The rise and fall of gay: A cultural-historical approach to gay identity development

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Research on identity development has paid relatively little attention to the development of marginalised identities such as those of gays and lesbians, whose isolation from the canonical narrative of sexuality may limit the available resources required for establishing a coherent identity. We examined these contested identities in relation to cultural-historical factors that may have played a role in shaping these identities over the past 50 years, and looked at how such factors have impacted the voicing and silencing of gay experiences. Participants ($N = 251$) reported (1) a memory of a cultural event relevant to their sexuality, and (2) a self-defining memory about their sexuality. Those in older cohorts reported cultural memories centred on politics and other external events (e.g., Stonewall riots), and younger cohorts reported more personal memories (e.g., coming out), suggesting that homosexual identities have become less culturally defined, and instead more personally defined. Further, participants of older cohorts reported self-defining events that were predominantly from one private domain (e.g., sex). In contrast, younger participants reported a variety of self-defining events. These results suggest that cultural-historical factors play an important role in defining the developmental pathway of individuals, perhaps especially those who have marginalised identities.

Keywords: Narrative; Master narrative; Homosexuality; Culture; Identity.

By looking closely at the changes that have occurred in gay culture in the past few decades, I attempt to represent the process through which a culture with unique traditions and rituals is submerged into the melting pot, its distinguishing characteristics dissolving into this grey, flavorless gruel as its members are accepted by society at large.

(Daniel Harris, 1997, p. 4)

This sentiment, from Daniel Harris (1997) in his book *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, speaks to the ever-evolving nature of gay identity. Specifically, Harris is resisting the assimilation of gay[1] culture into the mainstream, lamenting a distinct loss of identity that was once fundamentally about being "different". Indeed, various scholars (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005a, 2005b) have commented on the

[1]In the current paper there are many instances where the term "gay" is used to capture the experiences of both males and females who identify as homosexual. The usage of this term is intended only for convenience sake, as in mainstream discourse we often find "gay" used as such a catchall phrase. We are not in any way trying to offer a male-centred view of sexuality. We will identify and attempt to explain those points at which our results diverge for males and females.

increasing variability in personal narratives held by gay youth, which are tending towards "normalcy" in an increasingly affirming society. It is the intersection between culture and gay identity that is the subject of the current study, which examines how different historical cohorts define themselves within a dynamic cultural context.

Contested identities, which are associated with marginalisation and a struggle for personal coherence (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002), have been relatively under-represented in research on narrative identity (cf. Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Chandler & Proulx, 2006; Cohler & Hammack, 2006, 2007; Diamond, 2006; Hammack, 2005, 2006, 2008; King & Noelle, 2005; King & Smith, 2004; Lalonde & Chandler, 2004; Syed & Azmitia, 2008). Instead researchers have focused on the canonical life story, which in terms of sexual identity is one focused on heterosexuality. Nevertheless, theories in narrative psychology use an identity model that views the narration of personal stories as a mechanism for identity development regardless of one's status as marginalised or not; that is, in narrating one's experiences one comes to understand one's own identity (e.g., McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Thus we know quite a bit about the narrative construction of identity, yet we know less about how marginalised identities are forged in a variable cultural-historical situation. For the current study we have turned to a feminist framework crafted by Fivush (2004a, 2004b) based on the dynamics of "voice" and "silence".

MARGINALISED IDENTITIES: VOICE AND SILENCE

The theoretical framework of voice and silence is based on the dynamics of place and power. Voice and silence "emerge within the individual as a function of their historical and cultural place and their individual history of specific interactions with specific others" (Fivush, 2004b, p. 83). Those who have personal narratives that match the canonical narrative possess voice, and those who cannot or do not identify with the canonical narrative have stories that are silenced. These can be stories of subversion, resistance, or simply those stories that fall outside normative ways of being or thinking in a given culture. It is within this dynamic relationship that voice oppresses silence, or the canonical narrative oppresses the non-dominant narrative.[2] In the case of the current study, gay narratives subvert or resist the dominant narrative, and are thus silenced.

According to McLean et al.'s (2007) process model of narrative identity development, the narrative construction of personal identity is an interactive process, developed and maintained through the telling of situated stories about the self. Importantly, it is through the management of such stories that an individual selectively weaves an extended autobiography of the self that provides a sense of unity and purpose, and ultimately comprises the life story (McAdams, 1993). Thus personal disclosure is critical in this model of narrative identity development because it can facilitate the development of a coherent narrative identity (see also Fivush, 2001; Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000). Conversely, when one's voice is given limited air-time, or is silenced, the opportunities for personal identity development may be limited.[3]

Research on voicing and silencing has focused on how stories are co-constructed with important others. For example, Fivush and her colleagues have shown that narratives of autonomy are silenced for daughters (Fivush & Buckner, 2003) and narratives rich with emotion, particularly sadness, and those that are situated in terms of relationships are silenced for sons (Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). In older age groups, Pasupathi and Rich (2005) have found that distracted listeners elicited less-elaborate stories, when compared to stories that were told to attentive listeners (see also Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010 this issue). Thus, audiences may silence us by

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[2] There are some exceptions to this rule, where silence can conversely represent a form of power (Fivush, 2010 this issue), such as when one's personal narrative is so powerful it need not be voiced. For example, one need not voice one's heterosexual orientation, because heteronormativity assumes this to be the case unless otherwise told. Fivush (2010 this issue) conceptualises this form of silence as "being silent", in contrast to "being silenced". The latter is an imposed form of silence and is the focus of the current study.

[3] One might challenge this claim, given the large collection of research that has examined coming-out narratives (e.g., King & Noelle, 2005; King & Smith, 2004). Certainly for many gay individuals this is an important developmental milestone, a turning point where the gay person claims their voice. However, coming-out experiences are only one possible narrative among a potentially vast number of experiences that a gay identity might be built around. To this end, we have taken a broader approach to gay identity development that is reflective of the pervasive silencing that we believe to be typical of this non-canonical narrative.

emphasising one thing (e.g., sadness) and thereby silencing another (e.g., anger), as well as with behaviour that limits the degree to which we elaborate our stories. Consistent with Fivush's original framework, we expect that the dynamics of voice and silence will also be impacted by the larger cultural context in which personal narratives are constructed.

