

# The Adult Life Course and Homosexual Identity in Midlife Gay Men

Robert M. Kertzner

New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University

The meaning of homosexual identity as shaped by the adult life course is poorly described in the lives of gay men. In particular, the transition from young adulthood to middle age raises questions of how homosexual identity is redefined as gay men alter their participation in gay sexual culture, experience change in sexual desire and activity, and revise broader psychosocial identity as influenced by psychological and socialization processes related to aging. In addition, the HIV epidemic and historical change in social tolerance of homosexuality have shaped the experience of sexual identity among the generation of currently middle-aged gay men in the United States. A perspective that integrates sociocultural, historical, and psychosocial factors is thus needed to understand the subjective meaning of homosexual identity as it is experienced in midlife. In this paper I have described exploratory research on the meaning of homosexual identity in the life trajectories of middle-aged men. Such meanings reflect available social and cultural pathways for change in midlife homosexual identity, as well as individual psychological attributes and idiosyncrasies of life history. These findings have heuristic value in further refinement of models of homosexual identity maintenance and support a more inclusive view of the life course that considers the effects of sexual orientation on adult identity.

**Key Words:** homosexual identity, male homosexuality, middle age.

In considering homosexual identity from a life course perspective that focuses on the transition from young adulthood to middle age, the interplay between psychological and socialization processes related to aging, on the one hand, and psychosocial and cultural factors that shape homosexual identity, on the other, emerge as an important point of exploration. To date, descriptions of homosexual identity and the adult life course are not well integrated, despite large numbers of self-identified gay men and women traversing adulthood in Western societies.

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Robert M. Kertzner is affiliated with the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, New York, NY. This work was supported, in part, by center grant P50-MH43520 from NIMH, Anke A. Ehrhardt, PhD, Principal Investigator. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Robert M. Kertzner, MD, Box 15, The New York State Psychiatric Institute, 1051 Riverside Drive, New York, NY 10032. (rmk3@columbia.edu)

Thus, little is known about how ongoing life experience and evolving psychosocial identity affect self-representations of homosexual identity in midlife adults, or conversely, how being homosexual affects life experience and personal narratives of such experience throughout adulthood (Stein, 1993; Troiden, 1984).

My intent in this paper is twofold: first, to review how the field of midlife development provides a background for understanding the interrelationship between homosexual identity and psychosocial identity as they are revised over the course of individual lives. I will review the literature describing change in self-perceptions, social roles, and sexuality associated with middle age and explore the applicability of this literature to the lives of gay men. Secondly, I will examine how growing older shapes the meaning of homosexual identity and what implications this may hold for models of homosexual identity formation and maintenance. This focus is mindful of an observation made by Troiden (1984) in which he noted "The degree to which most homosexuals perceive the homosexual identity as central, desirable, significant, or permanent in most settings throughout the life span is an empirical question" (p. 106). In further elaboration of this question, I will consider the meaning as well as degree of these dimensions of homosexual identity.

This paper takes a phenomenological approach to understanding transitions in homosexual identity that is based on phenomenological perspectives on change in midlife psychosocial identity among adults in the general population (Ryff, 1984). In brief, a phenomenological approach toward understanding midlife development emphasizes the meaning of experience for the individual, self-representations of change or stability as adults undergo life transitions, and the connection of experience to the everyday world in the context of adults' lives (see Ryff, 1985, for a review of phenomenological approaches to the study of adult development). In addition, because a phenomenological approach is well suited to the exploration of subjective experience and intrapsychic worlds, it is particularly advantageous in studying middle age, a time of heightened introspection and interiority (Neugarten, 1968). A phenomenological perspective, however, is not without limitations. These include the heightened possibility of investigator interpretative bias, reliance on the verbal abilities of target populations when qualitative methods are employed, and the ability of this approach to describe but not explain the phenomena of interest (Ryff, 1985).

In discussing homosexuality and midlife, the population of interest to this paper is men who are self-identified as gay. Although homosexuality can be defined by overlapping criteria of behavior, desire, attraction, or self-identification (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994),

the latter criterion is most relevant to this paper, given my interest in how individuals attach meaning to homosexual identity throughout adulthood. In this paper, I define homosexual identity as a social construct that is strongly shaped by cultural factors but interpreted by individuals reflecting idiosyncrasies of personal history and psychological attributes (Herdt, 1997b). Using criteria developed by Cass (1984), homosexual identity is further defined as a perceived (as opposed to presented) identity, and as an identity inclusive of, but not restricted to, sexual identity. I will focus on men who are self-identified as gay since adolescence or early adulthood in order to better describe a longitudinal view of homosexual identity maintenance; gay men who "come out" in middle age are likely to have different developmental trajectories characterized by longer periods of heterosexuality or bisexuality and psychosocial identities influenced by marital or parental roles.

