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**GAY MEN AT MIDLIFE AND ADULT LEARNING:
AN UNEASY TRUCE WITH HETERONORMATIVITY**

A Thesis in

Adult Education

by

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ABSTRACT

Framed from a social constructivist perspective and informed by queer theory, this qualitative narrative inquiry was undertaken to explore how self-identified gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. In their own words and through their own stories, thirteen gay men between the ages of 40 and 60 relate lived experiences which explicate ways in which they both adhere to and resist societal and cultural expectations and understandings as to what it means to be an aging gay man. The findings have implications for adult development and adult education, two fields in which this group has largely been ignored.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of a qualitative study that seeks to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife within a heteronormative society. The chapter includes a background to the study, a purpose statement, a conceptual framework that guides the study, an overview of the research methodology, an identification of the significance of the study, definitions of some terminology used in this document, and a listing of assumptions and limitations associated with the study.

Background of the Study

Considerable societal changes in North America over the past three decades have resulted in increased visibility and public awareness of sexual minorities—an umbrella term inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender or trans-identified persons (LGBT); as well as those who disavow the notion and categorization of static sexual or gender identities, preferring instead the self-referent *queer* (Q). Pop culture, the Internet, and mainstream media have helped bring LGBTQ issues “out of the closet”—a far cry from when, as a young adult, I began to challenge heterosexism and to negotiate my own sexual identity in the 1970s. Television programs are including more lesbian, gay, and bisexual characters in roles that are not centered on sexual identity. *All My Children*, a long-standing and popular soap opera, recently introduced a transgender character. Same sex personal ads are now routine in many newspapers, and featuring lesbians or gays on televised reality programs and dating shows is now commonplace.

Two shows in particular, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk*, have brought attention to the reclaiming of the word *queer* by those sexual minorities who employ it as a source of pride and power (which is the way that I am using it throughout this document), while simultaneously robbing the term of some of its provocative defiance.

This heightened visibility has not gone unchallenged. The same communication tools (e.g., the Internet and mass media) are also utilized by those who would prefer to see all things queer expunged from society, or at best, relegated to the realm of the invisible and the silenced. This demand for silence and invisibility is rooted in *heteronormativity*, the deeply ensconced and taken-for-granted societal norm of heterosexuality—which has also been referred to as *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1980). Heteronormativity serves to sustain *hegemonic masculinity* which Connell (1987) defines as “the maintenance of practices that institutionalize men’s dominance over women” (p. 185), and subordinates masculinities that fail to meet the hegemonic norm including, for example, gay men. As a result of heteronormativity, there is no “normal” way for sexual minorities to present themselves in a heterosexist environment (Kissen, 2002). Interaction is often predicated on a tacit agreement not to be one’s true self. Although LGBTQ persons may be “tolerated” as long as they excise any mention or indication of their sexual identity, any violation of this imperative results in a condition of *hyper-visibility* (Straut & Sapon-Shevin, 2002); or, in the common vernacular, sexual minorities are accused of “flaunting it.” In effect, sexual minorities live their lives ever mindful of having to balance between visibility and invisibility, and the costs and risks

associated with each. Indeed, many sexual minorities have come to both expect and experience backlash and contention (such as dehumanizing religious and political rhetoric, and court battles over domestic partnerships and the right to marry)--not only in the ongoing struggle for equity and full citizenship, but also in the routines of daily life.

Although institutional and personal hostility towards those who identify as—or who are perceived as—sexual minorities remains pervasive, there has been some progress in the past decade. Berger (1996) offers an example from academia. He relates that when he was entering graduate school, he was cautioned “becoming identified with the topic of homosexuality is dangerous...it could lead to ostracism, academic difficulties, and future employment problems” (p. *xiii*). While such concerns are still valid, one welcome outcome of increased societal awareness and visibility of LGBTQ issues is a degree of heightened attention on the part of some social scientists and educational researchers to studying sexual minorities. In education, much of this research has focused on LGBT youth, e.g., preparing K-12 teachers to address the needs of LGBT students (Kissen, 2002); or on the topic of “out” faculty (McNaron, 1997; Pugh, 1998; Tisdell & Taylor, 1995). While such research is necessary and important, it only scratches the surface of LGBTQ research opportunities. Myrick and Brown (1998), state that “higher education has made great progress in creating open classroom and organizational environments for diverse populations; however, little research has been published on the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in college and university classrooms” (p. 295). Similarly, within the field of adult education, LGBTQ issues are more visible and receive more attention than was the case only a decade ago (Hill, 1995); and many in the

field are routinely inclusive of LGBTQ persons and concerns as a matter of course (e.g., Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; St.Clair & Sandlin, 2004; Sheared & Sissel, 2001; Tisdell, 2003). This increased attention is due in part to a growing awareness that “we occupy a historical moment marked by multivocality, contested meanings, paradigmatic controversies, and new textual forms” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 162). In response, many adult educators have become attuned to creating or facilitating more inclusive learning environments in an attempt to provide meaningful learning experiences for all learners; to help learners question theory from their own cultural or lived experiences; and to acknowledge and foster alternative ways of knowing (Amstutz, 1999; Tisdell, 1995).

Yet, while there have been considerable publications regarding LGBTQ issues in higher education and related fields (McNaron, 1997; Pinar, 1998; Ristock & Taylor, 1998; Talburt, 2000; Tierney, 1997), there has been little empirical work in adult education around LGBT or queer concerns, and few additions to the adult education body of knowledge specifically geared to such issues. In particular, educational research dealing specifically with middle-aged and older LGBTQ people is virtually non-existent (Bettinger, 2004).

A similar situation exists regarding research in the social sciences. Adult education is heavily informed by such research, particularly that dealing with adult development; yet such research has traditionally ignored middle-aged and older sexual minorities as well. This was certainly evident in the following quote from Berger (1982a):

The greatest grievance, it seems to me, has been the way older gay men and lesbians have been relegated to a land from where they are never seen nor heard from. Like the Amerasian child of the conflict in Southeast Asia, the older homosexual is not wanted by either side—by the gerontologists or the homosexuals...I feel more disturbed than ever about the fact that almost every gerontological researcher and commentator has chosen to ignore older folks who happen to be homosexual. Can these researchers believe that homosexuals self-destruct at the age of forty? Or have they simply been unaware of the millions of older persons who are homosexuals? (p. xiv)

Kooden (2000) provides yet another telling example: “in 1998, the MacArthur Foundation published *Successful Aging*, the results of its ten-year study on aging. The words *gay* or *lesbian* or *homosexual* are not to be found in the index” (p.2). This dearth of research is a salient issue because theories and models of adult development receive considerable attention in the field of adult education—both as research topics and as guides to practice (Creel, 1996; Imel, 2001). Indeed, Clark and Caffarella (1999) highlight the reliance of adult education on the literature dealing with adult development as follows:

Many aspects of our thinking about adult learners and the learning process are shaped by our knowledge of how adults change and develop across the life span. It is essential, then, for us to stay current with the advances in this rich and influential literature. (p.1)

Midlife, a concept that will be discussed more fully in chapter 2, is generally considered as a significant period of transition and change in one’s lifespan. It is often

perceived as a period of reassessment and reflection on one's past, and introspection regarding one's future (Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus, & Peng, 1994). In midlife, many people find themselves questioning everything--careers, life choices, and priorities—and assessing the possibilities for making changes. It is often seen as a point in life when one shifts from seeing the future in terms of one's potential and begins to see it in terms of one's limitations. Yet according to The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development (MIDMAC), midlife is perhaps the least studied and most ill-defined of any period in life (MIDMAC, 2006). Hayslip and Panek (2002) share a similar perspective in that despite portraits of midlife emphasizing such events as the empty nest syndrome, menopause, or the midlife crisis, “little is known about these events and other key experiences in midlife” (p.111).

While often defined from a chronological framework (for example, between the ages of forty and sixty), an understanding of midlife also entails social and cultural expectations (Neugarten, 1976), and as Merriam (1999) has noted “research suggests that contemporary age norms do exert a powerful influence on people's thinking” (p. 70). However, a point that is particularly relevant for this research study is that contemporary midlife is characterized by a growing diversity in roles, resources, and relationships (Moen and Wethington, 1999); indeed, many old norms and cultural expectations are out of date and others are in a state of flux (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997; Settersen & Mayer, 1997). Furthermore, traditional models of adult development were developed based on research that has been criticized for dealing solely or primarily with males, or representing the perspective of male authors. As a result, the picture of adulthood that emerged too often excluded the voices of women, people of color, and those of varying

socioeconomic classes (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Yet, adult educators need to be concerned about such difference as Caffarella and Clark (1999) note: “it is being taken very seriously in the literature on adult development, and it must be taken seriously in adult education as well” (p. 100). Fortunately, this situation has begun to be remedied as indicated by increased attention to such topics as women’s learning and development (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Hayes & Flannery, 2000); cultural aspects of adult development—with mention of gays and lesbians (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000); race and/or ethnicity (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002); and the influence of spirituality on growth and development (Kimble, McFadden, Ellor, & Seeber, 1995; Tisdell, 2003). By not ignoring or taking for granted issues of *otherness*, one can begin “to see what used to be less visible and to hear what was formerly unspoken” (Caffarella & Clark, 1999, p.100).

One type of otherness, status as a sexual minority, has failed to garner the same degree of research interest despite criticism that adult development research has been almost exclusively heterosexual in its focus (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). Although some developmental issues across the lifespan may be the same or similar to those of heterosexuals, adult development patterns and models may be largely irrelevant for lesbians and gay men because they fail to take into account historical events, social context, and lived experiences of sexual minorities; thus, traditional notions and models of identity formation and adult development cannot be presumed to be applicable to sexual minorities (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Kertzner, 2001). Cruz (2003) offers a similar perspective in relating that as he sat through courses relating to aging and

development, he came to a realization that his being gay makes his life qualitatively different than those who are non-gay. Without calling it such, he provides an example of the entrenched nature of heteronormativity when he asserts “those persons who cannot legally marry...are not only outside of our collective social imaginations but are also generally left out of aging-related academic research and writing” (p. *xi*). In the same vein, Kooden (2002) reports that many gay men follow developmental paths different from their heterosexual counterparts; for example, some come out very early in life whereas others do so at a much later age—sometimes even while heterosexually married. Individual differences in development pathways for sexual minorities are also subject to influence by a host of other factors including family relationships (Anderson & Hayes, 1996; Patterson & D’Augelli, 1998); class, culture, race, and ethnicity (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Greene, 1997; Greene & Croom, 2000); spirituality (Johnson, 2000; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992); and one’s geographic area (Smith & Mancoske, 1997).

LGBTQ issues in aging are receiving more interest among some social scientists as well (Cruz, 2003; Kimmel & Martin, 2001). While several studies have dealt with issues facing gay men and lesbians in older adulthood (Berger, 1996; Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Herdt & de Vries, 2004), or across the lifespan (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995), there is very little research that deals specifically and explicitly with LGBTQ persons at midlife. Sullivan & Reynolds (2003) report that much of the gerontological literature dealing with gays and lesbians “includes participants who would not normally be thought of by any definition as old” (p. 157), with the lower age limit for inclusion as “older” often ranging from 40 to 50 years of age. Similarly, Hash and Cramer (2003) report “most researchers looking at gay men in midlife have either

included them in studies of older gay men...or have based their conclusions solely upon theory” (p.48). As a result, little is known about the lived experiences of midlife gay men. As an example of conflated age range, Peacock’s (2000) study of adult development in an “older cohort” of gay men included participants whose ages ranged from ages 32 to 74. Sullivan & Reynolds (2003) used narrative analysis to document the types of sex gay men were having, how they felt about it, and what their social locations were. Their participants ranged in age from the mid-30s to mid-60s. On the other hand, Kertzner (2001) follows a more typical definition of midlife as between an age span of 40 to 60, but acknowledges that such definitions are arguable and to some extent arbitrary. His study (Kertzner, 1999) of the integration of socio-historic factors (such as HIV/AIDS) into a homosexual identity included 30 participants between the ages of 40 and 51.

Despite such preliminary research into developmental aspects related to gay men, there remains a decided lack of data based research on how gay men at midlife have learned from and make meaning of their life experiences. Among the factors that remain unexplored is the influences exerted upon gay men by virtue of living within a heteronormative environment. In what ways and under what circumstances do gay men at midlife either contest or adhere to homophobia or heterosexism? In a society that privileges heterosexual marriage, what sorts of relationships are developed by those to whom it is denied? What is the sense of life opportunities (e.g., career choices, parenting, educational pursuits) having been influenced—either adversely or positively—by an awareness of a gay identity; and by the stigma and marginalization that occurs should such an identity be disclosed? The understandings engendered through the lived

experiences in the face of rampant heterosexism and of gay men currently at midlife might offer many, and perhaps unique, lessons on these and other important issues.

Conceptual Framework

The overall conceptual framework for this study is social constructivism. Constructivists believe in the interrelatedness of behavior, mental processes, and the environment (Graedler, 1997). Constructivist theory is based on the assumption that knowledge is constructed as people attempt to make sense of their experience. Social constructivists concur with the basic premise that human beings make meaning as they engage with the world, but a social constructivist perspective highlights that such meaning is *socially constructed*--it is developed, transmitted, and shared within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998); or as Gergen (1999) puts it: "individuals construct the world, but they do so largely with categories supplied by social relationships" (p. 237). This perspective also holds that reality is itself socially constructed through an on-going, subjective, and dynamic process in which reality is reproduced by people acting on their interpretation and their knowledge of it. Reality is seen as multiply constructed through language including stories and conversations; systems of meaning; memory; rituals and institutions that have been created by people; and ways in which the world has been physically and materially shaped (McLeod, 2001). Such a framework reflects an ontological perspective that sees the world as one comprised of multiple local and specifically constructed realities which can be viewed relativistically, that is, from a variety of perspectives. Consequently, social constructivism focuses on the social, cultural, and historical contexts as determinants in growth and learning (Vygotsky 1978, 1981). Some authors, such as Gergen (2006),

differentiate between *social constructivism* and *social constructionism*. The social milieu is considered as a powerful determinant of knowledge in each perspective, but social constructionists consider a social constructivist perspective to be tied to a dualist epistemology and ultimately concerned more on the individual and psychological processes than on broader social and cultural domains. While this distinction is germane to the issue of heteronormativity, overall, the differentiation between the social constructivism and social constructionism is not made for the purposes of this study.

Social constructivism also reflects human development theory within a socio-cultural context. Individual development comes from social interactions where cultural meanings are shared by the group and eventually internalized by the individual (Richardson, 1997). Hence, individuals construct knowledge by interacting with the environment, and in the process both the individual and the environment are changed. It is through this interaction that interpretation and meaning making occurs, individuals develop, and the world is constructed. Reality is never separate from perception. What is to be considered true is a socially negotiated theoretical and contextual truth (Habermas, 1989); and the collective knowledge that is built together is used by each by each individual. Nardi (1999) demonstrates this concept in his study of gay men's friendships which serve as "avenues through which gay social worlds are constructed, the sites upon which gay men's identities and communities are formed and where the quotidian dimensions of our lives are carried out" (p. 13). Hence, social networks provide important sites for gay men's development, for the maintenance of personal identity, and for the reproduction of gay community and political identity (Nardi, 1999). This echoes Hill's (1995) contention that it is through such social interactions that *fugitive knowledge*,

that which is produced outside the dominant discourse, is produced and transmitted. Yet this construction of knowledge and its exactment in the daily lives and experiences of gay men at midlife still occurs within a broader context of societal heteronormativity. Thus, knowledge can be liberatory by offering the potential to challenge dominant structures that propagate and reinforce heterosexism and homophobia, and even the notion of gay identity itself; or oppressive by conforming to and reinforcing heteronormativity. It is for this reason that this study will also be informed by some aspects of queer theory.

Attempting to define queer theory is somewhat of an elusive task; indeed, Jagose (1996) states that its clout and political efficacy depend in part on “its resistance to definition” (p. 1). Hill (1996) explains queer theory as:

a complex set of notions, a field of research and inquiry, as well as a process of action—rooted in a self-reflexive social, cultural, political and historical context that acknowledges the legacy of feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and activism, as well as current trends in post-structuralism and critical postmodernism. (p. 113)

Questions associated with visibility and invisibility are at the heart of a queer perspective (Sedgwick, 1990), as well as fundamental in the degree to which heteronormativity is either accommodated or contested. Certainly a major tenet of queer theory, that of the problematization of sexual and gender categories--and of identities in general, would not seem to apply to a study dealing specifically with self-identified gay men. However, “queer notions...can be applied to arenas of theory, practice, and research beyond those specifically involving sexual orientation or gender identity” (Hill, 2004, p. 86). Furthermore, queer theory highlights that sexuality infuses many realms of

life not conventionally thought of as sexual, including such phenomena as racism, sexism, xenophobia, global politics, AIDS, international monetary organizations, medical policies, international trade and labor, tourism, and information technology (Altman, 2001; Connell, 1999; Gamson & Moon, 2004; Hill, 2004; Massad, 2002). Any or all of these phenomena may be germane to meaning making among gay men at midlife. Indeed, one aspect of queer theory that seems particularly germane to this study is its inherent predisposition towards dissonance and its sense of opposition and resistance. Queer theory's insistence on challenging cultural and societal assumptions and expectations imposed by heteronormativity provides the "potential to open up new possibilities of learning for adults... [and to] create new knowledge about ourselves, about our differences, about our own humanities, and even about how learning is created or suppressed in our societies" (Edwards & Brooks, 1999, p.55). While this study is not designed as action research, queer theory helps to maintain cognizance of the potentially transgressive nature of constructed knowledge as "instrumentally valuable as a means to social emancipation, which as an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 172).

Statement of the Problem

As a well-established societal norm, heteronormativity engenders both *cultural heterosexism*--stigmatization, denial, or denigration of sexual minorities in cultural institutions such as the legal system or academia; and *psychological heterosexism*--a person's internalized worldview (Herek, 1990), which is more often called *homophobia*. Blumenfeld (1992) identifies various detriments of homophobia including (a) it locks people into rigid gender-based roles that inhibit creativity and self-expression; (b) it

compromises the integrity of heterosexuals by pressuring them to treat sexual minorities badly; (c) it inhibits the ability to form close, intimate relationships with members of one's own sex; (d) it generally restricts communication with a significant portion of the populations, and, more specifically, limits family relationships; (e) it prevents heterosexuals from accepting the benefits and gifts offered by sexual minorities; and (f) it inhibits appreciation of other types of diversity.

Heteronormativity, along with its concomitant "twin plagues" (Sears, 1997, p.14) of heterosexism and homophobia, serve to devalue, denigrate, and marginalize sexual minorities. The heteronormative demand to exact silence and invisibility upon sexual minorities has likely contributed to the longstanding lack of attention to these populations and related issues in both the adult education and adult development fields.

Consequently, there is little understanding as to the relevance of traditional adult development models to sexual minorities; and to the processes by which these individuals make meaning of their lives. Yet, as sexual minorities have become more visible, some scholars and researchers in both fields have begun to recognize that the lived experiences of LGBTQ persons are worthy of increased attention (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Gabbay & Wahler, 2002; Kimmel, Rose, & David, 2006). In particular, this has been evident in the field of gerontology (Cook-Daniels, 1997; Cohler & Hostetler, 2002; Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Whitford & Quam, 1995; Quam, 1997), and regarding young people (Gray, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1998; Sears, 2004). However, in general, research related to sexual minorities at midlife remains sparse; and the negotiation of midlife in a heteronormative society remains unexplored. A key point in developmental research is that gender--irrespective of sexual identity--is an important consideration in the

exploration of lived experiences (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Kertzner, 2001; Kimmel & Sang, 1995). Indeed, the worlds of lesbians and gay men can be radically divergent involving different issues, situations, and historical moments (Nimmons, 2002). Although the lived experiences and cultural innovations of lesbians is as deeply important and richly complex as those of gay men, they are “so distinct that to suggest otherwise would be to blur profound differences and do injustice to those in both groups” (p. 223). It could be reasonably assumed that the same holds true for bisexuals and transgender persons. To both acknowledge and respect these differences, this research will focus on gay men. Specifically, the purpose of this study is to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife within a heteronormative society.

Research Questions

This study is framed from a social constructivist perspective and is informed by queer theory. As such, it is guided by the following questions which are designed to address issues that are poorly understood:

1. What is the subjective experience of aging in contemporary midlife gay men; and what is the significance of social interaction on both self-identification as gay and life experiences associated with middle age?
2. What is the sense of life opportunities having been either enhanced or restricted by being gay; and what strategies or forms of accommodation to, as well as resistance to, heteronormativity have been part of these men’s developmental histories?
3. How do these men make meaning of or reframe their personal

developmental journeys in light of inapplicability or asynchrony with traditional life course markers; the social stigma associated with being gay; and potential age cohort effects for those gay men currently in midlife (e.g., Stonewall; HIV/AIDS; growing visibility of LGBTQ issues and people in contemporary society)?

Overview of Design and Methodology

This qualitative study will be a narrative inquiry into how gay men experience and negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. A narrative perspective, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, sees developmental change as experienced through the ongoing construction and reconstruction of narrative or stories (Rossiter, 2002) around the lived experiences of a person or group of people. In order to have “information rich cases” (Patton, 1990, p.169) from which one can learn about the issues germane to a study’s purpose, one needs to “select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2002, p. 12). Thus, a strategy of purposeful sampling—including persons I know complemented by word-of-mouth and snowball sampling--will be used to recruit participants who meet the pre-established criteria for inclusion: a current age between 40 and 60, and a self-awareness of gay identity.

The determination of which data collection method or methods to use in qualitative research is based on which will yield the best information with which to answer the question posed by the study (Merriam, 2002). The primary data collection method for this research will be semi-structured interviews directed around the earlier noted research questions. These are designed to explore participants’ perspectives and understandings as to the impacts of a gay identity on their own development, as well as

the meanings and influences of being gay at midlife. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) describe an interview as “a purposeful conversation, usually between two people...that is directed by one in order to get information from the other” (p. 94). The semi-structured approach to interviewing is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording of the order of the questions is determined ahead of time (Merriam, 2002). In line with a narrative approach, participants will be encouraged to share stories and cite examples from their own experiences. A secondary data source for this study will be documents (written, oral, visual, or cultural artifacts). Participants will be asked to provide 1 or more photographs, pieces of art, prose, or other cultural artifacts that are personally meaningful to their sense of self. Discussion of these items will provide opportunity for deeper exploration into their relevance and significance at this stage of the participants’ lives.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews will facilitate a simultaneous approach to data analysis, and allow for adjustments to questions and discussion topics as the study progresses. Additionally, I intend on utilizing a researcher journal to record and reflect upon my observations, impressions, and affect during the research process. A more thorough discussion of the methodology utilized in this study, to include measures to insure trustworthiness of the data, is presented in Chapter 3.

Significance

This study is significant on a number of fronts. First, much of the adult development body of knowledge has been developed under the grip of heteronormativity, and thus reflects an overt or implicit heterosexist viewpoint. As a result, the lives and experiences of sexual minorities have traditionally been largely invisible in adult

development research. Such exclusion or oversight, even if unintentional, serves to perpetuate heterosexist assumptions and practices, and to reinforce further invisibility. Nevertheless, interest in issues related to aging among sexual minorities is growing (Sullivan & Reynolds, 2003). Although early studies often conflated the experiences of gay men and lesbians, many contemporary researchers typically consider the influence of gender as a key factor in life experiences; thus, lesbians and gay men are less likely to be considered as an amorphous group.

The onset of HIV/AIDS in Western nations during the late 1980s and 1990s resulted in considerable research on gay men, most of which was quantitative; and some of which was aggregated by age groups (Sullivan & Reynolds, 2003). Yet, research on gay men tends to either focus on gay elders, or to lump all those over a given age (e.g., 40 or 50) into a category of “older” with little distinction made as to those who might be considered “middle aged” and those who might be considered “elderly.” Furthermore, this literature has been mostly written within the context of health, psychological adjustment, and social services (Sullivan & Reynolds, 2003)—with little or no consideration of homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity as contextual factors impacting on how gay men develop, age, and make meaning. In exploring how contemporary gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society, this research makes a valuable contribution by addressing factors heretofore largely ignored in the literature. As this age cohort is the first to reach midlife following Stonewall and AIDS--and in a societal environment that has seen sexual minority issues brought more into public awareness--this age cohort may well influence patterns of aging for subsequent

generations of gay men (and other sexual minorities)—as well as contribute to deeper understanding of adult development and aging in general

A second area of significance for this study is to the field of adult education. Adult education has long relied on the contributions that adult development theory has made to adult education theory and practice (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Educators' attitudes, policies, and actions have tremendous impact on both learning environments and learning outcomes. Yet, despite strides to become more truly inclusive, Grace (2001) asserts "mainstream adult education mimics the dominant culture in its commitment to hetero-normative status quo" (p. 267). This study helps to bridge the gap between social science research and adult education regarding middle-aged gay men, and serves as a first step in identifying and understanding the unique issues and concerns of this marginalized group whose members have been and remain largely invisible and unaddressed in the adult education literature.

This study is also of considerable personal significance. As a sexual minority myself, I face the impacts of heteronormativity, homophobia, and heterosexism on a daily basis—and I am aware of the constant emotional labor and tolls they can exact (Evans, 2002; Resides, 1996). I have a heuristic sense of what it is like to be marginalized or excluded from public, community-organized, and institutionally-sanctioned recognition and sharing of significant life markers, those "accustomed and anticipated temporal emblems of change, conflict, celebration, and resolution" (Galassi, 1991, p. 78), that are enjoyed by my heterosexual counterparts. As a gay male at midlife, I "get" what Siegel and Lowe (1994) mean when they say gay men are living *uncharted lives*; and I am experiencing my own aging and development as did previous generations of gay men—

with “little historical experience or cultural expectations to guide them” (de Vries and Blando, 2004, p. 21).

Being socialized in a heteronormative environment entails learning certain myths, stereotypes, and expectations as to what it means to be an older gay man. In a sense, this study is part of my own developmental process--of “finding out who I was told I am” (Fries, 2003, p. xx) so that I can discover for myself not only who I was told I was, but also who I am, and who I will yet become; and so that I can encourage others who are interested in doing the same. Thus, ideally, a final contribution of this study is that it may be of some personal benefit to its participants in fostering their own understandings of heteronormativity, choices they have made, and how they have integrated their life experiences into their own developmental journeys.

Definition of Terms

1. *Adult development* is a continuous, dynamic process of learning and evolving intellectually, socially, professionally, spiritually, as well as physically.
2. *Midlife* can be defined in a variety of ways but is most often done in terms of chronological age. For the purposes of this study, participants will be between the ages of 40 and 60.
3. *Sexual minorities* is sometimes used (and sometimes disputed) as an umbrella term inclusive of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender persons, and those who otherwise fall outside heteronormative binaries of “straight/gay” or “male/female.” As used in this document, it is largely synonymous with *LGBTQ*, a frequently used acronym derived from lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/trans-identified, and queer.

4. *Self-identified gay man* refers to a man whose sexual or affectional orientation is to men, and who incorporates such orientation into his sense of self or his identity. Not all males who engage sexually with other males self-refer as gay. These might include bisexual males who may engage in sexual activity with both males and females; males who disavow any attempt at sexual categorization, some of whom might opt for the term *queer*; and others who consider themselves to be heterosexual despite participating in sexual activity with other males. Collectively, all of these fall under what is sometimes referred to as *MSM*—men who have sex with men.
5. *Accelerated aging* is the widely contested notion that gay men experience a feeling of being “over the hill” and devalued at earlier chronological ages than their heterosexual counterparts.
6. *Stigma* is “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit” (Strand, 1998, p. 109); to stigmatize is to characterize or brand someone as disgraceful or ignominious.
7. *Identity* is an idiosyncratic constellation of qualities that makes us who we are. A nonessentialist view of identity considers many possible expressions of identity and assumes multiple identities that change across time, are influenced by socially constructed realities, and may conflict with each other (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).
8. *Generativity*--a concern for producing something that will outlast oneself; to commit to society and help guide the next generation; or, in Erikson’s (1968) words: “I am what survives me” (p. 114).

9. *Queer*—an elusive term that, in one sense, is roughly equivalent to *sexual minority*, that is, a shorthand for all do who do not fit or identify with polar binaries of male/female or straight/gay. However, queer often implies a sense of defiance or dissonance. Its use remains controversial with the sexual minority community, and is appropriate primarily when used as a self-referent.
10. *Coming out* which is defined by Blumenfeld (1992) as “the process, often lifelong, in which a person acknowledges, accepts, and in many cases appreciates his or her lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity. This often involves sharing this information with others” (p. 283).
11. *Homophobia*--prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or acts of violence against sexual minorities, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender persons, evidenced by deep-seated fear or hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex (Sears & Williams, 1997).
12. *Heterosexism*-- a belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events, or activities (Sears & Williams, 1997).
13. *Heteronormativity*, a term related to heterosexism, means that heterosexuality is a taken for granted norm (Kissen, 2002); also referred to as *social heterosexuality* whereby regardless of one’s actual sexual orientation and sexual practice, one lives by the code of being and acting heterosexual (Herdt & de Vries, 2004).
14. *Meaning* is a fundamental concern in qualitative research and refers to “how

different people make sense of their lives” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 7). A related term is *lived meaning* which refers to the way that a person experiences and understands his or her world as real and meaningful. Lived meanings describe those aspects of a situation as experienced by the person in it.

15. *Hegemony* is the process by which we “learn to embrace enthusiastically a system of beliefs and practices that end us harming up and working to support the interests of others who have power over us” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 93). It is through hegemony that those in power secure the consent or social submission of those who are not in power—not through force but through values and ideas that are embedded in systems of practice (e.g., religious, educational, and media institutions) such that they “pervade the whole of existence” (p. 94).

16. *Hegemonic masculinity* is the dominant form of masculinity in any given setting. In contemporary Western society, the dominant form of masculinity is largely contextualized as White, exclusive heterosexuality, Protestant, English as first language, physical strength and bravado, economic independence or gainful employment including authority over women and other men, suppression of “tender” emotions, and an expressed interest and history of participation in sports.

Assumptions of the Study

There are a number of assumptions that I hold as I enter into this research. These include:

1. Adult development and learning are dynamic, contextual, and intertwined with social practices throughout life. Change in one dimension of our lives is interwoven with changes in other aspects of our lives.
2. Sexual identity is not one-dimensional and is engendered from the interaction of multiple factors. As a result each person's self-understanding of sexual identity or sexual orientation is unique—for some it can be relatively stable; whereas for others, it can be quite fluid and contextual.
3. Both individually and collectively, sexual minorities are subject to negative stereotypes and are likely to have experienced stigmatization, marginalization, and prejudice as byproducts of homophobia. As a result of socialization, homophobia is oftentimes internalized.
4. Notions of adulthood and sexual identity are socially constructed and a product of specific period in history (Harrison, 1995).
5. Developmental issues and pathways cannot be presumed to be the same for all sexual minorities (e.g., lesbians and gay men); furthermore, not all gay men face the same developmental hurdles nor share a single, developmental pathway.
6. As a group, gay men can be understood to share a *culture* (and sub-cultures) with its own discourse, and its own indigenous knowledge—which may be considered *fugitive* since it is developed outside the auspices of the dominant culture and can serve as the basis for adult transgression (Hill, 2004).

7. This research is not intended to compare or contrast the experiences of gay men with those of other sexual minorities or with those of heterosexuals.
8. Both identity and learning are dynamic, contextual, and intertwined with social activities and practices throughout life.
9. No research is value-free and all research has political consequences...the research itself is an action; as Mills wrote (as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), “the first step in social change is to locate others in the same position” (p. 227). Furthermore, the point of doing research is not merely to do research for its own sake; to me there is an implicit component of action implied, that is, a desire to improve (directly or indirectly) the lives of others.
10. Although experienced differently, there is an interconnected nature among oppressions of marginalized groups in society.
11. Resistance to hegemonic social structures is widely practiced by ordinary people in everyday life who are active and ongoing participants in the production and negotiation of meaning (Farmer, 2005).
12. Oppression limits the human possibilities of all people—those with greater and lesser advantage; so it is to everyone’s advantage to dismantle systems of oppression.

Strengths and Limitations

All research is partial at best. Some of the potential limitations of this study include:

1. My shared status as a gay middle-aged man (an *insider*) may help to

establish rapport and trust, but could also cause me to miss some certain data points because of a taken for granted expectation of common phenomena (LaSala, 2003); and could increase the potential for socially desirable responses.

2. Defining midlife is problematic; and delimiting precise age ranges for cohort effects is difficult because of individual variation, socioeconomic class, geography, gender, race, and a host of other factors (Kimmel & Sang, 1995).
3. It may be difficult to recruit participants of color, of varying educational levels, socio-economic levels, etc.; as with other gay-related research, this study may over-rely on participants who are White, well educated, urban, have above average income (Peacock, 2000).
4. My criterion for participants to self-identify as gay men may exclude those who identify as *queer*, or who opt not to assign any referent to their sexuality.
5. This study involves only gay men who have survived until middle-aged. As a result, it offers nothing in the way of discussion as to the developmental impacts of heteronormativity on the lives of those who those who, for whatever reason, did not reach midlife.

While acknowledging these limitations, this study also has a considerable number of strengths. It begins to redress a dearth in the adult education body of knowledge by adding the voices of midlife gay men, a group that has previously been largely unaddressed. It also contributes to the field of adult development by adding empirical

evidence to what remains as largely theoretically based constructs of how gay men develop and live out their lives. Much of the existing limited literature on gay men (and other sexual minorities) stems from psychological or sociological frameworks; and oftentimes is based in the domain of human services. This study is the first to look at the developmental aspects of midlife gay men from a theoretical framework that includes aspects of queer theory. Furthermore, it serves to strengthen the connections between adult development and adult learning, and is a step towards an interstitial discipline in which adults are seen to “develop and learn in unison, attributes that together aid in defining their holistic nature” (Hoare, 2006b, p. 21). By underscoring sexuality as a site of learning and exploring the impacts of heteronormativity on both adult development and adult learning, the study offers numerous and compelling implications for both further research as well as the practice of adult education. Importantly, however, these issues are not merely academic fodder that makes for good research; rather as Minor (2001) notes: “these issues are deeper, and more destructive to our humanity, than many of us have imagined. These are not just theoretical questions or surface issues easily educated away, but deeply inculcated elements of the way we are accustomed to seeing things” (p. 4). In this regard, this study offers lessons for society at large.

Chapter Summary

This first chapter outlined the background of this study to include an overview of the conceptual framework used, the purpose of the research, a specific statement of the problem to be addressed, and the research questions that guide the inquiry. The significance of the study and a list of definitions, assumptions, and strengths and limitations were also provided. Chapter 2 presents a summary and analysis of the related

literature. Chapter 3 details the explanation and rationale for the methodology used in the carrying out the research. Chapter 4 introduces the participants of the study through short biographical sketches of each. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the study. Chapter 6, the final chapter, discusses and examines the findings and the implications for the practice of adult education; and recommends additional opportunities for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

As an accounting of what has been published, the existing literature reflects the platform of current knowledge and ideas on a given topic of interest. Reviewing the literature provides the scholarly context by which one can build upon the existing knowledge base by positioning one's research relative to that of others (Bourner, 1996). As such, a literature review is an essential and critical component of the research process. It serves not only to reveal current understandings, but also to identify areas of consensus or contention—as well as gaps in knowledge. Given that the purpose of this study is to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife within a heteronormative society, an interdisciplinary literature review was conducted. Furthermore, the process was recursive and occurred over a lengthy period of time, with multiple and iterative literature searches undertaken. In addition to adult education literature, the materials reviewed draw heavily from related social sciences—to include anthropology, psychology, sociology, gerontology, and social work.

Several main areas of literature that are germane to this study are presented in this chapter. The first of these deals with social constructivism which is the overall conceptual framework undergirding this study. This is followed by a section on queer theory—a construct that informs my perspective for this research project—including its relevance to adult education. Next is a discussion of research dealing with sexual

minorities in general, exclusive of specific studies relating to gay men at midlife. The latter, along with literature on aging and “older” gay men, is addressed in the final major section of this chapter--the adult development literature which forms the crux of this review.