USING NARRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO EXAMINE THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Our approach to examining the role that culture plays in sexual identity development centred on a paradigm recently put forth by Hammack (2005, 2008; see also Cohler & Hammack, 2006), who suggests that to understand the development of sexual identity it is critical to understand both the *cultural* and *personal* developments relevant to the person. We defined a cultural event as an event that is experienced by many people (e.g., the AIDS epidemic), the meaning of which is often shared, or at least understood, among members of the cohort that experienced it. Conversely, a personal event is limited to one's own self-experience (e.g., realising one is gay) and, likewise, the meaning made concerning the event is unique. If voice and silence emerge from an individual's historical and cultural position vis-à-vis the canonical narrative, then this evolution raises the question of how cultural changes, and thus the condition of voice and silence in each decade, have had an impact on the construction of gay identity.

Hammack (2005, 2008) suggests taking a narrative approach to the question of identity because narrative construction is both a personal and a cultural process. That is, the personal meaning of the story is only understood in the particular cultural-historical context within which it is constructed (Hammack, 2005, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Indeed, culture not only influences the raw material for narration (e.g., the Stonewall riots), but also how to interpret such events. As such, in the current study, change in gay identity over time is examined by soliciting both *personal* and *cultural* narratives from gay individuals who came of age in different historical cohorts.[4]

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[4] We note that we are coming more from a historical framework than a collective memory framework, viewing historical events as possible vehicles for creating shared master narratives.

Employing a narrative approach enables us to examine the potential *master narratives* used by historical cohorts to make sense of their experiences. Master narratives are culturally valued ways of telling personal narratives (Boje, 1991; McLean, 2008; Thorne & McLean, 2003), and alleviate some of the effort required to individually integrate an event into one's identity because the master narrative comes with pre-packaged narrative meaning. For instance, the master narrative informing heterosexual identity is so pervasive that sexuality is assumed, and no effort needs to be exerted to acknowledge or integrate it if one is heterosexual.

Superficially, we agree that gay individuals likely engage in a high degree of meaning making by virtue of their non-canonical status (Bruner, 1990), and that across time it is unlikely that a single master narrative can account for all of the experiences of gay individuals. However, we suggest an expansion of Bruner's (1990) theory, in that sub-groups of canon-breakers might be able to create master narratives when they share a common cultural experience. We expect that this process will be most pronounced for historical cohorts that have clear cultural events (e.g., AIDS) tied to their identities, and thus share a common voice. There are two possibilities for how older historical cohorts engage in identity integration. Older cohorts may engage in an active meaning-making process because they are such canon-breakers, and thus have a need to process and understand their unique experiences, or a less active meaning-making process compared to younger cohorts because they have created cultural master narratives that provide them with shared meaning. These speculations are consistent with the theoretical assertions of Cohler and Hammack (2007), who identify two potential master narratives for gay identity, depending in part on the cultural situation in which one comes of age: the *narrative of struggle and success* and the *narrative of emancipation*.

A HISTORY OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN NORTH AMERICA AT A GLANCE

We offer an abridged version of gay history over 50 years to illustrate how the personal stories of each cohort might be shaped by a variable cultural milieu. Three master narratives are used to roughly organise the major historical shifts relevant to gay identity.

Narrative of silence

In the 1960s the heterosexual narrative prevailed, silencing the gay narrative. The silencing involved the medical (e.g., homosexuality as a diagnosable mental illness; Bayer, 1987), legal (e.g., statutes criminalising sodomy), and religious communities (e.g., homosexuality as an abomination). Gays had a bifurcated identity where one's private self was discrepant from one's public self (Goffman, 1963). We suggest that the narrative of silence may result in fewer possibilities for stories about gay identity, given fewer possibilities for disclosure and ways of identifying oneself.

Narrative of struggle and success

The early 1970s was a period of political and social liberalism, begetting a full-blown gay rights movement. The political activity of gays escalated as a result of a pivotal event in gay history: the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Loughery, 1998). The riots transformed the campaign for gay rights into a national movement. By the mid to late 70s, activists had secured an increase in social legitimacy for gays. In this post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS period, a culture of conservatism gave way to sexual freedom, increased social legitimacy, decriminalisation, and demedicalisation.

In the post-Stonewall era of the 1980s, narratives include the AIDS epidemic, first mentioned in medical literature and popular media in 1981 (Loughery, 1998). Gay activism began to move from the fight for civil rights to national and global campaigning for AIDS awareness (Bernstein, 2002). Thus narratives in the first half of the 80s decade included the emergence of AIDS, whereas the second half of the decade included narratives of protest, panic, and loss. Despite the fact that gays experienced pervasive oppression in the 70s and 80s, activists established a shared voice and effectively put gay rights on the map, and can be captured by the theme of "struggle and success". We suggest that those who came of age in this era will have more possibilities for self-definition with the increasing social legitimacy and voice that characterised this period.

Narrative of emancipation

In the 1990s the fear of AIDS transmission abated and the focus shifted to treatment and prevention. The prevailing narrative in this generation is marked by the increased acceptance of gays (Loughery, 1998). Political activism still occurs, but it now functions out of highly populated and vibrant gay communities. Homosexuality began to appear in the media for purposes that were not solely political in nature (e.g., the television programme "Will and Grace"), and information about homosexuality became accessible through books on a wide variety of topics.