In recognition of the key effects of gender in shaping the subjective experience of life course change and homosexual identity (Gilligan, 1982; Kimmel & Sang, 1995), I will limit discussion of homosexual identity and adulthood to gay men, although the common experience of developing a stigmatized sexual orientation and many of its implications for homosexual identity maintenance throughout adulthood may also apply to lesbians.

For purposes of this paper, middle age is defined as the span between 40 and 60 years of age. The age boundaries for midlife are arguable and to some extent arbitrary, with social class and cultural background affecting perceptions of when middle age begins and ends (Chiriboga, 1981), but in a recent probability survey of U.S. adults, male respondents perceived middle age as starting at age 43 and ending at age 59, with no differences in these estimates by sexual orientation (unpublished data, Brim et al., 1996). Given the November, 2000, estimate of approximately 36 million men in the U.S. between 40 and 60 years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) and a 2.8% prevalence of homosexuality among U.S. men based on the criteria of self-identification (Laumann et al., 1994), slightly over one million men in the United States are homosexually-identified and between the ages of 40 and 60.

### **Midlife Development**

#### *Midlife Development in the General Population*

The literature on midlife development, although generally blind to sexual orientation, describes significant change in social, psychological, and psychosexual realms of life experience during middle age (Erikson, 1963; Levinson, 1980; Neugarten, 1968; Ryff, 1984; Stevens-Long,

1990). Although a full review of the adult developmental literature is beyond the scope of this paper, several key points warrant mention in light of the current focus. In the existential realm of experience, middle age is associated with an increased awareness of less time remaining in life and an enhanced personalization of mortality (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1981). The presentiment of death, a unique human endowment, results in an increasing need to review life experience and to fashion a narrative of experience that coherently tells a life history (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 1990). Middle-aged adults increasingly perceive themselves and their relationship to the social world with greater cognitive complexity and a heightened appreciation of paradox, ambivalence, and uncertainty in life (Stevens-Long, 1990). Earlier identification with social groups may be revised or rejected, accompanied by the emergence of more idiosyncratic views of the self (Levinson, 1978). Despite a greater range and complexity of social roles in middle age compared to young and late adulthood, midlife adults experience a gradual psychological disengagement from, and decreasing identification with, the world of the young (Neugarten, 1968).

Psychosexual development in middle-aged and older adults is influenced by biological and socialization processes associated with aging, psychosocial adaptation to changes in physical health and sexual function, and the relational aspects of long-term marriages. Schiavi (1999) reported declines in sexual interest, arousal, and activity, but not sexual satisfaction, in a cohort of men over 40 years of age and discussed this finding in terms of age-related decreases in expectations about sexual activity and the increasing importance of relationships over time. In an exploration of the subjective meanings of sex for older adults, Levy (1994) found evidence that older adults experienced sex as equally satisfying as when they were younger, but with more frequent nongenital contact, greater flexibility in gender roles, and increased emphasis on intimacy and relatedness to their partners. Aging is also associated with anxieties about sexual adequacy and performative capacity in men, particularly in societies that promote youthful sexualized lifestyles (Schiavi, 1999). In addition, adults, not uncommonly, struggle to adapt earlier sexual scripts rooted in adolescence and young adulthood to the changed circumstances of later years, creating potential problems in sexual adjustment and mental health (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

#### *Midlife Development as Applied to Gay Men's Lives*

The applicability of adult developmental perspectives to middle-aged gay men's lives is uncertain (Cornett & Hudson, 1987). Broadly speaking, developmental models are based on conventional social and gender