Social Constructivism

In rejecting what is seen as the naïve realism of positivists, constructivists emphasize the “world of experience as it is lived, felt, undergone by social actors” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). Knowledge and truth are seen as being created as opposed to something “out there” waiting to be discovered; and the individual is seen as an active creator of knowledge as opposed to a passive receptor. Social constructivism centers on the social, intersubjective nature of knowledge; and holds that humans make meaning as they engage with and in a complex social, personal, and relational world that can be viewed from different perspectives. Various strands of constructivism can be identified based on dimensions such as the issue of agency (Spivey, 1997), and the relative importance of human communities versus the individual learner in the construction of knowledge (Phillips, 1995). For instance, while many use the terms *social constructivism* and *social constructionism* interchangeably, Gergen (2006) differentiates between the two. In each, the influence of the social sphere on learning and development is important, but he sees the former as infused with strong vestiges of individualistic ideology and the nature of psychological processes trumping the social. In contrast, social constructionism emphasizes the domain of the social while simultaneously maintaining a critical reflexive posture often focusing on discourse, dialogue,

coordination, conjoint meaning making, and discursive positioning (as well as the attendant politics).

From this viewpoint, the social is seen to encompass a wide range of phenomena--from historical, political, and cultural trends to face-to-face interactions. The group processes reflected may be either explicit or implicit, and the consequences of the interactions may be either intended or unintended (Au, 1998). Individuals are seen as making meaning as they engage with the world. However, meaning develops and is transmitted and shared within an essentially social context through the use of language, stories, conversations, systems of meaning, memory, rituals, and institutions (Crotty, 1998); and using categories supplied by social relationships (Gergen, 1999). Reality—or the social world--is created as an on-going, subjective, and dynamic process in which reality is re-produced by people acting on their interpretation and their knowledge of it (Gergen, 1995). For Berger and Luckman (1966), this means that no reality exists outside what is produced and reproduced in social interactions; or another way of considering this is that the mind and the social/cultural world “constitute each other” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 63).

Another essential tenet of social constructivism is the problematization of the notion of a unitary self—that is, “an integrated, rational, authentic, self-conceiving self, so familiar...from humanistic psychology” (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 101). Rather, the self is conceived of as *nonunitary*, that is, never static or fixed and always changing. This entails an implicit notion of *multiplicity*—or multiple selves such that “personal identity is not singular but plural” (p. 109). Social constructionists are interested in the multiple ways in which people find coherence, continuity, and meaning among their

multiple selves. Indeed, experience is viewed as a story that can be reinterpreted and reassessed. Furthermore, “because the self remains situated in history and culture, it is continually open to reinscription and reformulation” (Tennant, 2000, p. 94); and “a multiplicity of self-accounts is invited” (p. 96). Similarly, reality is considered to be multiply constructed, that is, comprised of “multiple realities” (McLeod, 2001). This paradigm, then, views reality as a social construction or social construct—that is, an idea which may appear to be natural and obvious to those who accept it, but which is actually an invention or artifact of a particular culture or society. As Pinker (2003) explains, “some categories really are social constructions: they exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist” (p. 202). Minor (2003) provides a clear example of such a social construct—that of the end of a year as an “artificial marker of time, meaningless in the natural scheme of things” (p. 33). To the rest of nature, December 31st is merely another day, yet humans in Western society assign it any significance it holds as worthy of the attendant hoopla associated with New Years Eve.

Social Constructs

This notion of social constructs is fundamental to this research effort on several fronts. First, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe in their seminal work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, invisible yet mighty borders and societal rules are created, institutionalized, and transmitted to the next generation. Knowledge—often in the form of societal prescriptions and proscriptions—is passed on by social and cultural institutions and agents (e.g., families, the state, and the media) from one generation to the next. Heteronormativity—those discursive and social practices that legitimize heterosexuality as the norm and make homosexuality invisible (Grace, Hill, Johnson &

Lewis, 2004)--would seem to be one such set of rules that guides much societal interaction. As Herek (2004) notes, hostility based on what is perceived as a non-normative sexual orientation exists in the form of “shared knowledge that is embodied in cultural ideologies that define sexuality, demarcate social groupings based on it, and assign value to those groups and their members” (p.14). Furthermore, these ideologies are expressed through heterosexism, that is, those societal systems that serve to keep sexual minorities invisible. Although not specifically addressing sexual minorities, Bateson’s (1994) observations that “we are ready with cultural labels long before we encounter the realities” (p.4), and “experience is structured in advance by stereotypes and idealizations, blurred by caricatures” (p.5) are examples of shared knowledge that stands at the ready in the defense of heteronormativity.

Various other taken-for-granted notions have been described—albeit not without controversy-- as social constructs. These include class, race, gender, sexuality, morality; institutions, and governments. Of particular relevance to this study is a view of sexuality itself as socially constructed, that is, a learned way of thinking and acting—as opposed to a more essential view in which sexuality is seen as basic and innate (Seidman, 2003, 2004). Gagnon and Williams (1973) espouse this perspective in arguing that society teaches what feelings and desires are considered as sexual; as well as where, when, and with whom we are permitted to express those feelings and desires. Weeks (1986) is of like mind in seeing sexuality not as a given but as something that society produces in complex ways, and as “a product of negotiation, struggle” (p. 26). His acknowledgement of “the social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies, and behavior [and that] sexuality has...many histories” (p. 26), is useful in understanding that the notion of a

“gay” (or lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer) identity is itself socially constructed and changes over time. Indeed, the literature reflects a considerable degree of attention both to the social components of non-heterosexual identity development or acceptance of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) identity (e.g., Brooks & Edwards, 1997, 1999; Cain, 1991; D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Eliason, 1996; Evans, 2002; Kertzner, 2001; Talburt, 2000; Weinberg, 1985; Whitman, Cormier, & Boyd, 2000); and to the history of how the modern LGBTQ social roles were constructed from earlier social roles (e.g., Altman, 2001; Duberman, Vicinus, & Chauncey, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Halperin, 1990, 1995; Katz, 1996; Kitzinger, 1988; Minor, 2001, 2003; Ringer, 1994; Warner, 1993, 2004).

Gender—and prevailing understandings of what it means to be a male or a female—or feminine or masculine—is yet another social construct of relevance to this study particularly as these notions set the stage for and serve to reinforce heteronormativity (Bem, 1993; Gardiner, 2002; Gauntlett, 2002; Kimmel & Messner, 2001; Levant & Pollack, 1995; Mead, 2001; Minor, 2001, 2003; Parker, Barbosa, & Aggleton, 2000). Finally, as will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter, even the whole notion of *midlife* is different for different groups and based largely on socially contrived expectations of what is occurring in peoples’ lives (Butler, 2005; Cummings & Galambos, 2004; Gergen & Gergen, 2000, 2003; Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Morgan & Kunkel, 2001). While social constructs such as those just discussed may be “historically and culturally created fictions” (Bem, 1993, p. 175), they nonetheless create a psychological and social reality (e.g., heteronormativity and heterosexism) within which one must negotiate. One way in which this reality is

constructed is through labeling (Gagnon & Williams, 1973)—that is, the words and terms used to describe and name things.

Discourses as Factors in the Creation of Knowledge

Schwandt (1994) notes the very terms by which people perceive and describe the world are themselves social artifacts. These terms are part of discourses which reflect the broader societal context, and influence how individuals construct both themselves and their world. As Pratt and Nesbit (2000) explain, discourse in this sense is not limited to vocabularies of speech or writing; rather it implies a whole network of social relationships and regularities:

Discourses can be found in all social institutions...we adopt and adapt discourses as we make sense of our world and conduct our lives. At the same time, discourses affect us. Any behavioral changes we make to accommodate prevailing discourses usually involve a personal change in attitude or self-concept, and therefore, help position and construct our identities and relationships. (p.119)

Discourses are among the powerful social forces that dramatically shape how we think of ourselves and how we make meaning (Clark & Dirks, 2000), and are essential to the social interactions in which meanings are shared by a group and eventually internalized by the individual (Richardson, 1997). Given that reality is seen as created through processes of social exchange, social constructivists are interested in the collective generation of meaning and knowledge among people—particularly the varied nature of knowledge developed as a consequence of membership in a given social group (Spivey, 1997). The social constructivist emphasis is on the process of knowledge construction by

the social group and the intersubjectivity established through the interactions of the group (Au, 1998); yet individuals construct knowledge by interacting with the environment, and in the process both the individual and the environment are changed. Echoing this notion, Pratt and Nesbit (2000) explain that as people interact within social network of relationships, they appropriate the actions and ways of relating within that social group; and also take on the goals and perspectives of members of that community or group. As a result, group membership and participation shape how people think, value, act, and make meaning. Examples of this phenomenon that are relevant to this research study include *fugitive knowledge*, which is those ways of knowing that have escaped the control of those who authorize and make legitimate the dominant heteronormative discourse (Hill, 1996; Grace & Hill, 2001); as well as *epistemic privilege*, the insider knowledge that oppressed persons have regarding everyday life under oppression. As Narayan (1988) explains, the oppressed know first-hand and often in an emotionally embodied way, “the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives” (p. 36).

Such knowledge is not always at a conscious level. According to Clark and Dirks (2000), one’s experience of multiplicity is complex and operates both within and beneath conscious awareness. Furthermore, one’s selves are always in process and often in conflict with one another, and require “constant negotiation and reinterpretation” (p. 115). A social constructivist perspective encourages exploring the myriad ways in which social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by humans; as well as how individuals experiencing these social phenomena make meaning of their experiences. A social constructivism paradigm tends to view knowledge claims as

situated, interest-based, and partial. The implication is that what has been learned (for example, hegemonic discourses) can also be unlearned; traditions and social norms that are taken as common sense reality (for example, heteronormativity) can be either accommodated or contested; and knowledge can be either liberatory or oppressive. Indeed, resistance to hegemonic social structures is widely practiced by ordinary people in everyday life as they actively produce and negotiate meaning (Farmer, 2005).

McAdams, Josselson, and Lieblich (2001) state that “living involves continually constructing and reconstructing stories of our lives, without knowing their outcome, revising the plot as new events are added” (p. xv). A social constructivist perspective allows for integrating “personal events into a historical unity” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 150) while acknowledging that knowledge is always partial and shifting; and that meaning is constantly negotiated as individuals create their perceived reality in relation to the social world of which they are necessarily a part. For LGBTQ persons in a heteronormative society, such personal events or meanings invariably reflect some sense of the non-normative—of “not fitting in.” This meets Halperin’s (1995) broad understanding of *queer* as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (p. 62); accordingly, this study will also be informed by some aspects of queer theory.

Queer Theory

This section of the review focuses on queer theory beginning with a discussion of the term *queer*. Queer theory is then addressed including its roots, issues with its definition, and its main premises. This is followed by a discussion of a tension between

queer theory and other types of LGBT research, specifically, the notion of identity. This section then concludes with a discussion of some criticisms of queer theory.

Queer

Central to a discussion of queer theory is the notion of *queer*, a term which is exceedingly elusive at being defined. Indeed, the term has a long history as an anti-gay epithet. However, during the HIV/AIDS and gay activist movements of the late 1980s and the early 1990s, some LGBT people began to reclaim and defiantly use *queer* (and, on a more limited basis, *dyke*, *faggot*, and *fairy*) as a source of pride and both personal and political power. In doing so, they sought to defuse the ability of these words to stigmatize and hurt, while at the same time, affirming “the desirability of not being ordinary” (Levant & Pollack, 1995, p.369). As Grace (2001) states “like many other queer persons, I take back the word from homophobes who use queer as a derogatory word to assault my integrity” (p. 257). In one sense, queer is an umbrella term—shorthand for all who do not fit or identify with polar binaries of male/female or straight/gay. This definition highlights the multiplicities and fluidity of sexualities, and would include LGBT individuals as well as those who are “questioning” where they fall on gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation continuums; as well as those who do not ascribe to a need to identify to these categories at all. Others, echoing the broader view of Halperin (1995), extend queer to include heterosexual allies who challenge the heteronormativity that posits exclusive heterosexuality as the sole way of being (Jackson, 2001; Morris, 2000). From this perspective, the queer movement is for anyone who “doesn’t fit in”; thus, anyone can be queer (Warner, 2004); or as Morris (2000) puts it—“straight queers are welcome in the queer parade too” (p. 21).

Despite this attempt at inclusivity and the sense of pride which “queer” is intended to instill, use of the term can be problematic. Tierney (1997) argues that one must be constantly aware of the contextualized nature of all language; since language is contested, one cannot claim that any term will prove to be more inclusive or exclusive than another. “Queer” is typically still considered pejorative to those “not aware of its new meanings and those who are aware but don’t accept that usage and cringe at the echoes of shame it sets off” (Rabinowitz, 2002, p. 178). Therefore, despite the pride and power felt by some who use “queer” as a self-referent, in some instances the term remains a harsh anti-gay epithet intended to insult people and to conjure up stereotypes of dangerous and undesirable persons (Boesser, 2004). Furthermore, use of the word “queer” is not universally accepted by many within the LGBT community, and its use with individuals is often advised to be limited to auto-description or self-reference (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2005; Grace, 2001; Jagose, 1996). Indeed, it remains a “vexed, conflict-ridden and confusing term” (Gamson, 2000, p. 349); but that may be part of its appeal as Jagose (1996) notes: “its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constitutive elements...part of queer’s semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition” (p.1). Much of that clout and influence has come about as a result of queer theory.

Exploring Queer Theory

Queer theory--a term attributed originally to Teresa de Lauretis (Brooks & Edwards, 1999; Wiegman, 1994)-- has gained considerable popularity across many disciplines since its inception in the early 1990s (Ristock & Taylor, 1998; Warner, 2004); indeed, “it has spread like wildfire, catching the attention of some of the most esteemed

scholars throughout the humanities and social sciences” (Green, 2002, p. 521).

Nevertheless, much like the term “queer,” queer theory is difficult to define or articulate.

Social constructivism serves as part of the foundation of queer theory (Gamson & Moon, 2004), underscoring Epstein’s (1996) point that “sexual meanings, identities, and categories [are] intersubjectively negotiated social and historical products...sexuality was, in a word, constructed” (p. 145). Yet, while queer theory addresses issues that gay and lesbian theorizing covers but it also works beyond the parameters of identity (Meiners, 1998). Queer theory has also contributed to a shifting in emphasis from studying a category of individuals (e.g., “homosexuals”) as a unitary entity, to analyzing and scrutinizing the relative historical, economic, and political base of the social constructs, that is, the categories themselves (Nardi & Schneider, 1998). Similarly, Hostetler and Herdt (1998) view queer theory as a brand of inquiry that established sexual identity as a central axis of contemporary critical discourse about personhood and agency. In explaining queer theory as a complex set of notions comprising both a field of research or inquiry as well as a process of action, Hill (2004) acknowledges both queer theory’s roots in a “self-reflective social, cultural, political and historical context that acknowledges the legacy of feminism, lesbian and gay studies, and activism” (p. 113), and the influence of current trends in post-structuralism and postmodernism

Although a ready-made, commonly shared definition is not at hand, there are general concepts and themes that are constitutive of or inform much of queer theory. As an example, Stein and Plummer (1996) identify several hallmarks of queer theory including: (a) conceptualization of sexuality that sees sexual power as running throughout the social life, is expressed discursively, and is enforced through boundaries and binary

divides, (b) the problematization of sexual and gender categories, and of identities in general, and (c) a willingness to interrogate areas which normally would not be seen as the terrain of sexuality, and to conduct “queer” readings of ostensibly heterosexual or non-sexualized texts. Queer theory is strongly informed by poststructuralism—including the works of Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, and especially Foucault (1980)—to include his notion that power is infused in all aspects of life, including the sexual sphere; as a result, sexuality is a basis for much of community and political life (Gamson & Moon, 2004). A pivotal text in the evolution of queer theory is Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) in which she posits:

An understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. (p.1)

Butler (1990), in her influential and frequently cited *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, explicates the socially constructed nature of identity categories (e.g., male/female; gay/straight; Black/White; etc.). Rather than natural and given, these categories equate to practices and behaviors that are *performed* to conform to the culture’s expectations of difference based on the alleged “natural” categories; thus, the meaning of any behavior is found in the way it fits into the *matrix of intelligibility*—“those around whose practices and gaze maintain...the power served by these practices” (Warner, 2004, p.323). In a similar vein, Gamson and Moon (2004) argue that by creating and reproducing sexual categories, people reproduce power; furthermore, “every social institution, however asexual in appearance, relies on and enforces sexual

boundaries and division” (p. 52). These notions inform this study as heteronormativity is among such cultural expectations to which members of society are expected to adhere. As such, the lived experiences and meaning making of gay men at midlife occur amidst the influences exerted by heterosexism and homophobia.

In line with both its social activist and its poststructural roots, another central feature of queer theory is its inherent predisposition towards a dissonance and a sense of opposition and resistance. Queer theory implies a political radicalism, and a “rude-positive, in-your-face” element (Morris, 2000, p. 26); and evocation of the term queer is itself decidedly defiant (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Grace, Hill, Johnson, and Lewis (2004) note that queer theory is “about being politically, culturally and socially dissident. The roots of its politics challenge hetero-hegemony” (p. 302). Queer theory has also variously described as defiant, transgressive, rebellious, unapologetic, misperforming, bothersome, perverse, and resistant (Britzman, 1998; Grace & Hill, 2001; Grace, Hill, Johnson, & Lewis, 2004; Tierney & Dilley, 1997; Warner, 2004). This sense of defiance or opposition is relevant in exploring the ways in which gay men at midlife both contest and conform to heteronormativity. Other aspects of queer theory are consistent with and inform this research effort. Of note are its emphasis more on commitment and social vision than on sexual orientation (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998); and a desire, often implicit, for social change (Warner, 1993). Seidman (1993), while troubled by what he sees as an undefined social vision, does note that “underlying this politics of subversion is a vague notion that this will encourage new, affirmative forms of personal and social life” (p. 132).

While many of the key tenets of queer theory are relevant to this study, one in particular —the disruption of sexual identity categories--is not. Classification of individuals into sexual identity categories is controversial at best. Different observers may prefer orientation, behavior, or self-identification as the sorting criterion. Yet, identification, even self-identification--with any particular “label” may be culturally, economically, generationally, geographically, or politically influenced. Furthermore, there are individuals who do not consider themselves lesbian or gay but who engage in sexual activity with same-sex partners; likewise, there are also individuals who consider themselves lesbian or gay who do not have sexual contact with same-sex partners. Others may not identify with any label. Such problems of definition may be irreconcilable, as the example posed by Berger and Kelly (1996) suggests:

Is a middle-aged man who recently left his wife and children to live with a male lover, a member of the gay population in the same way as the single male who has been integrated into an urban gay community since his teen years?
(p. 3)

This study deals with men at midlife who currently self-identify as gay; despite their individual life circumstances, if the individuals in the previous example each self-identified as gay, each would be appropriate for inclusion in this study. Informed by queer theory’s premise that identity can be fluid and dynamic, no *a priori* standards were established as to how long participants had to have an self-awareness of gay identity (such as “from at least early adulthood”). That is not to discount the importance of one’s *coming* out—the process of becoming aware of and accepting a non-normative sexual identity. Undoubtedly, how and when one comes out certainly influences one’s

developmental path; however, this study focuses on the negotiation of midlife, and not on the coming out process. Stricter adherence to queer theory would disabuse even the very notion of sexual identity categories; instead, as will be discussed in the next section, such categories would be challenged and disrupted.

Queer Theory and Identity

According to Eliason (1996), during the last 100 years, there has been a “veritable obsession with defining sexualities” (p. 34). For much of the past century, the emphasis was on identifying the causes of “deviant” sexualities. Over the past several decades, the focus has shifted to defining *identities*, or on describing how and why an individual adopts a sexual identity that falls outside societal norms—and the ramifications of doing so. Yet, as might be expected given the aforementioned discussion of socially constructed discourse, attempting to define what is meant by an identity is problematic. Identity is often construed as a sense of one’s self—“that idiosyncratic constellation of qualities in each of us that persists over time and makes us the person we are” (Harrison, 1995, p. 380). Yet Johnston (1973) notes “what you can say you are... [is limited] according to what they say you can be” (p. 58)—thereby acknowledging the self-evaluative component but limited to a socially determined range of categories. Cass (1984) proposes identity as an organized set of self-perceptions and accompanying feelings that an individual holds about him or herself with regard to a social category. Furthermore, for any aspect of identity to become integrated into the self, there must be direct communication with others about the identity. Many models have been proposed to explain how individuals come to accept a previously stigmatized sexual identity. As an example, Cass (1979) proposed a frequently cited six-stage developmental model

through which an individual progresses on the way to an integrated lesbian or gay identity. Cox and Gallois (1996) argue that many such models focus too heavily on psychological processes of the individual and that a shift towards a more sociological perspective is required. Eliason (1996), in a critique of several identity development models, cites a concern that many are based on LGBT persons who are White, middle-class, and well-educated. Additionally, the linear nature of the stages reflected in many of these models may be much too simplistic to account for the something as complex as sexual identity. As Weinberg (1985) explains “paths may run parallel, diverge, intersect, and perhaps merge at a later point” (p. 81).

The process of claiming a non-normative sexual identity is often seen as having both an internal component in a psychological sense, as well as an external component in a group-based and political sense; the latter aligns closely with a social constructivist view. One example is that of Fassinger and Miller (1996) whose model hypothesizes two separate but reciprocal processes of individual sexual identity development and group membership identity development in a four phase developmental sequence. This notion of a sexual identity as not merely the naming of one’s perception of one’s own sexuality or sexual expression, but also as a political identity was instrumental to the identity politics which were crucial in the development of the movement for lesbian and gay rights (Chan, 1995). Indeed, coming to acceptance of a non-normative sexual identity is still generally viewed to be affirmative and empowering, with the overcoming of sexual identity challenges leading to self-acceptance and identity pride (Grossman, D’Augelli, & O’Connell, 2001). Yet, the issue of sexual identity is more complex. Divisions between those who are “in” the closet and those who are “out” narrowly define sexual identities.

Furthermore, there is risk of privileging those who are “out” through assumed notions of courage or fortitude, while stigmatizing those who remain closeted (Brekhus, 2003; Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002; Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999). Furthermore, according to Brekhus (2003), we as a culture--and social science researchers in particular--have come too readily to accept the notion that gay individuals experience the same “gay identity,” thereby obscuring the diverse ways in which gay identity is managed and negotiated. In his ethnographic study of 30 suburban gay men who lived within an hour of New York City (and supplemented by additional discussions with 100 other gay men), he highlights that there is considerable conflict within identity categories as to what a given identity means--and no invariable, coherent way to be gay. Geography is one of many factors that contribute to the “multiple ways to present and organize a marked identity” (p. 11).

Seidman (2003) concurs with the perspective that there is no one reality for being gay in America today. The lives of some gay men are almost indistinguishable from heterosexuals—they partner, settle down in the suburbs, and raise families. The lives of other gay men center more on being gay—their friends are gay, and they live and work in gay enclaves. For still others, their lives are not that different from that of closeted homosexuals of past generations—“they marry someone of the opposite sex, are silent in the face of homophobic expression, and live in a constant state of fear” (p. 71).

Nonetheless, the social construct of sexual identity has been and remains a strategy for group formation, cohesion, and addressing discrimination. In the context of identity politics and in the continued struggle for equity for sexual minorities, a non-normative sexual identity equates to a form of resistance against conformity and restriction (Chan,

1995). Queer theory amplifies this resistance by disputing fixed categories or binaries such as heterosexual/homosexual or gay/straight, as well as the whole notion of naming sexual identity. In queer theory, the “subject” is considered a social construction--and the contestation of essential, intrinsic, or universal character of sexual identities rises almost to the level of moral imperative. This is in line with queer theory’s poststructural heritage in which all identity categories are seen as unstable, and identity is constantly shifting (Tisdell, 2001). From Foucault’s (1980) perspective, while studying gay and lesbian identity may disturb prevailing gender and moral systems in society, it might also result in the reification of gay and lesbian categories which fix or control conduct. Queer theory disrupts such an identity claim as “a construction that traps, blocks, stifles, retards—therefore queer refuses terms of identity” (Grace, Hill, Johnson, & Lewis, 2004, p. 303). However, they further explain there is a “push-and-pull to Queer since it simultaneously depends on and at the same time rejects fixed identities, subjectivities, and communities” (p. 303). This reflects an ongoing tension between research stressing lived experiences and meaning, and research that is which more structural or poststructural and stresses material determinants and effects of experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) liken this to every coin having two sides, with both sides being needed. In Plummer’s (2005) view, awareness of such tensions is essential for self-reflexive researchers, but he feels no compulsion to attempt to reconcile them—nor does he feel it is desirable to do so. Tension is also evident in Grace’s (2001) discussion of the “social misery of those inhabiting the spectral community of queer Others” and the necessity of “exposing and contesting cultural practices that dismiss or defile our identity in the effort to deny us agency” (p. 259). Similarly, Hill (2004) speaks to a “struggle” between using

terms referring to sexual minorities and queer theory's goal of ultimately challenging such categories. I share this struggle as a gay male conducting research to explore how other gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. I do not see identity as unproblematic. One of my assumptions (as listed in chapter 1) is that sexual identity is not one-dimensional; rather it is engendered from the interaction of multiple factors. Each person's self-understanding of sexual identity or sexual orientation is unique. For some, sexual identity can be experienced and is understood as stable and persistent over time. Yet, I agree with the premise of queer theory that sexual identity can be fluid, dynamic, and even contextual for some persons. However, Escoffier (1998) makes a cogent point when he argues "being queer does not necessarily mean that one can escape other institutionalized social identities" (p. 183). The intent in this study is to explore the lived experiences of men at midlife who currently self-identify as gay regardless of whether the notion of fluid sexual identity over time applies in a given case.

Criticisms of Queer Theory

Certainly, queer theory is not without its critics and detractors. One of its chief criticisms is that its emphasis on resistance leads it to be dismissed as too radically politically or "eternally reactive" (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998, p. 255). Others (e.g., Weston, 1993) focus on Butler's notion of performativity and argue that queer theory is itself performative or even parodic. As alluded to previously, others object to the semantic use of the term *queer* which is perceived as carrying so much negative cultural baggage that it can never be socially or politically effective. Yet another common complaint is queer theory's favoring of the symbolic and the cultural over structural and

material realities impacting the daily lives of sexual minorities (Edwards, 1998; Gamson, 1995; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998).

Like poststructuralism in general, queer theory is often criticized for being more effective in identifying problems than for coming with up solutions, and for engaging in dense, obfuscatory language—such that “despite its laudable ambition and broad academic appeal, queer theory tends to lapse into a discursively burdened, textual idealism” (Green, 2002, p. 522). This leads some to conclude that queer theory is an elitist and exclusionary movement with “a lofty, abstract, and inaccessible set of textual practices produced by and for a narrow academic audience far removed from the concerns of average gays and lesbians” (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998, p. 254). Hostetler and Herdt continue by positing that queer theory seems to set up its own hierarchies, exclusions, and more or less mandatory subject positions—“in fact the laundry list of voluntarily assumed positions that become necessary—if not sufficient—grounds for claiming oneself as queer produce a more monolithic identity than lesbian or gay ever was, replete with its own insider/outsider politics” (p. 261).

Some feminist writers have also criticized queer theory’s tendency to erase or merge gender and sexuality, or gay and lesbian into a larger amorphous category. Such conflation is seen as subordinating feminist concerns to what is seen as a gay male agenda within queer theory—thereby missing Zita’s (1994) point that “almost all lesbians are oppressed as women and as queers” (p. 271). Halperin (1995) similarly decries the erasure of the gay or lesbian subject which undermines the specificity of his or her experience and subjectivity; while Cohen (2001) extends this critique of erasure to include race and class. Chan questions where Asian American lesbians and gay men fit

into queer theory, since their Asian cultures of origin typically do not have categories of lesbian, gay men, and bisexuals—reaffirming that queer theory raises more fundamental issues than sexual categories, including the construction of identity itself (Chan, 1997).

Such debates and the exchanges evoked by these criticisms and objections have been “productive in moving gay/lesbian and queer scholarship forward” (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998, p. 255); indeed, “queer is part of an historical process” (p. 280). As such and just as any other theory, queer theory has evolved (and continues to do so) from its original conception. As an example, Gamson and Moon (2004) examine the parallels between queer theory and intersectionality, and cite an intriguing study in which gay men were interviewed as to their “type”—that is, the kind of people to whom they were attracted. Individuals’ desires were found to be shaped not only by gender, but also by constructions of race, ethnicity, class, and age. Gamson and Moon see this as validating a central tenet of intersectionality--that identity cannot be thought of as merely an accumulation of the effects of different categories. Nevertheless, despite the increased discourse surrounding queer theory, the preponderance of related literature is conceptual in nature. Brekhus (2003) has alleged that mainstream social theory has seemed to “ghettoize” queer theory (as well as feminist theory and multicultural theory) into special enclaves of knowledge about specific groups rather than being more broadly integrated into general theory development. He argues that studies of gays and lesbians, as well as queer theory, should inform the structuring of the social world more generally, but “this argument has so far been ignored by mainstream sociology” (p. 72)—a sentiment which queer theorists in other disciplines might share. To some degree, this might be partially

understood by situating queer theory within a broader context of LGBTQ-related research which is discussed in the next section.

Research Relating to Sexual Minorities

This section of the review provides a general view of research related to LGBTQ persons (excluding that related to adult development which will be addressed in a later portion of the review). This is followed by a discussion of the relevance of LGBTQ research to the field of education in general, and to adult education in particular.

Although it has had considerable influence from a theoretical and conceptual perspective, it is important to note that little empirical research is framed expressly from queer theory per se—particularly as regards gay men at midlife. Studies of LGBT persons are more often framed from at least two other strands of research, although there aren't necessarily clear-cut boundaries between any of these types--and perspectives overlap. One such strand of research reflecting a developmental perspective largely informs this study, and is addressed in a subsequent section of this review. Gay and Lesbian Studies is another field of inquiry, and generally can be distinguished from queer theory based on markedly different assumptions made about the connections between gender and sexuality. Very broadly defined, research from this perspective examines gender identity and sexual orientation more from a binary perspective (male/female; gay/straight), and investigates the history, culture, and social structures and constructs that define ideas about sexuality as expressive acts and sexuality as an identity. Such studies seek to understand how these categories of "normal" and "deviant" are constructed; how they operate; and how they are enforced. The desired outcome of the

studies is that gay men and lesbians, and issues regarding sexual orientation, will be viewed in a more positive light than they had been previously (Kaczorowski, 2004).

Despite their differences in emphasis and intent, each of these perspectives—queer theory, Gay and Lesbian Studies, and developmental approaches—spring from a common pedigree. Prior to the 1970s, the prevailing approach to studies of homosexuality was an illness model. Several assumptions are implicit in this view: (a) sexual orientation is a binary construct, existing only in two opposite, discrete forms: heterosexuality or homosexuality; (b) sexual orientation is a one-dimensional construct based solely on sexual activity; that is, what one does sexually defines one's sexual orientation; and (c) sexual orientation is assumed to form at an early age, and is an enduring, unchanging disposition. Following the American Psychiatric Association's removal of homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973 (Bayer, 1981)—and related to larger societal changes, new paradigms to conceptualize and define sexual orientation began to emerge. Researchers began to see sexual orientation in new light and in much more complex ways than had previously been the case. Sexual orientation (and sexual identity) began to be understood as a continuum that varies in degree, diversity, and intensity. It also was seen as encompassing multiple dimensions in addition to sexual behavior—including erotic-affectual behaviors and fantasies; emotional attachments; self-identification; and current relationship status. In what later became a foundational premise of queer theory, people began to argue that sexual identity is potentially fluid, changeable over time, and varies across social contexts and cultures.

At the same time, the social sciences were undergoing a paradigm shift “from a modernist, medical, deficit-oriented model, toward a more eclectic, post-modern,

contextual, social constructivist orientation” (Wahler & Gabbay, 1997, p. 15). Research shifted from viewing sexual minorities as pathological to much more of an affirmative approach focused on helping LGBT cope adaptively with the impact of stigma, minority status, and difference from the heterosexual mainstream. New themes began to emerge in the LGBT-related literature including rebuking long-established stereotypes of sexual minorities; “coming out” or the process of becoming aware of and eventually accepting a non-normative sexual identity; and disclosure and community involvement. The latter two topics still receive considerable research attention as attested to by “the proliferation of identity models during the last two decades” (Fassinger & Miller, 1996, p. 54).

Identity development and disclosure are often considered in terms of mental health, stigma, and resiliency—all of which remain topics of significant interest (e.g., Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2001; D’Augelli, Grossman, Hershberger, & O’Connell, 2001; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Shih, 2004). As an example, D’Augelli and Grossman (2001) looked at the relationship between sexual orientation, victimization, and mental health using 416 lesbian, gay, or bisexual adults ranging from 60 to 91. Their results demonstrate that many of these older adults had experienced significant victimization during their lives. In what the authors suggest may be age cohort effects, the earlier these adults came to terms with their sexual orientation by self-identification and disclosure to others, the more victimization they recalled. Furthermore, men reported more internalized homophobia, alcohol abuse, and suicidality than did the women. Such findings have led to a heightened awareness of the needs (some of which may be unique) of LGBTQ persons when it comes to social services (Quam, 1997); and the need to address policy issues at a macro level (Cahill & South, 2002). These last examples

indicate how LGBTQ research continues to evolve, and to expand further in addressing issues of explicit concern to and impacting the lives of LGBTQ persons on a daily basis-- a “defining of norms and terms based on LGBT realities” (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003, p. 15). Indeed, contemporary LGBTQ research now covers such a huge number of topics from so many and disparate viewpoints that it is impractical—if not impossible—to address in the context of a single literature review. In a telling example of an age cohort effect, such a situation likely would have been unfathomable to the pioneers of such research a mere three decades ago. As such, the next section of this review will briefly discuss examples of research that, although not specifically addressing gay men at midlife, nonetheless may be useful in informing such research.

Research Topics with Potential Implications for Midlife Gay Men

Research related specifically to gay men at midlife and/or “older” gay men will be addressed a later section of this review. However, with the increased attention to and wide breadth of interest in LGBTQ research, some topics outside the adult development literature may inform a study of gay men at midlife. One such interest area is that of gay men’s friendships (Nardi, 1999). Friendship networks provide the venue in which “gay men’s identities are formed and where the quotidian dimensions of life” (Nardi, 1999, p. 13) are carried out. It is also through friends that gay men get to question the heteronormativity of the roles assigned to them by society. Nardi’s interests are primarily friendships between gay men, although he notes that many gay men are integrating their friendship networks and including lesbians and heterosexual men and women among their close and casual friends. Connell (1995) suggests that friendships in the gay community are marked by a higher degree of reciprocity than those characterizing

heterosexual relations. He argues that gay men's sexual and friendship relationships have a political potential. Given the relative equality in gay men's sexuality and the formation of friendly interpersonal relationships, especially with women, such friendships have the potential to disrupt the social relations of gender thereby subverting the hegemonic order. In yet another angle on gay men's friendships, Price (1999) focused her research on friendships between 32 gay men and 24 of their heterosexual male friends. She found three patterns into which the friendship pairs tended to fall—those who embrace their differences who don't believe stereotypes about gay men; those who ignore their differences who attend mostly gender-neutral activities avoiding anything that calls attention to sexual identity; and those who struggle with differences with both men perceiving the other stereotypically and both behaving stereotypically.

One topic that is beginning to emerge in the literature is that of gay parenting (Strah, 2003). With issues such as gay marriage and gay adoption so much in the public discourse, increase in this subject will likely increase. Bigner (1999) cites estimates that about 20-25 percent of self-identified gay men are also fathers, and this group of gay men constitute "a minority within a minority" (p. 62). He adds that it is impossible to estimate the actual number of gay men who are fathers because many are heterosexually married and opt to remain in the closet. Indeed, Higgins (2004) conducted a qualitative study to explore why some gay men have been—or remain—heterosexually married.

Highlighting how little is known regarding this phenomenon, no differences were found between the 43 "never married" gay men and 26 "previously married" gay men on ratings of their sexual orientation and identity, and levels of homophobia and self-deprecation.

Gay male coupling is another area which could inform a study on gay men at midlife.

McWhirter and Mattison (1984) conducted groundbreaking work on this subject, but more contemporary looks at gay male couples include the dual development of career tracks for gay couples, and the decision of integrating a partner into social business occasions (Prince, 1995; Trau & Hartel, 2004), and the experiences of gay widowers after the death of a partner (Shernoff, 1997).

Certainly one topic of considerable relevance to those men currently at midlife is that of HIV/AIDS. Exacerbated by the perniciousness of heteronormativity, the lives of many gay men of this generation were, and continue to be, impacted by the premature loss of loved ones and countless friends; or by the disease itself. Yet such experiences have also led to learning, to growth, and to integrity. For instance, Crossley (2001) interviewed 38 individuals (primarily gay men) who had been HIV-positive for at least 5 years. He concluded that many people with an HIV-positive status manage to adjust constructively to a life in which their previous assumptions are shattered. One way they do this is by rebuilding images of self and the world thereby enabling them to make sense of the trauma of the disease and helping to explain the meaning and purpose of events to themselves. Other researchers, including from the field of adult education (e.g., Baumgartner, 2002; 2005; Courtenay, Merriam, Reeves, & Baumgartner, 2000; Egan, 2005), recognize the importance of HIV/AIDS as a site of learning and potential transformation. Indeed, as the next section demonstrates, education as whole has not been silent regarding sexuality.