In terms of millennial gays, there are four important factors that distinguish them from their predecessors (Cohler & Hammack, 2006). First, in the 1990s medical advancements helped AIDS to develop from a fatal disease into one that is manageable, transforming the *meaning* of AIDS for young gays such that it is no longer perceived as a threat to this community. Second, the life-course options for gays are changing in an increasingly progressive society. For example, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, Iowa, Maine, and Canada offers new opportunities for how gay youth in North America view their futures. Nevertheless, the idea of same-sex partnership is politically controversial, so we see gay activism re-emerge, targeting the gay marriage debate once again (e.g., Proposition 8 in California). Third, the globalisation of gay culture is facilitated by the Internet. Finally, scholars have noted a propensity for millennial gays to "shun labels" (Savin-Williams, 2005a, 2005b) and to adopt a more fluid sexuality, emancipating gays from historical understandings of what it means to be gay. Thus we expect that more recent cohorts will have a less clear cultural identity, with greater focus put on a personal identity that is not defined by sexuality per se.

HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

First, we expected that older cohorts would have clearer memories of cultural events tied to their identities, in contrast to more recent cohorts who will have fewer cultural events linked to their identities. Second, we expected that those who

came of age in earlier cohorts would have fewer content possibilities for their personal narratives, reflecting greater silencing, and more recent cohorts will have greater variability in the content of their personal narratives, reflecting greater voice. Lastly, we expected that more recent cohorts would exhibit more elaborative meaning making when attempting to integrate personal narratives into a coherent identity, due to the need for individualised meaning making in a cohort that we expect to lack a larger master narrative.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 251 participants ($N = 156$ males) collected through Internet listservs from a variety of gay and lesbian organisations (e.g., university student groups, health networks, sports associations, counselling support groups, activist organisations) and any subsequent snowballing from these networks.

Procedure

Participants signed into the online survey using a login and password provided in an e-mail sent to them for the purposes of recruitment. They accepted an informed consent sheet, after having an opportunity to send the researchers an e-mail with questions before proceeding. The survey was completely anonymous. Participants were given an unlimited amount of time to complete the questionnaire, which should have taken them approximately 1 hour. Upon completion, participants were shown a counselling referral sheet. Given the anonymity afforded by the Internet it served as an effective recruiting tool, a technique that other researchers have found to be a successful way to access hidden and stigmatised populations (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).

Demographics. First, demographic information was obtained from the participant, such as age, gender, and ethnicity. Sexual identity was assessed categorically (i.e., gay or lesbian).

Cultural memory. The first narrative solicited asked for a description of a cultural or historical event or period that has influenced the participant's gay or lesbian identity. The event or period could have occurred at any point over the course of his or her lifetime, and should have had a significant impact on them.

Self-defining memory. The participant was then asked to share a self-defining memory pertaining to his or her sexuality, which was defined as vivid, emotional, helps him or her to understand themselves better as a gay or lesbian individual, and is thought about frequently (modified from Singer & Salovey, 1993).

Narrative coding

The authors developed a coding system that was inductively derived from the narratives. The first author coded all of the narratives and was blind to the age, cohort, and gender of the participants. A second coder, who was also blind to these variables as well as the study's hypotheses, coded 27% of the narratives for reliability purposes.

Cultural event. Each cultural memory was coded as belonging to one of 13 mutually exclusive categories; although more than one event may have been present, only the central event was scored (overall kappa = .87). The categories were: *coming out* (5% of all events; e.g., "Coming out to my family and feeling accepted by them …"); *media* (8%; e.g., "Representation in pop-culture, such as shows like The L-Word, Will and Grace, and Ellen …"); *school setting as a significant time period* (3%; e.g., "Freedom and acceptance in the university environment allowed the development of my gay identity …"); *education or learning experience* (4%; e.g., "Reading Foucault's *History of Sexuality* in a graduate course …"); *social justice, human rights, gay activism* (7%; e.g., "Queer activism, such as ACT UP, Queer Nation, 1987 march on Washington …"); *sexual liberation/revolution* (1%; e.g., "The period of sexual liberation in the early 70s, pre-AIDS …"); *HIV/AIDS* (3%; e.g., "Learning many years ago of "The Gay Cancer" that was somehow contagious …"); *government/legislation*, (13%; e.g., "Pierre Trudeau's statement that the government has no place in the bedrooms of the nation …"); *exposure to gay people* (8%; e.g., "Exposure to my gay uncle helped me to be comfortable with

myself ..."); *experience of hate crimes, homophobia, marginalisation* (12%; e.g., "Hearing my older brothers and sisters talk about fags and God's hate for them ..."); *sex, love and romance* (6%; e.g., "My first same-sex kiss on a trip with my high school friends ..."); *gay social events or celebrations* (20%; e.g., "Attending my first Pride event ..."), and *other* (10%).

Personal and cultural focus. This code was used to measure the degree to which participants focused on cultural versus personal experiences when prompted for a cultural memory. Each narrative was assigned a score on a linear scale from 0 to 2, with 0 representing the most personal narratives and 2 representing those with the most cultural focus (*intraclass r* = .94). Those narratives that received a score of 0 possessed only personal focus. In these narratives there was no mention of any event or period that was beyond the experience of the teller, such as a specific coming-out story. Narratives with a score of 1 were about a specific personal experience, but contained features that would be recognisable to others, such as a Pride Parade. A score of 2 was assigned to narratives where the teller refers to an event or period that has immediate cultural focus, and has no more significance for the teller than any other person who might have experienced the same event or period, such as reference to seeing a TV programme.

