of voice in online shooters therefore carries significant ludic capital, testifying to the speaker’s dedication to teamwork and competitive gameplay. Yet as noted above by one of the forum respondents, voice communications seem most useful when they are used *un*-democratically—that is, when not everyone on a team opts to speak at once, or when certain players seize leadership roles by speaking more loudly and authoritatively than others.

In this hierarchy of audibility, female players don’t fare so well. Many women report a reluctance to use voice-chat in online FPS games out of a fear that the sonic revelation of their real-world sex might prompt male players to respond in an undesirable manner. One player says she abstains from speaking “because some of us are afraid we’ll get [hit] on by sketchy nerds or yelled at by 12-year-olds who don’t want to play a girl online” (Xkc20d, 2007). Another player states: “Throw up a vent [Ventrilo] server, the girls stop talking completely, the shy people shut up mostly, and all that is left are the 12–18 year old guys, and it becomes a locker room. Not so much fun, really” (Judson, 2007). Players who speak in this locker room are, by default, the ones setting the tone of the gamespace. The prevalence of adult male voices in online FPS games, as such, contributes to formations of homosocial soundscapes in which all players are assumed to be men unless one vocally outs oneself as otherwise. Female players who participate in mute play will thus automatically pass as men and escape direct sexual harassment, but such behavior entails the bargaining of silence for immunity.

Women who speak in online FPS games rarely fail to garner attention and excited commentary not least because of how uncommon it is to hear female voices in these environments. Sounds of female voices that are discerned as such can impact a match’s social dynamics in a number of ways: it might lead (mostly) male players to inquire into and obsess over the identity of the (supposedly) female speaker; it might instigate an explosion of misogynist jokes and expletives; or it might have a domesticating effect, causing swearing to drop to a minimum and the communications between players to become unusually chivalrous and polite.



Players of online games rarely inquire into one another's appearance, class, race, nationality, education, or occupation. The real-life identities of teammates and rivals are understood to be privileged information that is irrelevant to the technical goals of a match. Respect for mutual anonymity, however, often goes out the window when female (or sexually ambiguous) voices are heard on a server. It is not uncommon for a speaking woman to get bombarded with invasive questions about her height, weight, hair color, ethnicity, sexual experience, state of dress, and even bra size. Among the most popular inquiries tend to be those concerning age, relationship status, and physical attractiveness—all of which are posed presumably with the intention of confirming a female speaker as an admissible and worthwhile object of desire.

One might be tempted to rescue the agency of nonspeaking women in online games by imagining them as gleefully passing through the ranks of more outspoken players, reveling in role-play as silent soldiers. Peggy Phelan, writing about the politics of visibility, remarks on the “real power in remaining unmarked” in her attempts to expose the “[falsifying] binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility” (1993, 6). Similarly, Linda Schlossberg states that even though the act of passing “generally holds larger social hierarchies firmly in place,” it can nonetheless be “a uniquely pleasurable experience, one that trades on the erotics of secrecy and revelation” (2001, 3). The construal of passing as pleasurable is no doubt appealing for its empowering political orientation. Yet—like many outlooks grounded in standpoint epistemology—this runs the risk of reinscribing the very power gradients that a deminoritizing discourse purports to undermine. A danger in valorizing the passing of the oppressed is that it casts subjugated individuals as somehow appeasable by their putative occupation of a moral or intellectual high ground. As Barbara Hillyer notes, passing “involves adopting the values of the privileged group; it causes ‘emotive dissonance’; it is harmful to mental and physical health; it makes the secret the central focus of the passer’s life... and it maintains the very repressive system that causes it” (1993, 150). Trading silence for impunity comprises a social contract not unlike that which underpinned the former American military policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Such arrangements permit discrimination to pass as paranoid indifference (oxymoronically so) as a way of bringing prejudicial ideologies back within the pale of a supposedly greater good.

In the case of most online FPS games, players who engage in matches are dispersed across hundreds (if not thousands) of different servers, each of which can accommodate only a limited number of players at a given time. Any player can join a server as long as it has an available slot and is not password-protected. It is standard for players to hop quickly from one server to another (maybe after playing a match or two on each one) so as to experience different maps and game modes. Rapid, unpredictable turn-overs in server populations constantly bring together new communities of players who may not be acquainted with one another at the outset of a match. Closets in online FPS games hence lie on perpetually shifting ground: a female player who decides to speak and to come out as a woman would have to do so continuously lest she’s mistaken again for a (silent) man by incoming players who haven’t yet heard her speak. In an online FPS game, falling silent results in reabsorption into its male homosocial fabric. The

only way to *stay* out is to keep talking. So whereas a policy such as Don't Ask, Don't Tell did not permit outed individuals to return to the closet (and to remain in military service), the closets in online FPS games are nothing if not a point of magnetic return. It is by now a truism, in the views of feminist, queer, and disability scholars, that coming out entails not a single or temporally delimitable act, but rather an exercise in repetition, a cyclical routine of always coming out *again*.<sup>5</sup> Fitted with revolving doors, the closet is a heuristic home base at best, its ins and outs hopelessly blurred in the everyday imagination.