Salience of LGBTQ Research to Education

The field of education has seen a dramatic increase in the inclusion of LGBTQ issues and voices in recent years. Much of this attention has focused on LGBT youth or

preparing K-12 teachers to address the needs of sexual minority students (Harbeck, 1992; Jennings, 1994, 2005; Kissen, 1996, 2002; Woog, 1995); or on the topic of *out* faculty (McNaron, 1997; Myrick & Brown, 1998; Pugh, 1998; Tisdell & Taylor, 1995). Furthermore, the considerable number of books dealing with queer issues or queer theory in education that have been published over the last decade (e.g., Epstein & Sears, 1999; Garber, 1994; McNaron, 1997; Pinar, 1998; Tierney 1997; Ristock & Taylor, 1998; Talburt, 2000; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000) seem to confirm Ristock and Taylor's contention that "pedagogy and research theory are taken so seriously by scholars of lesbian/gay/queer studies as forms of social action where much is at stake in our mistakes and successes" (p. 3). Yet, with regard to higher education, Myrick and Brown (1998) note that while there has been great progress in creating open classroom and organizational environments for diverse populations, "little research has been published on the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals in college and university classrooms" (p. 295).

Within the field of adult education, there has been a similar increase in attention to sexuality as a site of learning (Brooks & Edwards, 1999; Edwards & Brooks, 1999; Edwards, Grace, Henson, Henson, Hill, & Taylor, 1998; Grace, 2001; Grace, Hill, Johnson, & Lewis, 2004; Hill, 1996, 2001, 2004; Tisdell & Taylor, 1995). The premise that uncritical acceptance of categories and narratives that have been provided by culture and society limits ways in which adults can grow, and constrains ways and places in which adult educators can help adults learn (Brooks & Edwards, 1999) would seem to be borne out by the increasing acknowledgement of sexuality and/or sexual orientation as

relevant to adult development, identity, and interlocking oppressions (Baumgartner & Merriam, 2000; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Sheared & Sissel, 2001; Sleeter, 1996; Tisdell, 1993). This increased awareness and discussion of the lives of and issues impacting sexual minorities has begun to remedy—albeit slowly-- the invisibility and silence for which the field of adult education had been previously criticized (Hill, 1995; Tisdell, 1995). However, much of the related literature within adult education is conceptual in nature, and the increased attention has not translated into an appreciable amount of empirical research. Thus, despite the potential for such research to offer “a rich source of local knowledge and experience and a rich resource for dynamic and inclusive forms of...adult education” (Grace, 2001, p. 266), Grace concludes that sexual minorities are too often not represented in any meaningful way in curricula and instruction in exclusionary mainstream learning circles; furthermore, attempts to be vocal and increase visibility in various educational spaces have been misinterpreted by some as threats to the maintenance of those spaces. As a result, while the field of adult education is making strides to become more truly inclusive, “mainstream adult education mimics the dominant culture in its commitment to hetero-normative status quo” (p. 267).

Yet efforts to build and use LGBTQ knowledge to create more inclusionary practices in adult education continue unabated. Echoing Brekhus’ (2003) notion of ghettoization of LGBTQ issues and queer theory, Brooks and Edwards (1999) are among those who contend that it is not the sole province of those who identify as non-heterosexual to disrupt and challenge cultural assumptions and societal expectations regarding sexual identity and gender identity. Acknowledging and honoring the life narratives of LGBTQ persons is one way to challenge mainstream cultural practices and

heteronormativity (Edwards, Grace, Benson, Henson, Hill, & Taylor, 1998). Hill (1996) discusses gay discourse as a mechanism that allows sexual minorities to give meaning and significance to their lived experiences as well as to define and claim knowledge. An integral part of gay discourse is what Hill terms *fugitive knowledge* as it has been constructed from experience that has been produced outside the dominant discourse—that has “escaped the control of society’s privileged specialists...members of the gay community do not need officials in order to know” (p. 258). Gay discourse allows for the expression of political resistance of everyday people through reinterpreting meaning; articulating distinctive modes of social selfhood; and fostering alternative cultural values through which the gay community can formulate “its own yardsticks, relative to what is relevant appropriate and believable” (p. 256).

Grace (2001) believes in transforming practice to affirm queer integrity within a politics of hope and possibility. This perspective frames much of the community education projects with which he is involved—such as arts-based education and leadership learning camps for LGBTQ youth (Grace & Wells, 2005). It also exemplifies Hill’s (2004) contention that all education advocates something. Educators’ advocacy occurs in many ways--from silence reinforcing the status quo to promoting *activism*--“direct action contesting or upholding one side of a controversial issue” (p. 85). The point of such resistance is not merely agitation and contest. Rather, it offers new ways of seeing and being in the world. It assists in the creation of new narratives that challenge what can be said and that interrogate taboos around sexuality, notions of the body, and “processes of normalization and their intersection with race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and identity as categories of both experience and analysis” (Hill, 2004, p. 90). Hill does

not necessarily shy away from learning as a result of conflict which occurs in situations of contest, in that those who encounter dissonance that sometimes results from inserting LGBTQ content into the learning environment may experience growth and development as a result. This echoes hooks' (2003) notion of embodying risk and honoring the fact that "we may learn and grow in circumstances where we do not feel safe...the presence of conflict is not necessarily negative but rather its meaning is determined by how we cope with that conflict" (p. 64). Indeed, LGBTQ persons in a heteronormative society are confronted daily with circumstances in which they do not feel safe or in which they experience conflict. Yet they continue to develop—and concurrently to learn, to grow, and to live their daily lives--in ways which both affirm and contest heterosexism and heteronormativity. It is this growing awareness and recognition that heteronormativity and heterosexism remain very much a part of the realities and the lived experiences of LGBTQ people that foregrounds the adult development literature as particularly salient to this study of gay men at midlife; and thus as the crux of this review.

Adult Development

This section of the review begins with a discussion of adult development to include its relationship to adult education. This is followed by a general overview of psychosocial adult development concepts and theories. Next comes a discussion of midlife; and, finally, the literature related to midlife gay men is presented. Finally, a discussion of research on aging and older gay men is presented.

Adult Development and Adult Education

Each of us shares a universal trait—indeed, one that is common to all living organisms—we are aging. Whether we are willing to accept it or not, implicit in the

aging process is change. The normal aging process impacts us simultaneously on a number of dimensions: (a) sensory-perceptual, (b) bio-physiological, (c) cognitive/intellectual, (d) personal-interpersonal, and (e) cultural-environmental. During adulthood, a change in any of these dimensions may impact one or more of the other dimensions; accordingly, adult development is continuous and dynamic (Hayslip & Panek, 2002). Tennant and Pogson (1995) describe two interdependent domains of adult development theory which implicitly relate to these dimensions: the development of intellectual or cognitive functioning, and the development of personality and social roles. Similarly, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) distinguish between adult cognitive development (i.e., how thinking patterns change over time), and adult development (i.e., how adults develop and change over time)—although they readily acknowledge that these aspects of development are interdependent. They see learning as a personal process, but one that occurs in a societal context which influences what an adult needs and wants to learn—and to a lesser degree, when and where learning takes place. They offer a typology that includes four perspectives on adult development, two that are more individually focused: biological aging and psychological change; and two that place emphasis on our collective selves as defined by society: sociocultural perspective and integrated perspective. It is these latter two perspectives that support both my research interest in how gay men at midlife learn and make meaning of their lives in a heteronormative society, as well as the social constructivist framework of this study. Consequently, literature that deals primarily with sensory/perceptual, biological, and cognitive/intellectual aspects of aging is excluded from this review.

The influence of adult development literature on the field of adult education is widely acknowledged (Hoare, 2006a; Imel, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006; Merriam & Clark, 1991). Wolf (2005) contends that alternative modes of adult development and growth challenge adult educators on a daily basis. This sentiment is shared by Clark and Caffarella (1999) who feel it is essential for adult educators to stay current with the adult development literature given its relevance to adult education. Similarly, Tennant and Pogson (1995) espouse the view that the very process of promoting adult learning inevitably engages adult educators with adult development. Furthermore, they argue for a new conceptualization of the relationship between adult education and adult development. In their vision, the developmental literature would not merely a source of knowledge which is then applied to adult education. Instead, the two areas should be viewed as being inextricably bound—dealing with the same concerns and interests while posing new questions and discovering new issues from a developmental perspective enhances the capacity of educators to analyze and improve practice. Echoing this need to interpret professional expertise in new ways, Caffarella and Clark (1999) stress the importance of the role of adult educators in expanding the adult development theory base to include other perspectives, lest they “continue to foster images of growth and change that fit only some of the people with whom they work” (p.126). In particular, they encourage adult educators to “see what used to be less visible and to hear what was formerly unspoken” (p. 100).

Recent adult development has tended to move away from grand theories to more of a focus on specific dimensions—and often a combination of dimensions—of development (Caffarella & Clark, 1999). This is reflected in Merriam and Caffarella’s

(1999) observation of the increased interest by researchers over the past two decades on the relationship between adult development and socially constructed notions of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The growing recognition of the importance of contextual and environmental factors on development has resulted in significant and groundbreaking research on the influence of gender on development (e.g., Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Caffarella & Olson, 1993); and prominent theories of racial and ethnic identity development (e.g., Helms, 1995). However, adult development research primarily draws from heterosexuals and sexual orientation is generally not even considered (Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Research as to “what life-span development looks like for gay and lesbian people is almost untouched” (Roseborough, 2003, p.30); and adult development patterns and models may be largely irrelevant for lesbians and gay men (Cruz, 2003; D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Kertzner, 2001). Nonetheless, given their fundamental and far-reaching impact, it is useful to review key traditional theories of adult development.

Overview of Adult Development Theories

The various theories on adult development can be categorized into different types. Presented here are two types of theories—stage (sometimes called *phase*) theories, and life event or lifespan theories. In each case, the most prominent and most frequently cited theories are included. These have been used for studies on various aspects of adulthood but none were located that were relevant to gay men at midlife.

Stage theories of adult personality change. Many of the traditional, and often cited, theories of personality development throughout the life course are premised on an individual progressing through various stages or phases towards an ultimate end point of

development—that being a mature, psychologically healthy person (Hayslip & Panek, 2002; Lanum & Birren, 1995; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Among the most well known of the developmental theorists are Erikson (1959, 1963, 1968, 1978) and Levinson (1978, 1986). Erikson proposed a series of eight psychosocial stages, each of which involves a “crisis” that can be resolved either positively or negatively. The first five stages cover childhood. His model includes three stages of adult development: a) young adulthood, in which the crisis to be resolved is *intimacy vs. isolation*; the successful resolution of this crisis enables the young adult to be able to merge with another person to form a mutual relationship of trust and love; b) middle adulthood with the crisis of *generativity vs. stagnation*; to be generative is to generate, that is, to produce or pass along something that outlasts oneself, whereas stagnation is a self-indulgent withdrawal from others; and c) late adulthood which is characterized by *integrity vs. despair*; those who successfully resolve this crisis and achieve integrity gain a sense of completeness about their lives; while those who despair fear death (Erikson, 1978; Hayslip & Panek, 2002). Erikson (1997) subsequently added a ninth stage to his model discussing the development of those in their 80s and 90s. In this stage, the resolution of a crisis between despair and disgust leads to wisdom which “rests in the capacity to see, look, and remember, as well as to listen, hear, and remember” (p. 112). Addition of this final stage complemented rather than supplemented or revised any previous stages.

Another stage approach is Levinson’s (1978) theory of adult personality development, based on a sample of 39 male students at Yale; and a subsequent follow-on study which examined the life transitions of 45 women during early adulthood over a four-year period (Levinson & Levinson, 1996). Levinson sees a fundamental process of

individuation—the changing relationship between self and the external world—as occurring throughout the life course. Furthermore, he uses the notion of a life structure (a coherent relationship between one’s own goals and the roles one plays in various life arenas such as marriage, family, career, etc.) that evolves through a sequence of four distinct periods (the first of which is childhood, birth to age 20); and the decisions that one makes during the three phases of adulthood: (a) Early, 17-45; (b) Middle, 40-60; and (c) Late, 60 plus (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Each of these adult phases includes subordinate developmental periods of transition; for example, the Mid-Life Transition (ages 40-45) represents:

A period of soul-searching, questioning, and assessment regarding the extent to which all that has been accomplished within the life structure has any real meaning or not. For some, it is a rather gradual, relatively painless change; for others, it is full of uncertainties, and often has an “either-or” quality to it. Either one starts anew or perceives that he has failed in some way to define what is important to him (Hayslip & Panek, 2002, p.97)

This transition period is a prelude to entering middle adulthood at which time one must again make choices (which may be, but are not necessarily, precipitated by *life markers* such as divorce, death of a loved one, change in occupational status, etc.). In midlife, individuation is apparent in the attempt to find a better balance between the needs of the self and the needs of society, or “a greater integration of separateness and attachment” (Tennant & Pogson, 1995, p. 75). It would also seem that this “soul-searching” and questioning the real meaning of one’s life is not unlike the generativity vs. stagnation crisis that Erikson saw as the essential crisis of middle adulthood.

Life event or lifespan approaches. Another category of theories on adult development represents an opposing view to stage and phase theories; rather, development is viewed in terms of life events and transitions (Reeves, 1999). Havighurst (1972) proposed that developmental tasks occur at different ages based on social expectations and biological development. Successful achievement of a developmental task leads to happiness and success in later tasks, whereas failure results in disappointment, societal disapproval, and difficulty with later tasks (Lanum & Birren, 1995). To Neugarten (1976), every society has a “social clock” which equates to the expectations regarding age-appropriate behavior or *life events* (e.g., marriage, career, retirement). The individual is seen as passing through a succession of socially delineated age-statuses, each with recognized rights, duties, and obligations. Normative patterns are largely adhered to as most people check themselves against the norms they perceive for their age group. Thus, behavior, self-concept, and subsequent development are influenced by whether one perceives himself or herself to be “on time” or not with these life events. Those for whom developmental paths lead to non-normative sexual identities may well be “off-time” for such social dictates as when to start dating, when to marry (heterosexually of course, as that is the only option conceivable within heteronormativity), and when to have children. Other life events that occur unexpectedly might also result in being “off-time.” Examples of such events might include winning a lottery, developing a health problem, getting laid off or fired from a job, or being a victim of a crime. All of these events are likely to be stressful; yet at the same time, “their potential for stimulating learning and subsequent development may be greater than for more normative, anticipated life events” (Merriam, 2005, p. 5). From this perspective,

there is no prescribed order to the crises that one experiences in one's development; therefore, development cannot logically be conceived as a sequence of life crises as other Erikson and others have proposed (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Baltes, Cornelius, and Nesselroade (1980), and Baltes, Reese, and Lipsitt (1980) support this perspective, but go even further by arguing that developmental processes can begin at any point in life and are not necessarily linear. They also highlight three types of influence on development that together account for considerable individual developmental variation: (a) normative age-graded influences that correlate highly with age (e.g., physical maturation, educational commencement, parents' death); (b) normative, history-graded influences, that is, those historical events that influence entire age cohorts (e.g., economic depressions, wars, social movements); and (c) non-normative influences or events that have great impact on individual lives but are not part of an overall pattern related to the life cycle (e.g., religious conversion, contracting a rare disease, winning a lottery, traffic accidents). In theorizing that biological and environmental forces constitute the basic determinants of development which are then impacted by these various types of influences, these theorists offer what Merriam and Caffarella (1999) refer to as an *integrated* perspective of development—one which combines different perspectives and reflects “a more holistic picture of adult life” (p. 131). Such a perspective recognizes that the specific pathways followed by adults will not all be the same. Furthermore, individual developmental is not seen in terms of single variables, but as total integrated systems (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Midlife as a Social Construct

Regardless of whether stage-based, life event based, or even from an integrated perspective, these theories typically include some characterization of *midlife* as a period of significant social, psychological, and psychosexual realms of life experiences (Kertzner, 2001). Yet defining what precisely is meant by *midlife*, a term often used interchangeably with *middle aged* or *middle adulthood*, is problematic. For one thing, the belief that midlife comprises a distinct period of life is a recent one, originating in the twentieth century (Willis & Reid, 1999). Indeed, to have many middle-aged people in society is a relatively new phenomenon. In earlier times, 90 percent of humans were dead by age 40. In prehistoric times, most people lived less than three decades. During the ancient Greek and Roman era, the lifespan was typically less than four decades. In the 16th century, ¼ of those born died in the first year, and another ¼ were dead by 16. Most childbearing women were dead by 30. Even in the history of the United States, the concept of midlife is relatively new. As recently as 1900, approximately ½ of those who reached 20 did not live to be 65. As a result, there was no sense of a population as a whole moving through midlife (Brim, 1995). According to Moen and Wethington (1999), the emergence of midlife as a distinct period in the lifespan is related to two demographic factors: the increase in human longevity and the decline in fertility. These demographic trends—working in tandem with economic and vocational transformations in society—have produced a “constellation of social roles” (p. 3) that has resulted in a reconfiguring of thinking about the life course, and midlife in particular. Such an analysis lends credence to the notion that midlife is a social construct; as such it varies

between and within cultures and does not even exist in some regions of the world (Shweder, 1998).

McAdams (1993) allows that certain biological changes (e.g., menopause) may play a role in demarcating this period of life, but asserts that midlife is primarily socially defined based on assumptions about the human life cycle. In Western societies, midlife is commonly—although not universally--thought of in chronological terms as a span between some specified age boundaries. For example, Hunter (2005) states “the age boundaries ...are approximately between forty and sixty-four years of age, with most researchers using age sixty-five as the entry point into older age” (p. 4). However, the arbitrary nature of such boundaries is readily apparent when contrasting Hunter’s definition with that of an interdisciplinary research group established in 1989, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Midlife Development (MIDMAC) which defines midlife as “the years between 30 and 70, with 40 to 60 at its core” (MIDMAC, 2006). Conceptions of age ranges comprising midlife vary between and within cultures and are influenced by a host of factors including socioeconomic class, cultural background, education level, and geography (Hunter, 2005; Kertzner, 2001; Lachman, 2001). Nevertheless, the notion of midlife is well-ensconced in society. It abounds with socially constructed images such as the “midlife crisis,” the “change of life,” and the “empty nest syndrome” that are reflective of contemporary age norms exerting a powerful influence on people’s thinking (Merriam, 1999), and societal expectations of certain behaviors, rights, responsibilities, and statuses (Neugarten, 1976). Yet, little is known about these events and other key experiences in midlife (Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus, & Peng, 1994). Stereotypical images of midlife tend to be negative,

conjuring up images of reading glasses, graying hair, weak kidneys, sagging jowls, loss of libido, and so on. A more realistic characterization would probably entail both gains and losses (Baltes, 1997); and, indeed, Neugarten (1968) views midlife as the period of peak functioning and responsibility. Brim (2001) reaffirms the perspective that there is much ignorance and myth regarding midlife and acknowledges that some widely shared cultural beliefs are likely to be wrong, yet “stand untested, unvalidated premises on which millions of people make decisions” (p. xi). She sees the transmission of misperceptions and misinformation regarding midlife from one generation to the next as a consequence of a longstanding tendency in human development to concentrate on childhood, adolescence, and old age.

A growing recognition of midlife as worthy of study in its own right and an increasing interest in midlife are underway due primarily to the “baby boom” generation—those individuals born between 1946 and 1967 (Kotre, 1984; Lachman, 2001; Willis & Reid, 1999). In the year 2000, there were greater than 80 million baby boomers in the United States, or roughly 30% of the population (Lachman, 2001). This age cohort and the subsequent generation will be the largest cohorts to ever pass through midlife in United States history. From 1960 to 1985, those between the ages of 45 and 64 increased by 24%; by comparison, from 1990 to 2015, the same age group will have increased by 72%. Furthermore, baby boomers represent the best educated and most affluent to pass through middle age (Willis & Reid, 2001). Such factors are salient given the ever-changing socially constructed meanings of midlife. Age-related paradigms are morphing and offer more choices along with the potential for great confusion (Butler, 2005). Contemporary midlife is characterized by a growing diversity in roles, resources, and

relationships (Moen & Wethington, 1999). Furthermore, old norms and cultural expectations are out of date (Gotlib & Wheaton, 1997; Settersen & Mayer, 1997). As Lachman (2001) states “the time has come to rid ourselves of these obsolete ideas about middle age and replace them with new knowledge” (p. *xi*). At the same time, one must “recognize the variability between individuals in midlife development—both within cultures and across cultures...everyone changes but some more than others and in different ways” (p. *xii*). Heteronormativity is one such old norm that impacts the development of gay men. Its concomitant heterosexism is not a singular or isolated experience or event; and, as such, it cannot be disconnected from the broader context of an individual’s development (Greene & Croom, 2000). Exploring how gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society is one way to meet Lachman’s challenge to rid ourselves of obsolete ideas and create new knowledge about midlife.

Research on Midlife Gay Men

This section highlights that most literature regarding gay men at midlife is either conceptual or theoretical in nature, with very little empirically based studies being reported. This is followed by a discussion of Erikson’s concept of generativity.

Dearth of empirical research. Despite the increase in attention and interest in issues relating to aging and development of sexual minorities over the past two decades, there remains a dearth of literature on aging LGBT people in general (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Kertzner & Sved, 1996); and a lack of empirical information documenting the lives of aging gay men in particular (Cruz, 2003). Boxer (1997) points out “many important questions remain to be investigated” (p. 191), in what have Siegel and Lowe (1994) have referred to as *uncharted lives*. Most of the research on adult

development in sexual minorities that has been conducted also tends to mirror the tendency within the field of adult development to focus on youth (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1998), and those in later adulthood (e.g., Berger, 1982a, 1996; Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Herdt & de Vries, 2004). Furthermore, much of the literature relating to midlife gay men is conceptual, and many researchers have based their conclusions solely upon theory (Hash & Cramer, 2003). As a result, there remains a decided lack of empirically based research relating specifically to gay men at midlife. Kimmel and Sang (1995) were unable to identify any such research, although one study (Bennett & Thompson, 1990) was cited as focusing on the age at which middle age is thought to begin. Sullivan and Reynolds (2003) noted only two articles specifically focusing on the experience of middle-aged men—the aforementioned article by Kimmel and Sang, 1995; and a theoretical article by Kooden (1997). Based on his work as a psychotherapist, he suggests the successful resolution of developmental tasks for midlife gay men is generally achieved through the eradication of internalized ageism.

Sullivan and Reynolds' (2003) contribution to the empirical base included a qualitative study using narrative analysis “to document the sexual lives of gay men who have largely resolved the difficulties, ambiguities, and uncertainties of coming out” (p. 154). They defined middle-aged as between 35 and 65. The participants all had social identities as gay men (despite the fact that some were heterosexually married with children), and in some cases public or professional identities as gay men as well. Each was asked to describe explicitly a type of sex practice or relationship and to place it within the social, psychological, and emotional context of the rest of their lives. The stories the men told were considered to be “arts-informed inquiry” (p.162)—an important

aspect of which is “to gain insight and, therefore, understanding, in a phenomenological sense, of people in particular circumstances” (p. 163). In this case, what emerged were personal accounts of different meanings that individuals draw from sex. These men drew very different meanings from sex. Sex was contextual and its significance changed over time and from person to person. Aging and sex was an important theme. Despite “a strong cultural expectation that an interest in sex will decline with age” (p. 145), the participants in this study generally resisted such a notion. Indeed, embracing middle age didn’t necessarily narrow one’s sexual opportunities as might be expected from popular wisdom; for some men maturity and experience brought its own sexual adventures. One man, married with children yet self-identifying as gay, exemplifies a sense of freedom in his newly discovered gay identity, yet speaks of what is both his “greatest anxiety” and “a terrible attraction” (p.14)—falling in love with another man. He doesn’t dismiss the possibility of this for the future but “not till the kids have grown up” (p. 149). Such examples certainly inform how gay men can both contest and conform to heteronormativity, and are useful in informing my research. However, this study focused specifically on explicit sexual practices or contexts and how these relate to their gay identity. While sexual practices are certainly one part of the lived experiences of gay men (and indeed may be informative as to ways in which heteronormativity is either contested, affirmed, or both), my study is not limited to a single aspect as to how these men make meaning.

Generativity. One concept that is useful in examining various aspects of the lives of midlife gay men is Erikson’s (1978) seventh life stage development crisis, generativity versus stagnation. Stagnation indicates a lack of psychological growth. Stagnated adults

are self-centered individuals who have difficulty looking beyond their own needs and seek to maximize their pleasures at the expense of others. These individuals may be fairly happy until confronted with the onset of the physical and psychological consequences of aging—at which an identity crisis may ensue. Generativity, the opposite of stagnation, entails a concern for producing something that will outlast oneself, or to commit to society and help guide the next generation (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997); or, in Erikson's (1968) words: "I am what survives me" (p. 114). Despite the high degree of interest and attention that the concept of generativity has received, there is still uncertainty and lack of a common understanding as to what constitutes it (Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998). Since Erikson coined the term, generativity has been variously described as a "need", a "drive", a "concern", a "task", and an "issue." Furthermore, it has been associated with behavior, with motives and values, and with a general attitude towards life and the world (McAdams, 1996a; 1996b.). Generativity is frequently interpreted in terms of child-bearing and child-rearing; however, Erikson never restricted the concept of generativity to parenthood; rather, it can be expressed through a vast variety of life choices, beliefs, and commitments of midlife gay men (and lesbians) including vocation/occupation, professional activities, volunteer activities, social group memberships, friendships, and even leisure pursuits (de Vries & Blando, 2004). Obviously, gay men in midlife may be fathers--through previous marriages, adoption, or biological co-parenting (Kertzner & Sved, 1996). Other expressions of generativity include career choices (such as teaching and mentoring); artistic pursuits such as dance or theater; restoration and preservation efforts often found in gay neighborhoods (Fellows, 2004); and "perhaps political activism in many forms may also

be seen as generative; these forms are creating social change to benefit others...in the service of creating for the self and others a better place to be” (de Vries & Blando, 2004, p. 17).

This perspective would be supported by a new theory of generativity developed by McAdams (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). This model of generativity incorporates seven psychosocial features oriented around the overall goal shared by the individual and society—that of providing for the next generation. These features include (a) an *inner desire* for agentic immortality, (b) age-graded social norms expressed as a *cultural demand*, (c) *concern* for the next generation, (d) a *belief* in the goodness of the human enterprise, (e) generative *commitment*, (f) generative *action*, and (g) *narration* of generativity, which becomes part of the larger life story that makes up a person’s identity. Adults desire to be generative in various ways, but the social environment need to encourage this desire. Thus, when seeking to understand generativity, it is necessary to “look both within the person and into the person’s social and cultural environment” (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, 1998, p.9). Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998)—in the only empirically based study of generativity in midlife gay men located as part of this review—display such a perspective. They argue that the study of gay midlife development must address both the experience of being outside normative social timelines “without benefit of a gay-specific social timetable” (p. 277); as well as the enormous cohort difference in lived experience that have resulted from dramatic social change and the emergence of HIV/AIDS. Using a qualitative methodology, they conducted interviews of up to four hours in length with an unspecified number of gay men—although the perspectives of three of these men are included. One theme that

emerged is that gay men often arrive at midlife at least off-time—if not entirely off-course—for expectable life events and role transitions. One such example is the impact of HIV/AIDS which has hit the current generation of midlife gay men very hard—including the loss of loved ones and escalating the realization of the finitude of life. Another challenge relates to careers in which some have faced “a choice between deceit and discrimination” (p. 278). At the same time, the gay community has developed some of its own solutions and alternatives to these concerns (e.g., networks of supportive and understanding friends). Furthermore, the stories of the men presented demonstrated a variety of commitments that were seen as generative. The authors conclude that the complexity of any given period in the life course cannot be captured by a single developmental concern. Everyone faces challenges throughout life, made more or less difficult by the resources at their disposal.

The lack of empirically-based studies contributes to a lack of resources in understanding how gay men experience midlife. Indeed, this review located only two additional empirically based studies--Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998), and Kertzner (2001) that were not cited in previous literature reviews. With such a dearth of information, it is necessary to seek out related literature which can inform an interest in gay men at midlife. To that end, the next section will address literature regarding aging gay men.

Research on Aging and “Older” Lesbians and Gay Men

Research into LGBT-related issues in general does not have a long history, with the earliest literature dating to the 1950s and 1960s. Many early studies were geared towards determining the “cause” of what was considered to be a pathological

phenomenon; as such, they reflected “heterosexist bias” defined by Morin (1977) as “a belief system that values heterosexuality as superior to and/or more ‘natural’ than homosexuality” (p. 631). Following the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality by the *per se* from its list of mental disorders in 1973 (Bayer, 1981), research interest and attention regarding sexual minorities shifted from a preoccupation with etiology and pathology to a greater focus on characteristics and psychosocial concerns of sexual minorities, including social attitudes about homosexuals (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). This was accompanied by a concomitant shift from a deficit orientation towards a more holistic understanding of how sexual minorities live their lives (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Gabbay & Wahler, 2002); and in examining the ways in which LGBT paradigms help to inform and re-conceptualize broader psychological and social issues of sexuality, gender roles, identity, intimacy, family relationships, and life span development (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). The related literature that does exist has been written mostly within the context of health, psychological adjustment, and social services (Sullivan & Reynolds, 2003). Many early studies had as a purpose the debunking of myths and stereotypes (Wahler & Gabbay, 1997). Probably the most common, widely held stereotype is that of the lonely, socially isolated, unhappy old gay man—fearful of being “found out.” While this might accurately describe a relatively few older gays, studies have consistently found that loneliness and unhappiness are no more prevalent in older gay men than in their heterosexual counterparts. Research as far back as the late 1960s has largely found that older gay men (and lesbians) are psychologically well-adjusted, tend to have high levels of self-esteem, and strong friendship ties (Dorfman et al., 1995; Hash & Cramer, 2003); furthermore, they tend to care less about

“exposure” than younger counterparts (Berger & Kelly, 2001). Nonetheless, there remains “prevalent and deeply entrenched negative stereotypes...in spite of the growing evidence to the contrary” (Wahler & Gabbay, 1997, p. 16).

Much of the early research on these issues also conflated the experiences of gay men and lesbians (while virtually ignoring bisexuals and transgender persons). However, as Wahler and Gabbay (1997) caution:

Gay men and lesbians are more different from one another than they are similar...any attempt to join them for the purpose of sociological research is both artificial and misleading. Joining them under one umbrella of research on “homosexuals” has the effect of diluting our understanding of each and trivializing the experience of both. (p.2)

Many contemporary researchers are more inclined to view gender, regardless of sexual identity, as shaping life experiences in basic and pervasive ways, providing different pathways and opportunities, and different referents for making meaning (Koropeckyj-Cox (2003); and to acknowledge that despite some commonalities, both the development of sexual identity and lived experiences are different for lesbians and gay men (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). Although current knowledge about sexuality and developmental issues among midlife lesbians is very limited (Adelman, 2000; Garnets & Peplau, 2006), it may nevertheless be instructive. Some research has looked at lesbians in midlife focusing on such topics as dating and courtship (Rose & Zand, 2000); friendships (Weinstock, 2000); and midlife lesbian parenting (Donaldson, 2000). One phenomenon that seems to be much more prevalent among women than men is a change in sexual orientation over time. In a study of 110 lesbians between the ages of 40 and 59, 25% identified as lesbian

for the first time in midlife (Sang, 1991). Similarly, Charbonneau and Lander (1991) studied 30 lesbians ranging in age from the mid-30s to mid-50s, most of whom had never considered the possibility that they could be lesbians until they fell in love with another woman in midlife. Garnets and Peplau (2006) suggest that adopting a gender perspective is useful for understanding lesbian sexuality. Such a perspective highlights commonalities in the experiences of women regardless of sexual orientation, and the differences between the sexualities of women and men. As an example, men are more likely to sexualize (having sex with someone) and women to romanticize (falling in love with someone) their sexual orientation. Furthermore, research combining men and women runs the risk of taking men's experience as the standard while missing important aspects relating to women's sexuality. A paradigm that acknowledges women's distinctive life experiences implies that older lesbians' sexuality may more closely resemble the pattern of adult development of women in general as opposed to the pattern of gay or heterosexual men (Kertzner & Sved, 1996; Peplau & Garnets, 2000).

Just as some lesbians and gay men have sometimes been combined for research purposes, so too have gay men in midlife often been lumped into ill-defined categories such as "older" or "aging" gay men (Hash & Cramer, 2003); and the gerontological literature related to aging among gay men also typically establishes a lower age threshold for inclusion than is typically thought of as "older"--often ranging from 40 to 50 years of age (Sullivan & Reynolds, 2003). One salient example is a qualitative study by Pope and Schultz (1991) that used questionnaires to investigate sexual attitudes and behavior of 87 homosexual males who met their criterion of "midlife and aging," defined as age 40 and over. The ages of the respondents ranged from 40 to 77. The primary finding of the

study was that these older gay men maintained both an interest in sex as well as the ability to perform sexually which corroborated similar findings reported by Kelly (1977) and Berger (1982a, 1982b). Similarly, Peacock's (2000) definition of "older" referred to gay men over 45. His qualitative investigation into Erikson's developmental stages in an "older cohort" of gay men included 20 participants whose ages actually ranged from 32 to 74. He concluded that the both the civil rights and gay rights movements, as well as the so called "sexual revolution" affected the way these men these men identified themselves as gay; that myths regarding what it means to be old and gay still linger despite research which has discovered them to be unfounded; and that traditional schedules of issues across the lifespan are not apt for gay men. Instead, patterns of development for gay men can start at various ages in large part based on when identity-acceptance begins. Peacock's rationale for using a definition of "older" that is lower than the generally accepted definition in the larger, non-gay culture is that "the gay subculture assumes and expects older individuals to fade into the outer perimeters upon evincing the physical signs of aging" (p. 15). This statement alludes to the notion of *accelerated aging*, a term coined by Minnigerode (1976), to reflect the "folk wisdom" (p. 273) that held that that gay men perceive themselves as old and experience an earlier onset of midlife and old age than their heterosexual counterparts. Data from his quantitative study of 95 gay men between 25 and 68 years of age did not support the suggestion that gay men enter midlife and old age earlier than heterosexual men. The notion of accelerated aging has been somewhat vexing in the literature involving gay men. It has been roundly criticized and dismissed as a myth and totally unsupported by empirical evidence (e.g., Berger and Kelly, 2001); and others have found that any supporting evidence is

contradictory and inconclusive at best (Bennett & Thompson, 1990; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Kertzner, 2001). Nonetheless, much of the literature on gay men refers directly to ageism and an emphasis on youthfulness (Bergling, 2004; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997); and “age continues to serve as an influence in the social organization of gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities” (Boxer, 1997, p.189). Russell and Bohan (2005) identify sociocultural differences between age cohorts as well as limited socially sanctioned opportunities for cross-generational interaction among LGBT people as major contributors to age-segregation within the LGBT community.

Cohorts. The notion of an age *cohort*, or “the aggregate of persons of the same age” (Giele & Elder, 1998, p. 15), is fundamental to research on development and aging, particularly regarding sexual minorities. Although delimiting precise age ranges for cohorts is difficult because of socioeconomic class, geography, gender, race, and a host of other factors (Kimmel & Sang, 1995), the generation typically considered as currently at mid-life roughly equates to those born between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s, a cohort commonly referred to the “baby boomers.” Qualitative differences between gay cohorts based on historical or sociopolitical events are frequently discussed in the literature (Adelman, 1991; Kertzner, 2001; Thomas, 1996; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997). Recognition of the impacts of such events is often revealed in narratives of lived experience, and “leads to a more complex and textured understanding” (Cohler & Hostetler, 2002, p. 156) of the lifecourse. The Stonewall riots (often considered to be the pivotal event initiating the gay rights movement) and HIV/AIDS are almost invariably mentioned as factors impacting on the development of the current cohort of gay men in midlife (Cruz, 2003; Grossman, D’Augelli, & O’Connell, 2001; Herdt & de Vries, 2004;

Kooden, 2000; Shernoff, 1997). Kimmel and Sang (1995) identify Stonewall as the event that began to change the social construction of homosexuality from a personal pathology to minority-group membership. Those currently in middle age were in the prime of early adulthood when the HIV/AIDS emerged, and many were personally impacted by this disease. Indeed, Gorman and Nelson (2004) state “it would be astonishing if an event of such psychological, cultural, social, political, and economic magnitude as AIDS did NOT impact the psyches of these individuals” (p. 80).