Self-defining event. Events reported by participants in their self-defining memories were coded as belonging to one of eight mutually exclusive categories, in which each narrative was only scored for the central event (overall kappa = .87). These were: *realisation of "different" feelings towards same sex* (19% of all events; e.g., "In grade 4 when I first realised I was 'different', in the school changeroom ..."); *coming out to oneself as gay or lesbian* (21%; e.g., "It was the first time I was forced to accept my sexual orientation. I always knew that there was something different about me, but I always denied that was what it was ..."); *coming out to others as gay or lesbian* (15%; e.g., "In grade 12 I first came out to a non-family member ..."); *sexual experience, fantasy, or thought* (16%; e.g., "Finding my father's playboy magazines and masturbating for the first time ..."); *romantic-relational experience or fantasies* (14%; e.g., "Six years ago, for the first time in my life I found what being in love meant – the feeling and the way it changes a normal man into a slightly mad

man ...");[5] *exposure to gay and/or lesbian people* (4%; e.g., "Having a lesbian boss who was a good role model who encouraged me to explore my sexuality, whichever it was ..."); *discrimination/marginalisation* (7%; e.g., "I had a conversation with an extremely bigoted sexist homophobe who claimed that lesbianism doesn't exist ..."); and *other* (4%).

Meaning making. We operationalised meaning making as what the teller learns or understands from an event as he or she reflects back on it, coded on a scale from 0 to 3 based on McLean and Pratt's (2006) system. A narrative with no explicit explanation of what one had learned was coded as 0 (*intraclass r* = .90). A narrative was coded as 1 if there was some evidence that the teller acquired some tangible or specific behavioural lesson from the experience (e.g., "I learned never to look for dates online."). A narrative was coded as 2 if the teller described an experience of growth or development, beyond behavioural change without much specificity (e.g., "My life changed after that."). Finally, narratives were coded as 3 when the meaning making applied to greater aspects of the teller's life, and was specific, often evidenced by some sort of transformation in the teller ("I became more comfortable with myself and my sexuality."). Meaning making was only coded in the participant's self-defining memory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics

Participants were aged from 18 to 74 years (M = 31.69, SD = 11.94). For the purposes of analysis, participants were divided into historical cohorts. There were 74 participants in the millennial cohort (born in 1983 or later; n = 48 males), 87 participants in the 90s cohort (born between 1972 and 1982; n = 52 males), 45 in the 80s cohort (born between 1962 and 1972; n = 27 males), 21 in the 70s cohort (born between 1952 and 1962; n = 12 males), and 15 in the 60s cohort (born

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[5] For the cultural memory sex and romance were treated as one category, unlike the distinct categories in the coding of the self-defining memory. This was done because both categories are personal memories in response to a cultural prompt and only comprised 6% of the responses to the cultural memory combined, whereas they made up 30% of the narratives in the self-defining memory.

between 1942 and 1952; $n = 13$ males). Nine participants did not report age, and five did not report gender. We were not able to examine ethnic differences as 35 participants were non-white, but covered 11 ethnic categories, and 64 did not report ethnicity. We also collected immigration status, with 206 participants born in North America, and 45 immigrants. There were no differences for immigration status on age, meaning making, the personal-cultural focus of the cultural memory, or the event types for either memory.

Primary analyses

We will first discuss the results for the *cultural memory*, followed by the results pertaining to the *self-defining memory*. In both sections we illustrate the results with narrative examples. Finally, we will look at the degree to which different cohorts engage in meaning making in their self-defining memories. We also examine gender differences in all analyses.

Cultural memory. We investigated the question of how cultural events shape personal identities by looking at the types of events reported when prompted for a cultural memory, and by examining the degree to which these events possessed cultural versus personal focus. There were significant gender differences in event types, $\chi^2(12) = 28.57$, $p < .01$. Inspection of percentages suggests that men were more likely to talk about "*coming out*", "*social justice, human rights, gay activism*", "*sexual liberation/revolution*", "*HIV/AIDS*", "*government/legislation*", "*experience of hate crimes, homophobia, marginalisation*", and "*sex, love and romance*". Women were more

likely to talk about "*exposure to gays and lesbians*". The rest of the event types are fairly evenly distributed between genders. It is possible that women discuss exposure to gays and lesbians more often because this describes a relational experience, which is consistent with research showing that women are more emotionally oriented in their sexual identities (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Further, Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) also observed that men are more sexually oriented, which would explain why they discussed sex-related topics more often. That gay men discussed such things as government/legislation, HIV/AIDS, and discrimination more than women might be a by-product of the persecution they endured during the AIDS epidemic in comparison to women.

In terms of the kinds of events reported, as expected there was a significant difference in event types reported by different cohorts, 80.80 (48), $p < .01$ (see Table 1). Older cohort members had clearer cultural events that are tied to their identities than those shared by younger cohorts, as they were more likely to report actual cultural events (events of which many people would be aware), such as "*social justice, human rights and gay activism*", "*HIV/AIDS*", and "*sexual liberation/revolution*". In contrast, younger people reported more personal memories of "*coming out*", "*experiences in high school or university*", "*learning and education about sexuality*", and "*experience of hate crimes, homophobia, marginalisation*". In fact, the only cultural event that younger people reported pertained to "*government/legislation*", which was predominantly celebratory narratives that centred on the passing of gay marriage legislation. While the latter is

TABLE 1
List of cultural event categories and percentage reported by each cohort

Cultural event category	1960s cohort	1970s cohort	1980s cohort	1990s cohort	2000s cohort
Coming out	0	0	18	46	36
Sex, love, and romance	25	0	8	25	42
Exposure to gay people	11	11	28	22	28
School setting as a significant time period	0	0	0	17	83
Education or learning experience	0	13	0	63	25
Hate crime, homophobia, marginalisation	8	8	29	25	29
Gay social events or celebrations	2	7	12	45	33
Media	0	0	18	47	35
Social justice, human rights, gay activism	14	21	29	29	7
HIV/AIDS	20	40	20	20	0
Sexual liberation/revolution	67	33	0	0	0
Government/legislation	4	7	11	39	39
Other	5	5	36	27	27

clearly a legitimate cultural event, it is a *positive event* about an important political achievement, and as such is qualitatively different from the narratives of political upheaval and struggle that defined the older cohort's narratives.