roles, traditional configurations of family life, normal life expectancy, and the absence of historical or social factors that preclude the full realization of individual potential (Erikson, 1963; Vaillant, 1993). In addition, developmental models presume a linearity of life transitions and underemphasize the influence of sociocultural factors in shaping life trajectories (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). The course of gay men's lives belies many of the above assumptions. Developing and maintaining a stigmatized sexual identity introduces different meanings and a different time course to the psychosocial tasks of adulthood such as consolidating sexual identity and establishing first long-term relationships (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Coleman, 1985). Living with HIV or surviving multiple AIDS bereavements, particularly for the generation of currently middle-aged gay men in the U.S., may result in a sensitization to mortality earlier in life, although this may be changing as new treatments extend survival (Kertzner, 1997). Finally, it is difficult to generalize findings of sustained levels of sexual satisfaction in older, married heterosexual men to gay men, given the lower prevalence of long-term relationships among the latter throughout the life course (Fowlkes, 1994). Because of these caveats, Kimmel and Sang (1995) and others have argued that adult development is not a useful concept in understanding homosexual lives and that a life course model is more appropriate, with its decreased emphasis on intrinsic development and greater attention to historical events, social context, individual narrative, and lived experience (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000).

### **Toward a Longitudinal View of Homosexual Identity**

To explore further the applicability of adult developmental models to the revision of psychosocial and sexual identity in midlife gay men, it is necessary to discuss processes related to the formation of homosexual identity from a life course perspective. The subjective experience of homosexual identity in midlife and throughout adulthood is shaped by a constellation of sociocultural, historical, and individual factors that will be discussed in turn.

#### *The Sociohistoric Context of Homosexuality and Aging*

Throughout the adult life course, homosexual identity is strongly shaped by sexual culture: the symbolic meanings of beliefs, rules, norms, and social exchanges surrounding sexuality and, for purposes of this discussion, homosexuality (Herdt, 2000). Perhaps the most pervasive effect of the social field as it pertains to homosexuality is the stigmatization of a minority sexual orientation. From a life course perspective, the effects of stigma based on homosexuality are particularly

important as they extend across adulthood and converge with the socialization processes of aging that confer a sense of being "on" or "off schedule" with respect to life events and role transitions (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Neugarten, 1970).

A sense of life course asynchrony may first arise in the adolescence and young adulthood of gay men. The formation of homosexual identity is often delayed in gay men because of the social proscription of same-sex feelings and behaviors, limited access to gay peers, restricted opportunities for dating and role playing, and the absence of appropriate role models (Coleman, 1985; Maylon, 1982). This may, in turn, delay readiness for the assumption of roles related to the psychosocial tasks of intimacy and generativity, the latter term defined by McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) as motivations, commitments, behaviors, and narration organized around the goal of providing for the next generation. Gay men may begin to feel "off schedule" in their thirties as they make social comparisons to heterosexual peers who have married, started traditional families, or established community identities (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000).

The stigmatization of homosexuality also contributes to an absence of social markers that define life transitions for gay men throughout middle age. Milestones of partnerships, such as marriage, anniversaries, and later rites of bereavement and widowhood, for example, are often socially unheralded in the lives of gay men (Shernoff, 1997). Moreover, stigma associated with homosexual desire may contribute to the pre-eminence of sexuality as a source of self-definition during the process of homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1979), sometimes accompanied by a relative neglect of other developmental tasks that lay the groundwork for later life adjustment such as the establishment of vocational identities or social support networks (Kertzner, 1997). For many young adult gay men, sexual intimacy becomes the touchstone of identity, and single marketability and sexual desirability serve as prime indicators of group membership (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Rotello, 1997). However, sexual desire or desirability may diminish in midlife, thereby undermining a sense of social identity as homosexual (Isensee, 1999). In heterosexual male adulthood, in contrast, sexual identity is more frequently extended into such public role commitments as that of father, mentor, or community leader (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Beyond stigmatization, the life configuration of gay men may contribute to a sense of uncertain aging experienced in the second half of life. Given the absence of markers of adult life transitions such as marriage and anniversary celebrations in unpartnered gay men or the growth and emancipation of children or assumption of grandparenthood

in gay men who are childless, conventional social reference points for aging may be lacking. As an additional consideration, gay male sexual culture as it exists in large urban areas has not provided, to date, much recognition of elements in homosexual lives that are revealed over time: long-term relationships; nontraditional configurations of family and friends; or generative relationships with children, adolescents, and young adults. Gay male sexual culture amplifies the ageism found in contemporary American society in its devaluation of older adults as less attractive, less important, and less sexual (Cahill, South, & Spade, 2000; Schiavi, 1999). These factors may also contribute to a sense of becoming middle-aged or old earlier than heterosexual peers, although the phenomenon of "accelerated aging" in gay men is not consistently reported in the literature (Friend, 1987; Mennigerode, 1976) and, if it exists, may pertain to subpopulations of older gay men who more actively participate in gay sexual culture (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000).