This influence of historical age-cohort effects and the shared meanings of a collective social and cultural life are germane to each of the two additional focus areas within the aging literature to be discussed as relevant to midlife gay men: successful age, lifespan development approaches to aging.

Successful aging. Many contributory factors to successful aging are the same or similar across sexual orientation (e.g., education; social networks; financial security; intimate relationships; avoidance of risk factors such as smoking or obesity). Yet, while gay men face the same issues about aging as their heterosexual counterparts, they may have additional unique challenges as well. These include ageism in the gay community (Kooden, 1997, 2000) given the “emphasis on youth within gay culture” (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997); the assimilation of being gay into one’s life patterns (Peacock, 2000); and the dilemma of integrating the traditional notions of masculinity while accepting their gay identities (Nardi, 1999). However, the most pressing is the stress, trauma, and social stigmatization and associated discrimination due to having a minority sexual orientation (e.g., Cain, 1991; DiPlacido, 1998; Herek, 1998a, 1998b). Such stigmatization contributes to an absence of social markers in the lives of sexual minorities

(Kertzner, 2001). Milestone events such as marriage, anniversaries, widowhood, and bereavement are unheralded socially in the lives of LGBT persons (Shernoff, 1997). Thus, stigma may inhibit achievement of individual potential and may affect a sense of fulfillment and purpose in life, although different age cohorts may experience stigma differently (Kertzner, Meyer, & Dolezal, 2004).

Adelman (1991) concurs with the differences in age cohorts, but adds that what is adaptive for one generation in a specific socio-historical context may be maladaptive for the next generation. In her empirical study of 27 self-identified gay men and 25 self-identified lesbians (all of whom were age 60 or older), one finding seemed counter-intuitive—high life satisfaction was statistically significant to low involvement with other gay people. She attributed this to the participants being of a generation in which they had few opportunities to interact with other gay people; furthermore, she speculated that the finding would not hold true for subsequent generations. High life satisfaction was more strongly related to several factors including low disclosure at work; an early age of awareness; and a decrease in the importance of homosexuality in later years. She concludes that gay development need not occur at a certain age or specific period of life for adjustment to occur; rather the crucial factor is the influence of stigma and the individual's psychosocial resources to deal with the environmental demands and pressures created by the stigma.

Friend (1991) theorized that negotiating such stigma early in life could lead to later high levels of adjustment, in part due to “a response to the pervasive negative messages about homosexuality with which they were raised” (p. 109). This is built around Kimmel's (1978) concept of *crisis competence*, which suggests that having to

deal with the crises associated with *coming out* (accepting a gay identity) “buffers the person against later crises” (p.117). Having worked through the coming out process, gay men (and lesbians) develop resilience and may be better prepared for the processes of aging than their heterosexual counterparts (Adelman, 1991; Cruz, 2003; Grossman, D’Augelli, & O’Connell, 2001). Berger and Kelly (2001) refer to this phenomenon as *mastery of stigma*. Gay men (and other sexual minorities) have already had to manage the stigma of being different; and when faced with the stigma of aging, they are better able to adapt. A *crisis of independence* is a similar phenomenon in that gay men (and other sexual minorities), who often cannot rely on traditional institutions for support, learn adaptive skills that later facilitate the process of aging. Indeed, despite the added stressors of being an “other” in a heterosexist society, the vast majority of research on midlife and older gay men (and lesbians) have found them to be psychologically well-adjusted, self-accepting, and comfortable with who they are (Berger, 1982b, 1996; Berger & Kelly, 2001; Brown, Alley, Sarosy, Quarto, & Cook, 2001; Friend, 1980; Kimmel, 1978; Adelman, 1991). Among the first of such studies, Hooker (1957) suggested that homosexual men were psychologically normal. Trained clinicians comparing the personality structure and adjustment of groups of heterosexuals and homosexuals (matched for age, education, and IQ) were unable to distinguish between the two groups on the basis on the result of projective tests, attitudes scales, and life-history interview material. In a survey of 241 gay men between the ages of 16-79, Kelly (1977) found that no evidence that homosexuality caused difficulty for older gay men, although he noted that the social stigma of homosexuality caused problems for them. Adelman (1991) cites unpublished research (Minnigerode, Adelman, & Fox, 1980) which compared social,

personal, and sexual adjustment of heterosexuals and gay men/lesbians over 60 years of age found few differences in psychological adjustment on various psychometric scales. Kimmel (1978, 1979) is among the most cited studies on aging gay men. In interviews with fourteen gay men (ranging in age from 55 to 81), he found that all (with one exception—a man who had been married for much of his adult life and had not come to a self-identity as gay until late in life--had some experience of oppression. Yet many had “created their own satisfying social and physical environment which provided them with a comfortable living situation, a circle of gay friends and a varied pattern of appropriate interactions with heterosexual friends, relatives, and coworkers” (Kimmel, 1979, p. 247). Berger’s (1982b) study of 112 men age 40 and older also serves as a classic example of this type of research. The great majority of the respondents were found to be psychologically healthy as measured by such variables as self-acceptance, depression, and psychosomatic symptoms. Furthermore, most did not worry about death, had a marked preference for socializing with their age peers, and were satisfied with their current sex life.

It is worth noting that as is not atypical with much research dealing with sexual minorities, participant recruitment strategies and procedures for many such studies often relied on out individuals with established social networks or otherwise involved in LGBT community organizations; so it is possible that some of these findings reflect a sampling artifact (Woolf, 1998). Garnets and Kimmel (2003) seem to discount such notions, however, in stating “in general, research that focuses on refuting stereotypes about...gay men does not require representative samples to be compelling, because it focuses on disproving these generalizations” (p. 7). Furthermore, Dorman et al. (1995) conducted a

quantitative study to test the assumption that elderly gay men and lesbians are more depressed and socially-isolated than their heterosexual cohort. The sample consisted of 55 women (23 lesbians and 32 heterosexuals) and 53 men (33 gay men and 20 heterosexuals)--ranging in age from 60 to 93. The study revealed no significant differences between homosexuals and heterosexuals with regard to depression and overall social support, despite significantly less family support in the homosexual group. The authors concluded that in contrast to the myth that older gay men and lesbians are sadder and more isolated than their heterosexual peers, the two groups are equally likely to be depressed and to have social supports.

Lifespan developmental approaches. The literature on midlife development describes significant change in social, psychological, and psychosexual realms of life experience during middle age, yet it is generally blind to sexual orientation; thus, “the applicability of adult developmental perspectives to middle-aged gay men’s lives is uncertain” (Kertzner, 2001, p. 78). Numerous researchers echo the position that traditional models of adult development do not adequately address developmental patterns of gay men (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Cruz, 2003; Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Kooden, 1997). In addition to age and sociopolitical cohort effects previously mentioned, individual differences in development are influenced by a host of other factors including family relationships (Anderson & Hayes, 1996; Patterson & D’Augelli, 1998); class, culture, race, and ethnicity (D’Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Greene, 1997; Greene & Croom, 2000); spirituality (Johnson, 2000; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992); and one’s geographic area (Smith & Mancoske, 1997). Furthermore, gay men do not share a single, developmental pathway. Cohler and Hostetler (2002) provide an

example that makes this point is a caution to researchers to be aware of the possibility of significant intra-cohort variation in the developmental pathways of gay men. They discuss a participant in a focus group who, during his midlife, visited a gay bar while his wife was out of town. There he met a man with whom he fell in love. He subsequently divorced his wife, and has lived with this male partner for more than a decade.

Indeed, as this example indicates, a critical factor contributing to the wide diversity of adult development patterns for gay men (and other sexual minorities) is the age at which one comes out—that is, when one acknowledges and accepts an identity other than heterosexual (Eliason, 1996; Kimmel & Sang, 1995). This self-acceptance is often seen as integral to successful aging and healthy development for gay men (Brown, Alley, Sarosy, Quarto, & Cook, 2001; Cruz, 2003; Gabbay & Wahler, 2001; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997); as well as to higher levels of self-esteem (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). Numerous writings and studies on gay psychological development have focused on identity and the disclosure thereof (Drescher, 2001; Evans, 2002; Cox & Gallois, 1996; Isay, 1996; Talburt, 2000), and it remains a topic of keen research interest. Yet, identity is not static; rather it changes and develops across the lifespan (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). Furthermore, “gay men maintain other identities and social roles besides those related to being homosexual” (Kertzner, Meyer, & Dolezal, 2004, p. 102). Anderson and Hayes (1996) echo this view and explain that a lifespan developmental approach is neither a defined theory nor an assumption; rather, it is a prescription to be open-minded and pluralistic in considering psychological functioning throughout adulthood given that “people are lifelong ‘meaning makers.’ A person is not a stage of development, but is part of a long and meaningful process...over a lifetime” (p. xvi).

Kertzner's (2001) study of 30 gay men at midlife, which he defined as between the ages of 40 and 60, typifies a lifespan developmental approach. Using both qualitative (semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological assessment of self-appraised homosexual identity) and quantitative methods, Kertzner sought to describe the experience of aging, current psychological adjustment, and outlook towards the future. Four main themes emerged: (1) *self-realization* of homosexual identity characterized by a sequence of awareness, acceptance, and disclosure; (2) *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; (3) *accommodation* by some who viewed their homosexuality with both acceptance and resignation but not regret; and (4) *encumbrance* in which homosexual identity was perceived as a burden that disrupted life history and presented hazards to aging. Furthermore, the meaning of homosexual identity was highly variable reflecting the heterogeneity of life experience described by the participants. This variability was expressed by some as a decrease in the relative importance of homosexuality over the life course; yet, Kertzner speculates that special circumstances unique to gay men (e.g., those who are recently out of the closet, or who experience discrimination related to their sexual identity) may result in homosexual identity assuming or retaining a foreground status during midlife.

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a discussion of social constructivism, the conceptual framework of this research effort. Following was a section on queer theory, which informs this study, to include subsections on the term *queer*; an exploration of the main premises and hallmarks of queer theory; the tension between queer theory and the very

notion of sexual *identity*; and criticisms of queer theory. Research dealing with sexual minorities in general was then presented to include research topics that might inform studies of gay men at midlife, as well as the salience of LGBTQ research to education (and specifically, adult education). The adult development literature serves as the basis for the final major, and most topical, section of this review. Topics addressed include the relationship between adult development and adult education; and an overview of adult development theories, constructs, and types. Subsections include a discussion of midlife as a social construct; the dearth of empirical literature regarding gay men at midlife; generativity at midlife; and studies on aging gay men that may provide insight to the development and experiences of midlife gay men.

With credit to Waddington (1956), Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998) suggest that development may best be understood as a metaphor—that of water running down a hill to join a stream:

Along the way it encounters obstacles that threaten its integrity and coherence, such as the loss of a parent through death or divorce, social unrest and conflict, or the experience of stigmatization. However, it is precisely the meanings that are made of such adversities that give the course of development and the life story its distinctive form. (p. 301)

Those outside the norm of heterosexuality face numerous developmental impediments imposed by heteronormativity; yet heterosexism and homophobia serve to deny the very existence of such obstacles and to ignore or dismiss unique developmental issues facing gay men (and other sexual minorities). Without an awareness or understanding of such issues—a circumstance exacerbated by the dearth of empirically

based research in this area—gay men are left with little choice other than to follow the well-worn paths of their heterosexual counterparts, or to blaze new trails and pathways of their own. How gay men at midlife negotiate the obstacles of heteronormativity--the ways in which it is both affirmed (by following well-worn paths) or contested (by blazing new trails)--and how their perceptions of a self-identity as gay have shaped their distinctive developmental paths, are at the heart of this research effort.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter begins by reviewing the purpose of the study. This is followed by an overview of qualitative research, and why such a paradigm is suited to the purpose of this study. Subsequent sections will present the guiding research questions, my background, and procedures for selecting participants. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of data collection procedures and methods, data analysis, and strategies to insure the trustworthiness of the study.

Research Purpose and Problem

Existing literature does not consider several important parameters as to how heteronormativity may shape adult development in the lives of gay men: the effects of social stigmatization; delays in realizing and consolidating a gay identity; and non-traditional configurations of intimate relationships and family life (Kertzner, 1999). Furthermore, very little is known regarding how ongoing life experiences affect self-representations and understandings of gay men at midlife; and conversely, how being gay affects the life experiences and personal narratives of these men (Kertzner, 2001; Stein, 1993; Troiden, 1984). This qualitative study, the purpose of which was to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society, was an effort to redress these shortcomings.

Overview of Research Kind

While various strategies are encompassed under the rubric of *qualitative research*, they all typically share certain features (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). These include a naturalistic setting in which the researcher is the key instrument; “richly” or “thickly” descriptive data in the form of words or pictures rather than an emphasis on numbers as in quantitative research; a concern with process more so than outcomes or products; an inductive approach in which any resulting theory is grounded in the data itself as contrasted with attempting to prove or disprove hypotheses; and an emphasis on “meaning”, that is, how participants experience reality from their own perspective. A key underlying assumption of such research is that individuals, in interaction with their world, socially construct knowledge and meaning; thus there is no one, fixed reality (as assumed in a quantitative paradigm), but rather multiple constructions and interpretation of realities that are in flux and vary over time (Merriam, 2002). Typically smaller purposeful samples are used in qualitative research, and the intent is not to be able to generalize the findings. Rather, the researcher, as “the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis” (Merriam, 2002, p.5), is more interested in the process by which people make sense of their lives or a particular phenomenon than in a specific outcome or action while the research is in progress. Contrastd with the purported “elimination” of bias in quantitative research, the qualitative researcher attempts to identify and monitor any biases and influence that he or she might exert on data collection or analysis. This analysis includes interpretation of data that is “rich in description of people, places, and conversations, and not easily handled by statistical

procedures” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 2). The process is inductive in that researchers gather data to build concepts or theories as opposed to deriving postulates or theories to be tested--the deductive approach used in quantitative research (Merriam, 2002).

Qualitative research is often used when the topic is exploratory in nature and one’s goal is to understand the complexity of phenomena (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Furthermore, some qualitative methods offer the potential to empower study respondents, to promote social justice for oppressed populations, and are deemed appropriate for “a population that lacks sufficient voice in the literature” (Hash & Cramer, 2003, p. 49). Indeed, those who have been excluded from--or are studying those who excluded from—the mainstream often find qualitative research appealing as Bogdan and Biklen (2003) relate:

Groups such as women, African Americans, gays, and lesbians have been attracted to qualitative research because of the democratic emphasis of the method, the ease with which the method attends to the perspectives of those not traditionally included in mainstream research studies, and the strengths of the qualitative approach for describing the complexities of social conflicts. (p. 14)

In addition to the potential for empowerment, allowing marginalized persons to tell their stories in their own words and having their experiences validated can engender what Bogdan and Biklen (2003) refer to as the “transgressive possibilities of qualitative methods” (p. 14).

It is precisely these transgressive possibilities that undergirded the choice of a qualitative framework for this research into how gay men negotiate midlife. Exploring

how these men have negotiated their sexual identities despite societal repression and the turmoil of internalized homophobia validated their right to challenge society's mandate for conformity (in deed, in thought, in action); and, in so doing, to make meaning of their own lives. The potential for such empowerment is a primary advantage of qualitative inquiry with middle-aged and older gay men, and ideally can help to “produce change in the attitudes of others” (Hash & Cramer, 2003, p. 57). It is also an example of how “research becomes a tool by which LGBT people transcend invisibility and marginalization” (D’Augelli in Meezan & Martin, 2003, p. *xxi*).

Overview of Research Type

The use of narratives in qualitative research in the social sciences, psychology, and adult education is well-accepted and well-documented (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Dominice, 2000; McAdams, 1993; Merriam & Simpson, 1995). Narrative methods encompass autobiographical research, personal narratives, life histories, oral histories, memory work, self stories, and testimonio (Beverley, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Rockhill, 1993).

Narrative strategies are also widely utilized in research dealing with sexual minorities (Brooks & Edwards, 1997; Cohler & Hostetler, 2002; Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998; Galassi, 1991; Grace & Benson, 2000; Jones, 2000; Kertzner, 1999; Kimmel, 1979; Siegel & Lowe, 1994; Vacha, 1985). Oral tradition, life histories, and stories are indispensable as teaching and learning aids to help sexual minorities “discern the limits of an outwardly imposed artificiality and the genuine in a functioning gay identity. How else do we define who we are in this alien, yet familiar, world?” (Quinn, 2000, p. 5). Legal and political barriers to full citizenship (e.g., denial of the right to

marry or adopt); non-normative societal support (e.g., condemnation by religious institutions, misrepresentations in the media); and the relentless pressure of living in a heteronormative society irrefutably result in different life experiences for sexual minorities than for their heterosexual counterparts. Indeed, Herdt and de Vries (2004) assert that the impact of living as a gay or lesbian person under heteronormativity is “profound and oppressive” (p. xvii). Yet, as de Vries and Blando (2004) note, large numbers of gay men and lesbians have come of age and come out with little historical experience and few cultural expectations to guide them. Research to aid in this endeavor has been insufficient and inadequate. This helps to explain the urgency and the compelling nature of Clark’s (1985) comments regarding the lessons to be learned from gay and lesbian elders:

We gay people have worked hard to free ourselves in the formative years of childhood. We may never be free of the haunting shadows of some of those lies. But perhaps...we can help others to see...now we awake to our aging and search for our ancestors, living or dead. We want to hear their tales and touch their scars. We want to know the paths they followed. (p. 8)

Narayan (1988) asserts that oppressed groups have *epistemic privilege*, that is, immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression; and “know first-hand the detailed and concrete ways in which oppression defines the spaces in which they live and how it affects their lives” (p. 36). One way that beleaguered groups survive such oppression is through storytelling (Frontain, 2000). Furthermore, sexual minorities create and produce a type of knowledge which Hill (1996) terms *fugitive* since it is produced outside the dominant social discourse, and can serve as the basis for adult transgression.

These are the types of knowledge that are surfaced when “hearing the tales” and “touching the scars.” Exploring them further was a way to both pay tribute to those who have blazed trails before me and to smooth the paths for those who come after me—in effect, an expression of my own generativity implicit in the desire to do research into the meaning making of gay men in midlife.

The type of research informing this study is narrative inquiry, which has been characterized by Chase (2005) as both a “field in the making” and “an amalgam of analytical lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods -- all revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them” (p. 651). The term *narrative* is itself open to various understandings and interpretations, often linked to disciplines (Daiute & Fine, 2003; Mishler, 1995). Hardy (1968) describes it as a basic mode of thought, whereas Bruner (1986) sees narrative as a way to organize knowledge. Labov (1972) defines narrative rather narrowly to refer to a specific linguistic form that is distinguishable from other kinds of talk. Reissman (1993) suggests there are several different kinds of linguistically identifiable narratives. Narratives can also refer more broadly to a life story about some aspect of the narrator's experience that is a deep and abiding concern for him or her (Chase, 1995). Narrative is ubiquitous, as Richardson (1990) notes: "Narrative is everywhere; it is present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass window, cinema, social histories, fairy tales, novels, science schema, comic strips, conversation and journal articles" (p. 117). Chase (2005) explains that a narrative may be oral or written; and may be heard or elicited during fieldwork, interviews, or naturally occurring conversations. In any of these situations, a

narrative may be (a) a short topical story at about a particular event and specific characters; (b) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life; or (c) a recounting of one's entire life from birth to the present.

The essential element of narrative—the story—is a fundamental way of representing ourselves to the world, and story can be thought of as a metaphor for human life (Rossiter, 1999). Indeed, humans are storytellers by nature who “use narrative to communicate and understand people and events [and who] think and dream in narrative” (Conle, 2000, p. 50). Given the chance, most people like to tell stories about themselves. These stories “create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience. The unfolding drama of life is revealed more by the telling than by the actual events told” (McAdams, 1993, p. 28). Stories organize many different kinds of information and form the basic structure of human meaning-giving (Polkinghorne, 1995; Rossiter, 1999). This happens at an individual level as well as at a social level, as people compose and construct lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives (Chase, 2003). It is through narrative that cultures have created and expressed their worldviews and have provided models of identity and agency to their members (Bruner, 1996, p. *xiv*). Narrative inquiry is concerned with experience as expressed in lived and told stories; and is “the study of experience, and experience, as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 189). Such a perspective aligns with the social constructivist framework of this study; and with my interest in how the ingrained societal narratives of heteronormativity and heterosexism impact how gay men at midlife understand themselves and their position in

the larger society. Chase (2003) underscores the role of queer theory in informing my research when she states:

Learning to hear how the social world is embedded and individuals' stories would require a strong understanding of the concept of cultural ideologies and discourses, as well as the ability to hear how individuals constantly use, make sense of, resist, or transform those cultural resources and constraints. (p. 98)

Narrative has also been described as a developmental discourse (Daiute & Fine, 2003). Humans tend to comprehend time in terms of stories; but as time passes, events happen (McAdams, 1993). The stories we tell and the lives we construct in the interpretive search for meaning change over time--influenced by cultural, social, and historical contexts. The meaning and value of a given experience becomes clearer by looking back at it, and telling stories of one's life becomes "an infinite process of reconstructing experiences, events and choices. At every moment, past events might receive new meanings and form the basis for other biographical strategies that might offer new action perspectives for the future" (Stroobants, 2005, p. 51). Thus, narrative not only gives meaning to past experiences; it is constitutive of learning and "invites people to interpret their experiences in another way, but also a transformative power that might make them act differently in the future" (p. 51). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) echo this notion of development and potential transformation through narrative in that "telling stories of ourselves in the past leads to the possibility of retellings" (p. 60). As an example of this, the late 20th century phenomenon of gay and lesbian coming out stories produced new understandings of sexual orientation, which in turn transformed not only

individuals' lives, but also wider cultural meanings, politics, and legal issues concerning sexuality (Chase, 2003; Plummer, 1995).

Although narrative inquiry as a whole is interdisciplinary, specific approaches are sometimes shaped by interests and assumptions embedded in researchers' disciplines (Chase, 2005). Examples include (a) a psychological approach that focuses on the relationship between individuals life stories and the quality of their lives, especially their psychosocial development; (b) sociological approaches that highlight "identity work" that people engage in as they construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive, and local cultural contexts; or that are based on inquiry about specific aspects of peoples' lives; and (c) autoethnography, in which researchers turn the analytical lens on themselves and their interactions with others; and typically write, interpret, and/or perform their own narratives about culturally significant experiences. The approach used in this study is a blend of the psychological and the sociological approaches listed above.

In a similar vein, Chase (2005) outlines a set of five interconnected analytic lenses through which contemporary narrative researchers approach empirical material. Taken as a whole, these lenses "suggest the distinctiveness of narrative inquiry—how it is different from (if connected to) other forms of qualitative research" (p. 656). A condensed summary of these lenses follows:

1. Narrative researchers treat narrative as a distinct form of discourse. Narrative is retrospective meaning making -- the shaping or ordering the past experience. It is a way of understanding one's own and others' actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time, while also

expressing emotions, thoughts, and interpretations.

2. Narrative researchers view narratives as verbal action, as doing or accomplishing something. Narrators explain, entertain, inform, defend, complain, and confirm or challenge the status quo. When someone tells a story, he or she shapes, constructs, and performs the self, experience, and reality.
3. Narrative researchers view stories as both enabled and constrained by a range of social resources and circumstances. These include the possibilities for self and reality construction that are intelligible within the narrator's community, local setting, organizational and social memberships, and cultural and historical location.
4. Narrative researchers treat narratives as socially situated interactive performances--produced in a particular setting, for a particular audience, and for particular purposes. As a result, narratives are flexible, variable, and shaped in part by interaction with the audience.
5. Narrative researchers view *themselves* as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present or publish their ideas about the narratives they studied. As such, researchers narrate "results" in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social resources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures, and historical moments; and they write or perform their work for particular audiences.

These lenses weave through and bolster my conceptual framework (social constructivism informed by some aspects of queer theory). Furthermore, they are

congruent with my personal beliefs (discussed in a subsequent section) which guided and filtered my research, and evidenced in the selection of research questions and the interpretations of research results. (Gabbay & Wahler, 2002). Specifically, I informed the participants of my sexual orientation, and shared my experiences related to aging and sexual identity as seems appropriate. My personal knowledge of and lived experiences in gay men's culture—and with living under heteronormativity--were salient aspects of my role of researcher as instrument. Such familiarity enables gay investigators to “communicate a special empathy that encourages correspondent trust and honesty” (LaSala, 2003, p.15). However, as this was not a heuristic study, the voices and stories of the participants were of primary importance and at the center of the data collection and analysis as opposed to putting my own experiences and self-reports at the core of the inquiry (Moustakas, 1990).

Plummer (2005) notes the “multiple, often contradictory assumptions of inquires” which reflect that “research—like life—is a contradictory, messy affair” (p. 357). He cites his own tensions with using both queer theory and a more critical humanist perspective, but opts not to attempt to reconcile differences between them—a task that he feels is “not possible and probably is not even desirable” (p. 367). Although I suspect he is correct, as a novice researcher, I found it important to negotiate the maze of approaches to research to determine an appropriate “fit.” For this study, use of narrative inquiry helped to mitigate the apparent tension that would result between a more traditional phenomenological approach seeking to understand the ways in which gay men at midlife make meaning of their lives, and the postmodern bent of queer theory which places “much more emphasis on meaning as a *contested event*, a terrain of struggle in which

individuals take up often conflicting subject positions in relation to signifying events” (McLaren & Crankshaw, 1993, p. 385). Instead, narrative inquiry fully acknowledges the ways in which peoples’ creation of selves can be both enabled and constrained by societal, cultural, and historical locations. Furthermore, the telling and retelling stories of our pasts allows for new and different meanings and understandings to emerge. As such, no interpretation or meaning is ever complete—a concept that is compatible with a post-structural perspective that “meaning can be strategically reinterpreted, reworked, and deferred” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). More importantly, however, is narrative inquiry’s implied sense of agency as “people are ...composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). Heteronormativity foists a “terrain of struggle” as a backdrop for the lives of those outside the heterosexual norm; yet, gay men both resist and conform to the societal demands placed upon them such that their positions or actions are often conflicting. Seeking out the stories of these men was not only an instructive way to explore the richness of individual lives by capturing nuances and details that might otherwise remain undiscovered; it also allowed for the possibility of new understandings and meanings—and an enhanced range of possibilities for creating new lives—to emerge. While this study was not designed to be action research aimed at producing such effects, any such new awareness or potential for learning and growth (on my part as well as that of the participants) that may have resulted are welcome outcomes indeed.

Research Questions

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) note that “Questions developed to guide a qualitative study need to be more open-ended and concerned with a process and meaning rather than

cause and effect” (p. 150). With that caution in mind, this study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the subjective experience of aging in contemporary midlife gay men; and what is the significance of social interaction on both self-identification as gay and life experiences associated with middle age?
2. What is the sense of life opportunities having been either enhanced or restricted by being gay; and what strategies or forms of accommodation to, as well as resistance to, heteronormativity have been part of these men’s developmental histories?
3. How do these men make meaning of or reframe their personal developmental journeys in light of inapplicability or asynchrony with traditional life course markers; the social stigma associated with being gay; and potential age cohort effects for those gay men currently in midlife (e.g., Stonewall; HIV/AIDS; growing visibility of LGBTQ issues and people in contemporary society)?

Background of the Researcher

I’ve sometimes heard it said that “we study who we are.” While this seems too sweeping a generalization, I tend to agree with Krieger’s (1991) assertion that researchers ought to “acknowledge, more honestly that we do, the extent to which our studies are reflections of our own inner lives” (p. 1). A personal interest in a topic seems often to be a key motivator in pursuing research in a given area, and that certainly is the case with this study.

I am afforded much privilege in this society as a White, middle-aged, and middle class male. Concurrently, as someone who is both gay and highly self-reflexive, I am

well aware of (and have been subjected to) the marginalization and stigma associated with being a sexual minority. I was socialized in a heteronormative society in which heterosexism and homophobia not only pervade even the most basic aspects of everyday life, but are also reinforced and celebrated by many societal institutions—thereby rendering the lives of sexual minorities to invisibility or scorn and derision. Yet I have come to see my sexual orientation as a very special gift—one which has both facilitated my personal growth and development and provided me with incalculable benefits. I feel a sense of community with other sexual minorities stemming from what Galassi (1991) refers to as the “existence of a gay and lesbian collective experience” (p. 75), and based largely on having been ignored or excluded from much of the public, community-organized, and institutionally-sanctioned recognition of significant life markers that are sometimes seen as pivotal in one’s psychosocial development. I have seen first-hand how social networks and friendships provide the learning and support required to develop the resilience and sense of self to challenge heterosexist assumptions, and to face life hurdles due to a sexually marginalized status. Given that the persistent misperceptions (and often deliberate) misrepresentations of sexual minorities do not fit my reality, I have also learned not to trust stereotypes. As a result, I have an affinity for the struggle of those who are oppressed on any number of fronts, and what I perceive as—and hope is—a genuine respect for difference. Emanating from this is a yearning for deepened understanding of others’ experiences, and a desire to be part of something larger than myself in striving for social equity.

Yet, these are my traits and subjective aspects of who I am as I negotiate my own midlife as a gay man in a heteronormative society. Despite essentialized notions to the

contrary, there is no one way to be gay (or to be middle aged for that matter). In writing about his life as a gay man born with a physical congenital disability, Fries (2003) says “the narrative of disability is not a narrative of answers...it is a narrative of questions” (p. *xii*). He explains that in a narrative of questions, “there is not one simple answer. Answers shift over time and with the context in which the question is asked. Memory itself, as well as the way we remember, changes as our lives change” (p. *xviii*). I think such is the case with the narrative of sexual orientation as well—for some questions the answers will remain ineffable. Yet, for me, asking questions is necessary. I agree with the proposition that all knowledge is partial, and am not uncomfortable when confronted with inconsistencies. In fact, the choice of a qualitative paradigm rests largely on such an epistemological perspective. Nonetheless, this study was, in part, a continuation of my own developmental journey of finding out both who I am and who I might yet be. As part of that process, I hope this study makes a contribution to those who are following—or guiding others along—similar paths.

Participant Selection Procedures

Since the purpose of qualitative study is to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the persons involved, “it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2002, p. 12). However, recruiting sexual minorities as research participants can be “fraught with dilemmas, particularly with populations that are difficult to define, hard to reach, or resistant to identification because of potential discrimination, social isolation or other reasons” (Sullivan & Losberg, 2003, p. 148). Many sexual minorities are justifiably suspicious of “research” since it has traditionally labeled them as sick or deviant (Herek, Kimmel,

Amaro, & Melton, 1991). Citing the “ample history of medical and social science research involving [sexual minorities] that have violated contemporary ethical standards,” Martin and Meezan (2003, p. 183) caution that researchers may need to take additional measures to safeguard confidentiality and to protect sexual minority participants from harm. The examples they provide range from lack of informed consent and invasion of privacy to castration and pharmacologic shock to “cure” homosexuality. Although the latter may seem extreme, the philosophical offspring of these measures continues today in the form of *reparative therapy* and *transformational ministry*. Grace (2002) likens these efforts to “convert” or “transform” sexual minorities into heterosexuals to *theocratic terrorism* and *therapeutic terrorism*, respectively (p. 124). Other studies have resulted in harm in that the results were “used to promote stigma and to foster unfounded stereotypes of lesbians and gay men as predatory, dangerous, and diseased” (Herek, 1998a, p. 247). As a result, a common limitation throughout much research dealing with sexual minorities is an over-reliance on participants who are White, well educated, urban, have above average income, and are typically *out* in regards to their sexual orientation (Cruz, 2003; Fusco, 1993; Meezan & Martin, 2003; Peacock, 2000).

For this study, specific criteria for participant selection were determined, and participants meeting those criteria were actively recruited—a strategy referred to as *purposeful sampling* (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The criteria for selection included a current age between 40 and 60, and a self-awareness of gay identity. Intentional efforts were made to seek out participation and inclusion of gay men across various categories, e.g., rural, working class, men of color, and varying educational levels. This was not based on a preconceived notion that these men necessarily have different meaning or experiences

of midlife; rather, it reflected a sincere desire to be more inclusive as to whose voices are heard in the research process. Participants were recruited through a combination of methods—including several persons I know who met the criteria complemented by word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. I also contacted several local social or recreational groups geared towards gay men. My status and emic perspective as a gay man may have helped mitigate some of the aforementioned dilemmas when recruiting participants for this type of research in that researchers who are sexual minorities conducting research with other sexual minorities “live in the same world as their respondents” (LaSala, 2003, p. 18). Nonetheless, these initial approaches proved inadequate in recruiting beyond the “easy to find” categories. Recruitment strategies using the Internet—specifically posting information about the study on web sites geared for “older” gay men such as *Silver Daddies* (www.silverdaddies.com), and participating in online discussions in chat rooms typically frequented by gay men (for example, www.gay.com)—were then utilized in an attempt to add to the diversity of participants, thereby adding to the richness of the research. Although these efforts met with limited success overall, they resulted in a broader range of study participants particularly regarding socioeconomic class, rural locations, and ableness.

Data Collection Procedures and Methods

Various methods of data collection can be utilized in qualitative research including observation; interviewing; focus groups; and review of artifacts, documents, or records (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The determination of which data collection method or methods to use is based on which will yield the best information with which to answer the question posed by the study (Merriam, 2002). The primary means of data collection

for this study was interviewing. Documents or other artifacts such as photographs were used as a secondary source of information.

Interviewing

The notion of an interview, described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) as having “a purposeful conversation...directed by one in order to get information from the other” (p. 94), is so commonplace that it almost seems self-evident and simple. Interviewing is so much a part of the social fabric that the contemporary age has been called *the interview society* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p.3). Indeed, perhaps in no other field has qualitative interviewing become as pervasive in research as in education (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Yet such familiarity can lead to an assumption that “an interview is an unproblematic window on psychological or social realities” (Wengraf, 2001, p.1) through which information can simply be extracted and quoted. In actuality, interviewing presents broader social, institutional, and representational issues that should be considered (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Furthermore, neither the interviewer nor the interviewee leaves behind anxieties, hopes, blind spots, prejudices, class, race, gender, age and historical positions, emotions, and a sense of one’s possible future (Wengraf, 2001). These perspectives align with both the social constructivist framework of this study and the narrative inquiry type of research that was utilized.

Interviews also vary as to format and structure. They can be conducted either one-on-one, or in a multiple interviewee format; and can range from highly structured on one end of a continuum to open-ended on the other. Most, however, fall somewhere in between, in which case they are referred to as *semi-structured*. Typically, such interviews are guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact

wording of the order of the questions is determined ahead of time (Merriam, 2002).

Given that each question does not have to be worked out in advance, novice researchers often feel that semi-structured interviews are easier than other types to plan and implement—a perception that Wengraf (2001) refers to as “a *terrible* mistake” (p. 5). Wengraf goes on to explain that compared with fully structured interviews, semi-structured ones require as much planning beforehand, more discipline and creativity during the interview, and more time for analysis and interpretation after the session. He also provides two meanings for the term “in depth” as applied to interviews: (a) to get a more detailed knowledge, and (b) to get a sense of how the apparently straightforward is actually more complicated, and how surface appearances may actually be quite misleading.

For this study, the primary data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. A one-on-one approach aligned with my assumptions that each person’s understanding of sexual identity is unique and that development (including midlife) is experienced dynamically and contextually. A semi-structured format allowed for more flexibility in exploring meanings with a given participant; and in-depth interviews helped get to layers and shades of meaning. Locations were at mutually agreed settings that afforded a requisite degree of privacy; in most cases, this was the participant’s home. My role as an interviewer was informed from a feminist perspective of heightened self-awareness and reflexivity and a view of the interview based more on friendly conversation than on “masculine” interrogation (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002). This aligns with what Fontana and Frey (2005) refer to as “empathetic interviewing” (p. 696)--that is, one which takes an ethical stance in favor of the

individual or group being studied. Of note, prior to being interviewed about their private lives, many gay men “want to know where both the researcher and the teller of that life are coming from, what kind of relationship they are having together, and how intimate details will be used and represented” (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002, p. 249); as such, I informed the participants of my sexual orientation, and shared my experiences related to aging and sexual identity as seemed appropriate.

This study also included elements of narrative interviewing which is a process to elicit stories from respondents regarding life events (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Wengraf, 2001). These stories are seen as useful in exploring the complexities of experiences as well as the social and cultural contexts in which the respondents’ lives are embedded (Chamberlayne, Bornat, & Wengraf, 2000). In line with narrative interviewing, I intentionally sought out stories by using phrases such as “Tell me about a time when...” I then attempted to draw out or extend the participants’ storytelling by asking for specific examples or details, or what other things that he was reminded of—without necessarily specifying the content or topics to be included in his story. Keeping the focus on storytelling helped to insure that data generated were due more to the participant’s understanding of a situation or event than to mine. Through this approach, I also sought to discern examples of *counternarratives*, the “little stories” that these men have learned or constructed to counter the heteronormative and hegemonic “official” narratives of society (Chase, 1995).