To verify that a "cultural" event is actually cultural in nature, we examined the degree to which the events had a cultural versus personal focus. We conducted an ANOVA with cultural event type and gender as the between-participants factors and the scale of personal-cultural focus as the dependent variable. There was a main effect of event type, $F(12, 212) = 31.43$, $p < .001$, and post-hoc Tukey tests showed that the events with the most cultural focus were those concerning sexual liberation and government or legislation, followed by discrimination with a mid-level of cultural focus, and the events with the least cultural focus were education, school, exposure, sex/love/romance, and coming out. The other event types did not differ between groups on cultural focus. The most personal event types were reported by younger people, and the most cultural events were reported by older people, with the exception of government/legislation. There was no main effect of gender or gender × event type interaction.

With less cultural focus attached to their identities, it appears that younger cohorts are no longer achieving self-definition through opposition to the canonical. In contrast, this finding suggests that millennial gays, whose cultural memories are more personally focused than older cohorts, may be integrating into the dominant narrative of sexuality. This finding speaks to the cultural-historical specificity of sexual identity development. For example, Tyler provides a typically personal millennial narrative:

When I was 18, just before I left for a year (backpacking in Europe), I told my father that I was gay. Surprisingly, he reacted in a very compassionate way! Once I got to Europe, I felt like it was time to explore my sexuality without hiding myself. At this time, I strongly thought my father would badly welcome this sight of me.

Tyler's story has no immediate cultural focus and is instead a completely personal event. In contrast, Denny, who came of age in the 80s, reported the following cultural event:

1985 – I am in university. I know I am gay. AIDS is destroying the lives of men throughout Canada and the United States. I am alone. The media is filled with right wing hatred from the Republican administration of Reagan. No one knows what this disease is, where it comes from, or how it is transmitted. It only kills gays and Haitians. Both of these groups are expendable. I know that to stay alive I must remain silent. I must not have sex. If you were not a gay adult during this time, you do not know the terror and hysteria that the media had whipped the general population into.

Denny's story is a powerful one, made vivid with the intensity of the emotions and the use of the present tense, which suggests that this experience is still an important part of who he is (e.g., Libby & Eibach, 2002). Further, the event is narrated as a shared experience, particularly in reference to the subgroup that "must" know about this experience, namely the other gay adults from this era.

Self-defining memory. We next investigated whether or not self-defining memories varied across cohorts in terms of event types and the degree of meaning making. There were no significant gender findings in relation to self-defining event category or meaning making, or interactions between gender and cohort for these variables. Finding some support for the second hypothesis, we found a marginally significant difference in self-defining memory event by cohort, $\chi^2(24) = 38.35$, $p = .09$. As can be seen in Table 2, those coming of age in the 1960s predominantly reported memories about "*sexual experiences*" to the exclusion of other types of memories, possibly because sexuality in this decade was restricted to the bedroom, reflecting the social values of the time.

For the 70s cohort "*realisation of 'different' feelings toward same-sex*" and "*coming out to oneself as gay or lesbian*" become prominent and these two categories stay relatively prominent through all subsequent decades. This shift away from sexual experiences and towards the "self" is possibly a by-product of increasing social legitimacy, coinciding with positive political change. This is also a time not yet marred by AIDS; in some ways the post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS period was a "golden era" for gay men and women. Still, identities seem concentrated in one or two areas of the self.

TABLE 2
List of self-defining event categories and percentage reported by each cohort

Event type	1960s cohort	1970s cohort	1980s cohort	1990s cohort	2000s cohort
Realisation	7	32	5	27	17
Coming out to self	7	26	30	22	15
Coming out to others	7	11	10	18	20
Sexual experiences	40	16	18	12	15
Romance, relationships	20	10	13	13	15
Discrimination	7	5	13	3	11
Exposure	0	0	10	4	3

The 80s mark a turning point in gay identity from being concentrated in one or two domains to a diffusion of events across a variety of domains, a trend that becomes stronger in the cohorts to come. Interestingly, the event code for "*discrimination/marginalisation*" is highest in the 80s in relation to other decades, probably a result of socio-political prejudice surrounding the AIDS epidemic. Also, this decade marks the emergence of "*exposure to gay and/or lesbian people*" as important to gays, perhaps because the AIDS crisis and increasing prevalence of gays in the media created a higher profile for homosexuality.

In the 90s issues pertaining to the "self" persist as a strong concern for gays, suggesting the possibility that increasing social acceptance affords greater self-exploration and commitment. Also, for the first time in the 90s, relational experiences outnumber sexual experiences, perhaps reflecting the greater life-course possibilities that accompany greater social acceptance. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, discrimination decreases, potentially because of the numerous support services and organisations that were developed to ameliorate the devastation caused by AIDS.

Finally, more than any other decade, millennial gays embody an individualised identity, with almost all events being similarly represented. Interestingly, "*discrimination/marginalisation*" reappears in this decade, which seems counter-intuitive given that the AIDS crisis has disappeared from the young gay radar. Closer inspection of this discrimination signifies a qualitative distinction between millennial and 80s discrimination. Discrimination in the 1980s was systemic, social, cultural, and political, with an emphasis on the government. In the new millennium discrimination is almost exclusive to the personal realm, with stories of individual experiences of discrimination, such as the inability to bring your same-sex partner to the prom. Interestingly this example of millennial discrimination is based on an expectation to participate in a canonical rite of passage; indeed the importance of the prom date is almost mythical. Again this is evidence of integration into the dominant narrative, which is consistent of Cohler and Hammack's (2007) *narrative of emancipation*. This narrative resists the social categorisation of sexual identities, preferring a more inclusive and fluid narrative of sexuality for younger cohorts.

We turn now to some narrative examples, first focusing on narratives from the 60s cohort that centre on sex. George reports the following narrative:

In Grade 9 I consented to a clandestine rendez-vous with a male classmate at the supper hour back at the school locker room. It was one of the few times in my teens when I had sexual contact. The feel of another male body was exciting. However, my cultured guilt took over for it was several years before I was truly able to sort my true feelings out. Back then, there were very few people to talk to in a small town. However, I knew then that this was a memorable moment in my life and I would probably revisit it again.