### *Historical Cohort Effects*

Given the rapid change in social awareness and tolerance of homosexuality, the ongoing evolution of civil rights affecting the lives of homosexuals and the impact of AIDS on the lives of gay men (Paul, Hays, & Coates, 1995; Yang, 1999), historical age-cohort effects are highly relevant to a discussion of homosexual identity. Over the past 30 years, greater social acceptance of homosexuality and stronger legal protections for homosexual lives have permitted greater integration of public and private identities and, in so doing, have likely changed the course and consequences of homosexuality identity formation for individuals. In addition, whereas past generations of gay men approaching their late thirties and early forties felt marginalized within gay social worlds (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Harry, 1982), contemporary midlife gay men have considerably more opportunities to experience a sense of social integration within their communities. Thus, many currently middle-aged men are involved in cultural institutions, social service agencies, and special programs within and outside of the gay community that were either nonexistent or unwelcoming of openly gay participants in previous generations (Boxer, 1997).

The HIV epidemic has strongly shaped homosexual identity over the past 20 years by conflating sexual discovery and pleasure with illness, and in its wake of premature mortality, denying gay men a full measure of lives grown old together (Kertzner, 1997). For many years, AIDS obscured the question of gay aging by understandably diverting resources for research and advocacy toward more basic matters of survival. Yet AIDS also created an increased awareness of homosexual

lives, galvanized many gay men to become more politically assertive, and, as suggested earlier, created new community organizations that provide important leadership and service roles for middle-aged and older gay men (Herdt, 1997a).

### *Psychosexual Development*

Few researchers have examined the effects of sexual orientation on psychosexual development in middle age, although some of the above findings on sexuality in midlife men may pertain to gay men as well. In a convenience sample of gay men 40 to 77 years of age, Pope and Schulz (1991) found that most respondents described levels of sexual satisfaction that remained high since young adulthood. Older men within the cohort, however, reported lower levels of sexual activity and interest than middle-aged men. Kelly (1977) also found high levels of sexual satisfaction in a convenience sample of older gay men, despite an increasing prevalence of being single after the age of 55 attributable to the death of partners or declining interest in having long-term relationships. In a clinical report, Isensee (1999) described a broadening of sexual interests in middle-aged gay men characterized by greater enjoyment of nongenital sex and appreciation of emotional intimacy.

Despite these similarities to sexuality in heterosexual men, important differences exist in gay men's lives that may have bearing on midlife sexuality. In their comparative study of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that gay male partnerships had the most amount of sex early on in the relationship, followed by the least amount among all groups. Moreover, coupled gay men have a higher incidence and tolerance of sex outside relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Perhaps more significantly, single status is more common among gay versus heterosexual men throughout the life course, as noted previously (Fowlkes, 1994). Whereas partnership in gay lives provides a context analogous to marriage in which to evaluate sexuality and sexual satisfaction in older gay men, less is known about sexual satisfaction and the meaning of sexuality for older, single gay men.

### **Homosexual Identity Maintenance During Adulthood**

Of note, many endpoints of homosexual identity formation seem to correspond to characterizations of psychological change during adulthood as described above. Thus, Cass (1996) writes that in the final stages of identity formation, homosexual identity becomes merely one aspect of the self, the world is no longer divided into "good" homosexuals and "bad" heterosexuals, issues of oppression are now addressed in a



less defensive manner, and the level of identification with lesbian or gay groups is reduced. To the extent that these shifts occur as individuals approach and enter middle age, they can also be understood in terms of the increasing complexity and pluralism of thought that characterizes midlife development (Stevens-Long, 1990). The generational divide experienced between some young and older gay men (Berger, 1982) can be interpreted as a result of the decreased identification with young adults characteristic of middle-aged adults (Neugarten, 1968) and not just in terms of the emphasis on youthful desirability in gay sexual culture. Social identity as homosexual may become less important in midlife because of an increasing tendency for middle-aged men to become critical of the particular groups and institutions that have had the greatest significance for them, with less dependence upon group rewards and the assumption of a more universalistic perspective on life (Levinson, 1978). These observations may be relevant to gay men's changing experience of homosexual identity and identification with gay sexual culture, and partially explain earlier findings of age-related disengagement from gay social life (Weinberg & Williams, 1974).