The questions and topics guiding the interviews for this study are listed in an Interview Guide which is provided at Appendix B. It included some basic demographics related to age, race/ethnicity, occupation, household composition, socioeconomic status,

and other topics of interest. There was both a retrospective aspect and a contemporary component to many of the questions. Some were intended to get at social networks, circles of care and support, and other relationships. Others were posed to explore understandings and experiences related to both gay identity and midlife. Collectively, the goal was to discern the “treasure trove of experiential data pertinent to beliefs, feelings, and activities” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 13) that is at the heart of how these gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. Respecting that each individual ultimately makes meaning in his own way, and in line with a semi-structured approach, not all interviewees were necessarily asked all the same questions. Furthermore, the participants were advised that they could elaborate where desired, and could decline to answer any of the following questions with which they feel uncomfortable. Of note, none of the participants expressed any qualms or hesitation at answering any of the questions, or otherwise stipulated any topic as off-limits.

In line with a qualitative paradigm in which the data collection process is sometimes fluid to enable the researcher to effectively meet changing circumstances (Neuman, 1997), no pre-determined duration was set for the interviews. During the first interviews, which ranged in length from 1.5 to 3 hours, the men spoke at length of their past developmental histories and experiences as well as current aspects of their lives, largely (but not exclusively) around the Interview Guide. Second interviews tended to be shorter in length (typically 45 minutes to 1.5 hours), and more free-flowing; and included revisiting topics as desired, clarifying points from the previous interview, member checking, and exploring potential themes. In several cases, due to logistical or

administrative constraints (and with the participant's expressed permission), second interviews or member checks were conducted telephonically.

Documents

Another important source of data in qualitative research is documents, which can be written, oral, visual, or cultural artifacts. There are three main types of documents including (a) personal--those produced by individuals for private purposes and limited use; (b) official--those produced by organizational employees for record-keeping and dissemination; and (c) popular culture--those produced for commercial purposes to entertain, persuade, and enlighten the public (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Photographs, videos, letters, diaries, yearbooks, and posters are but a few examples of documents. Merriam (2002) notes the strength of documents as a data source "lies with the fact that they already exist in the situation...and often contain insights and clues" (p. 13) into the topic under consideration. Image-based research has captured the attention of a significant number of researchers (Prosser, 1998; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). As an example, Taylor (2002) notes that the use of still photography in research "offers helpful tools for the researcher in investigating the nature of tacit assumptions and beliefs" (p.135).

Although interviews served as the predominant method of data collection for this study, documents provided a secondary source of data. Participants were asked to provide 1 or more photographs, pieces of art, prose, or other cultural artifacts that were personally meaningful to their sense of self. This was easier for some men than others. One man discussed how his tattoo represented what was important to him; for others, it was a favorite poem, or book, or song. A few of the men struggled with coming up with

something, but after some reflection, were able to think of a symbol or metaphor with which they could identify. Discussion of these items provided opportunity for deeper exploration into their relevance and significance at this period of the participants' lives.

Researcher Notes

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2002) suggest that an essential component of interviewing entails an early evaluation of what is happening. This includes more than looking for trouble spots; reactions and patterns of responses to certain kinds of questions should also be noted. Using their suggestions as a guide, some of the types of self-posed questions that informed my researcher journal include: (a) what did I feel and when did I feel it as the interview was underway? (b) what impression did I think the participant was trying to create? (c) what was said, or not said, that surprised me; scared me; angered me; or resonated with me—and why for each? (d) what did the participant have mixed feelings about; seem glib about; or have trouble articulating? (e) what would I want to ask or do differently if I could do the interview over? These sorts of questions significantly added to the reflexivity that I considered to be essential for an interview process to be empathic and supportive of interviews that are “personal, interactional, and emotional” (Kong, Mahoney, & Plummer, 2002, p. 249). Such reflexivity, along with the use of field notes and a researcher journal are indispensable to Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer’s call for interviewers to “become more aware of their own feelings, and in turn, use them to guide the research process” (p. 253). These techniques helped to make sense of the interview process and procedures as they evolved (which is consistent with a qualitative approach), and were instructive in early refinements to both the interview

guide and to my own style of interviewing. Furthermore, they led to the elicitation of richer information in subsequent interviews and member checks.

Ethics and Informed Consent

It is always incumbent on researchers to consider the consequences of their work; and issues of ethics and responsibility are key topics in discussions of qualitative research (Christians, 2000; Fine, Weis, Wessen, & Wong, 2000; Merriam & Simpson, 1995; St. Pierre, 2002). Two issues undergird this attention to the ethical aspects of research: (a) subjects enter research projects voluntarily, understanding the nature of the study and the dangers and obligations that are involved; and (2) subjects are not exposed to risks that are greater than the gains they might derive. These guidelines are often implemented through the use of an “informed consent” form that is properly vetted through a human participants committee, or what is commonly referred to as an *institutional review board* (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This study utilized an informed consent form pre-approved by the Pennsylvania State University Institutional Review Board prior to the start of data collection (See Appendix A). The participant’s signature on the form--which included a description of the study and how the findings will be used as well as other pertinent information--is taken as evidence as informed consent.

Even with such consent, Martin and Meezan (2003) assert that studying stigmatized populations such as sexual minorities heightens ethical questions and potential dilemmas. They explain that due to the marginalized and devalued societal position accorded to sexual minorities, these populations are at increased risk for experiencing violence, discrimination, and exploitation in a variety of contexts—as well as the negative effects of such experiences. Since research involving sexual minorities

generally occurs in these contexts, there may be greater potential for exploitation and harm to the participants or the communities of which they are members than in studies of less vulnerable and marginalized populations. Furthermore, research in this area may “touch upon painful life events [which] may generate considerable emotion and even distress” (Radford, 1998, p.191). In fact, such emotional responses may occur in both researchers and participants (deMarrais & Tisdale, 2002). Thus, researchers must be particularly committed to serious consideration about the possible consequences of their engagement with sexual minorities during and after the research process. Meezan and Martin (2003) stress “in many cases, such research requires additional measures in order to ensure the safety of the participants and the relevance and usefulness of the study’s findings” (p. 197). Their suggestions (which were incorporated in this research process) included consulting with the participants, conducting member checks, and utilizing flexible rather than predetermined methods. Furthermore, participants were apprised of measures taken to insure both their anonymity (including the use of pseudonyms), and the safeguarding of data that was collected.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis process is one which carries great responsibility and foregrounds the need for integrity, honesty, and rigorous analytic procedures (Jones, 2002). Various analytic strategies may be appropriate for qualitative research depending on the methodology employed. The appropriate strategy is that which both produces themes and findings that convey a deeper understanding of the issue under investigation, and relates to the theoretical perspective undergirding the research. Jones (2002) relates the resulting story “must be one that is recognizable to those who told it; that emerges

directly from their words, behaviors, and the contexts influencing the study; and that holds together as coherent, believable, and cogent to all who read it” (p. 468).

Fundamentally, as Warren (2002) points out, “the purpose of qualitative interviewing...is to understand others’ meaning making” (p. 97). It is through the interpretation and presentation of such meaning making that new insight is gained (Arminio & Hultren, 2002). An often used interpretation and presentation strategy is to explicate meaning through common themes; indeed, Ryan and Bernard (2003) contend that the task of discovering themes is at the heart of qualitative research. However, Crotty (1998) calls for “a radical spirit of openness to... the potential for new or richer meaning” (p. 50) which exposes “masks and screens of prevailing meanings” (p. 59). This suggests it is equally important to explore in depth the meanings embedded in a given context for a given participant, and allows for their individual perspectives to be retained. Those perspectives can then be analyzed for common themes that cross contexts and experiences.

One data analysis strategy that engenders both a deeper understanding of individual cases as well as facilitates a subsequent theme analysis is the simultaneous collection and analysis of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This approach, which was utilized in this study, was facilitated by the semi-structured nature of the interviews. It allowed both for checking emerging interpretations and for adjustments to questions or discussion topics as the research evolved, and revisions could be easily accommodated. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed (with due consideration to confidentiality). Through a technique referred to as the constant comparative method—originally presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as an aspect of developing grounded theory, any

unit of data (a meaningful word, phrase, narrative, etc.) can be compared and contrasted against other data in a search for common patterns across the data. From my perspective, this was applicable to the data from an individual participant (e.g., responses to different questions) as well as to the subsequent search for common themes across different perspectives and contexts. This entailed conducting a line-by-line analysis and asking questions such as line “What is this about? How does it differ from the preceding or following statements?” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, see section 4); and “what does this remind me of?” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 157). As fruitful as the constant comparative method was, Ryan and Bernard (2003) advise that “no single technique does it all” (Summary, para.2); rather they advocate that an even more powerful strategy of data analysis combines several techniques. Based on suggestions they outlined, the discernment of themes in this data analysis was also informed by and entailed the following techniques:

1. word repetition—how frequently certain words or phrases are used.
2. indigenous categories--local terms that sound unfamiliar or are used in unfamiliar ways. This was an important consideration given my shared status as a gay male at midlife; and indeed, I was introduced to two new terms: “DTB” (doorbell trade referring to acquaintances who stop by informally for casual sex); and “friends with privileges” (those not interested in a long-term relationship but with whom sexual activities are enjoyed).
3. a search for missing information--that is, what is not mentioned. Silence can indicate areas people are unwilling to afraid to discuss, or can be use strategically for any number of reasons. Ryan and Bernard note this may be

the most difficult of the techniques they outline.

4. metaphors and analogies—this technique is based on the observation that people often represent their thoughts, behaviors, and experiences metaphorically or through analogies. These proved to be particularly useful in eliciting layers of meaning as well as layers of interpretation.

Regardless of the techniques used, any themes or categories that emerged were subsequently analyzed and distilled and alternative explanations sought. Furthermore, data were analyzed and presented to capture overall themes across the whole of the data while also acknowledging and recognizing “the depth and intricacies...within individual cases” (Worthen & McNeill, 2002, p. 121).

Verification

The basic question addressed by verification is the notion of trustworthiness, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), centers around a relatively simple issue: "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). A key point of their discussion is that criteria defined from one perspective may not be appropriate to evaluate actions taken from another perspective. Echoing this viewpoint, Arminio and Hultren (2002) have noted the “tension resulting from the common practice of critiquing qualitative research by quantitative standards” (p. 446). Nonetheless, interpretivist inquiry requires as “serious a consideration of systematic, thorough, conscious method as does empirist inquiry (Lincoln, 1995. p. 276). In seeking to explicate the inappropriateness of applying conventional criteria of trustworthiness (e.g., validity, reliability) to qualitative research--as well as to provide alternatives that they believe

better reflect the assumptions and epistemology underlying qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria that were incorporated into a research design both to enhance trustworthiness and to assess qualitative findings. The four criteria are:

1. Credibility--this relates to the believability or credibility of the research findings from the perspective of the study participants. This would seem to be particularly relevant given that “the understanding of reality is really the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ interpretations or understandings of the phenomenon of interest...it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved, uncover the complexity of human behavior in context, and present a holistic interpretation of what is happening” (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). Thus, credibility is the assessment of whether the researcher has captured and represented these multiple realities adequately.
2. Transferability--this relates to the extent to which findings can be generalized or “extrapolated” (Patton, 1990, p. 489) to other settings, contexts, or populations. This depends on the degree of similarity between the original situation and the situation to which it is might be transferred. The researcher cannot specify the transferability of findings; rather, the determination as to whether the findings are applicable to the new situation is left to the reader. However, transferability can be enhanced by detailing the research methods, contexts, and assumptions underlying the study so that the reader has sufficient information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
3. Dependability--this relates to the need to account for and describe the changing contexts and circumstances that are due either to instability or

designed-induced changes implemented as insights emerge throughout the research process.

4. Confirmability—this refers to the extent that the research findings can be confirmed or corroborated by others. It is primarily concerned with pinpointing potential areas of bias or distortion, and whether the researcher is aware and has accounted for individual subjectivity or bias.

While Lincoln and Guba (1985) call attention to the fact that these criteria are open-ended—that is, “they can never be satisfied to such an extent that the trustworthiness of the inquiry could be labeled as unassailable” (p. 329), this study incorporated techniques designed to establish and enhance trustworthiness. Sharing my status as a gay man was one way in which researcher credibility was established; and many of the participants mentioned this helped put that at ease, or allowed them to say things more freely. Member checking also played a key role in helping to establish credibility. There are two types of member checks, both of which were utilized in this research; and both of which added to the richness of the findings. The first occurs during the interview process, and consists of the researcher restating, summarizing, or paraphrasing the information received from a participant to ensure that what was heard or written down reflects that person’s perspective. In this study, this type of checking helped to mitigate several potential instances of misunderstanding that might have otherwise resulted. The second type occurs after data collection, in which case the researcher reports back preliminary findings to participants and asks for feedback. This was particularly useful in clarifying meanings and expanding concepts and perspectives beyond that which were originally stated. Discussing the data collection and analysis

process with other doctoral students and having my advisor and critique my emergent findings for plausibility or alternative perspectives are examples of peer/colleague review, another strategy that adds to the credibility of this research. Utilizing negative case analysis (actively seeking accounts or data that differ from the main or consensus accounts) also enhanced the credibility of this study by highlighting complementary and conflicting data. This was particularly relevant in this study given stereotypes of gay men.

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources, multiple methods, multiple investigators, or multiple theories to gain more complete understanding (Merriam, 2002). It plays an important role in enhancing confirmability, reliability, and credibility. Data triangulation was used in this study through the comparison and cross checking of data from both interviews and documents. Furthermore, the use of both social constructivism and some aspect of queer theory as lenses to view the data allowed for consideration of alternate perspectives and is another type of triangulation. Providing thick, rich descriptions such that the reader is taken into “the setting being described” (Patton, 2002, p. 437) is particularly important as regards transferability. Capturing the participants’ stories through more than just direct quotes by adding the observed context as well as emotive and affective components enhanced transferability for this study. Providing a thorough accounting of the methods and procedures followed during and after data collection can also support transferability as well as dependability and conformability. In that regard, although no formal post-study audit was conducted, I have maintained study records based on Halpern’s audit trail categories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The use of a reflexive journal in which I noted and reflected upon my own feelings, biases, and changes as part of the interview process also added to the overall trustworthiness of this research. Through a combination of these factors, I hope that my research has met what Phillips (1990) would characterize as “good”—that is, “it has been opened up to criticism, and the reasons and evidence offered...will have withstood serious scrutiny...will have faced potential refutation, and insofar as [it has] survived...be regarded as worthy of further investigation” (p. 35).

Chapter Summary

This chapter began with a review of the purpose of this study which was to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. This was followed by an overview of qualitative research, and a rationale as to why such a paradigm was suited to this purpose. Major tenets of narrative inquiry, the research type guiding this study, were then examined. Subsequent sections addressed the guiding research questions, my background, and procedures for selecting participants. Finally, the chapter includes a discussion of data collection procedures and methods used in the study—focusing primarily on semi-structured interviews, data analysis techniques, and strategies to insure the trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER 4

BIOGRAPHIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Introduction

In many respects, the lives of gay men and other sexual minorities are similar to their heterosexual counterparts; for instance, increased attention to physical changes and caring for aging parents are common concerns of midlife—regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. However, heteronormativity exerts an additional burden on both the development and the ongoing routines of living for sexual minorities. Heteronormativity dictates what is acceptable or “normal,” and pervades virtually every social context. This purpose of this research is to explore how gay men experience and negotiate midlife in such a heteronormative society. While one may never be able to totally subvert the impacts of heteronormativity, the narratives of these men begin to reveal ways in which they both resist heteronormative influences as well as how they sometimes yield to them.

As is the nature of qualitative research, this study is in no way an attempt at reckoning the widely disparate and richly diverse lives of those who comprise what is sometimes called *the gay community*. Similarly, the biographical sketches presented in this chapter are intended to give a sense of the lives of the participants, but barely scratch the surface of the many dimensions comprising their lives. In line with the selection criteria for participation, the participants in this study share two common attributes: (a) each self-identifies as gay (although the men’s personal understandings of what that

means vary widely); and (b) each is between the ages of 40 and 60. Some background information on social and contextual aspects of these men's lives is helpful to understanding the findings of the study that are presented in Chapter 5. To that end, the next section of this chapter addresses general demographic data. This is followed by a section which includes a short biographical outline of each participant.

General Demographics

The participants in this study were diverse on a number of factors including relationship status, educational level, occupation, and previous heterosexual marital status. A synopsis of selected participant demographics is presented at Table 1.

Unfortunately, as will be discussed further in Chapter 6, there was not as much racial or ethnic diversity as I had hoped. Only one man of color, Ray who is an African American, was included among the 13 participants. The rest were White and of European descent, including one who was born in Europe and emigrated to the U.S. as a young adult. A lack of diversity was also noted given the preponderance of Christianity as one's early religious background among the study participants.

Ages of the participants ranged from 42 to 60, with a mean of 50.7 years. Four of the men (Jeremy, George, Jeff, and Mitch) had been heterosexually married, ranging from 3 to 27 years; and three (Jeremy, George, and Mitch) are fathers. Another (Steed) had broken an engagement several weeks before the wedding; and all but one (Joe) had some history of heterosexual dating and sexual experience. Seven of the men were currently in a same-sex partnership of at least one-year duration (and ranging up to 25 years). All but one had been in such a relationship at some point; no one reported involvement in a long-term polyamorous relationship (one involving more than 2

partners). At some point in their lives, two had required hospital treatment following gay bashings; others had friends who did so. Most had lost very close friends—and, in several cases, partners—to HIV/AIDS; one acknowledged an HIV positive status.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Military	Previous marriage	Parent	Current partner	Religion	Educ. level
Scott	47	White	No	No	No	Yes 16 yrs	Protestant	BS
Ray	52	African American	No	No	No	No	Catholic	Masters
Ben	52	White	No	No	No	Yes 1.5 yrs	Baptist	BS
Jeremy	42	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes 1.5 yrs	Lutheran	HS
Steed	58	White	Yes	No	No	No	None	Masters
Jeff	53	White	No	Yes	No	Yes 7 yrs	Prot	AA
Joe	42	White	No	No	No	No	Presb	HS
Mike	49	White	No	No	No	Yes 1.5 yrs	Spiritual	2 yr college
George	58	White	No	Yes	Yes	Yes 1.5 yrs	None	BS
Andy	60	White	No	No	No	No	Atheist	Masters equiv
Duncan	50	White	No	No	No	Yes 25 yrs	Methodist	HS
Don	50	White	No	No	No	No	Lutheran	BA
Mitch	46	White	No	Yes	Yes	No	Spiritual	GED

The educational levels of the participants include two with masters degrees, five with bachelor degrees, two with an Associates degree or at least two years of college, and four high school graduates (including one GED). Two served in the military. One is a retired school teacher, and one is legally blind and on disability retirement. The occupations of the rest of the participants include management positions, the information technology field, customer service positions, and two who are self-employed—one of whom is a funeral director.

The Participants

The findings of this study are based on the stories of the 13 men who are briefly introduced in this section. These men came to hear of and be part of the study through various means; yet all approached it willingly, enthusiastically, and—for several—with a sense of purpose: “people need to hear about our lives.” Almost without exception, the men asked if they could have a copy of the study upon its completion. No one declined to answer any question (an option that was clearly explained in advance), and each participant seemed to express himself honestly and openly—often with humor, sometimes with passion, and occasionally with tears. None of the participants was particularly concerned about having his real name used, although pseudonyms are used in several cases such as when two men shared the same first name. Several of the men specifically asked that a pseudonym not be used. Thus, some names presented below and used throughout this study are the person’s real name, and others are pseudonyms. The biographical outlines are presented in the order in which the first interviews occurred;

and adhering to a key principle of narrative inquiry, direct quotes from each participant will be included.

Scott

Scott, for whom it “pretty much just feels like I’ve been gay all my life,” was the youngest of four siblings who grew up in a financially comfortable family in Philadelphia’s Main Line. He never had any internal struggle accepting his sexual orientation which he credits in part to being raised in a non-discriminating household with parents who both “preached and practiced what they preached” about racial equity. They never touched on sexual orientation, but Scott knew his parents felt “all people, as long as they weren’t hurting anybody, should be treated fairly and equally.” Coming out for Scott was also probably easier than is the case for some people because he “was aware at a pretty young age that there was a gay society out there.” When he was a young teenager, one of his sisters “hung out with a very artsy theater crowd, so I had a lot of contact with gay men then, not sexually but socially. And most of them were pretty flamboyant and out there.” She also lived with a gay man for awhile, so Scott had many opportunities for social interaction with him prior to his own self-identification as gay at age 17.

After graduating college with an agriculture degree, he interviewed for positions in related fields. He quickly realized he didn’t want that sort of work, and he moved into the restaurant and hotel field “probably because there are a lot more gay people there than there were in the ag field, at least out gay people.” He surmises that had he been straight, he may have been more dedicated to a career in his 20s and early 30s as he would have likely had to provide for children. Scott came out to his mother and siblings when he was

in his mid-20s. Although he never discussed his sexual orientation with his late father, he notes “My one sibling told me my father always said he admired me because I always went down my own path. And probably by that, he knew I was gay. He knew I was doing my own thing.”

Now 47, and looking back over his life “through the lens of midlife,” Scott thinks that being gay probably led him to go down “a wilder and crazy path” in college and as a young adult. He “came out sexually in a college atmosphere during the late ‘70s” when he was 19; and within a year he was very publicly out to everyone but his family--even speaking to classes about being gay. He recalls “dancing with men at straight bars and getting bottles thrown at me.” He also was very promiscuous during this part of his life. He feels very fortunate not to have been infected with HIV/AIDS and to have survived to reach midlife when so many of his friends and peers did not. He worries that many young people are “screwing around with AIDS right now like it’s the common cold.” He would advise them to “be safe, number one; to make sure you get older. Live your life safely. Have fun, but make sure you get to middle age. It’s a good place to be.” He feels that being gay has in some ways “probably made my life a lot easier. I have less [family] responsibilities. I don’t need as much income to make my life very comfortable.” His 45th birthday hit him pretty hard—“that’s when I definitely knew I was middle-aged,” but he quickly adds “I’m fine with the age I am.” However, he’s less comfortable with the notion of death and the realization that he’s getting closer to that inevitability as he explains: “I don’t think being middle-aged bothers me. You know, I still don’t know what’s going to happen if I’m lucky enough to get old; and that does scare me a little bit.” Scott finds himself reflecting on these sorts of issues much more

now that he is older, although he clarifies: “I don’t obsess with it but I think about it more.” He’s also noticed that he is more judicious with how he spends his free time, and both the frequency of social interaction and the size of his social network outside of work have decreased over the past few years. He’s gained an appreciation for “learning about my own [gay] community, my own history, and being able to see things from somebody in my community’s perspective.” His biggest angst at midlife is that he no longer feels satisfied with what he does for a living, and would much rather have a job that he would enjoy more and that would also be of some benefit to society. He has thought about nursing and hasn’t ruled out a career change, although he has not yet acted on it. In retrospect, he feels that his career choice was probably a mistake, but changing careers at this point would have considerable financial ramifications particularly in regards to planning for retirement. He would suggest to younger gays that they “make sure they find a real career that they really like, whatever they do for a living...so at a young age, get involved with something you really enjoy and make something you like be your career.” He has other advice to offer as well based on his own lived experiences and his perspective at midlife: “I would say keep pushing for your rights. Keep out, keep out. Don’t go back in the closet. The more people that know you’re out, the better it is for gay people and society. And have fun, have fun.”

Ray

Growing up with his eight siblings “kind of on a farm” in southern Maryland, Ray recalls having a normal childhood. As the youngest of 7 boys in an athletic family, he considered himself “one of the guys,” and wrestled and played soccer in high school. He notes that his parents were accepting of differences. One of his brothers dated a White

woman “and back in the late 60s, of course this was just *scandalous* [italics added], but they welcomed her” to family functions and Sunday dinner. Later, when another brother who was two years older than Ray and also gay became ill with HIV/AIDS, “the family really rallied around him and supported him as much as they could.”

Ray also dated women through college and for some years afterwards. While he found sexual intercourse to be enjoyable, it was “not fulfilling”; and he worried about performance satisfaction for the women. It wasn’t until his first male experience at 32 that he felt “Oh this is what it's meant to be! It was comfortable and stress-free.” Prior to that, he “didn’t connect the dots about myself” and “didn't have a clue or notion” that he was gay.” Coming out for Ray wasn’t very dramatic. Through this first experience with a former colleague, he was “introduced to an incredible network, a whole family, of people” in the city where the man lived. At first Ray would visit there and “have blast and then come home and pretty much live a straight life.” But then he made a “conscious effort to investigate the gay life and meet gay friends, and to become comfortable being gay” in his own area. Ray has been very successful in this regard. He’s been involved in several long-term partnerships, including one of 11 years which recently ended. But more importantly from his perspective, is his strong friendship network about which he comments “the friends around me would be what define me.”

The paramount importance of this social connection is represented in a tattoo he got on his arm right before his 50th birthday. It is of the triangle used on the communicator in Star Trek and represents:

This is the way I live my life. You have to have a spiritual, a business, and a social life; and they have to be in balance. And if any one of them gets out of

balance, then your life usually falls apart... I keep business in perspective. I keep my social life into perspective. And I keep my spiritual life into perspective...I try to keep those three things in balance. So far, I've been pretty successful in doing that, and life has gone well.

Ray started in the insurance industry after college. He planned to do that for two years but it ended up being 25. He worked his way up to a vice president within the training division. Seven years ago, the home office was moved to Chicago, and Ray chose not to relocate since he didn't know anyone there. Had he gone, it would have been for the job, "and I just didn't think that was a wise thing to do, to move *for* [italics added] the job. So I took the severance package." After taking a year off, he went to work for his current employer, a Catholic non-profit organization, which affords him the opportunity to integrate his business and spiritual perspectives. His Catholic faith is very much intertwined with his sense of self and is "what nurtures me." His primary responsibility at the non-profit is management development, but it is a much different type of organization than in his previous career. Now when he does training, he enjoys both getting to work with people and being able to see the results, as he explains: "I get to see how they changed their behaviors and how they change how they do things to be more effective in what they do...I can see the difference here...That's just kind of cool. "

Ray says he doesn't know if he's "been blessed or lucky," but he hasn't experienced any homophobia in his life; nor has ageism been much of a concern. Perhaps surprisingly, as an African American, he can recall only about three incidents of racism in his entire life. Now 52, he describes himself as "very, very content with being at midlife." He acknowledges that "life is different in mid-life...your body behaves

differently and your mind may even behave differently”; but his advice is:

Accept it and enjoy where you are. Don't worry about where you were and what you used to. Worry about and enjoy where you are...don't look at the past and think about what's no longer there. Look at where you are and just enjoy it. Because, I mean, it's a great time to be. You know, I really am enjoying where I am.

Ray advocates “living in the moment,” yet he does allow himself the luxury of pondering about his own retirement...will it be at the beach home he had built after his previous job buy-out? Might it closer to his remaining family members in another state? Or will it be near the friends that are so keen to his sense of self? For now, he is content to stay on his current course knowing that, as he has done in the past, he can explore alternative or unexpected routes as they present themselves.

Ben

Church was the center of Ben's social activities “as a child, all through high school and college, and for many years beyond.” His conservative Baptist upbringing and his strong music background presented him with a dilemma when it came to selecting a college: “I had to make a decision...based on music or religion. I had to weigh a scholarship at a state university opposed to a private religious college where I wasn't going to get the perks that I would've gotten.” He selected the smaller religious school, and graduated from a bible college which he believes “sent my life in a whole different direction. I mean, it was a truly a fork in the road.” He became a school teacher in a private Christian school, and taught for 10 years. Even though he was “very closeted, always have been, until very recently,” there came a point when he became

uncomfortable staying in such a “very concentrated religious area that was not open to this lifestyle,” so decided to make a career change. I didn’t know what I wanted to do but I wanted to get out of that position where I felt if something came to light about my lifestyle, my career would be ended.” Ben took a job with the state government. After several years, he “made a complete change and went back to the church” where he had taught, but this time as “a music Christian education director. You know, I ran right back to where I had been.” After four years, he once again decided he needed to get away from that environment and he again took a position with the state government where he remains employed.

During all this time, most of his friends and his social network were church-related. He didn’t have many gay friends or socialize within the gay community because “I was so closeted; not that I didn’t want to, but I was very guarded over everything. I was afraid, very afraid, of what would happen if people found out.” Nevertheless, he did have two same-sex relationships of 8 years duration each during his late 20s to mid 40s, but “they were kind of dysfunctional relationships in that I was not out about it at all. We really didn’t socialize much as partners--just lived together, that was the extent of it, really.” Several years ago, Ben began chatting and “just socializing” with other gay men on the Internet. For the first time, he began to develop “normal friendships” as opposed to seeing other men as objects. He also began to date, and eventually met Jeremy—whom he considers his first true partner, about a year and a half ago. Not quite a year ago, in what he calls “the biggest decision of my life,” Ben summoned the courage to come out to his family and some very important friends. He relates that doing so has changed his life completely and adds that at age 52: “Now I’m very free to be gay. It’s just a non

issue for me. When I was so afraid of what everyone might think of this and how they would react to it, when I finally came out to my family and to these important friends, it suddenly became a non issue.” Although many friends “weren’t happy about it,” they are still his friends; furthermore, his family’s support and understanding has surprised him and they’ve become much closer.

In retrospect, he says that if he would have incorporated being gay into his life earlier, he “would have led a much more normal life...I often say I should have come out, you know, 30 years ago.” He thinks he may have missed out on the richness of some of life’s experiences—even routine things like going on a vacation with a partner--because he lived them “as a hiding gay man” as opposed to “just living them as a gay man.” Yet he remains buoyant and optimistic, and says:

I’m catching up on some things that I missed. I don’t know if there’s a psychological term or a clinical term for delayed adolescence. For instance, I did not date men for a long time. At the time when I probably should have been dating, that all came later... for me. So I feel very young. I don’t feel like I’m in mid-life, although age-wise I think I’m in mid-life. I feel very young; very young-hearted.

Ben feels he is at a good place in his life now. He’s very happy with the choices he’s made, and is thrilled to have a loving partner with whom he can share his life. Although he is still quite conservative by his own estimation, he acknowledges that he is “mellowing” and he has become “very much more open to ideas of any kind.” He attributes much of this to having a caring and supportive network of friends--including both his “extended family” of new gay friends, as well as most of the friends from when

he was closeted. This “ideal environment” in which to live out his midlife is one he recommends for anyone. It entails “surrounding yourself with people who love you no matter what your orientation is or what color you are or any of that. You live your life and you associate with people that are like you and who you like--no matter who they are.”

Jeremy

The home Jeremy shares with Ben is decorated with angels of all sorts and sizes. Jeremy explains “I just heard one day that angels are a very positive thing, so I started collecting them. I feel very positive when I have angels around.” He relates that he had a very bad childhood. “My mom had lots of boyfriends. Her last husband used to beat us.” Another of her boyfriends sexually abused him, as did another adult male. Jeremy felt that his mother and older sister were too controlling. He wanted a better life and felt “I had to get away from them and all the negativity.” By ninth or tenth grade, he was already looking towards where he wanted to be at 40. He knew he wanted to have a house of my own. He knew he wanted to be a father; and “I knew I was probably going to be gay because I had gay tendencies then. I just didn’t have the outreach of the gay community to bring me that way. So I lived that straight life.”

Jeremy figured the military would be his ticket out of his negative environment, “so I joined the military in the delayed entry program in my junior year so I knew my senior year I was already going to be there. I knew I was going to be an MP. I knew I was going to go to Germany; and I knew I was going to be there two weeks after high school.” During his enlistment process, the recruiter advised him “You’re going into the service. If they ask you if you’re gay, you’re not gay.”

After coming home from the military, he moved with his sister, and her roommate Karen, the woman who would become his wife: “we started just dating each other...she bought a trailer and I thought ‘well, if we’re going to live together I might as well marry her.’ So I married her. And then a year later we had our son.” Some months later, he found out another man where he worked was gay. “I called him up, invited him over to the house; played with him a little bit.” Jeremy had had same sex experiences in junior and senior high school, but he considers the experience with the man from work “what really outed me. I was about 24 or 25 at the time.” After that, his relationship with his wife “started to get distanced...I was laying on the couch with Paul; it was a week before his first birthday. She came home and asked ‘how come you can’t tell me you love me anymore?’ I told her I honestly can’t tell her that and mean it; and with that she picked him up and left.” He moved back in with his sister, and “hooked up with a lesbian friend of mine that I hadn’t seen her for years.” He came out to her and she responded that she always knew, and was just waiting for him to tell her. She introduced Jeremy to a whole new circle of friends. Shortly thereafter, Jeremy met his first lover with whom he was partnered for 5 years. Initially, he told people they were cousins, but soon “I was telling everybody we were gay. I basically started coming out totally. I’m open all over the place. I have a picture of Ben (his current partner) on my desk.”

This openness extends to his son. Although he no longer interacts with his ex-wife “once Paul came of age and I didn’t have to deal with her anymore,” but he’s always been involved in his son’s life. When his marriage dissolved, Jeremy told his family that his son “is going to know he has a gay dad.” When Paul reached adolescence and started bringing friends to the house, Jeremy asked him:

if he was going to tell them that you have a gay dad, or was he hiding it. He told me that he was telling them beforehand. So all of his girlfriends or other friends that came by knew ahead of time that his dad was gay and had his lover here as a partner. He's fine with it because he's always known; that's how he was raised. Jeremy feels that neither he nor Paul missed out on anything by his being gay: "with having Paul, I went to wrestling matches, I went to baseball games. I did the parent thing. He was in football; so I was participating with him in school, PTA meetings and all."

At 42, Jeremy can't imagine not being gay. To him it means "just loving who you are and being with and loving the one that you want to be with. I'd probably be very unhappy if I tried to hide it. I've always been attracted to men as long as I remember." He considers himself middle-aged chronologically, but "I feel like I'm in my 30s. It all stems with having people that are positive in your life. I just don't keep negative people around me." He's also noticed that he's "mellowing out as I get older; I don't get upset at things like I used to." In part, he thinks this is due to having left a stressful customer service job for a position with less aggravation, but considerably less pay, once he no longer had to pay child support for Paul. However, he attributes much of it to his strong, tightly knit circle of "caring and supportive friends that are good people." His social network is very important to him, and has helped him address self-esteem issues from his youth. While most of his closest friends are other gay men, he feels that the neighborhood in which he and Ben live is ideal because it is diverse and friendly—the kind of place where he and his gay friends can "sit out in the afternoons for a couple hours, you know, like everybody else does." He adds:

I'm having a hell of a good time now. I love my life. I have a good job...and enjoy going to work. I enjoy coming home to somebody that's in my life that I'm very happy with, and who makes me laugh. We do things together. I'm just very comfortable. And Paul recently told me that I'm going to be a grandfather; so now I have that whole new chapter of my life to look forward to.

Steed

Since his father was in the military, Steed's family moved every few years both in the U.S. and overseas. By the time he was in seventh grade, he had been in 10 schools. He feels that moving to a different place every few years and having to make new friends, as well as "the opportunity to see the world," were character-building experiences. He's known since he was a kid that he was gay, although he's "never had a problem" accepting himself. The only time he had to struggle with his sexual orientation was following "social rules" and "hiding it when I had to because of the environment" when he was in school and in the Army. He dated women through his college years and beyond and became engaged at one point, but was having sex with men at the same time. Steed came to be fully comfortable with his sexual identity once he got out of the Army, and began "meeting a lot of gay guys." It was the disco era with "so many cool hot guys...out there dancing...that's what really kicked it in." He doesn't think younger gays today "could even fathom the feeling that we had back then...the music, the time, the poppers--whether you used them or not, just that dance floor—it was awesome!" He and friends "who went through that era and survived it" have discussed it as "a real turning point" in their lives, one which "just made you feel so free and so, you know, this is me and deal with it." From that point on, he no longer worried about what people

thought or said. He “didn’t advertise it, didn’t wear it on my sleeve,” but if someone asked if he were gay, he acknowledged it. “People could call me anything they wanted,” he says, “and you know, it wouldn’t bother me one bit.”