This is a narrative about desire from a time when sexual contact was socially prohibited. There is also the reference to "cultured guilt", which is an example of the silencing that we suggest was more prominent in this era. Interestingly, he implies some resolution by sorting out his feelings, but he revisits this memory and reports it for this study, suggesting that this physical, sexual memory is an important part of his identity perhaps, we suggest, because of the era in which his identity was beginning to form.

Ronnie, from the millennial cohort reported the following narrative:

I can't say that I have any memories that lead to "strong feelings" about my being gay. However,

there is one memory I have that illustrates just why this is the case. That is, it illustrates just how natural I thought it was to be gay. In grade six, I remember many of my friends started talking more about girls they liked, celebrities and classmates alike. Some started asking girls out. First attempts at dating. One day I was sitting in class wondering why it was that I wasn't feeling any of these same feelings for girls. I looked around the classroom at each girl there and tried to think about whether or not I thought they were attractive. Or, to be more crude, if any of them turned me on. None really did, although I thought if I had to I could say I liked Cynthia, since she didn't seem too bad. But I did know that thinking about boys did excite me in the way that I thought was supposed to happen when I thought of girls. It didn't occur to me that this was significant at all, it was just what I thought, and that was all.

Ronnie gives us an example of a relatively normal feeling and an experience that is not clandestine, weird, silenced, or closeted. Although this narrative is about desire, it is more cognitive than it is physical in nature, as Ronnie is trying to *figure out* his desire.

These data are notable for several reasons. First, these results suggest that for older cohorts there were fewer possibilities to choose from for self-definition, exemplifying the *narrative of silence*. In the 1960s homosexuality was defined by straight and gay society as being about sex. Indeed, for men especially, social interactions and places where gay people could meet were predominantly focused on sex (Loughery, 1998). This appears to be reflected in the dominance of one or two types of narratives, which we describe as a concentrated identity. In contrast, for the millennial gays there is no one specific kind of self-defining event, but rather a multiplicity. By this stage our culture has evolved to accept, or even embrace, many possibilities for gay youth to define themselves. In the new millennium, either there is no clear master narrative for gay identity or the master narrative is one of individualised identity. As such, millennial gays might be conforming to a broader master narrative held by youth that are coming of age in the new millennium, irrespective of their sexual identity. In the current cultural moment, straight and gay youth alike seem preoccupied with establishing themselves as unique (e.g., through dress-style, interests, etc.). It could be that for millennial gays even

their sexual identity is shaped by this master narrative that pushes for uniqueness, manifesting in the disposal of labels and the desire to simply be "who they are", which ultimately has come to reflect the *narrative of emancipation* (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). Thus, over these historical cohorts we see a movement from a "concentrated" identity to an "individualised" identity.

One interpretation of the data concerning self-defining memory events that we have put forth is that those in older cohorts have fewer narrative options or possibilities for identity. Based on this interpretation, it is possible that the older cohorts may have a more integrated sexual identity because there were fewer options for self-definition, making the process of integration easier. We also suggested that older cohorts may have less need to make meaning of personal experiences, due to cultural master narratives that facilitate self-understanding. To further examine this interpretation we investigated the degree of meaning that participants made of their memories.

To examine whether cohort predicted the degree of meaning making reported we conducted an ANOVA including event type and cohort as predictors of meaning. Results showed that there was a marginal cohort effect, $F(4, 218) = 1.24$, $p = .05$. Post-hoc Tukey's test showed that those who came of age in the 1970s and 2000s had the most meaning in their self-defining memories compared to those who came of age in the 1960s (those who came of age in the 80s and 90s did not differ from other groups). In terms of event type, there was a significant main effect, $F(7, 218) = 2.78$, $p < .01$. Post-hoc Tukey tests showed that narratives about "*coming out to the self*" had the most meaning compared to narratives about "*sexual experiences, fantasies, or thought*" or "*exposure to gay and/or lesbian people*". There were no main effects of or interactions with gender.

Although our findings on cohort and meaning are marginal they are potentially illuminating, and an argument can be made for how the fluctuations in meaning-making activity parallel the cultural evolution in which they are framed. That members of the 60s cohort engaged in the least meaning making may be best explained by the ubiquitous silencing that occurred in this era. Under such conditions of silence there was little room for exploring one's identity or integrating it into the self in any overt way. We see a rise in meaning making in the 70s cohort. Given that this "golden era" marked the first major advancements in gay

rights activity and also an increase in the visibility of gay people and their issues, cohort members had greater access to shared material for integration into their identities. Thus cohort members began constructing the cultural gay experience, and infusing it with shared meaning—the result being new master narratives for which identification was possible. There were no significant differences in meaning making for the groups that came of age in the 80s and 90s when compared to the other groups, perhaps because the master narratives that had been established by the 70s cohort facilitated the integration process for later cohorts, relieving them of the need to engage in elaborative meaning-making processes. Finally, we see an increase in meaning-making activity in the millennial gay cohort. This is consistent with our previous interpretations that millennial gays have stopped identifying with antiquated master narratives, which no longer account for or capture the experience of what it is like growing up gay in this generation—a generation that emphasises the individual over the collective. As such, we see millennial gays engage in meaning making once again, so that they may negotiate, and ultimately integrate, a new cultural moment in time.

Importantly, event type also predicted meaning, in particular the narrative of coming out. However, we do not view event type and cohort as competing predictor variables. Instead, we suggest that increasing social acceptance likely provided greater opportunities for meaning making; or put differently, more possibilities for events with which to define oneself. Indeed, our data and others' (e.g., Floyd & Bakeman, 2006) show that the age of coming out is becoming progressively lower with each cohort (e.g., in our data set the age of coming out was 30 in the 1960s and 70s cohorts, 23 in the 1980s cohort, 20 in the 1990s cohort, and 17 in the millennial cohort). Thus we see event types as the raw material that each cohort has for narration, which predict both meaning and relate to the cultural happenings experienced by a given cohort.