Complicating the politics of voice-chat in online games are instances in which voices fail to yield definitively sexed bodies. A common question that outspoken women first get asked is *whether* they are women at all. On an Internet forum, one player explains: "Whenever I play the game [*Team Fortress 2*] and use voice-chat, all I get is: 'Are you 12 or a girl?' And then starts the 'You should be in bed' / 'This is a big boy game' / 'You should be playing hello kitty instead' kind of stuff, until I quit" (Karma Guard, 2008). Inquiries into whether a player is a woman *or* a boy indiscriminately infantilize and feminize women and younger men in one fell swoop, conflating their perceived amateurism as a way of denying the prerogative of either group to partake in what some would maintain as a grown man's game. Boys themselves, granted, often participate in the harassment of women; they are, however, also occasionally mistaken *for* women and harassed accordingly by adult male players (as well as by other young boys, who themselves could be mistaken for women—and on it goes). A boy who takes the initiative to harass might thus do so as a means of disavowing boyhood, of preemptively asserting that he *is* a (soon-to-be) man and that he can dish out the abuse just as effectively as the grown-ups can. A similar self-disavowal may likewise inform the bullying actions of older players who, by openly mocking youths and adolescents, become better positioned to detach themselves from the juvenile image that society still associates with gamers of all ages.

## BEYOND THE PALE

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Back in 2010, the topic of this chapter came up while I was having a round of late-night drinks with a friend. I summarized my plans for the case study as best as I could, explaining players' anxieties about voice-chat, the sexual politics of passing and coming out in online games, and so on. My friend, after listening to this spiel, chimed in with a solution to problems of sexual harassment in online games. His suggestion had to do with voice-changing devices, which, he reasoned, could eliminate bigotry and social hierarchies if the technology were integrated into games and made available to all players. The ubiquitous use of voice-changers, in his view, would muddy the crosshairs of potential harassers and give heart to shy players who might otherwise hesitate to speak. The argument seemed to be that the widespread (and ideally obligatory) use of voice-changers could lead to a paradise regained, a cyber-utopia where wizards may return behind the



curtain, where *Second Life* residents would have no more cause to protest, and where closets could effectively be everywhere—and, consequently, nowhere.

These measures are technically possible, but chances are that adding vocal camouflage would not be enough to prevent discrimination from seeping into online spaces. For while it is true that someone using a voice-changer in an online FPS game might be able to escape harassment by passing as a normatively voiced adult male (whatever one imagines this to sound like), deeper problems lie in the structures of repression that compel women, children, individuals with speech impediments, nonnative English speakers (on English-speaking servers), and other voice-adverse players to pass in the first place, whether via silence or voice-changers. In any event, among the FPS players whom I have interviewed, few reported ever having used a voice-changer. Several players in fact responded defensively, stating they would never go for such a technology because they didn't feel like they had anything to hide. One player additionally said he found it "silly to go the extra mile to be anonymous on the Internet" when the medium already offers a layer of concealment and security (interview, Sepharite, May 31, 2010). For some players, the ability to speak with one's own voice provides a happy compromise between total obscurity and excessive disclosures of identity—a means of reclaiming a sonorous glimmer of the purportedly real self amid online interactions.

Vocal exchanges among players in games are no doubt more than just idle chatter. These conversations are integral to modern multiplayer games, and indeed, to any online platform that encourages the adoption of alternative, contrarian, and pluralist personae. Possibilities for different kinds of games—games predicated on aural fascination, lewd inquiry, and harassment—can all of a sudden erupt upon the introduction of voices that, in whatever capacity, sound like they do not belong. In gameworlds, players' voices carry considerable powers of communication, imprinting prosthetic stamps of selves into realms of prerendered sprites and sounds. Accompanying these voices are practices of oppression and passing that should be addressed precisely because they are inscribed in silence. To penetrate this silence is to venture behind the curtain, beneath the mask, and beyond the pale of definitive identities. It means struggling with knowing nothing about those who do not speak, while bracing for the possibility of finding out too much—or sometimes, still not quite enough—about those who do.

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**NOTES**


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1. See respectively Barthes (1977, 179–189), Koestenbaum (1993), and Grosz (1994).
2. Literary theorists, sociologists, philosophers, linguists, and scholars of disability in recent years have increasingly applied biomedical conceptions of prostheses to critical explorations of identity and agency in poststructuralist perspectives. As Vivian Sobchack explains: “Sometime, fairly recently, after ‘the cyborg’ became somewhat tired and tiresome from academic overuse, we started to hear and read about ‘the prosthetic’—less as a specific material replacement of a missing limb or body part than as a sexy, new metaphor that, whether noun or (more frequently) adjective, has become tropological currency for describing a vague and shifting constellation of relationships among bodies, technologies, and subjectivities” (2006, 19). For studies on prostheses’ cultural and discursive valencies, see Nelson (2001, 304–305), Mitchell and Snyder (2000), Jain (1999, 31–54), Lury (1998), and Wills (1995).
3. Theories of posthumanism posit “the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born” (Hayles 1999, 3). For additional discussions of prostheses and identity ambivalence, see Garland-Thomson (2009, 128–129), Wilson (1995, 239–259), and Tanenbaum (1986, 63–65).
4. The concept of the prosthesis has been invoked in a small number of musical studies to date. Tia DeNora likens music to a “prosthetic device [that] provide[s] organizing properties for a range of . . . embodied experiences and in ways that involve varying degrees of deliberation and conscious awareness on the part of music’s conscripts” (2000, 103). Raiford Guins and Omayra Cruz describe turntablism as “an instance of media as technological extension/prosthetic” (2006, 225). Jennifer Iverson frames elements of electronica in Björk’s music as “a prosthesis, a mechanical supplement that draws attention to the lack latent in the natural voice” (2006, 65).
5. On “coming out” as an exercise in repetition, see Halberstam (2005, 52–53), Samuels (2003, 237), Kleege (2002), Butler (1997, 302), and Tyler (1994, 222).

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