This self-assuredness, which he credits to his parents raising him to always feel good about himself, has served Steed well throughout his adult life. Explaining that he knew he “wasn’t straight and didn’t want to be because I didn’t have a choice,” he adds: “I liked where I was. I like where I am.” He’s very comfortable as a gay man, and sees this as the basis for his confidence in whatever decisions he makes, and in how he chooses to live his life. At 58, he laughingly says he has been at midlife “for a long time”; for him, it has been a period of being “very satisfied and content” with who he is; of knowing what he wants and doesn’t want; and of looking forward to pursuing what he wants based on his experiences. He describes his life as “extremely happy,” “excellent,” and “full with friends--people at work, neighbors, gay and straight friends.” He has had several long-term relationships, including one of 10 years duration that lasted until his partner’s death from HIV/AIDS, but at this point in his life, he adds: “I could never picture myself being with somebody for 20 years.” There is one thing about getting older that has surprised him and that is “is the sex part. It’s just gotten amazing. I mean, to be almost 60 and there’s all the sex I want. And I have no problem with that.”

Steed has always had friends of all different ages. He feels ageism in the gay male community exists but no differently than in society in general; and he adds “I’ve just never experienced it.” When he was much younger, he liked to sit and talk with older gay men to “hear their stories” and “to learn from your elders and appreciate what they went through.” He thinks that gay men of his generation have lessons to pass along

as well and notes: “we were the first to be out so much and to feel so free and besides along that the sex was good. You know, you’d be with anybody and anyone...we were the first generation to experience that openness.” Subsequent generations of gay men “had their own awareness or their own feel good or whatever; but nothing like what we had back then.” He’s not sure he could tell younger gay men what midlife is about, but “just by telling them what my life is like, sharing some stories,” they could see that “as I’ve gotten older, the years just get better and better.” Emphasizing this point, he adds: “It’s a personal thing. You have less hang-ups and life’s easier as you get older; but between 40 and 60 it’s just gotten better.” If he were the “type of person to be settled down,” being monogamous with one person “except for, you know, some occasional little trysts and games for fun” would be ideal; “but,” he adds: “I do what’s right for me.” He jokes that it might not be wise to tell younger gays that “when you get 60 you can have sex every day if you want”; but he does want them to know “for a single guy in his late 50s...life can be fantastic.”

Jeff

Jeff describes his coming out experiences by saying “basically, my closet had a revolving door for a number of years.” He grew up on a farm and went to a “country high school.” In retrospect, he thinks he was fairly naïve: “growing up on a farm you don’t really get out a lot and don’t know a lot of street language.” After graduation, he worked for a year and then started nursing school at a local hospital. He describes this period as “in and out [of the closet] times for me” and “experimenting.” Upon moving to a nearby city to attend a community college for nursing, he “became a lot more familiar with what the whole scene was about and lovers versus just tricks, and all that kind of stuff.” He

identified as gay at that point, but his parents challenged him about his sexual orientation and had him meet with both a pastor and a psychologist—each of whom advised “this is who you are; live out your life.” Jeff had been raised in a very religious family and religion was (and is) a large part of his life. When he was about 23 or 24, he determined that he needed to reevaluate his sexual expression. After a year or so, he began dating a woman and they ended up getting married (by the same pastor with whom he had previously discussed being gay). The marriage lasted about 3 years until his wife filed for divorce, a situation that Jeff found heartbreaking as he “pretty much had figured I had changed...and this is really what I wanted.” Jeff was living within walking distance of a gay bar and would go there once in awhile “so again, I was in and out.” He began a relationship with another male; when that ended, he became involved with a female. Ultimately, he “decided that I really couldn’t do this and I needed to be true to who I was...there was no great revelation, but at that point somewhere I decided this was who I am.” He entered a long-term same-sex relationship which lasted 10 years. After that relationship ended, Jeff met Lou, his current partner of 7 years.

At 53, Jeff has long since resolved most of his inner struggles regarding his sexual orientation and “once I finally accepted that this is who I am and this is who I need to be, I’ve been pretty much staying the course on that the rest of my life.” He doesn’t think he would change anything about his earlier life experiences because looking back, each thing he did “prepared me for the next step.” After working with his parents through the process of giving up their home and moving to a retirement home, followed by his dad’s struggle with cancer and his death a year and a half ago, Jeff thinks he is “probably” at midlife. Having someone to grow old with has always been of prime concern to him; and

he and Lou, who is 11 years younger, have begun serious discussions regarding retirement and planning for “the next phase of our lives.” He’s also noticed his social priorities are changing, “settling down, maybe,” and “taking things at a little more slower pace.” He enjoys entertaining and his parties usually entail many guests, but he is considering “doing things smaller because with 40 and 50 people, I can’t do the work. Physically I’m exhausted and I can’t enjoy the party. So what’s the point of doing that?” One area that he is reluctant to cut back on is his involvement with church-related activities. This is a very important aspect of his life, and he spends considerable time and energy developing programs for and trying to increase membership in his church.

Jeff would advise younger gays to be true to themselves, but not to put a lot of expectations of other people. He explains that he doesn’t “push” the issue of his sexual orientation, and his “style” is to not “really talk about myself as being gay.” He routinely discusses his life with Lou with family members and work colleagues, but doesn’t really come right out and say they are gay. “I’m not sure that’s important or that it needs to be said” he says; “It’s like, you know, people aren’t stupid.”

Jeff dreams about a utopian world which he describes as “a totally open society where everybody can live in harmony with everybody being accepting of everybody else...where folks just don’t have prejudice.” He realizes that each of us has “our own emotions, our own feelings, and our own belief systems that format who we are,” and result in stereotypes. Learning how to deal with his own stereotypes and prejudices is something that he feels has come with age; but he adds: “If somebody else is stereotyping, that’s their problem, not mine.” Continuing on, he says “Maybe that’s the thing, you need to really be strong in who you are and believe in yourself. Because if

you're strong in your beliefs and you know who you are, you can be more accepting of other people.”

Joe

“I’ve known since I was nine that I was gay,” Joe relates; “I found men attractive back then.” The first time he acted on it was when he was 12 or 13 and at a group home where he was lived for a few years following his father’s suicide. He had sporadic same sex contacts when he was an older teenager and young adult, but was fearful of hurting his family if they found out about him. Then a close friend of his who he didn’t realize was gay died of AIDS. This scared Joe and he went for long periods—sometimes years--without any sexual activity “because of the area I lived in. I didn’t drive, and I was just afraid to act on it.” Joe got tired of being alone and one day asked a co-worker how he met all the women he dated. The co-worker told him that all he needed was an Internet provider and demonstrated several sites while explaining “there’s women for men; men for women, and even men for men and women for women if you want.” Joe recalls that night: “I’ll never forget it. It was December 10th. I went home, got the credit card out, and I signed onto AOL. Within probably a week and a half I met the first guy, and spent the whole night with him.”

Joe lived on the second floor of a duplex he owned, and his mother and step-father lived on the first floor. Soon after Joe discovered the Internet, his mother questioned where he had been for a few days. He decided to use the opportunity to come out to her and said “I was with a guy. Mom, I’m gay.” “Oh, I know,” she replied, “I’ve known since you were a little boy.” She explained that she had discussed it with their doctor and he said that Joe would come out when he’s ready. So, at the age of 36, after

years of being afraid of hurting her, Joe came out to his mother and their relationship blossomed, and they went from “son and mother to best friends. I think because now my mom knew, I could express myself more; and she could understand who I was so much more.” He began to date and his mother even tried to play matchmaker. Sadly, she died suddenly about 6 months later. Soon thereafter Joe met “probably the first guy that I ever dated that I really truly, deeply loved,” a man who was at a halfway house following many years in prison.

That relationship ended, but Joe saw life as going well. He had a steady work history as an assembler in a manufacturing plant, a new car, and was trying to arrange for refinancing of his home to make necessary repairs. Then upon waking up from a nap following work one day two years ago at the age of 40, Joe couldn't read his computer screen. Physical examinations indicated that he had suffered visceral hemorrhages, and his eyesight continued to deteriorate. He arranged to have eye surgery using his employer-sponsored health insurance, and coordinated the time off work. Two days before the scheduled surgery, he received a letter from the company terminating his employment which immediately canceled his insurance. Thus began a bureaucratic and logistical nightmare. In the process, he lost his home, his car, and moved five times in a matter of months. He cashed in his retirement in an attempt to find an eye surgeon who would do the surgery for cash. Eventually he found a surgeon who was determined to perform the surgery and save Joe's remaining eyesight; nevertheless, today at 42, Joe is totally blind in one eye and legally blind in the other. Ironically, his online profiles, even before he lost his eyesight, have included one of his favorite sayings: “If we were all blind we wouldn't know who to hate.”

Joe is now on disability and recently assumed payments on a trailer home that he hopes to pay off in several years. His mortgage payment and lot rent eat up more than half of his monthly SSI check, and he adds that he lives “literally from check to check.”

He feels he’s totally functional despite not being able to do some things by himself, and acknowledges sometimes getting frustrated with having to ask for help; with “some people tend to treat you like a baby”; and particularly with having to give up driving which “makes it harder to meet people.” He also is prone to “social anxiety in public,” and adds: “I’m afraid of being rejected...I’m afraid to open my mouth and say something stupid, you know. So now with the blindness on top of it, it makes it even worse.”

Nevertheless, at this point in his life, Joe is optimistic and content with his life. He has a few close friends. The Internet remains a vital social, and sometimes sexual, link for him and he has developed friendships with people all over the world. He thinks his father would be proud of him for “putting up with all the crap I’ve put up with in my life and dealing with the fact that I’ve gone legally blind and could end up totally blind and able to deal with it without committing suicide.” He describes unhesitatingly himself as “finally happy,” and continues:

Overall I’m pretty happy now with my life, even though it’s at where it’s at.

Yeah, it’s a sad thing that happened in my life. But I’m going to have to learn to live with it, because you can’t change it. They don’t make eye transplants.

If he could live his life over again, Joe says he wouldn’t change anything: “I wouldn’t say I want to be rich. I wouldn’t say that I wouldn’t be gay. I wouldn’t say that I wouldn’t be blind. Things happen for a reason.” Still, he’d like to “find a soul mate,

life mate,” but adds he’s “not frantically searching. I guess because I am happy being single.” He comments that this is a change since reaching midlife and says “I actually I think the older I get the, the wiser I get. I think I’m more calmer in my life now.” He recalls that when he first came out, he’d “just line them up hoping to find somebody. Well, now I’m older and when you’re older, sometimes it is harder to find somebody,” but he’s undeterred. “If it was meant to be,” he says, “you’ll find somebody when you’ll least expect it.” He sees being on disability as providing him with the flexibility to live anywhere in the U.S., so he’s continuing to search for a life mate. “I’m scared,” he admits; “but I’m willing to try.”

Mike

At 49, it’s almost immediately evident that Mike enjoys a quick wit, a friendly disposition, and a fun-loving nature. Yet he recalls the internal struggles that he faced as a child growing up in a small town of 2500 people; and thinking there was something different about him but not knowing what it was. He believed no one else shared such feelings, and sometimes felt isolated or alone. As a teenager, he prayed to God to be cured from what he was feeling. He didn’t have a label for the feelings; and even as he began to experiment and act on these feelings in his senior year of high school, he chalked it up to adolescent horseplay. When Mike got to college, he became involved with theater and met some people who self-identified as gay—so he then knew “how to label myself if I got to that point.” Others began to assume that Mike was gay -- a situation that in some respects, he found disturbing. He had not yet accepted himself as being gay; however, he also felt somewhat relieved because he realized if he were gay, he may not have to be a social outcast.

When Mike went off to New York to go to mortuary school, his dad told him “if you come home from New York City a virgin, there something wrong with you.” He had a female friend from college, who was also in New York at the time, and one night they decided to have intercourse. Afterwards he felt a sense of accomplishment that at least he done it, but he was disappointed because there “weren’t any fireworks,” and it was nothing that he was particularly interested in repeating. Over time, he became very curious about the gay bars that were only blocks from his apartment. He would walk by them and watch the people entering and leaving, but he didn’t summon up the gumption to go in himself.

At home from mortuary school one weekend, Mike was out with some older friends, one of whom pulled him aside by saying he has something to tell him. The older gentleman grabbed Mike, who was 21 at the time, and kissed him passionately. Mike describes this as “a moment of revelation, a threshold for me...that’s as clear today as it was when it happened.” There was no denying it anymore, and “the door was flung open...because I had had the fireworks.” When he came out to his family, his father advised him he would have to move far away to a city “where your kind of people are. You’re never going to make it in a small town with the attitudes around here.” Mike did not heed his father’s advice, deciding instead to remain in his hometown. As a young professional, Mike was somewhat guarded regarding his sexual identity. He joined the Lions Club at an early age and was a loyal member for years, all the while pretending not to be bothered by the pervasive homophobic and sexist jokes and comments in that environment. As he matured, however, he began to see himself as a hypocrite, and it was “just not worth it to me to expose myself to groups like that.” As he came to a deeper

acceptance of “who I am and I’m not fighting it anymore,” he knew he could no longer belong to a group “just because it’s good for business. I’ve come to my own. I own my own time and self.” However, Mike is prudent when it comes to the realities of living and operating a business in a politically and religiously conservative small town. While he doesn’t consider himself to be a gay activist—“having a rainbow flag on my car, that’s just not who I am”—he does occasionally wonder whether his being gay is a factor when business gets slow or when funerals he would have expected to handle go to a different funeral home. Nevertheless, he never regrets his decision to remain in his hometown. His espoused philosophy of “if you allow yourself to be open to what happens in life, often the platter will be set for you” seems to be reflected in his owning a successful and expanding business; his involvement with a partner for whom he cares deeply; a wide circle of friends; and the very contented nature of his life. Mike believes in living “all out--it’s all or nothing.” In part, he thinks this may be due to having lost so many friends to AIDS; but, while acknowledging he is generalizing, he feels it’s also because gays “just know how to live it up; and we enjoy it. We don’t hold back in most cases.” He displays both an implicit understanding of the impact of heteronormativity on the everyday lives of sexual minorities, as well as his deep-seated refusal to totally succumb to its demands when he adds:

We’re struggling for our freedoms...we’re supposed to be living in a free country and yet there’s still so many people that hate us...so if we can express ourselves and do it without getting clobbered or shunned or whatever, it’s like enjoy that space that you’re in at that moment...because you never know when we’re going

to have to turn around and just watch ourselves because of who's in the next room.

George

Even as an adolescent growing up in his native country of Switzerland, George knew that he was different than what everyone wanted him to be. Yet there was such a stigma to being gay, that “you just wouldn't admit it to yourself, let alone to anyone else so you tried to fit into that mold that everyone assumed and wanted to be in.” Nevertheless, George never really had much of an internal struggle or a feeling that something was deeply wrong with him. Rather, “it just was something that was there, but it didn't affect my day-to-day life. It didn't mean that I didn't function within normal society. I had girlfriends and I basically behaved or worked and lived in a heterosexual society; and was basically happy.” He also had sex with men on the side which he characterizes as mostly one night stands with no emotional attachment. This pattern continued even after he moved to the United States at the age of 23 to manage a family business. When he was 30, he married a woman from Switzerland who was seven years younger, and who he had known since she was a little girl. Basically, they had a happy and fulfilling marriage for the better part of three decades, although George continued his surreptitious gay flings and affairs. George became a father at the age of 37 and had a second child a few years later. He spent his 40s “raising children.” It wasn't until he was in his 50s that he realized “hey, this isn't really what I wanted. It's not that I'm sad or that I'm not happy, but this isn't what I am.” Up until about three years ago, George--who is currently 58--considered himself to be bisexual. Since that time however, he identifies as gay—“I finally admitted it to myself; I think we all go through the same kind of thing--

there comes a point when you have to say I got to stop living this lie...there's something wrong. Something needs to change.” George characterizes this process as “the building blocks were always there but they were never put together. And when I finally came out, they were all put together...it was there as a whole then; and its there as a whole now.”

About a year and a half ago, George met another gay man with whom he felt an immediate strong connection. It's not something that he was necessarily looking for, nor did he expect it. He can't explain why it happened this time or why it had never happened before; but for the first time, George became emotionally involved with another male, Mike, who remains his current partner. Since then, his “world has changed.” His divorce recently was finalized. He remains on good terms with his children, although his relationship with his oldest daughter was initially strained because “all of a sudden, Dad wasn't the same anymore.” He and his ex-wife are very good friends. They talk almost every day and “I do things for her and she does things for me. It's just that we went two different ways.” George sees his life now as “sort of a new adventure [that has] really changed my life” in ways that he never would have expected. One of these ways is through an expanded circle of friends. He explains that he's always enjoyed meeting people. “I figure I'm late 50s; you know, I can go retire and die and, you know, nobody will ever know better,” he kids. “But here it is I meet all these new people from all age groups; from, you know, 20 to 80--and it's just an enriching experience.” He doesn't see ageism operating any differently in his new social network than in society at large. While he thinks “it's there to some extent,” he's “very surprised that it's not more prevalent in the gay community than it is in hetero society; and it's not.” Another observation that he finds “really funny to see” is that “there's a certain

homophobia in the gay community...but it's just the same process that I went through they go through too.”

While acknowledging that much around him has changed since he came to identify and accept himself as gay, his perspective is “I myself really didn't change. I'm still me. I just changed the way I lived.” He remains very much upbeat about life, and always tries to look at things in a positive light. What he thinks about people, the values he has and thinks others should have—none of those fundamental things have changed. “Be a good person—that's a value to me,” he explains; “and whether or not you're gay or straight doesn't enter into that.” His personal spiritual credo is: “live life the way you think you should be living it so that at the end of the day you're happy and true to yourself without having to bring harm to other people.” Trying to live his life in this way continues to serve him well at midlife, and he suspects it will sustain him as he progresses into later life.

Andy

Growing up as gay wasn't easy for Andy given the politically and religiously conservative area in which he was raised. He kind of knew he was attracted to men from a very early age. He knew what that was called by the time he was about 11; and by 13, he admitted to himself he was gay. He didn't have much of an internal struggle with this, but he realized it wasn't something that he could share with his parents or other important people in his life. His biggest problem was that he didn't know other gay people. This changed during his first year of college. He became good friends with another gay student who had a large group of gay friends; and for the first time, he became a part of a network of gay people.

Andy came out “accidentally” to his mother during his senior year of college. While he was home for a break, he received some letters from a man he was dating. He hid the letters in his dresser under some clothing, but “my mother somehow found them there in the bottom of the drawer underneath clothing. She claims she was putting clean clothing in the dresser and found the letters.” There was lots of tension at home the rest of that year and the summer after he graduated. He explains:

Then things kind of settled down and nothing much was said for a long time. It was probably about 10 or 12 years later I had a lover and he left me. I went through a very bad emotional period. My parents knew something was wrong. I kept telling them I didn't feel well. Finally one night on the telephone my mother said something to me, and I just broke down. She came to my apartment and we sat down and talked. She said she had tried to learn as much she could--she didn't understand it, but if that's the way I was, she loved me anyway--I was her son.

After that they became much closer prior to her death. She told him his father suspected that Andy might be gay “because of some of the people that I had as friends”; but he and his father never discussed it.

Today, at 60, Andy is happy to be retired after 35 years of teaching, but he misses the “social interaction and non-teaching times, like lunch times and in the hallways” at school. He enjoys being around people—“not huge crowds, but people I know; people I feel comfortable with, and doing something that I enjoy and just getting away for a bit.” He excels as a make-up artist and is involved with several theater groups, and has several close friends with whom he can share that passion--but they live several hours away so

they don't get together all that often. He also has a straight couple that he feels are his family, and even more so since his father's death:

I had worked with the wife and had eventually come out to her, and it was at their house. So the husband was included, and they've kind of adopted me into their family. We jokingly say occasionally that the wife and I are brother and sister. I have no siblings she does have one brother, but they're not close.

Andy still lives in his hometown which has grown to a small city of about 18,000 people, but it remains very conservative. Not only is there virtually no outlet for socializing with other gay and lesbian people, but Andy has sometimes faced blatant homophobia such as occurred when he asked his next-door neighbor if they would have a guest of hers move his vehicle so Andy could use his driveway. While agreeing to do so, the neighbor muttered "fucking faggot" under her breath. No longer willing to meekly accept such treatment, a big altercation ensued including police involvement. In such an environment, he's found it quite difficult to develop and maintain a supportive social network. He knows other gay people in the area who are friendly, but "they don't socialize. I don't know what they do. Some of them are stuck in their youth days. They continue the same things like going to the bars and so on."

Andy never was much of a "bar person"—although with the hope of meeting a special person with whom to share his life, "when I was younger, I went to the bars a lot, even though I wasn't good at it." He also joined various social and support groups over the years and he explains, "I'm not a hermit. I do like being around people. I just don't do well in large groups of people I don't know, but I do enjoy being around people in social situations." He thought about moving periodically throughout his career, but job

offers never materialized and his now deceased mother, with whom he was quite close, never really wanted him to leave the area. With his father's recent death, Andy is the last remaining member of his family. He has toyed with the idea of moving, perhaps to one of the new gay and lesbian retirement communities that he's read about—"it seems like that would be a better situation," but he wonders whether it would really "make it any more accessible or easy to meet friends or a partner." He's recently contracted for an addition to his home even though he feels it might be "trapping myself even more. It will be completed and I'll go from there, but I guess it's kind of like sealing my fate that I'm going to be here." Still, he's excited about it; but adds "I'd like to have somebody to share with. It just gets very lonely."

Not wanting to be alone has always been important to Andy; and the fact that he isn't partnered is a continuing source of frustration. He attributes this in part to ageism in society in general, as well as within the gay male community including online interaction which is his most expedient way in which to meet other gay people. As he has gotten older, his "feelings and experience have gotten more negative, more frustrated largely because of ageism in one form or another. I mean, sometimes it cracks me up and sometimes it angers me or depresses me." He explains that is why he was so interested in participating in this study: "I don't think there's been much done on older gays. I just think there's not enough about us out there, and I think it is important that people know about our lives."

Duncan

Growing up in a rural area in Pennsylvania, Duncan knew in eighth or ninth grade that he was gay, but even then he realized that he had to "live within what was acceptable

for the area...which would not be growing up gay.” After graduation from high school, he left home and moved to a small city in a different part of the state. He tried being straight for a while and dated women. Although he became good friends with some of them, he sometimes felt bad because often after the date ended, he would end up going out to a local gay bar. He had sex with several different women, and it was "sort of okay. It's just that really inside me, I could tell the feeling, the emotion wasn't there; I didn't get the excitement that I did when I went to bed with a guy--- that feeling of satisfaction." He ended his period of “experimenting” when he was 21 because he felt he had tried enough situations such that “if there was a chance I was straight, I would have realized it.” He doesn't feel that he missed out on anything in life because of being gay and he doesn't have “any wild impulses to go do something that I feel like I won't have the chance to do again...nothing like that.” Indeed, he feels that being gay has benefited him by fostering independence such as when he decided to quit the community college after several semesters, and again when the company with whom he was serving a carpenter apprenticeship went bankrupt. Had he been straight, "I probably just would have gone back home and lived with mom and dad. Now that would have been fine, but I knew that wasn't going to be the life I wanted so that made me continue to be independent; find a job; and do something I could develop in."

Now, at age 50, he describes himself as "fairly run-of-the-mill--nothing much exciting." Nevertheless, he is quite content and satisfied with his life. He's not concerned at all about being at midlife. The only birthday that he thought about his age was when he turned 42; he recalls thinking “well, I'm never going to be young again,” for a brief minute, but then he “never really thought about it again.” He's always been active

and been involved with motorcycling, hill climbs, and “all kinds of stuff”; and feels that he’s still in good enough shape that he could do whatever he’d like for quite awhile. He’s proud that he has worked his way up to a technical analyst position writing requirements and debugging applications on mainframe and Internet systems. Being gay didn’t have any impact on his occupational choice, and he laughingly says he’d “probably be a master carpenter right now had that company not gone bankrupt.”

He and his partner of 25 years, Dane, maintain a host of interests—including hunting, boating, and classic car restoration. They also enjoy a fairly wide range of friends although he’s noticing that the frequency of social interaction has gone down a bit, and the “circle of friends compared to what it used to be is kind of shrinking.” A key component of his approach to life is that things can be replaced but people can’t; thus he tries to be friendly or helpful in whatever way he can be to others, and to “just try to do good things.” Caring for and supporting his elderly mother is one of his top priorities at this point in his life. She’s had a series of health setbacks over the past few years—and Duncan’s goal is to see her through these problems and to keep her happy. “Who knows? I mean, she might live to be 100, he banters; “but I’m not expecting I’m probably going to have her that much longer.” His desire to help others extends to the succeeding generation as well, as he shares his life experiences with and tries to mentor and guide his 29 year old nephew who is also gay. He advises him that he think about what he wants out of life, and what he needs to do to get there. Then, based on his own experience, he adds: “he’s just going to have to find his own way.”

Don

As early as grade school or middle school, Don knew he was different although

he isn't "sure that I knew what it was"; but he definitively "liked looking at men, especially men with hairy chests; and I also knew somehow that you didn't talk about that." He dated girls and never acted on his interest in men until shortly after high school. College in another state provided a whole new world with people he didn't know, and he "got a little more adventurous." However, he "wouldn't say I was out either." There were a couple of people who knew of his interest in men although he still dated women as well. After graduating college and returning to his home area, Don was dating two men and two women and "was very interested in all of them." However, he eventually "became a little bit more entrenched in a gay lifestyle; with the bars and all that, the women kind of just fell to the wayside. And I focused on men." He didn't really discuss this with anyone and basically only came out to two people in his life. As he explains, "in my family, we were all very private...nobody talked about their feelings." Sharing this trait, he's "never had a lot of people that I talked to about things that were bothering me or things that concerned me. I wouldn't talk about personal things." His interest in men "was just one more of those things that I didn't talk about."

After college, Don took a job in retail management eventually "took over" his life. He often worked 60 to 70 hours a week, leaving little time for a social life. The high degree of public contact contributed to his perceived need to remain relatively closeted. Several years ago, when he was in his mid-40s, the company Don worked for went bankrupt. Rather than being despondent, he says "I lost my job it was the best thing that ever happened to me because it forced me to make a change." He could easily have gotten another retail management position, but it was no longer what he wanted. "A lot of people would consider that a mid-life crisis. I considered that a great opportunity to

recreate my life. And I think I did that, to a degree.” Introspective by nature, Don came to see that “some of the things that I used to think were really important ended up not being that important.” He sees his being at midlife as a factor in his decision to leave retail, and since doing so, he “really started becoming comfortable with who I am and realizing that I have every right to be who I am just like anybody else does. And if you don’t like it, I don’t care.”

He’s decided he’s “just not going to hide it anymore. If somebody asks me I’m just going to say yeah.” Still, his life is definitely compartmentalized as he explains: “I am who I am with my family and I am who I am at work; and I am who I am with my gay friends, you know.” Sometimes he wishes it weren’t that way: “there are times when I wish somebody in my family would just come right out and ask me if I was gay so I could say yes,” he says laughingly; “but none of them have.” He’s surprised that his brother hasn’t asked, and with the recent passing of his mother, he thinks it’s more likely to happen. “I know there are people at work who know,” he says; “and I don’t care about that anymore.” He adds: “My whole life has been compartmentalized and I really wish that would just go away. I’d like to knock those walls down.”

Now 50, Don is happy and “pretty much content.” He has a quick wit and a great sense of humor and likes to “inject humor in almost any situation, or at least what I think is funny.” He tends not to “live in the past; when I move on, I move on.” Having “made a niche” for himself, he doesn’t need to keep looking for what he isn’t finding—although he continues to try to make life better. He would like to join a book discussion group and perhaps begin to write which is “something I wanted to do when I was in college and put it on the back burner because I realized that I needed to live more before I could start to

get any of that down on paper.” While he’s “perfectly content” with reading a book or listening to music, reflecting his belief that “literature and music are just the ultimate,” he is open to the possibility of a long-term relationship. He would advise younger people to “be who you are...and learn to appreciate who you are,” and that is irrespective of sexual orientation. Speaking from his own lived experiences, he adds: “Evaluate who you are honestly, and if there’s something that you don’t like, be able to seriously try to change it.”

Mitch

When Mitch was about 12 or 13, he used to play strip poker with other boys in his neighborhood. The loser would have to “do stuff” for the others boys. He looked forward to strip poker, and he especially liked to lose. In junior and senior high school, he avoided phys ed classes because he felt picked on to some degree because he was feminine. Instead, at the beginning of each semester, he would talk to his phys ed teacher and arrange to spend the class time in art class instead. He came out to his parents as a teenager. They weren’t happy about his sexual orientation and were somewhat distant even though he remained living at home. He quit school (and later earned a GED) and began working at a local restaurant where he didn’t try to hide his sexual orientation. He became very good friends with a girl at work—she even told her family about her “gay friend Mitch.” After a few months they “ended up kissing one night,” and decided to date. Even though he knew he was more attracted to men, he was aware that society frowned upon gay people, and “you were supposed to get married, have children, live happily ever after, things like that.” After a few months, he proposed and they married several months later. They remained married for 17 years and had four sons. During

much of their marriage, Mitch tried to suppress his attraction to men and to be faithful to his wife, even while working a second job as a bar-back at a gay bar. He was flabbergasted when his wife said she wanted a divorce, but she explained that he was “no longer the happy kind of guy I was that she fell in love when they first met. She felt I was way too closeted, and repressing away too much of myself.”

Since their divorce, they have remained best friends; and he enjoys a wonderful relationship with his sons. Their oldest two children are now young adults, and Mitch and his ex-wife share custody of the younger boys. They often have meals together and share in important occasions in each other’s lives. At 46, Mitch feels happy about where he is in life. As he’s gotten older and come to a full acceptance and openness about who he is, he no longer feels he has to “follow the trends.” He’s proud of the numerous awards he’s received at work, and has advanced to a fast-food management position. He credits this to maturing and having “more direction and expectations [in regards to] making more of myself.” He explains that “Ten years ago, I would probably just run with things and hope; and if it didn’t work out, I would get frustrated and just give up and just go onto something else.”

In addition to his job which entails lots of contact with the public, Mitch has plenty of friends, and remains heavily involved with his sons and their activities. Still, he does admit to sometimes being lonely. He has dated and even at one point while he still lived with his family after the divorce, his male partner moved in for a few months. That situation didn’t work out well, and Mitch has been a bit hesitant about entering a long-term relationship since then. He attributes this, in part, to his preference for dating men in their early to mid-20s. He says that his older boys have joked with him that they are

“fine with having a step-dad, but don’t really need a step-big brother”; and Mitch wonders how his younger sons would handle his being involved with someone not much older than their brothers. He also has considered whether his preference for younger men is an attempt “to hold onto youth...because I didn’t want to become old.” He somewhat discounts that notion now, and feels it is because their higher energy levels make him more energetic, and they are “more fun to hang out with...not just sexually, but just in everyday life.”

Although he would very much like to be involved in a long-term relationship, he isn’t “desperately trying to find somebody.” He relates to Will from the television show *Will and Grace*: “He really wants a relationship, but he’s quite comfortable with being who he is; and the people who have come in and out of his life have helped him grow.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented summarized demographic background on the study participants, followed by a brief biographical sketch of each participant. While not intended to represent the full richness and complexities of the lives of these men, the information in this chapter helps to set the stage for a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the study findings that are included in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

*Do not go where the path may lead,
go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*
Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how self-identified gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormativity society. This research was premised on three guiding questions centering on (a) the subjective experience of aging in contemporary midlife gay men; (b) life opportunities that have been affected either positively or negatively by being gay, and the ways in which these men either adhere to or resist society's expectations for what it means to be a gay man; and (c) the meanings these men make of their own developmental histories given the social stigma associated with being gay; as well as any age cohort effects such as the Stonewall riots, AIDS, and the growing visibility of sexual minorities in contemporary society.

The participants narrated stories of their everyday lives -- lives that are rooted in each man's reality. Despite having faced stigma, discrimination, and heterosexism, the men in this study are generally leading happy, satisfying, and fulfilling lives. To varying degrees, each has been impacted by heteronormativity and each has adjusted to it in varying ways. It presented these men with difficult dilemmas and tough decisions; and for some of the men—though not universally—it exacerbated a sense of struggle and conflict. However, although heteronormativity may have constrained the lives of these

men, it has not determined them. Included in these stories are each man's perspectives and understandings as to how his sexuality shaped his life not only at this point of his life, but along his developmental pathway. These men expressed an awareness of feeling different or disconnected; for most, but not all, this occurred relatively early in life. Each also had an implicit, concomitant understanding of societal norms that indicated it was not okay to feel what he felt or to think what he thought. In his own words and in his own way, each described his journey to self-acceptance and a search for community; as well as the circumstances, perspectives, and understandings of his current status as a gay man at midlife. While each participant's life is unique and richly complex, this chapter reports the themes that emerged across the interviews. In line with the narrative inquiry methodology of this study, these themes will be presented largely using relevant direct quotes from the individual participants.

The findings of this research are presented in two sections as follows: (a) The Intersection of Midlife, Gay, and Male; and (b) Contemporary Socio-political Issues. As outlined in Table 2, the first section reflects five categories of themes with corresponding subcategories which emerged from analysis of the data for common patterns across the data, as well as for frequency and repeated emphasis of certain topics. The second section reflects the participants' viewpoints on several current socio-political issues that are part of the context in which these men are experiencing midlife, yet were unavailable to earlier cohorts of gay men. Additionally, the participants' perspectives on the issue of ageism within the gay male community are discussed.

Table 2 *Outline of Findings*

- I. The Intersection of Midlife, Gay, and Male
 - A. History of Heterosexual Dating and Relationships
 - 1. Societal expectation, experimentation, and exploration
 - 2. Previous heterosexual marriage as social expectation
 - B. Acceptance of “This is who I am”
 - 1. Giving up pretenses
 - 2. High level of contentment
 - 3. Midlife as a continuous process
 - C. Tension between Fitting In and Being “Too Out”
 - 1. Iterative and contextual nature of coming out
 - 2. Situationally confronting homophobia
 - 3. Aversion to “activism”
 - 4. Personal sphere of influence
 - D. Reconciling Religious Tension
 - 1. Source of conflict/struggle and solace
 - 2. “Make it my own”
 - 3. Spiritual perspective exclusive of formal religion
 - E. Belonging and Community
 - 1. Learning from key others
 - 2. Inclusive social networks
 - 3. Changing nature of social interaction at midlife
 - 4. Sex, intimacy, and relationships
- II. Contemporary Socio-political Issues
 - A. Gay Marriage
 - B. HIV/AIDS
 - C. The Internet
 - D. Ageism

The Intersection of Midlife, Gay, and Male

This section explores various dimensions of the participants' lives, including both retrospective aspects surrounding their individual pathways to recognizing and coming to a self-acceptance of a gay identity, and narratives of their current lives. These men share the common bonds of being male, gay, of an age range typically considered to be midlife, and having been raised in a heteronormative society. Each has traveled his own idiosyncratic journey on the way to midlife. In some regards, parts of the journey have been somewhat similar for the men despite widely diverse contexts and circumstances; while other aspects of one's journey had to be negotiated and traveled alone--so too with their midlives. Included in this section are the following five categories of themes: (a) History of Heterosexual Dating and Relationships; (b) Acceptance of "This is Who I Am"; (c) Tension Between Fitting In and Being "Too Out; (d) Reconciling Religious Tension; and (e) Belonging and Community.

History of Heterosexual Dating and Relationships

While none of these individuals specifically used the term heteronormativity, its influences were weaved throughout each and every story. Almost all of these men recounted that even at a very young age, they had a sense or feeling of being "different" and knowing that it was not something they could talk about. Many among the generation of gay men currently at midlife learned early and well society's admonitions against being "deviant," that is, being outside the dominant norm of heterosexuality.

Heterosexism was inescapable in the lives of these men as it was (and largely still is) so deeply embedded in the socialization process. With little opportunity for meeting

similarly situated peers and lacking supporting societal sanctions, the cohort of gay men currently at midlife faced considerable pressure in their adolescence and young adulthood to conform to heterosexist mandates by dating females—even if the men believed or understood themselves to be gay. The majority of the men in this study reported some period of heterosexual dating including four who have been heterosexually married, and another who broke off an engagement with a woman shortly before the wedding date. Two categories comprise this theme: (a.) Societal expectation, experimentation, and exploration; and (b.) previous heterosexual marriage as social expectation

Societal expectation, experimentation, and exploration. Only one of the participants in this study never dated girls or women at all. Several of the remaining men felt societal pressure to date females because it was “expected” or because their friends were doing so, but the relationships never progressed to a sexual level. This was the case for Andy who dated females in high school and college as he explains:

In high school, it was primarily because everybody was doing it and I didn't have any other things going on. In college, they actually were really close friends. We sort of dated, but nothing ever sexual. I never was attracted to women sexually. Similarly, Ben relates “I dated women through college. Even after I was out of college and in this area teaching, I dated a little bit. It just never went anywhere. That was not where my sexual fulfillment was.” He was also having sex with men during this time but “I was not dating. I was quite promiscuous, and it was all in the background.”