In sum, we must acknowledge the caution with which these findings should be interpreted. The cohorts may not necessarily be pure, in that they could be impacted by factors outside the realm of sexuality that have also evolved with time. For instance, our findings for the millennial cohort may be contaminated by an enormous self-help industry, which might press younger people to make meaning of their personal experiences compared to those coming of age in previous generations.

We now turn to some examples concerning meaning making, beginning with Sameer, who is a millennial gay:

I think the most defining conversation of my sexuality was with my twin brother after I came out to him. This was a few months before high school graduation, and I had already come out to about 8 friends and my mom. I found a time where I knew nobody would be around for a good couple of hours or so, and actually made him play hangman to guess the word "gay", and told him the word was about me. I just couldn't tell him outright. Just afraid I suppose, afraid of the reaction or of saying it too abruptly. But afterwards the whole conversation was really about our mutual belief that the general population was intolerant (coming from a very small city), and how silly intolerance, homophobia, racism, etc. actually are. It turned out to be a very philosophical conversation, leading us to think about what life actually is and how happiness is the only thing that matters. It was a very uplifting and memorable conversation. It made me understand who I am, because I had to explain to someone very close to me when, how, what I felt and why I felt it. Up until this time I didn't accept myself, I didn't accept that I couldn't change, I wanted to be normal and live normally with a wife and kids and a house and a job. I didn't want to go through telling people and being different. And after this conversation, I still didn't. I didn't accept myself until a few months ago, after I'd 'lost' every tie that I have with my 'old' life as a closeted person. I now live with a roommate who knows I'm gay, I have many friends who I'm completely out to, I volunteer for the University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Allies center. And I've now endured a few same-sex relationships.

Sameer represents several important aspects of the millennial gay narrative. First, he engages in a reflective narrative process about who he is, which was less prevalent in the older cohort. Second, while there have been massive cultural and societal changes in the direction of acceptance, he reports quite a painful experience of intolerance. Thus, despite a more accepting atmosphere, the environment in which millennial gays

are attempting to integrate their personal experiences into a coherent identity is far from utopian.

David, who is from the 60s cohort, offers a contrast to Sameer's narrative:

> *When I was a graduate student I told a friend that I had known for five years, who I knew was going to gay bars, that I was gay. He invited me to go with him to a gay bar. This was the beginning of my coming out. We were never sexual friends but without his accompanying me, it would have been much more difficult to come out. He then became my 'confidant' and I would tell him about my experiences meeting people. Having someone to share with was invaluable. He died in 1992 from the complications of HIV. I am in a very happy partnered relationship now, but I have never missed anyone who has died (including my parents) as much as I miss my first gay platonic friend Arnold.*

This narrative, like Sameer's, is also about coming out to others; however, David narrates the event in a factual manner without reflection or elaboration on the impact of the event.

In summary, we assert that the self-defining experiences of our cohorts tell us a story that reflects the evolution of the gay cultural-historical experience. Our tentative interpretations are that pervasive silencing restricted meaning-making processes for those coming of age in the 60s cohort. The 70s cohort engaged in elaborative meaning-making activity, perhaps to make sense of their newfound liberation and visibility, establishing cultural master narratives for gays in the process. Finally, we suggest that the personal events shared by younger cohorts do not come packaged with meaning, resulting in a need for more individualised meaning-making processes.

Summary of results

An exploration of the *cultural* and *personal* memories relevant to historical cohorts of gays and lesbians has indicated variations in identity across historical cohorts. When prompted for a memory that pertained to a cultural event linked to one's identity, older cohorts shared clearly cultural events compared to younger cohorts who had a more personal focus. In terms of self-defining memories, older cohorts shared memories that were concentrated in one or two life domains, which were restricted to the private realm. In contrast, younger cohorts shared a variety of self-defining memory events. In terms of identity integration, silencing in the 60s may have restricted meaning making for this cohort, whereas members of the 70s engaged in more elaborative meaning-making activity. The millennial cohort engaged in elaborative meaning-making processes, perhaps due to their individualised identities, which falls outside the scope of previous cultural master narratives. Lastly, meaning-making activity also varied by event type, which may be linked to available opportunities and experiences afforded to each cohort. Together these results suggest that some cohorts have more obvious cultural master narratives that inform their identities, despite their overall non-canonical status (Bruner, 1990). Others find themselves in a process of developing such scripts or, like the millennial gay cohort, do not share cultural memories and are instead characterised by a multiplicity of personal narratives and a more elaborative identity integration process.

IMPLICATIONS: THE END OF GAY

In many ways the narratives shared with us have evidenced the *rise and fall of gay* (Harris, 1997). Early accounts of the gay life story were largely silenced by the canonical narrative of heterosexuality, which was illustrated in the self-defining memories of gays who came of age in the 1960s. Soon after, the gays of the 70s and 80s fought the canonical narrative, and through activism generated a communal, politicised voice. The emergence of this voice marked the *rise of gay* culture, and was reflected in narratives with topics such as Stonewall, AIDS, and the gay rights movement.

For years the gay voice challenged the canonical, but as culture evolved to be more accepting of homosexuality the communal gay and lesbian voice waned. Gay individuals who came of age in more recent decades reported a diverse array of narratives that were more personal in nature. Despite a rich history of comradeship, the need for political unification in the 21st century may be less pressing, offering gay individuals a multiplicity of narratives with which they can identify. Thus, their experiences possess less cultural meaning, at the same time as individual meaning making has increased.

In his work *The End of Gay (and the Death of Heterosexuality)*, Bert Archer urges older gays and lesbians to "free succeeding generations from

the chains they took up to pull us into the modern age'' (1999, p. 284). There is no doubt that the achievements enjoyed by gays in the millennial era are bountiful, reflecting acceptance and, in many cases, an increasingly socially legitimate place in both the medical, legal, and religious world. This acceptance has created an environment that enables a multiplicity of gay narratives to flourish, resembling the plethora of possibilities that are characteristic of the canonical narrative of heterosexuality. To this end, millennial gays are not concerned with establishing themselves as distinct from the canonical, in contrast to their predecessors.