### **Midlife Homosexual Identity: A Qualitative Study**

I turn now to the central focus of this paper, consideration of how homosexual identity reflects social and psychological processes related to the formation of a stigmatized sexual identity, the novel social configuration of gay lives, and developmental change attributed to aging. Little research has studied how gay men in nonclinical populations ascribe meaning to homosexual identity from an integrative perspective considering psychological and sociocultural processes associated with aging. How, then, do gay men revise life narratives as they negotiate social age norms poorly defined in their lives? What range of meanings do middle-aged men give homosexual identity, and how can these meanings be understood in the context of individual lives?

#### *Method*

To further examine these questions, I conducted a small, exploratory study of middle-aged gay men's self-appraisals of homosexual identity using qualitative and quantitative methods (see Kertzner, 1999). Based on the assumption that the qualitative study of subjective experience is particularly useful in the exploration of poorly described changes in interior landscapes (Ryff, 1985), I employed a semistructured interview to assess self-representations of homosexual identity, including appraisals of possible change in the importance of homosexual identity over respondents' lives and the current importance and meaning of

homosexual identity. In addition, respondents were asked about work, health, sexual, and mental health histories; their sense of accomplishment and regret in life history; experiences of and concerns about growing older; and the impact of AIDS on their lives. Measures of Eriksonian stage of psychosocial identity were administered, as well as assessments of self-esteem, depression, life satisfaction, and commitment to homosexual identity. Transcripts based on the semistructured interview were reviewed for themes expressing the role of homosexual identity in personal narratives.

### *Sample*

A convenience sample of 30 middle-aged gay men was recruited from community newspaper advertisements and social groups, bar postings, electronic list-serves, and word of mouth notice. The cohort was relatively affluent, primarily Caucasian, and well educated, with an average age of 45.6 ( $SD= 3.9$  years). Thirteen men were in ongoing relationships (median duration, 5 years; range 3 months to 19 years). Seven of the men were HIV-positive and three untested; two had fathered children, although neither had played an active role in raising their children.

### *Results*

The cohort was characterized by high levels of commitment to homosexual identity, self-esteem, and life satisfaction, with 11 respondents agreeing with the statement that "these are the best years of my life." When asked in an open-ended probe to identify what is important in their lives, the most frequent response was friendships or relationships, endorsed by 20 of the men, followed by work and personal philosophy about life. Seven men mentioned being "out" or open about their homosexuality as the most important aspect of their lives.

Participants were asked about the meaning of homosexual identity in their lives and gave widely varying responses ranging from "It's just something I do in bed" to "It's like a sweater with loose thread; once you start pulling that thread everything unravels." Many participants described the personal significance of being homosexual as depending on context and circumstance. Thus, several men said that although it had obvious relevance to their social lives, homosexual identity had little bearing on their work lives or political viewpoints. Other men cited the greater importance of nonsexual identities, such as being Black, overweight, or single, or stated that homosexual identity was important only if others made it so. If respondents perceived homosexual identity as changing in importance to them over the years, it was in the direction of decreasing importance as exemplified by one man's comment, "It

was a big deal when I was young, now it's nothing horrible but nothing fabulous" and another respondent's observation, "I don't think about it a lot, in a sense now that it's a given."

For many of the 13 men in relationships, the meaning of homosexual identity was inextricably tied to the history and current state of partnerships. Relationships were described as a prism through which sexuality and personal identity were refracted, a facilitator of homosexual self-acceptance in young adulthood, a sanctuary providing solace in the midst of multiple AIDS bereavements, and an exemption from a singles world that required dating finesse or explicit consideration of becoming romantically or sexually involved with HIV-infected men.

Returning to the cohort as a whole, four nonexclusive themes suggested how the experience of homosexual identity organized personal narratives of life experience. First, most men shared the theme of *self-realization* of homosexual identity as characterized by a sequence of awareness, acceptance, and disclosure of sexual identity; this theme reflects the widely held notion of always having been homosexual but having to become gay as expressed in the archetypal story of "coming out." A second theme applicable to several participants was that of *transformation*, in which being different by virtue of being homosexual served as a welcomed model for the expansion of personal identity into other realms of life experience; here, men spoke of parlaying their sense of being an outsider into vocational or personal identities that valued awareness, compassion, creativity, or activism. The third theme of *accommodation* characterized respondents who viewed their homosexuality with both acceptance and resignation but not regret; these men described meaningful relationships and a sense of life satisfaction as middle-aged men, but also said that if they could live their lives over again, they might want to be heterosexual citing advantages of traditional family life such as parenthood or, more generally, the perception that life would be easier.