For others of the men, however, these heterosexual relationships did entail sex—not solely because of societal expectations, but also as a way of exploring their own sexuality. For example, in speaking about his first (and only) act of sexual intercourse

with a woman, Mike says: “Afterwards I felt a sense of accomplishment that at least I had done it, but I thought ‘I can remember the fireworks on *Love American Style* on TV, and there certainly weren't any fireworks!’” To Mike, if that's all there was to it, he “could be celibate for the rest of my life.” Steed had a much longer period in which he engaged in heterosexual sex as he describes:

When you are in high school you had to play the role. I had sex with some of the guys in high school once in a while, but I still dated girls. I was in the homecoming court and my girlfriend was on the court and all that. It's part of the game. I fooled around with women and that continued through college, although I also had gay experiences in college.

After his stint in the Army, Steed started dating a woman he had dated in college. He characterizes it as “playing around” and thinking that being gay was “something that will change.” He became engaged but “after awhile I was seeing somebody [male] at the same time I was engaged. Then I just finally realized this is really stupid. So I broke off the engagement just a month or two before the wedding.” He admits that he knew since he was a kid that he was gay, but thought maybe it would go away. He continues: “You know, I knew it wouldn't go away, because I knew it was inside me. I mean, I just knew it. That's the way I was born but I just went by the social rules for all those years.”

Duncan also dated women for a period but his dalliance with heterosexual sex wasn't as long-lasting as he explains:

I tried being straight for awhile. I dated several women. I told myself that I had to have sex at least a couple times with a female partner to make sure that I wasn't just, I don't know, imagining this or whatever. So I did that. I went through that.

I put myself through enough situations where if there was a chance I was straight, I would have realized it...I think the last time I tried that experiment, or whatever you want to call it, I was probably about 21. The sex was sort of okay. It's just that really inside with me, I could tell the feeling, the emotion wasn't there; and it wasn't "well, I haven't met the right one." I didn't get the excitement that I did when I could go to bed with a guy--the feeling of satisfaction.

Ray also has a history of heterosexual dating and sexual experiences through his early thirties, but perhaps for a different reason as he relates: "The thought never crossed my mind that I might be gay." It was at the age of 32 that he experienced his first male experience during a weekend visit from a friend and former work colleague. When his guest initiated sexual overtures, Ray recalls thinking: "This is different. I'm not sure what's going on here, but...I just kind of went with it." He was very shocked at how much he enjoyed it and surprised that he felt "no pressure to perform like I felt when I was with a woman. It felt far more natural than being with a woman." This experience put Ray on the path of "considering other options, and that's when the realization came to me 'Good god, you've been barking up the wrong tree!'"

Previous heterosexual marriage as social expectation. With regards to all the study participants who had been heterosexually married, each mentioned societal or cultural expectations as one of the factors in deciding to get married. All four also had either already self-identified as gay, or had had same-sex experiences prior to marriage. The courses and patterns of these marriages vary widely, as do relationships with children and ex-spouses.

For example, Mitch explains “I think I got married because back in the early 80s, gay isn’t something that was discussed.” The view of social reality that Mitch learned well was that everyone was supposed to get married and have children, a course of action Mitch undertook even though he was out to himself, to his family, and to his work colleagues. Even his future wife knew he was gay. While now divorced after 17 years together, he and his ex-wife remain best friends and are the proud parents of four sons.

Similarly, Jeremy says “I was married for a month shy of three years and I have a 19-year-old son, and I’m going to be a grandfather in November. I always knew I was gay. It’s just when I was in my early 20s and going in the military, I was doing that straight thing, what was expected by society, basically.” He has had no contact with his ex-wife since his son turned 18 and child support was no longer required, and he would just as soon keep it that way.

Heteronormative and heterosexist expectations are evident when George discusses the stigma attached to being gay and “different than what everybody wanted me to be...you just wouldn’t admit that to yourself, let alone to anybody else...so you just tried to fit into that mold that everybody assumed or wanted you to be in; or that everybody says you have to conform to.” Reflecting back on the period after he emigrated to the United States at 21 until he married at 31, George explains that he never had a girlfriend, just one “quickie” with a woman:

The rest were all gay encounters...I basically ended up marrying a girl from Switzerland who I had known since I was a young boy. I think it was a convenient way for me to enter that heterosexual world, or be part of that heterosexual world without having to actually go through the dating process as

much as you would with somebody that you just meet; and to top that off, she really was an attractive 21-year-old to me.

Although George began to identify as gay about 3 years ago, his divorce was only recently finalized. It was tough when his wife told him she was going to move out, and when she actually did. He states:

We had been married for almost 28 years; and that's a big part of my life, obviously; and her life. It was comfortable, but it obviously went somewhere where she didn't want it to go, so she took action. She was basically preemptive in what she was doing--which in hindsight was the right thing to do; but she herself says that she wouldn't have wanted to miss all the years that we were married. I mean, we had a great marriage...obviously the gay thing, it's the major part of the divorce, but there's no animosity between me and my ex-wife at this point. We talk almost every day, and I do things for her and she does things for me. It's just that we went two different ways.

Early religious grounding was a key factor in Jeff's decision to marry. As a young adult, he vacillated between dating both men and women. At his parents' urging, he talked with both his pastor and a psychologist about his gay tendencies, and both basically advised that "this is who you are--live out your life." Yet Jeff remained conflicted:

I guess I was about 23 or 24, and I continued to consult my religion. I began to feel that I really needed to stop and think about this again. After a period of about a year or so, I starting to date a girl, and we wound up getting married. She ended up hiking out on me because there were a lot of other issues for her. It was very,

very heartbreaking for me because I pretty much had figured I had changed and everything else, and this is really what I wanted.

Regardless of its duration or the degree to which heterosexual dating and relationships played a role in the developmental pathways for the participants in this study, each eventually came to accept himself as a gay man—a process which seems to come to fruition or deepen during midlife.

Acceptance of “This is who I am”

None of the participants in this study expressed any sense of an ongoing inner struggle with being gay. That is not to imply that these men are unfazed by the ongoing impositions of heteronormativity and heterosexism on their daily lives; but these men tend to be less concerned about the opinions of others about them than they were when they were younger, particularly if those opinions are essentialized based on sexual orientation. With few exceptions, the men are happy, not only with themselves, but with midlife. Regardless of when in their developmental path these men came out, it seems that during midlife, socially and culturally conditioned heteronormative messages as to how these men should live their lives—silent, invisible, and in shame--lose at least some of its grip.

The findings for this theme are presented in the following three sub-categories: (a.) giving up pretenses; (b.) high level of contentment expressed in various ways; and (c.) midlife as a continuous process.

Giving up pretenses. For those outside the heterosexual norm, any number of activities may be employed to disguise or make one’s sexual orientation and feign an outward appearance of heterosexuality. Some common examples referred to by the men

in this study include having used indeterminate pronouns (such as “they” instead of “he” or “she”) and going to an office party with a single, heterosexual woman as opposed to one’s partner. One consequence of heteronormativity on the lives of those outside the heterosexual norm is the need to remain continually vigilant in assessing any given context for any clues that one may be at risk. Given the potential for, and all too frequent instances of, expression of homophobia (including ostracism, discrimination, harassment, acts of physical violence, and worse), many sexual minorities feel compelled to attempt to “pass” as heterosexual; to ignore or minimize their sexual identity and relationships when engaged in broader social interactions; or to compartmentalize their lives such that they are “out” in certain social circles, but remain “closeted” in others. For most of the men in this study, concomitant with midlife there seems to be integration between these different spheres of one’s life. The majority of the participants made comments indicating that as they have gotten older, they have become less concerned about what others think, and “who knows and who doesn’t.”

Don provides a particularly salient accounting of a sense of being “on guard” and always having to monitor his behaviors, mannerisms, and language. He states:

I don’t remember ever not being a situation where I had to be careful regarding what I was going to say; and then I had to be careful not to watch a guy walk by-- or not to say “ooh, look at that.”

He continues that it has only been during the last few years that he’s really started becoming comfortable with who he is and “realizing that I have every right to be who I am just like anybody else does. And if anyone doesn’t like it, I don’t care.”

George feels pretty much the same way. He explains that he is not affected by what people think of him or think he should be. “I do my own thing,” he says, “and if people can’t deal with that then let them gripe. Let them—it doesn’t affect my day at the end.” Steed offers a similar sentiment: “Back then you’d hear all those names; and, of course, that would affect you negatively. You’re being stereotyped and given a label. Now I could care less...they could call me anything they want, and it wouldn’t bother me one bit... this is me, deal with it.” Duncan is even more succinct when he says he’s reached the point that “from here on you just accept me or you don’t.”

Several of the men commented on how this enhanced self-acceptance has engendered additional benefits. For Don, becoming more comfortable with himself means:

My priorities have changed. I used to be very introverted, looking to become more extroverted; looking to be more of a social person than I was comfortable being. Now that I don’t care about that anymore, I’m generally more extroverted than I’ve ever been because I can just be myself.

Ben has recently been reflecting on how his life may have been different had he not been concerned with “what would people think if I did that or that or that?” He’s decided “I’m not going to worry about that anymore. I’m just going to do it if I think I want to do it, and not worry about anything else.” This new attitude is evident in his relationship with his partner, Jeremy, as he explains:

When I had a partner before or there was someone else in my life, I would be very guarded about where we might be seen together, or else we just wouldn’t go anywhere as a couple. Now I look forward to going with my partner rather than

going alone. I would rather do things with him...I'm not on the edge of "what if somebody finds out?" anymore. If people know it, they know; if they don't they don't.

He clarifies that it's not that he doesn't care what other people think; rather, "I care, but I don't fear it anymore. As a result, my stress level has gone to zero in my personal life."

Ray cites a practical example that reflects how tough it is can be to lead a compartmentalized life (that is, one in which an individual is out in some circles, but not in others). Until about 10 years ago, he had three separate groups of people in his life—his friends, his family, and his work colleagues. He found that it took considerable energy handling the different groups and "who knew and who didn't." Finally, he decided: "That's it! you all figure out how to make this work because I'm not doing this anymore—and you're all old enough to figure things out." Since then he invites people from the different groups to the same parties and other social activities, and it hasn't been a problem.

The reduction in stress and expenditure of energy worry about what others think or "who knows and who doesn't" are likely contributors to an overall increase in personal satisfaction and contentment.

High level of contentment. Almost all of the men in this study commented that as they have become older, they have reached a point where they are happy and satisfied with their lives. With a few exceptions, when they were younger, these men did not have considerable social interaction with older gay men. As a result, the pathways approaching and through midlife were largely uncharted, and without mentors or guides along the way. Yet, along with a deepening of self-acceptance and giving up pretenses

during midlife, these men have seemed to cast off at least some of societal, cultural, and institutional heteronormative messages. Duncan explains how he came to challenge stereotypes that didn't fit with his life experiences:

I guess until I really got to know some other gay people, I thought that all gay men were real effeminate and everything. That's not really the case. I looked at myself then, and didn't think I was especially so; and I knew I wasn't going to turn that way...it just didn't fit with my life. That's when I realize stereotypes are so ridiculous.

Duncan's example typifies re-learning and the development of a revised personal narrative that counters broader heteronormative narratives that is an integral component of the stories of these men. Others expressed delight and surprise at how good midlife is, and cited positive aspects that being gay has added to their lives.

For example, Ray is typical of someone who is very content at midlife. For him, "There is just as much enjoyment now as when I was young...it's a great time to be." He adds that he sometimes looks back on some of the things he used to do and thinks "oh, to be able to do that again;" but it's more in a bemused way with friends—"we'll say 'oh, remember when we used to do X? Oh lord, those were the days!' Then we move on and talk about what we're doing now." Mitch also considers himself to be very happy, an assessment that he feels those important to him share. Speaking of his children, he says: "They see that since I am on my own and finally have been able to be open about who I am, I am so much more happier in life; and I actually seem to be making more of myself." For Joe, entrée into midlife was tumultuous "with going blind, losing my job, my house, and my car...but I'm finally happy. Overall, I'm pretty happy now with my

life, even though it's at where it's at."

Several of the men talked about feeling "special" or "unique" attributes that being gay adds to their lives. Members of Don's family have often commented that he tends to be more attuned to other people's likes and dislikes. He feels that might be because he is gay and the "different level of awareness" that brings. He adds that he is very introspective, and "maybe that's part of being gay. You might understand yourself a little bit more in case you have to relate on so many different levels"—and as a result, understand others better as well. Similarly, Mike also discusses a "specialness" that entails the ability to read people well, which he believes stems from "the fact of being gay and having a little intuitiveness as you get comfortable with your own sexuality."

Other participants identified other aspects of being gay that they saw as positive or as beneficial. In Duncan's case, being gay has "helped foster some independence." He says:

I think gay people are often a lot more disciplined than straight people; in some sense they have to be in their lives. In most cases, when people find out you're gay, you're kind of on your own. People are probably less likely to do something for you out of the goodness of their heart than they might be if they thought you're just poor some down on his luck straight kid. I think you have more discipline in how you're going to handle yourself and react to situations.

As a consequence of "putting up with stereotypes," Jeremy feels he's developed "some backbone," and thinks "any gay person, woman or man, becomes stronger because we have to fight a bit more for what we want."

Like the majority of the men in the study, Don is "pretty much content. I've made

a niche, and I don't feel like I need to keep looking for what it is that I'm not finding.”

Yet he stressed that his contentment should not be misconstrued as complacency: “I don't want to say content to mean that I don't want to change life for the better. I'm always trying to make it better.” Furthermore, he adds:

It's important to be who you are, whether you're gay or not. And to understand that the term gay, hopefully, doesn't totally encompass who you are--that you're more than just gay, that you're also a reader or a writer or a musician or a politician or Lutheran or Catholic or something. You're a lot of things. Only one of them is gay...to focus on, to summate your life or your personality or your person by saying “I'm gay” and that's supposed to describe who you are, is just not reasonable. You need to develop all of you, and be confident of what who you are in all of those aspects.

Ben echoes this perspective when discussing what he would advise younger men approaching midlife, he quickly responds:

not to make the gay life the center of their life. Being gay is not the “be all, end all.” That's who you are and yet it's not you. It's not everything. Realize that being gay is just part of who you are.

Midlife as a continuous process. The men in this study all had a sense of either being at midlife or approaching it. None felt or expressed any sense of being older than his chronological age; to the contrary, several mentioned that they felt younger than they actually are. Many of the participants described midlife in terms other than chronological years. These included the explicit use of metaphors such as having been on a journey, following paths, or things coming together. Other notions evident from the stories

include a sense of midlife as a period to reflect on the past and to look to the future; and to see themselves as a work in progress, and continuing to change and evolve. In addition, the majority seem optimistic about the future for themselves.

Many of the men in this study have unique definitions and understandings of the term “midlife.” For Ray, it means “being comfortable in my own skin.” Jeremy and Joe each discussed midlife in terms of becoming calmer or “mellowing out. Mitch finds that he is looking at his life more since reaching midlife. He feels that he is more stable, has more direction, and is better able to set and achieve goals than he was even 10 years ago. Steed sees midlife as “the point where you really are satisfied with who you are and what you know about yourself and what you want. Then you look forward to pursuing what you want, based on your experience.” For Scott, it’s “being a lot more settled down; a lot more looking forward to retiring and thinking of free time.” He adds:

I just realized, probably in the last five years, I don’t understand the music. I don’t understand MTV. I’m now what my parents were when I was in college. Just this whole generation that doesn’t quite understand the other generation. I just feel like I’ve passed to that next generation when I hit my mid-forties, but I’m fine with the age I am.

Don considers midlife to be “more of a stage than an age.” Now 50, he acknowledges that he is “probably at midlife” although he hastens to add “I certainly don’t feel like an old man, and I sometimes I feel like I’m still in my thirties.” Until five or six years ago, he felt like a young guy who had his whole life ahead of him; now he’s looking forward to retirement sometime in the future: “I’ve gotten to that point where I’ve reassessed where I’ve been. What exactly is it that I want? Am I doing what I want

to do? It's a whole new attitude thing than when you're in your 30s. Maybe that's what mid-life is." Looking forward to or planning for retirement was also mentioned by several other participants as a component of midlife. Ben, who defines midlife as "when you start to think about the latter part of your life," provides one such example. He explains: "When you're younger, you're thinking about the young part of your life. As you grow older, your perspective is more ahead. I think about how long I have to work...I want to know how long it is until I can retire; what I'm going to do after I retire; --how long I'll live after I retire." He adds while laughing "Everything's sort of focused towards the end of my life now."

Many of these men seem to either implicitly or explicitly recognize life as a continuous process. Perhaps nowhere was this more explicit than in Ben's discussion of the famous final line of a poem by Frost. He says:

'Two roads divert in the yellow wood and I chose the less traveled'--and the last line of that poem says 'and that has made all the difference.' Choices make all the difference. My choice to be myself has made all the difference. Whenever there's been a choice, you always wonder where that other path would have gone; and this is where I went. And that never changes; they come up all the time.

Mike feels that aspects of his developmental journey have been "like a puzzle being put together." At 49, he feels he's "approaching midlife. I mean, I've noticed the physical changes that I think would be the hallmark of what it's all about. I'm not scared by it. I think it's just another learning experience. It's change." In a similar vein, his partner, George, describes his coming out at midlife as "a long drawn-out process. The building blocks were always there but they were never put together. When I finally came

out, they were all put together and it was there. It was there as a whole, and it's there as a whole now." In discussing why he chose antique a "Gone with the Wind" lamp as the logo for his business, Mike depicts a salient metaphor not only for his own life, but for the developmental process in general. These lamps, which were "always very elegant and precious, and expensive," once used kerosene but have been wired for electricity. He likens the changing of the mode of light production to how we mature and grow in wisdom and says:

What we've done is we're still adding light--and we're that light; it's like the ray to the future. It's almost like our lives. We take what we're given. We're given this vessel that gets older and older, just like the lamp. And what we project through us, like the light the lamp projects, is really what's remembered and what goes out there and feeds the universe as we're alive. When the lamp's broken, it's forgotten but I like to think that light is still going out there, just like a star that shines much longer after it's gone. And after our bodies are broken and dead, what we shared and what we put out there is still shining; still producing a light out into the world.

This metaphor exemplifies the notion conveyed by many of the participants that midlife is just part of an overall ongoing developmental process.

Tension between Fitting In and Being "Too Out"

One of the burdens that heteronormativity imposes on gay men (and other sexual minorities) is the expectation of invisibility. This expectation is based on the premise that one must remain invisible so as to be "tolerated." Going along with this proposition exacts a high price including denial of one's true self; even participation in routine social

interactions is predicated on either attempting to “pass” as heterosexual or by excising any mention or indication of one’s non-normative sexual identity. Even the slightest violation of this heteronormative imperative leads to accusations of “flaunting” one’s “lifestyle.” Such a situation inevitably leads to some sort of balancing between a desire for full self-expression with the risks and costs of coming out publicly, and some degree of self-censorship depending upon a given context.

The findings supporting this theme are categorized into the following sub-themes:

(a) iterative and contextual nature of coming out; (b) situationally contesting homophobia; (c) aversion to “activism;” and (d) personal sphere of influence.

Iterative and contextual nature of coming out. The notion of “coming out of the closet” as a gay man or other sexual minority can lead to the false conclusion that it is a one-time event. Instead, coming out is inherently an iterative and never-ending process. Sexual minorities (especially those who could “pass” as “straight”) who are out in most aspects of their lives have to continually assess shifting and dynamic contexts and each interaction to decide if, how, and when coming out is a safe event; and whether or not it's worth the emotional investment that coming out entails. The men in this study do not perceive this as a struggle; rather they have accepted it as “reality,” or “just the way it is.”

For many of these men, being out with some family members and not others is a common phenomenon. Steed and his parents never mentioned his being gay, although he found out from a sibling later that his parents had discussed it as he explains: “Mom mentioned to Dad that I only brought these guys home, and asked what he thought that means. And Dad, this retired Colonel who had been through World War II and Vietnam, shrugged his shoulders and said it doesn’t really matter.” His father died shortly

thereafter and Steed came out to his siblings. They were fine about it, but it was never discussed with his mother. In Joe's case he says "I'm perfectly fine being gay, but I don't advertise." He adds that since coming out to his brothers, "I don't talk about it around my brother Jim's kids because he has a rule; but my brother, John, and his kids and his grandson, they're fine with it."

Scott's family members all know he is gay and include his partner, Alberto, in all family functions; but he doesn't openly discuss it with all of them. He notes "I'm totally out with my sisters, but I don't discuss it with my mother or brother. Why force it if it will make them uncomfortable which will then make me uncomfortable; so why even cross that bridge?" In some cases, the men just assume that their families know or "have figured it out. Duncan relates an amusing story regarding a recent visit to his mother in which she commented to some of her friends that "she was just waiting." Speaking of his mother, he explains this further:

She was implying that she's still waiting for me to get married; otherwise I won't be able to have kids, or I'll be too old when I have kids. My brother and sister-in-law just look at me and we sort of laugh. I didn't know what to think about Mom-you know, she's smart enough. I wanted to say "Mom, where did that come from? I've been living with Dane for 25 years."

Don also assumes his family knows that he is gay. Since he's gotten more comfortable with his sexual identity since hitting midlife, he says "there are times when I wish somebody in my family would just come right out and ask me if I was gay so I could say yes." Ben would strongly advocate that Don come out to his family, as he did a year ago:

That whole concept has changed for me. I feel like I've missed so much of my family because I guarded myself so much. Not that I alienated myself from them, but one of the things my mother said after my brother and I talked with her and I talked with her, my brother said that she said to him "maybe that's why he hasn't wanted to spend so much time with us." I never even gave that a thought. I did not want not to spend time with my family. I just avoided the situation because I was afraid.

The workplace is another social arena in which many of the men are less likely to be out or to publicly acknowledge being gay. In Scott's case, this is largely because he feels that sexual orientation has nothing to do with his employment. However, he relates that "I don't lie about it but I don't flaunt it. I'm 47 and live with a man—'figure it out.' People talk and everyone there knows Alberto." He adds that despite his and Alberto's hosting of an annual pool party for his colleagues and even occasionally making gay jokes about himself in meetings, "every once in awhile someone will say something to or about me that shocks me—and I think 'god, do they think I'm straight?'" Jeff has a similar perspective to Scott's in that he doesn't talk about being gay at work, yet he does discuss his partner Lou, with whom he hosts an annual holiday party for his work colleagues. In Jeff's case, however, he doesn't discuss being gay with anyone in his family either. He says:

It's interesting. I don't really talk about myself as being gay. I talk about my life with Lou but I don't really say that we're gay. I'm not sure that that's important or that it needs to be said? Even at work, I don't come right out and say I'm gay; but I talk about Lou; but people aren't stupid.

Because of heterosexist assumptions that everyone is straight, these men have to make continual assessments of whether or not to come out in any given context or situation. Even those men who are out in most aspects of their lives would likely find being out 24/7 would simply be too exhausting in a heteronormative society. One of the reasons for this has to deal with homophobia, the topic of the next sub-section.

Situationally confronting homophobia. As both a component of and a byproduct of heteronormativity, homophobia is rampant in society, and its expression can often be subtle and insidious. Many factors weigh into an individual's decision as to whether to confront the homophobia in a given context. Consideration of such aspects as risks to include to one's physical safety, time and energy required, and the anticipated benefits enter into determinations that enter each situation in which a sexual minority encounters homophobia. The men in the study largely are in the camp for whom direct confrontation is not expressed. Use of such avoidance tactics such as avoiding people who are homophobic; "walking away;" and using humor are part and parcel of the lives of these men as they negotiate through conflict in facing the challenges of heteronormativity; yet the majority of the study participants are not willing to dismiss homophobia in every case.

Most of the men in this study report having had homophobic comments directed towards them, and most knew other gay men who have been assaulted because of their sexual orientation. Two, Mitch and Steed, have themselves been gay bashed—in Mitch's case, it's happened twice. In the first incident, he was beat about the legs with a metal pipe by several young men to the point that he required hospital treatment. The second event involved a robbery during which a gun was held to his neck with the assailants

hurling homophobic epithets at him. Steed relates an incident in which he, a man he was seeing, and a straight female friend were exiting a gay bar and “got jumped by three guys that were out looking to bash some faggots.” He continues:

I got a shovel over the side of the head; so I got a scar there...they pounded the shit out of us. We ended up having to go to jail, and go into court and all...it gave credence to the fact that it happens. It's been happening for centuries and it still happens. One little street fight here in town is nothing compared to what some others have gone through—being harassed for years and years and being kidnapped and murdered. This was just a simple little thing; but it says “this is what you are and this is what's going to happen. It can happen.”

Steed's rendition of this “simple little thing” underscores what he and many of the men in this study see as a reality of their lives. Furthermore, many would concur with him when he says: “you're not real resigned to it but you just realize things aren't going to change. There's nothing you can do about it for one. That's just reality. Worrying about or getting upset about it too much isn't going to do anything for you.” Duncan echoed a similar perspective regarding homophobia saying “maybe you don't like it but that's people. You're not going to change the world by confronting somebody about it.”

Most of the men in this study would just as soon avoid and confrontation with those who are homophobic. Jeremy acknowledges that he used to let a lot of things “get me to my boiling point,” but now he tends to ignore homophobia as he explains: “You just learn life by experience and things start mellowing out for you--the older you get, you won't be upset with things like you used to...why get upset about it?” Jeff shares a similar perspective when hearing homophobic jokes, and says: “I always let that kind of

roll off. My brother would sometimes say things like that to me and I just recognized that for what it was--an ignorant comment. I chalked that up to his ignorance.” Ben, too, has “learned to tune that stuff out...and chalk it up to that’s how those people think. I can’t think of myself as stepping up to the plate and defending something when somebody says something like that, even now necessarily.”

Duncan is more inclined to take the context into consideration. He tends to disassociate himself from people he feels are homophobic “because I’ve seen some people that I thought were just insane;” but it all depends on who the people are as to whether it’s worth worrying about. He continues: “You don’t have to just take it. Given the situation, you instinctively know how you can respond and not create a big uproar.” Scott would strive to avoid controversy and walk away if he felt or perceived that he might be in physical danger, but he won’t dismiss homophobia if he doesn’t feel threatened. He explains:

I wouldn’t confront a gay basher on the spot; but other times if I hear a joke or something, I may make a joke back to make him feel like an asshole. For instance my workplace is a non-threatening environment; if someone says something there, I’d say “oh, if you took it up the butt once, you’d be begging for more.”

One of Steed’s favorite hang-outs is a neighborhood straight “redneck” bar. Following his own advice not to worry about it too much, he still sometimes contests homophobic slurs and comments he hears there. He usually ends up coming out and adding “you can think anything you want. It’s up to you.” Almost invariably, he engages the person in a discussion in which “he’ll talk and explain his rationale for how

he felt and what he said. In every case, once they get to know me they say something like ‘I’m sorry I did that. I didn’t realize. I didn’t mean to insult you.’

Ray laughingly says that he’s not very astute, so he may not even noticed homophobia, but he doesn’t feel he’s ever experienced it. However, he says:

I’m not sure if it’s just my nature or an age thing, but at this point, if someone were to not like me because I’m gay, I don’t care. I guess they are entitled to their opinion or their feelings or whatever it is. I’m not going to sit there and make them try to like me or to like the gay society. You know that’s okay with me. If someone has a problem with it and wishes to discuss it with me, I absolutely would spend *days* discussing it with them and trying to help them understand the gay life; but if someone were just opposed to being gay or homosexuality just because it is, I’m not going to spend the energy for that.

The inherent risk involved with confronting homophobia and the energy to which Ray alludes are likely factors why the majority of the men in this study shy away from any public notion of “activism.”

Aversion to “activism.” The majority of the men in this study seem content to just to have survived to midlife and to be able to personally refute heteronormative mandates to the point where they are happy and content with their everyday lives. Almost without exception, the participants specifically mentioned that they were not activists or “not radical.” While this might be assumed to be a capitulation to heteronormativity, there are also practical considerations that weigh in on such a decision: challenge and confrontation on a broader scale require additional energy and resources that might throw one off the delicate balance that one has achieved.

George says he has “never considered myself to be a radical one way or the other, and I still don’t. I think there’s a happy middle ground for anything; and there’s common sense for everything.” Similarly, for Jeff:

It’s important to be true to yourself. That’s kind of an old cliché but live who you are and don’t make a lot of expectations of other people. By that I mean, I’ve gone through 53 years and have not felt a need to come out of the closet. I don’t need to make a big political statement; and that’s for me. Fortunately somebody did make a political statement at Stonewall and therefore I don’t have to.

Ben provides yet another example in saying “none of my friends are very radical. I think what bothers me most about a lot of the gay community is its radical attitude toward things; antagonizing, rather than just standing up for what they believe.” He continues “they would rather often push those buttons, where they wouldn’t need to. I think it ends up alienating people...and they’d get much further faster if they wouldn’t.” Ben also feels that there is sometimes “forced filtering in” of gay issues into the media and states:

I don’t think every show has to have a gay character...I don’t think it has to be part of every story line. Sometimes I think it gets forced although I don’t mind it being there and I think it’s good for it to be there if it’s put in naturally. It can be very instructive for people and help the straight community come along a little bit. But often, it’s so radical or unusual that I don’t think it helps a bit.

Although Jeremy didn’t specifically speak in terms of activism or radicalism, his perspective seems to align with the examples cited. He knows from his personal experience that gay men can and do serve in the military. He thinks the “Don’t ask/don’t

tell” is wrong but says “it doesn’t upset me. I mean, it’s the one thing you just don’t talk about if you’re in the military. I don’t think you should [talk about it] because if you do, you’re going to get rebutted against. There’s too many hardcore rednecks; you know, just don’t talk about it.”

Despite the apparent reluctance to engage in large scale movements or efforts aiming for increased rights and full citizenship for sexual minorities, these men are countering heteronormativity or contributing to the betterment of society in other ways as discussed in the following section.

Personal sphere of influence. The inclination to avoid being labeled as an activist or a radical does not imply a lack of caring about social equity or other issues. Many are involved in trying to make a difference on a personal level. The narratives of these men reflect ways in which they challenge heteronormativity in their own ways on their own terms. In some cases, this involves change on a “one to one” basis, or what might be referred to as “breaking down barriers one interaction at a time.” Several of the men mentioned that they vote, and for some, doing so began at midlife. Examples of other aspects of generativity and contributing to a greater good other aspects of contributing abound in the lives and the stories of these men.

Mike is a good case in point. Being a business owner in a very small town would hold him back from being engaged in any sort of political activism. However, he’s not really predisposed in that direction anyway as he explains:

I’m glad there are people that do that, but that’s just not my style. Having a rainbow flag on my car, that’s just not who I am. I wouldn’t put a bumper sticker on my car. I don’t need to designate that. I would rather write a check to help

the group financially and hope there's a few flamboyant radical people that are going to wave flags when need be. Maybe that's a little bit of a copout, but I do believe they need people that can sit back and write checks too.

Steed's experiences in his "neighborhood redneck bar" exemplify this "one to one" approach to contesting heteronormativity and homophobia. He's met many people there through the years, including many who were initially homophobic; but he explains that once they get to know him and "have a beer and share some good times; they might have a little struggle at first, but they reach a point where they say 'what's the big deal?' That happens all the time...and that's just one little bar on a corner." One of his drinking buddies is a senior official with the local police department. Since Steed came out to him, "I've opened him up to the whole gay lifestyle, and what goes on in the city, and it's helped him in his job...I heard from a lesbian friend on the police force that he's really changed about his attitude toward gays. He's become more understanding, more talkative."

Two of the men mentioned that participating in this research was a way of helping to get more involved. Andy was very pleased to participate "because there is so little out there about gay men at midlife." Mitch explains:

I never voted...I get a lot of grief, especially from people in my age range. They ask "how do you expect anything to ever change things?" I think maybe that's why I'm choosing to do this interview—perhaps it's a step of maturing a little more and realizing that maybe my voice could have an impact. When I first heard about the study, I thought about it and realized we need more people to get involved in our communities.

For many of these men, personal influence is expressed in ways that might be considered generative. For example, not unlike some of their heterosexual counterparts at midlife, some of these men are fathers. Furthermore, caring for or providing support to aging parents has been a staple part of and informed the midlives for many of the participants such as Jeff. Caring for his father prior to his death was the catalyst for Jeff's realization that he is at midlife and in his interest in planning for the rest of his life. Duncan is also typical in this regard. Aside from his lover, supporting his mother, who's 86, is the most important thing in his life. He explains: "She's had a lot of problems over the last couple of years...I'm realizing that what's important is just keeping her happy, because who knows? I'm not expecting I'm probably going to have her that much longer." For Andy, his mother's financial support prior to her death allowed him to buy and restore an old, which is itself a way of contributing to society.

Some of the men have jobs or careers that they feel make a difference in society. Mike is one such example. He thinks it's important to "have a reason to get up in the morning" and he feels the funeral business gives him that. He says:

You need to have a profession or a job that allows you to feel that you're doing something useful. I really do feel like I'm giving back while I'm working...if you can find a job that makes you feel like you're an important wheel in that whole cog of life, life machine, then that's what's going to be rewarding; and it's just going to add to all the other things.

Although Scott isn't trying "to leave any legacy or try to get some of my ways of thinking embedded in other people to pass along," he often reflects on changing careers. He says:

Work to me used to be simply a way of making an income. A big change at this point in my life is that I don't feel satisfied with what I'm doing. I feel I would rather have a job that I enjoy more and also in some ways helping society. The position I'm in now, I don't feel that fills that; but I haven't acted on it...I've thought about nursing many, many, many times. I haven't acted on it but I think I would enjoy it now since like I said, it would be a lot more of a benefit to society.

While the men in this study may not wish to be considered as activists in a “gay rights” movement, most are interested and actively engaged in making the world a better place. These men do this in ways that are important to them—ways which may hinge in part on religious or spiritual underpinnings, a topic addressed in the next sub-section.

Reconciling Religious Tension

The narratives of many of the men in this study reveal the enduring nature of early life religious training and doctrine. Heteronormative and heterosexist foundations of the religious denominations in which they were raised (primarily Roman Catholicism and various mainstream denominations of Protestantism) continue to wield influence in and inform the daily lives of some—but not all—of the men. For sexual minorities, dogmatic prescriptions and proscriptions relating to a non-heterosexual orientation compound the interplay between faith development and one's overall developmental course, and complicate one's path to self-acceptance. Developing and utilizing strategies to mitigate or ameliorate the resulting tension is itself a process. The men in this study are at various stages in that process, and are using—or have used—various approaches to

reconcile the associated tension. To varying degrees, issues of religion and/or spirituality remain an essential aspect of self-understanding for many of the participants.

The data supporting this theme are categorized into the following subcategories:

(a) Source of conflict/struggle and solace; (b) “Make it my own” within a religious context; and (c) spiritual perspective exclusive of formal religion.

Source of conflict/struggle and solace. The degree of active involvement with formal religion varies widely among these men—from none to highly involved. The stories of several of the men indicate that regardless of the level of actual participation in church-related activities, some still experience some sense of ongoing conflict in regards to their sexual identity.

Explaining why he doesn’t attend church on a regular basis even though he does believe in God, Joe says “I believe there are those that are put out there to praise His word and there are those of us that are there to observe it; and I’m an observer.” He doesn’t think he is “going to burn in Hell for being gay.” Furthermore, he doesn’t “deliberately sin despite what it supposedly says in the Bible...I just know it says you’re not to lay next to a man--stuff like that, but I believe that’s why He died for our sins.” Nevertheless, when he was going through the rough period of losing his eyesight and most of his material possessions, he “kind of felt like I was being punished for being gay.”

Jeff has always been, and remains, very active in church activities. Yet he “came to realize for myself that if this is what feels natural to me, then that’s what I need to be. And wouldn’t it be a bigger sin for me to be straight if my tendencies were to be gay?”

He recalls a recent conversation with the pastor at his church in which he laid out this perspective:

I can understand it would be a sin for an individual who...is straight to enter into a gay relationship; but it isn't necessarily as much of a sin for me to enter into a gay relationship as it would to enter into a straight relationship because that's not who I am.

Ben acknowledges that he's still very conservative. He notes that he understands "the restrictions and the narrow-mindedness of some of my religious background, but I still hold to a lot of what I call truth there--enough that I'm often uncomfortable around gay people because of conservative-liberal issues." He adds that he doesn't often see or accept that "the conservative world is anti-homosexual, or anti-gay." Discussing the Christian Right, he continues:

I'll accept some of that just because I know where they're coming from. I believe a lot of what they believe. As I get older and more versed in the gay community, I guess I am learning what I believe that contradicts what they believe. I'm sort of a mixture of both sides, I think.