However, the canonical narrative perpetuates itself by silencing other narratives, which is the mechanism through which it maintains its power. The canonical *is*, because other narratives *are not*. When the individualised millennial gay narrative and canonical narratives converge, silence consumes the voice that was once established by a revolutionary identity, giving way to the *fall of gay*. What significance will the transition from having a revolutionary identity to being just like everybody else hold for gay people?

An interesting consequence of the individualisation of gay identity and the emergence of a multiplicity of potential gay narratives for young people is a culture of voice and silence between such narratives and the narratives held by older cohorts. This interchange may result in marginalisation among the marginalised.[6] That is, a narrative might not only be marginalised by canonical heterosexuality, but it might also be silenced within the gay community by a more powerful or socially acceptable gay narrative.

One mechanism that enables a single narrative to marginalise another narrative is *positioning*, which refers to the social and emotional standpoint from which the narrative is told (Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990; Thorne & McLean, 2003). For example, one of our participants wrote, ''I don't particularly like to subscribe to a particular label, because I find it limiting and exclusive . . .'' by voicing this position the reporter effectively silences personal narratives that express the position that endorses labels. We suggest that the interplay of voice and silence

[6] See Loiacano (1989) who discusses how racial and sexual identity interact to produce marginalisation among the marginalised, specifically examining the challenges associated with identification as an African American in the predominantly white gay community.

between these positional narratives may challenge the capacity for gays and lesbians of different age cohorts to form meaningful transgenerational relationships. Additionally, the multiplicity of narratives characteristic of the millennial cohort is further subjected to within-cohort silencing.

An illuminating parallel can be drawn between the status of voice and silence in gay identity and that of feminist identity over the past 50 years. Feminist activity has evolved considerably, an evolution that can be roughly captured in three distinct waves. Second-wave feminism resembles the identity politics of gays of the late 60s, 70s, and 80s, as both movements were concerned with attaining equality for its constituents. Currently, however, scholars have documented and critiqued what they call a ''post-feminist'' movement (Coppock, Haydon, & Richter, 1995; Porter, Ducker, Ferrell, & Helton, 2001). Of interest to us is a collection of post-feminists who argue that feminism is no longer pertinent to women's lives (Coppock et al., 1995; Porter et al., 2001). Narratives like this have created a tension between individuals who subscribe to the different schools of feminist thought, who often come from different cohorts.

The formation of the individualised millennial narrative, or the *narrative of emancipation* (Cohler & Hammack, 2007), represents an analogous movement in gay identity politics; that is, the beginning of a ''post-gay'' era. It is possible that the inevitable silencing that is reflected in a post-gay narrative will challenge the formation a coherent identity. The interplay, or perhaps more appropriately the tension, between multiple gay narratives in contemporary society, as well as the loss of gay narratives altogether, should be the subject of further narrative inquiry.

By this point the reader may have deduced that as authors we are positioned against the individualised millennial gay narrative, given that we have spent some time discussing the challenges it imposes on integration and the development of coherence in one's identity. However, it is our goal to treat gay identity in a manner that recognises the inevitability of the individualisation of gay narratives. A multiplicity of narratives is not inherently problematic but, from a narrative perspective, silence is. That is, silence limits the telling of situated stories about the self, which is the material used in the social construction of identity. In contrast, it is voice that promotes telling. With this turning point in gay identity we suggest that it

is important to encourage the conditions of voice that are necessary to propagate a more sustainable and ubiquitous notion of acceptance.

Recent events in California point to the fact that society is perhaps not as accepting as one might expect, and that gay is still a threatened identity. In the state of California, on 26th November 2008, a vote in favour of Proposition 8 turned back the clock on gay rights. The Proposition changed the state constitution to limit the definition of marriage to a union between a man and woman, and eliminated the marriage rights of same-sex couples. It is insufficient that only in times of threat do gays get torn out of complacency to protect their human rights. For this reason the gay developmental trajectory cannot be collapsed into that of the canonical, or straight, experience, which is in effect what silencing does. Without voice millennial gays are left to negotiate important aspects of development that are dissimilar from their heterosexual counterparts, such as enduring experiences of discrimination based on sexual orientation. Thus there are real risks associated with re-silencing communal narratives of gay identity.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our first limitation is the homogeneity of our sample, restricting generalisations to various ethnic groups who might have quite different stories to tell. We further cannot generalise to people from varying socio-economic levels or geographic locations. There is no doubt that such positions will impact how history is remembered and experienced, and will be important for future research. Second, using dichotomous and restricted categories for sexual orientation may have limited the stories told about fluidity in sexual identity. Third, given that this was an Internet survey there may have been access limitations. Fourth, although this was an anonymous survey there might be a sample bias concerning participants' willingness to take part, particularly those who are more silenced. Finally, we note that cohort and age are confounded. Thus our conclusions about cohort differences should be taken with caution and in consideration of possible factors related to age.

As we close, we would like to take a step outside the specifics of this study to suggest that our data fit within a larger literature on the social construction of identity. With other studies on the social negotiations of identity and voice and silence, this study highlights the multiple levels of negotiation available for future inquiry. The bulk of previous research has examined dyads in negotiation (e.g., Fivush et al., 2000; Pasupathi & Rich, 2005). Here we have shifted from the dyadic negotiation of telling memories to examine instead the individual's negotiation within his or her larger cultural and historical context. Other studies might include negotiations within families (e.g., Bohanek, Marin, Fivush, & Duke, 2006), friendship groups (e.g., Bamberg, 2004), and other groupings that would help researchers to understand the diverse levels of negotiation for narrative identity. We close by emphasising the importance of the personal and social processes of identity development that are deeply embedded in cultural and historical developments relevant to the person.

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