A fourth and final theme is that of *encumbrance* in which homosexual identity was perceived as a burden that disrupted life history and presented hazards to aging. Of note, several men exemplifying this theme described significant histories of depression or substance use in young adulthood. These men seemed specifically sensitized to the feeling of being "off sequence" in midlife, citing long-standing difficulties with self-esteem and difficulties forming or maintaining interpersonal attachments. Heterosexual lives were seen as advantaged, benefiting from traditional gender roles that provided definition and stability in relationships and markers of aging, that conferred social status and a sense of place in life. In contrast, gay life was viewed by these men as the

province of the young and the beautiful, offering little consolation to older men.

### *Discussion*

This study represents a line of inquiry that explores how the experience of homosexual identity is influenced by idiosyncratic life experience, historical age-cohort effects, and the shared meanings of a collective social and cultural life in which gay men participate. The dimension of time implicit in a life history assessment allows a richer understanding of how homosexual identity is situated within the larger stream of an individual's life course. Several overriding themes characterized gay men's integration of homosexual identity into personal narratives of life experience; these themes were organized around the value of an identity as "different" in facilitating or impeding the realization of individual potential. The meaning of homosexual identity was highly variable among gay men reflecting the heterogeneity of life experience described by study participants.

Before further discussing these points, several methodological limitations of the above study warrant consideration. The small sample size of the study and volunteer bias, over-representation of educated respondents, and cross-sectional design limit generalizations that can be made about the study's main interest. Study of larger and more diverse cohorts may find additional themes characterizing the role of the sexual in integrating personal narratives. Differences among gay men in sexual drive, desire, and behavior, or in political views of homosexuality, for instance, may significantly shape the meaning of homosexual identity as it is understood in the context of life history. Thus Browning (1993) wrote that homosexual identity comprises a spectrum of meaning for gay men ranging from assimilationist to transgressive, the latter connoting a radical, collaborative exploration of pleasure and sexuality.

Moreover, the cross-sectional design and retrospective recall used in this study preclude a causal analysis between the meaning of homosexuality in respondents' lives and dominant themes in personal narratives; it is possible, for instance, that early life experience such as the quality of attachments to parents and caregivers may significantly affect the narratives of both sexual and nonsexual life throughout the life course (McAdams, 1993). In addition, other factors not fully analyzed in this study shape the experience of homosexual identity in the context of life history; these include race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, education, relationship status, and age at which individuals "came out."

Reflecting these factors, homosexual identity may be inextricable from other lines of identity development and thus be as varied as the stories comprising individual lives. Indeed, in the above study, specific social

roles and commitments, relationships and friendships, vocational identifications, and personal experience based on race provided a more proximal sense of meaning and identity in most respondents' lives. Many men, did, however, describe a decrease in the relative importance of homosexual identity over their life course. This may become particularly evident during midlife when several trends converge: the developmental tasks of realizing and consolidating homosexual identity may no longer be as salient; other social identities ascend in importance as described above; sexual drive as an organizing force diminishes or may be sublimated; and a greater sense of pluralism in adult identity emerges (McAdams, 1993; Isensee, 1999). In addition, an increased sense of personal autonomy and environmental mastery associated with middle age (Ryff, 1989) may decrease the significance of being homosexual as a point of difference for middle-aged and older gay men.

It is important to note, however, that special circumstances unique to gay men's lives may result in homosexual identity assuming or retaining a foreground status during middle age. These include the situations of men who are recently "out," those who seek to actively participate in the gay community or find new partners, advocates committed to promoting homosexual civil rights, or gay men experiencing discrimination or violence because of their sexual orientation.

In further discussing the life course trajectory of homosexual identity, the role of psychopathology warrants mention. Mood disorders, substance abuse and dependence, and other psychiatric conditions may significantly disrupt developmental milestones including the formation of sexual and social identity in adults, regardless of sexual orientation. This may have particular significance for the present discussion for two reasons: recent reports of increased rates of mood and anxiety disorders in gay men (Cochran & Mays, 2000; Sandfort, de Graaf, Bijl, & Schnabel, 2001) and the interactive effects of pre-existing psychopathology and stigma (Meyer, 1995). Psychiatric disorders may compound difficulties in acquiring a stigmatized sexual identity because individuals with higher levels of distress are more susceptible to societal antigay attitudes, and that after such attitudes are internalized, internalized homophobia further increases the level of distress (Meyer, 1995). Moreover, depression tends to be recurrent and may result in negative attitudes and interpersonal rejection (Hammen & Garber, 2000). As mentioned earlier, several participants in the above study who viewed their sexual identity as problematic also described significant histories of depression or substance use in young adulthood. Although the above study design precludes generalizations about the association of psychiatric histories and narratives of sexual identity, there may be important subsets of gay

men who have particular difficulties maintaining a positive homosexual identity throughout adulthood because of the interactive effects of mental health vulnerabilities and stigma. These men may be particularly sensitive to the added effects of stigma based on aging.

The themes of identity and narrative discerned in this study are an attempt to describe the interaction between individual predisposition, including those related to positive and negative mental health, and socio-cultural influence, which can be permissive or proscriptive, in understanding the life stories of middle-aged gay men. Recent work underscores the importance of sociocultural factors in shaping differences in individuals' homosexual identities and self-representations. (Grossman, D'Augelli, & Hersberger, 2000; Herdt, Beeler, & Rawls, 1997).

### *Homosexual Identity as Transmuting*

What may be most characteristic of homosexual identity across the life course is a quality of *transmuted* meaning. In adolescence and young adulthood, homosexual identity is commonly accorded a heightened significance by gay men based on the importance of sexual identity formation to the developmental task of adult individuation (Erikson, 1963); although the latter is true of young heterosexual males as well, sexual identity assumes an even greater importance in the lives of young gay men because of the stigmatization of homosexuality that must be overcome (Troiden, 1984). In middle age, homosexual identity may be less relevant to the management of life experience due to psychological processes associated with aging, further integration of homosexual identity as described by models of homosexual identity formation, as well as historical effects, such as greater social tolerance of homosexuality. However, whereas heterosexual identity remains socially and culturally articulated throughout the life course, the social and existential meaning of homosexual identity becomes less clear in the second half of life with regard to questions concerning the legacy of individual lives for future generations and the role of the self in the world (Levinson, 1980; Kertzner & Sved, 1996; McAdams, 1993). Gay sexual culture does not yet speak to these questions. In the words of Herdt (1997b):

What moral action defines the role of the self following the act of coming out? In part, the question of a gay self concerns the nagging sense that the self in the stories of gay life has not yet found a moral voice. . . . a moral sensibility and ethics that go beyond the act of coming out. (p. 168)

### **Conclusion**

The need to explore the meaning of homosexual identity beyond adolescence and young adulthood is reflected in a recent literature that

describes a sense of identity displacement in middle-aged gay men (Isensee, 1999; Kooden, 1997). Further models of homosexual identity maintenance are needed to describe change in the meaning of homosexual identity across the adult life course; such models would have heuristic and practical value in health promotion. Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998), for instance, argued that studying the generative roles, commitments, and identities in gay men's lives broadens our understanding of the spectrum of adult generativity. Greater knowledge of how homosexual identity persists beyond the realm of sexual experience may contribute to a sense of a sustainable gay culture among gay men (Rotello, 1997). Furthermore, it may help individuals maintain reduced sexual risk behaviors by providing alternative means of social identity.

The relatively novel phenomenon of lives constructed about a homosexual identity continues to evolve at a rapid pace, with as yet untold implications for models of homosexual identity formation. Lesbians and gay men, for example, may be coming out at earlier ages in adolescence, with greater tools for overcoming stigma and social isolation; this, in turn, may result in an accelerated consolidation of homosexual identity formation and a diminished sense of being "off time" as other development tasks of young adulthood are engaged. The world that awaits young homosexuals also presents a widened scope of imaginable lives characterized by expanded opportunities for the realization of individual potential and greater integration of homosexual and public identities.

In considering the present meanings of homosexual identity among midlife gay men, a larger question is at hand. Beyond an understanding of historical and sociocultural forces that shape homosexual identity, a life course perspective on sexual identity asks how sexual subjectivities relate to broader life concerns. As applied to gay men's lives, this question asks how an affiliative and sexual life based on same-sex preferences shapes, and is shaped by, the universal experience of loss and transformation associated with the second half of life. Whereas the same question may be pertinent for an understanding of sexuality in all adults, it is now only being explored in the lives of gay men and warrants further study.

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