Together with the other participants, these men have responded to the tension ensuing from early religious indoctrination in various ways. Some have rejected formal religion entirely while others have come to a self-acceptance while retaining active religious involvement as an aspect of who they are at midlife.

"Make it my own" within a religious context. For some of the men in the study, formal religion retains an importance in their lives; but with adaptations, such as

disregarding dogma that doesn't fit with one's identity as gay, or "church hunting" for one more attuned to issues and concerns of sexual minorities.

"Religion is still a very strong drawing," says Jeff. Even though he understands a distinction in that "the religions themselves have dogmas and rules and regulations that you have to live by," for him, "religion and spirituality are pretty much the same thing." Jeff has been associated with the Lutheran church most of his life, but explains "the church that I'm at right now is a UCC church which is very open to gays and has made public statements about gays." He appreciates the fact that the UCC will "actually ordain gay clergy. I'm not sure that the Lutherans will; or if they do, you'd have to basically lie and say "no, I'm not; or I'm not practicing.'" That runs counter to Jeff's sense of integrity, so even though he acknowledges "religion is very fundamental to who I am," he's quick to add "but I've made it my own."

Religion has also been a pivotal factor in Ben's development. Raised in a very conservative Baptist home, he attended and graduated from a Bible college which he feels "sent my life in a whole different direction." Afterwards, he taught at a private Christian school for 10 years. He left that position for a secular job but eventually he "made another decision to go back as a Christian education director for the same church I had taught at. So I ran right back to where I was," a cycle which was repeated several times. Ben moved in with his partner, Jeremy, about a year ago and about the same time he "left the church that I was working in; not directly over this...but I did leave that church and I sort of church hunted and looked around a little bit." He has settled into a secular job but is also currently an organist for a Catholic church, which he relates "is very different for me." Jeremy considers himself to be more spiritual than religious. He

says: "I talk to God by myself. If I have a private moment, I say 'thank you for what you gave me today. Please help me do whatever I need to do.'" Since meeting Ben, he's been attending church more than he had in the last 15 years, but adds: "don't force me to go to church. Don't throw your religion down my throat. I believe in God and Jesus Christ and all that but just don't shove it down my throat."

Ray attends church regularly and volunteers with church-related functions, not out of a sense of obligation, but "because I absolutely love the Catholic Church. I always have, and that hasn't changed at all as I've gotten older." Religion and spirituality are very much intertwined for Ray, and being Catholic "is very much a part of I am." As to official Catholic sanctions against the expression of one's gay sexuality, he simply disregards or dismisses them, as he explains: "I just ignore the parts I don't like."

While these men have come up with approaches to integrating formal religion into their lived experiences at midlife, others express their spirituality in ways that don't necessarily incorporate religious practice.

Spiritual perspective exclusive of formal religion. Many of the participants describe themselves as spiritual although personal understandings of that term vary widely. For some, it is related to but different from religion, whereas others see the two as completely separate phenomena. Whether speaking of spirituality in terms of a Higher Power, God, nature, or some other personal belief structure, what was common among those who did so in this study was the preeminence of spirituality over religion in their personal meaning-making.

Like many of the men in the study, church activities were very much a part of Duncan's younger life. When he was in his late teens, he started realizing "you've got to

completely conform to what they want, and that kind of totally turned me off. I just didn't go back...it just opened my eyes up to what they were really about." Now at midlife, he sometimes finds himself "wondering if there really is a God," although he hopes there is and does sometimes pray; but he does so on his own and is indifferent to the notion of participating in church-related or religious activities.

Spirituality and religion are related from Don's perspective as he notes: "I'm Lutheran, and I'm comfortable with that." His parents were both very active in the church and he considered becoming a minister, but once he got to college, "it didn't take me very long to realize that...was not the direction I was going to go." His opinion now is that "religious associations always seem to me like more politics. And I just chose not to be a part of that." He feels he can be who he is; be a good person; can believe in God; and can live a righteous life "without having to go to church, and I think I'm doing those things for the most part." He adds that he thinks "a lot of people use religion or their church as an excuse or as a cover up." He acknowledges that there are stereotypes "about people who go to church being hypocrites;" but he adds "there are a lot of times that seems to be the case."

Mitch also is bothered by what he sees as hypocrisy on the part of some. He explains "I see myself being more spiritual than I am more religious because I do believe, but I don't partake." He finds the musical aspects of religion to be uplifting and enjoys services when his sons are performing in the church band. One reason he doesn't attend regularly is his erratic work schedule, but he is also troubled that:

Many people that go to church every Sunday and think that makes them a Christian...yet, as soon as they get out of church on Sunday afternoon, they're

back to doing the stuff that they do all week long that really doesn't fit any of the Commandments. I call them hypocrites.

In George's case, it was he who at one point felt hypocritical. He sees a clear distinction between formal religion and spirituality as he explains: "let's put it this way. Being a decent person that doesn't harm anyone or anything is much more important than having to go sit in a pew on a Sunday morning, and listen to some stranger lecturing me on what I should be...To me, my church is nature--anything outside." At one point, George and his ex-wife felt they needed to be part of a formal church so that their daughters had an awareness of religion. But George found the experience "dreadful," and reached the point "where I said 'I can't do this anymore. It's like hypocrisy.' All the while I'd be sitting there, I'd be thinking 'oh God, I wish I was taking a walk, or in the forest somewhere.'" George's spiritual philosophy, which he relates is "part of who I am and what I strive for and what I hope I do every day," is easily summarized: "live life the way you think you should be living it so at the end of the day you're happy and true to yourself without bringing harm to other people...and that is regardless of whether you're straight or gay."

Several of the participants were emphatic that they have absolutely no need or desire to be involved with organized religion. Andy categorizes himself as "a nonbeliever, an atheist, and I have been for a long time;" but he's not sure how he defines spirituality. He says "I'm very aware of nature, and to me, that natural state of things is the supreme power and we're screwing it up big time." He loves animals and thinks spring is the most wonderful time of the year "when things start coming up out of the

ground and turning green. I guess if that can be spirituality, that's the kind of thing that I feel--relating to the whole world of nature.”

On the other hand, Steed does have a strong belief in God, but “it’s strictly spiritual and not ceremonial at all.” He doesn’t like organized religion and “the fact that these people just sometimes blindly follow their shepherds as long as you follow the Ten Commandments, basically.” He finds the growing trend towards “mega-churches” to be amazing—“it just blows me away!” He feels no need to attend church; but if he were to do so, it would be “a little church with 50 people and 20 pews where you can talk to the minister.” For him, that would be “more valuable...and more meaningful than to sit with 3000 other people and watch the big screen and never talk to the guy.” Although this phenomenon bewilders him, he sees a connection with and relates it to broader issues when he says:

How they manipulate the people and how these people just are flabbergasted over what they have to say, and listening to these people--it reminds me of how Karl Rove writes. I mean, there’s no difference whatsoever—it’s the same manipulation of words and feelings. These people fall for it and they just think it’s great.

Scott expresses a similar opinion when relating that he has “a little distaste for organized religion in general,” and that “organized religion has been responsible for much evil in the world.” He hasn’t practiced any religion since he was about 16 and notes “I honestly don’t have any beliefs.” However, as he ages, Scott is thinking about such things more often. He feels that “maybe I should have some sort of structured belief system for my own mental protection as I get older.” He explains “I don’t think ‘am I

going to go to Heaven?’ ... [it’s] more like ‘you’d better get some scheme in your head because you’re going to face that you may not wake up the next day.’ ” Scott’s always believed “you die and you rot in the ground and become organic matter.” Now at midlife, he feels “that might not a real comfortable thought as the years keep going on.”

Mike describes his spiritual odyssey as one of “major transition with lots of side roads along the way.” He was raised in a “financially comfortable” family with a “rather liberal United Church of Christ upbringing.” He felt he had a good understanding of the Bible, but what he eventually came to realize was that “it was all *good*; it was all *beautiful*.” He believes many denominational Protestant churches lean towards “telling you all the pretty stuff about the world...and everything’s stained glass windows and velvet ropes.” Because of his religious upbringing and his family’s class status, he was “brought up only to see the beauty in life.” It wasn’t until he went to college and then to mortuary school in New York City, that he started to see homeless and poor people; and to “realize that there’s a lot of evil out there...it blew my mind away to see the vulgarity of reality...the grittiness of life that isn’t being dealt with” in denominational churches or “pretty religions.” He began to drift away from organized religion, but before doing so completely, he became involved in the Lutheran church “and that became almost a social occasion” complete with banquets and videotapes. Of this experience, Mike says “I saw the hypocrisy of it all. What was spiritual about what we were doing in church? Other than the fact that you were communing and having good times with people.” It was not “an investigative search for the truth of life, or of what God meant.” Eventually, he dropped his church membership and he clearly states “I don’t ever care to be a member of a church again.”

The movie *The Da Vinci Code* made “an awful lot of sense” to Mike and reinforced his view that:

The way our religions are run, and the way our society runs, has always been a business. It’s always been motivated by money, power, and who can control what and who. It’s sad, but there’s a lot of people spending a lot of money building a lot of big buildings and running a lot of high class religious organizations, and I’m not sure that makes us a better world.

Now, Mike defines himself as spiritual “almost in a metaphysical sense.” He’s not worried about any kind of organized afterlife saying “That’s not something that’s important to me at this point in my life.” He believes that energy continues to go on, and says “I prefer to think at this point that when our energy goes [death], it’s goes back to the source; so that it can recreate in some form.” Tied in with this perspective is a belief that what’s important is “what we have inside us. The Bible stories [that are so often a part of funeral services] mean less and less to me.” He adds: “There’s an inner feeling, a warmth, when it’s truth. I’m finding as I get older, I hear more and more things being said by so-called religious leaders or ministers that just don’t go there.”

The degree and depth of religion and/or spirituality involvement and expression vary widely among the men in this study, as do the approaches and strategies used to reconcile tension between religious dogma that complicates one’s path to self-acceptance. For some, religion still provides a stable and sustained meaning and fulfills some needs; whereas for others, organized religion is completely irrelevant. In either case, other social interactions add to the richness of the lives of the participants as will be discussed in the next section.

Belonging and Community

In the wake of heteronormativity, gay men and other sexual minorities face diminished opportunities for external validation than do their heterosexual peers. Family relationships are sometimes strained; long-term partnerships are often denigrated, and equitable benefits denied; and media representations too frequently reinforce negative and misleading stereotypes. Furthermore, normal avenues of social support for key life events, such as celebrating anniversaries or the death of a partner, are often muted at best. Given such a backdrop, many sexual minorities develop and rely on deep and enduring social networks and friendships, frequently invoking notions of “family,” “community,” or “culture” to describe either their individual social support networks, or the broader spectrum of sexual minorities.

This theme consists of several sub-themes as follows: (a.) learning from key others; (b.) inclusive social relationships; (c) changing nature of social interaction at midlife; and (d) sex, intimacy, and relationships.

Learning from key others. Friendships and other social relationships fulfill a wide range of needs. An important one that many of the men in this study specified was the learning that ensued from their friendships throughout their developmental process, and how such learning contributes to who they are today.

Several of the participants talked about the types of things they learned from older gay men when they themselves were younger. Steed recalls that as a young adult, he enjoyed talking with “the guys in their 60s, these old friends, who went through what they did in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s--how they suffered and had to really hide or were almost condemned as a leper if they were found out.” He continues “They were just so

great. To hear their stories--not everybody has the patience or the interest in doing that. But that's just human nature, that's life--to learn from your elders, and to appreciate what they went through." Duncan also benefited from the experience of older men "who were really great" as he relates: "I could always have a good conversation with them, and I tried to get the benefit of their experience. People who have been through things before have the benefit of experience--so why not take advantage of that?" Many of the things Duncan learned were "simple practical stuff" like how to be safe, avoiding dark alleys, and not blowing all your money in the bars. He realizes these "are general things that you get from your parents too, but in another way some of that really made sense" when he heard them from older gays.

Mike had always had older gay friends and says "I learned *more* from them and I am who I am today because of some of the mentoring that the older guys gave me." Through these friendships he was exposed to ideas, concepts, and settings that he feels he might otherwise have never encountered; in particular, "the people I got to meet--all social classes, all circles, because I was with older guys." To Mike, these experiences were "another piece of the puzzle. It all fit in. It's all part of my memory picture, and of who I am today." As a result, he feels it's important to have friends of all ages and says:

I try to encourage *myself* also to be friends to younger gay people too...you learn from the old ones and the young ones are going to be there either to teach or to be there to be supportive to you when you need them too, because the older ones are going to be gone. I think especially the young people in gay society need to learn that there is a wisdom there. This isn't just for gays. But we have a history, and

they can learn from that and grow upon it. We're going to benefit if they continue to grow upon our wisdom.

As Mike points out, this type of learning is ongoing and part of one's developmental process. In Joe's case, he says "even though some of it may sound silly or seem mundane and insignificant, I learned from each one of my boyfriends something that I have kept in my life." Simple things like how he makes a bed (with the pretty side of the top sheet facing down), and wearing button-up shirts instead of pullovers (because the former look better on his heavysset frame) are important to him because they remind him of the person from whom he learned it. He adds that he has also learned something very important about himself: "I can feel true love. I can honestly know when I'm starting to fall in love with somebody." Ben provides another example of how, even at midlife, he continues to learn and grow through his involvement with his friends. He explains that he's "a rules person. If there's a rule then you follow the rule--no matter how stupid it is." However, since he is "getting older and more versed in the gay community, I'm hearing multiple sides of issues rather than such a narrow view of things and I'm learning and reassessing what I believe." He thinks he's coming to "understand that if it's a stupid rule, maybe it needs to be changed;" but he laughingly adds: "but for now, we follow that rule."

Learning is also important to Scott at midlife, especially learning about gay history and gay culture. He explains he didn't have much opportunity to learn those things in his twenties and thirties, but he's taken to watching more gay-oriented television about which he says: "A lot of it is documentary-type stuff, so it's part of who I am. It's also part of gay culture, and I feel like part of it. I see things that I didn't even know

existed.” One of the shows he enjoys is a travel show. He explains that he’s never before been able to watch TV and see what it is like “to go to London as a gay person and hit some of the gay establishments.” He adds:

I have more in common with them than I do with a lot of people on TV so I can relate to it. Learning about my own community, my own history; and being able to see things from somebody in my community’s perspective. Although the community is very diverse, still, it’s from a perspective that I can relate to, usually more than some straight person’s perspective.

As Scott’s example points out, many gays—including the men in this study—have a clear sense of connection and appreciation for other gays; however, there is by no means a gay litmus test for membership in the social network for the men in this study.

Inclusive social networks. Because of limited opportunities to share in the full spectrum of socially and culturally sanctioned institutions and events, friendships within the gay community may take on a different significance than in the larger society. Yet while some gay men may interact primarily with other gay men by circumstance or design, the range of social associations or affiliations is typically broad. Such was the case with the men in this study.

Friendships figure very prominently in the narratives and in the lives of these men; and in how they see themselves. When reflecting on a symbol of himself at midlife, Jeff identifies himself in terms of how others see him: “I’m sure a lot of friends see me in the kitchen carrying out a pot or a tray, or setting out food...or maybe just an open door—welcome. Come on in—the door’s always open.” Ray describes an ideal environment as “Just having my friends around me and being comfortable.” He adds that

“a good day” revolves around friends...sitting around in the kitchen cooking and laughing; having a glass of wine and talking--just laughing and having a great time.” He continues that “a grand day” involves three special friends who live in different states. Each year they get together, and this year it was in Palm Springs. He describes being there as follows:

It was just great being out there in March laying in the sun watching the mountains and talking with three guys you really enjoy being with and not about anything in particular, just being. Just being—no pretenses, no false airs; and talking about anything we want to talk about.

Many of the participants either explicitly stated or alluded to notions of support and caring within their social networks through terms such as “family” and “community.” Ben provides one such example. After decades of remaining closeted to his family of origin, Ben came out to them a year ago. He was surprised by how well the news was received, but he was prepared had it not been the case. He notes that if someone goes wrong in his life, he now has “lots of people that I could go to. Almost an extended family--that’s exactly how our friends act with each other.” Furthermore, he adds “we’ve gotten to know each other’s families too so that we’re part of their lives just as much as anyone in the family.” His partner, Jeremy, gets together with a small group of friends every evening for cocktails, and “to find out how we’re doing and how was everybody’s day. It’s like a small family.” As to what advice he would offer younger gay men approaching midlife, Scott replies:

You’ve got a few good, good people in your life and you need to make sure you’re good back to those people. Those friendships really, really mean a lot and

you're going to need to rely on those people. They're going to need to rely on you, especially being gay. You need to form your own community a little bit.

Several men also allude to a sense of affinity with other gay men or other sexual minorities based on a shared status as outside the heterosexual norm. For instance, Scott explains that ideally he'd rather be living somewhere that has a larger population of gay people such that:

If you chose to go out to dinner and wanted to be surrounded by gay people, you could go to a restaurant that was gay-owned and frequented by many gays, or a coffee shop, or just shopping for knick knacks at the local corner store. Ideally, I would rather be surrounded by more gay people than I am in society, because I feel like I really I live in a straight society where I am.

This same desire to be around more gay people is what piqued Andy's interest in the new retirement communities being geared primarily for gays and lesbians. While he's opted to remain in his hometown, he longs for an environment where there would be greater opportunities for socializing with other gays and lesbians; and to meet new friends—and perhaps a partner.

This sense of kinship with other LGBTQ people often comes to fruition when first coming out, although it seems to both stable and enduring. Steed says that the “the biggest thing that made me feel comfortable and why I had no problem coming out was meeting a lot of gay guys.” It was the disco era. He recalls “this incredible music with these fantastic hot men with their shirts off” and thinking “my God, I'm not alone, which I knew I wasn't. But I had no idea it was like this.” George, who came out within the past three years, is experiencing this phenomenon to some extent. He notes “at this point

most of my social circle is male, or gay, per se, whether male or female.” Meeting new people through his relationship with Mike has also changed his social network in new and unexpected ways as he explains:

I don't want to say for the better, but it has enriched it because there are people that I would have never met before that are now part of my life...not necessarily on a day to day basis but such that I value their friendship or their input or their opinion...and they're a fun bunch to be...it's sort of almost for me a new adventure. It really has changed my life like I would have never expected it to change.

While several of the men mentioned that their primary social interactions are with other gay men, most were quick to point out that they do not set boundaries on friendships based on either gender or sexual orientation. Jeff relates that most of his best friends through his thirties, forties, and early fifties have been heterosexual. Similarly, excluding his partner Alberto, Scott's best friend is a straight woman; and Andy includes a straight couple among his closest friends. Even though Jeremy and Ben's social network is mostly gay men, they each point out the mixture of friends they have in their diverse neighborhood. “Gay people shouldn't limit themselves to the gay community” says Ben. Nothing changed with his neighbors in his old neighborhood when he came out. He notes “it still comes up in conversation occasionally, but it's not the focus. You should just be comfortable no matter who you are...a well-rounded life is better than a gay life or the straight life.” For Steed, it boils down to being comfortable with oneself: “When there's nothing to hide and you can be yourself, you know who you like and who you like to spend more time with... It's always been good for me. I've always had fun

with people, gay or straight.” Ray makes a similar point quite succinctly when he states: “My friends are friends because they are friends, not basically because they’re male, female, gay, straight or whatever.”

Four of the men were perplexed by what they see as a split between gay men and lesbians. Each of the four has lesbian friends, and each was careful not to cast aspersions on all gay men in this regard. Still, their dismay on this topic indicates a desire for more inclusive relationships. Andy, who indicated he has sometimes felt more comfortable with lesbians than gay men, says: “it seems like there’s a divide between gay men and lesbians of sorts. It doesn’t make any sense to me...I don’t know why that rift exists.”

Duncan says he has also noticed that some gay men dislike lesbians and adds:

I really don’t see any reason for it; and I don’t understand it. I guess in general I don’t understand why people who don’t like somebody just because they’re Black or because they’re Puerto Rican or whatever. But gay men should be a lot more tolerant; and just looking at some of their attitudes towards women, I don’t understand that. If there’s something that bothers me, that does, because there’s no reason for it.

“The biggest irk about gay life” says Steed, “is the discrimination, the bias--I don’t know what you call it between lesbians and gay men...there’s never been a closeness.” He notes that there are personal relationships, but adds:

but for the most part, gay guys could care less about lesbians. Even though they supported us so much during AIDS, and now with breast cancer such a big issue, we should return that favor...but there’s always been that thing between gay men

and lesbians, and lesbians feel the same way. They don't want to spend time with gay men.

The men who mentioned this phenomenon noted that it is something they see as persistent and resistant to change. As discussed next, however, other aspects of social interaction do seem to relate to some degree to the developmental process.

Changing nature of social interaction at midlife. As noted previously, the men in this study see midlife as part of an ongoing process of growth and development. While these men share two attributes--self-identification as gay, and an age between 40 and 60, each individual's developmental journey is unique. While meaningful friendships and social networks play a role in each man's narrative, for some, the nature of those relationships are morphing as well. Some men report a preference for quality interactions; smaller group sizes when socializing; less interaction overall; and an appreciation of solitude.

At midlife, Jeremy's learning that he can be his true self with his friends. Early in life, he learned to "sit there and shut your mouth." Until recently, even with his friends, he was usually quiet since "I didn't know what to say and I didn't want to make myself look like an asshole." As he's getting older, he's becoming a lot more open with those he considers to be his true friends--"We tell each other how it is and we get pissed off with each other once in a while because we don't like what they say but we're friends. We do that, we get over it."

In Duncan's case, it's the level and frequency of socializing that has "definitely changed over the years...and has probably slowed down a bit." He and Dane still have a fairly wide range of friends, but he notes "the circle of friends compared to what it used

to be, is kind of shrinking. People have died; people have moved away...and I probably can't say that I really have made an effort to replace them." Like Duncan, Scott's social circle is shrinking but largely by his preference. He explains that a special day 20 years ago, would have entailed a large group—"probably been some sort of social event or like a big gala party in some establishment or party in somebody's house; or a trip where six or eight of us went to the beach for the weekend;" with lots of energy, some alcohol, and possibly drugs. Although he has a work position which involves considerable social contact, in his personal life he is becoming more of a "hermit" and would much rather spend his time with his partner, his family, or one of a few close friends.

Several others also stated that quality of friendship has become more important than quantity. Joe, for instance, says "at this point in my life, friendship is something very special. It also involves love. I'd rather have two really good friends than to have six so-so friends...I believe in having true closer friends." Similarly, Andy wants "a circle of friends who are social and not just meeting in the bar on Saturday night, you know, swimming, doing things together. Real friends, and keeping in touch with them doing things." Mike also prefers getting to know people on a deeper level, and says: "The older I get, what you call friends, especially gay friends, and what you call acquaintances, there's a bigger divide." He uses "a nice intimate birthday party with people I'm comfortable with" as an example; and says "Today I probably would think that would mean less than 10 people in my life that I would really want to be there; that's not saying that I couldn't have a bigger party and invite 50 people, possibly--but you couldn't spend quality time then." He would want to "really share one on one time." The larger gathering "where you just bump into one another, that's like being just at a

gay bar. That's okay if you're up for that; but it's really not my cup of tea when I want to spend quality time together."

Another change that many of the men have noticed as they have gotten older is an appreciation for solitude, or enjoying time spent alone. Don cites this as an essential lesson he has learned as he says: "first and foremost I'm not afraid to be by myself. I don't need to have somebody else around to have a good time. I'm perfectly content sitting here reading a book or watching a movie or doing whatever." He suggests that younger gay men approaching midlife take the time to nurture the ability to spend time with themselves, and he advises: "Learn to have solitude. Learn to be able to appreciate who you are, think about who you are, evaluate who you are honestly, and if there's something that you don't like, to be able to seriously try to change it." For Mike, midlife brought the realization that he didn't "have to be so much a people pleaser. I choose my private time. I choose to be with the people I want to be with and do what I want to do more than ever. It's not something I feel forced to do." His partner, George, also values his privacy and explains that regardless of whether one is gay or straight, "we all need our time to ourselves and to be functioning properly while we are not by ourselves-- because that's a counter balance." Noting that he himself is in a relationship, he adds: "I don't think any one person can completely fulfill your needs or your desires to the point where it's complete." Mitch, who currently is not involved in a partnership, would agree. Although he is interested in establishing a long-term relationship at some point, he notes "there are times when it's nice to just come home and be by yourself." While spending time in solitude is something that many of the men value and have come to appreciate,

for most that is secondary to issues surrounding sex, intimacy, and relationships—as discussed in the following section.

Sex, intimacy, and relationships. One key aspect of the developmental journey of many people is love as expressed in a primary relationship with one or a series of partners. Through the tandem effects of heteronormativity and heterosexism, such relationships among sexual minorities who choose to enter into them are undervalued at best, and far too commonly belittled and castigated as “immoral” or “sinful.” Furthermore, LGBTQ people are largely disenfranchised from the “normal” societal and cultural sanctions surrounding their partnerships. However, just as one deepens self-knowledge and self-acceptance by casting aside heteronormative notions that do not fit with one’s lived experiences, many (but certainly not all) gay men come to question other socially conditioned messages such as romance is a precursor to love, sex should only occur with one’s “true love” (who is, of course, of the “opposite sex”), and monogamy. For many gay men, “sometimes sex is just sex”—it’s seen as something enjoyable that may or may not be associated with love, and may occur both within and outside of established relationships. As a result, a broader range of relationship patterns may be seen among gay men.

Two couples (Mike and George, and Ben and Jeremy) are included in this study, although each person was interviewed separately. Three of the other men are also partnered. With only one exception, the rest of the participants had been in at least one sustained relationship lasting a year or longer. None of the men mentioned ever having been in a multi-partner, long-term relationship. Collectively, these men represent a diverse range of views on intimacy, romance, and partnerships.

Andy, whose longest partnership was three and a half years, would very much like to find someone special with whom to share his life. The Internet is “about the only way I have of connecting,” he says, “and that's not working very well.” He gets exasperated with so many personal ads including “no strings attached” or “friends with privileges,” which he explains means “they want friends that they can go places and do things with, and the privileges are sexual privileges. They don't want to be tied down to a relationship with one person.” Mitch is also currently single. He says that although he doesn't “really prefer to be by myself, but I'm content with it in life right now.” Yet despite having lots of friends, a job that involves constant people contact, his sons “who keep me busy enough,” and enjoying time alone, he notes: “honestly, at this stage in life, I sometimes do feel lonely...I'd like to be able to find a partner and get into a relationship and be a little more committed than just wanting to just play.”

Don wonders sometimes if he's incapable of emotional attachment or commitment adding: “maybe that's why I've been single, essentially single, for 19 years.” He's had some “minor relationships, but nothing serious” including one in which he “lived with a guy for four years, who I should have never been with in the first place” and some of shorter duration. He explains “I always managed to find a reason that I don't want to commit. Now I would like something to happen, and I'd be open to that; though I'm not necessarily looking for it.” While he thinks it “would be kind of nice if it happens,” he adds that he is not “desperate for it.” If he were, he adds amusingly, “I probably wouldn't sit at home most nights, because I guarantee you, unless some really good-looking burglar happens to come through that window, it's not going to happen here.” Joe, who describes himself as “a very romantic person,” has no doubt that he is

capable of committing. Yet despite having been in love a few times, a long-term partnership has thus far eluded him. He says it seems like “a lot of people, basically are being gay because it’s a sexual thing. It’s becoming popular with people that want sex. I find a lot of married men contact me.” It frustrates him when these men say they want to be his friend, but it turns out they are “just looking to get off.” He continues “it’s not that I don’t enjoy sex...but when you fall in love with somebody--to me, it’s no longer sex, it’s making love; and it takes on a new realm of feeling and emotion.” It is that deep feeling and emotion that he so passionately desires.

Jeff has been with his partner Lou for seven years. He thinks that gay men sometimes don’t focus enough on the merits of “staying in a committed relationship--and however you manage that is between you and your partner.” For him, doing so is essential. He notes:

When you get to this point in your life, you can begin to work toward your dreams of building your own home, building your own life and then moving forward and building into your retirement--and having somebody to grow old with. That’s always been an issue for me.

George has been involved with Mike for a year and a half. He thinks that primary relationships are important as people “need to be able to bounce things off of each other on a very personal, one-to-one basis that you don’t get even with your best friend or with a social relationship.” However, regarding such a partnership, he adds “don’t constrain yourself.” He explains that the ideal is having that companionship but also being able to go out to get whatever else you need that the companionship isn’t providing, be it “sexually, socially, spiritually, whatever--if you’re not getting it with this person that

you're living with." He continues "men, especially men--women less maybe, but men are not necessarily a monogamous animal. I don't think any one person can completely fulfill your needs or your desires to the point where it's complete." Compromising and settling for less would mean "I'm not really 100 percent happy at the end of the day, and I think happiness has a lot to do with what we are as a human being."

Mike echoes a similar sentiment. He thinks "most gay men are much more sexually plugged in, at least mentally...and see other people and situations in a much more sexual way than the average straight person." His longest relationship was nine years and immediately preceded George. Of that relationship he says:

I was monogamous for a little over nine years, which, *my God*, I don't want any awards, because if there's anything monogamy taught me is that it builds up a lot of resentment in me. I don't know how couples do it. I just don't think it's a normal way for men, especially. I don't think it's a normal way for human beings, but if it works for them, all well and good. But I don't want any awards for my nine years of monogamy because I'd never do it again. I learned that if anything, it just instilled boredom. It instilled a lack of creativity on my part. Even my friends were telling me "you just aren't the same person. You're just dying inside."

Mike felt he was "forcing down a lot of the sexual feelings and they bring out other creative feelings." He's sees a strong link between creativity and being sexual and sensuous; and at this point in his life, even though he's with a long-term partner, "that sexuality, you got to express it--and being with the same person all the time doesn't necessarily do that."

Some men are quite happy and content with being single at midlife. Probably no one in this study exemplifies that better than Steed. A month shy of his 59th birthday, he has spent “almost 20 years altogether of being with somebody, and the relationships are all different.” His longest partnership of 10 years ended with the death of his partner from HIV/AIDS a number of years ago; it was also his last long-term relationship. As to the possibility of another relationship, Steed says “spending time with one individual, for some reason, it just--I don’t know. I could never picture myself being with somebody for 20 years. I found I just enjoy being by myself.” He quickly adds “There’s one thing about getting older that has surprised me, and that’s the sex part. It’s just gotten amazing.” He recounts how just in the last year alone, he’s “connected” with at least three of the straight men in his neighborhood, and adds: “I just find it amazing at my age that they want to either experiment or whatever. I don’t know the story, but it’s their individual thing.” He continues by saying he gets a lot of what he amusingly calls “DBT, short for doorbell trade.” He explains this refers to “guys that are all within walking distance” that he has met throughout the years “in different places, the drug store or the grocery store or the eye contact that we have on the street, that little glance that’s a little too long. Then you look back and they’re still looking, that kind of thing.” Most are married or have girlfriends, but “they stop in, and have a little session--could be 20 minutes. They’re in and out; and that happens all the time. That fulfills the day. That can happen three and four times a week.” Steed explains that when he first met each man, he told him: “I’ll know you by whatever name you give me; if you lie, I don’t care. I don’t want to know where you live; where you work; or your phone number. If you want to stop in, just call.” He says he has “proven to be honest and true; and as a result, “they

just are really comfortable with it...that's been a major part of my life for years; and it's very, very nice.”

Contemporary Socio-political Issues

This section of the findings explores the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding several contemporary socio-political issues that make up part of the context in which they are negotiating midlife. Specifically, the topics discussed in this section are: (a) gay marriage; (b) HIV/AIDS; (c) the Internet; and (d) ageism. Of these, the first three were not part of the social fabric of the lives of previous cohorts of gay men. The final topic (ageism) may well have been relevant to previous cohorts of gay men, but likely is experienced differently due to shifting social and cultural landscapes.

Gay Marriage

Perhaps no single issue challenges the essence of heteronormativity more than that of gay marriage. The exploitation of this topic as a wedge issue in politics demonstrates its potent capacity to polarize and divide people—both those within the gay community and those in the broader society. While some see gay marriage as the ultimate measure of equity and full citizenship, others condemn it as evil through venomous and vitriolic rhetoric.

Many in the gay community are dismayed at the amount of attention the issue of gay marriage receives, and express serious reservations regarding its diversion of attention from other concerns. While there is certainly widespread support for efforts to obtain or expand same sex partner benefits to be on par with those of heterosexually married couples, there is a lack of agreement as to whether this should be pursued as a

separate and distinct goal in and of itself; or subsumed under a broader goal of full marriage. Furthermore, there is no cohesive set of approaches and strategies to achieve the goal in either case. By and large, the men in this study reflect the disparate perspectives of the larger gay community to include the semantics and ramifications of “civil unions” as an alternative to marriage.

Without exception, the men in this study believe that gay couples should have the same legal and financial rights as heterosexually married couples; and for some, this issue has taken on added importance during midlife. Ben provides one such example when he says “we’re certainly aware, especially my age group, of partner rights and privileges and insurance and that kind of thing.” This was also the case with Jeff. His father’s death a year and a half ago after a protracted illness was the catalyst both for Jeff to begin to think of himself as at midlife, as well as to consider the long-term implications of partner benefits--particularly since his partner Lou is 11 years younger his junior. Noting that he “never thought of gay marriage as a possibility until it became something that was a financial issue,” he explains that if Lou were eligible to receive survivor’s annuity benefits in the event of Jeff’s death, they could both retire “and live better” when Jeff turns 65. However, if Lou is not in a position to receive those benefits, Jeff will have to work longer to insure they “could both live out our lives without concern.” The corporation where Jeff is employed does offer survivor benefits to those same sex couples who are married in any jurisdiction where it is legal. So although neither Jeff nor Lou “believes in gay marriage, if you will...it becomes more of a financial issue than it does a political issue per se;” and they have considered flying to Canada to be married.

Most of the other participants were similarly ambivalent about the notion of being “married.” Ben notes that he and his partner “talk about our partnership. Neither of us wants to get married. We haven’t even talked about a commitment ceremony or anything like that, but we are sympathetic to those who want that.” For Duncan, marriage isn’t something that he and his partner Dane have considered, even though they have been together for 25 years. He explains that he isn’t against gay marriage but says “it has to be really taken seriously if it’s going to be done.” He adds “you can’t make a commitment like that lightly; and I’m really afraid if they’re allowed a lot of gay people will. Then again, there’s nothing to say they shouldn’t be allowed to.” While recognizing “there are advantages with legal rights and benefits to marriage,” Duncan says “I almost wish it hadn’t come up.” He fears this issue will result in a backlash against other gains that sexual minorities have made, and says:

When the whole thing started...my first thought was this is going to backfire.

“You’re just putting a stick in your own eye,” because it’s kind of what I felt like they were trying to do to the religious people...it’s a pretty big mess. I don’t know how it’s going to get straightened out. I hope it doesn’t hurt us too much but I think it may. I think if they would have went for the civil unions and settled for some type of inheritance rights or whatever, it would have worked out. I think we could have gotten there and it would have been a lot easier.

Many of the participants echoed a similar viewpoint that the semantics of “marriage” was problematic. Such was the case with Jeremy who said “I think it should be a union. Everybody would get a lot better opinions about it and approval if they would just call it union instead of marriage.” Similarly, Steed says:

I find the major problem is just the word marriage. If the gays had not used the word marriage--if they had just not pushed that; if they had pushed or just settled on partnership or civil union, or whatever--which wouldn't have been a problem, as much of a problem--if they had just stayed away from that one word that just riles the people up...the biggest thing are their benefits and their rights. They have to be equal, and that's common sense. But it's just that one word...I think the approach they took was just so wrong--using the word marriage. I mean, that's just a killer.

Scott encapsulates the feeling of most of the participants surrounding the trade-off between pursuing full marriage as a matter of equity, and the importance of gaining legal and financial rights typically associated with marriage, particularly at this point of life.

While he feels the term marriage would be "truly right and truly equitable", he says:

I particularly don't care if it is called gay marriage or not; I think that word just inflames some people...but I don't give a fuck what people call it. I don't really care anything about a ceremony or a wedding--I want the legal rights, the financial rights, taxes, wills, and visitation. It's outrageous that we don't have them...as far as self interest in the short term, in my lifetime, I want the benefits. Let them fight over what they call it but if they get the same rights, I think we've won. If we got the rights first, then the marriage thing would end up coming.

A few of the men were more supportive of the notion of gay marriage. For Mitch, who had been heterosexually married, it boils down to what he sees as fundamental: "if two people really love each other and want to spend their lives together as a married couple, I think it should be allowed." In Ray's case, while he has not given gay marriage

a lot of thought as far as he personally is concerned, he says “as regards the overall concept, I absolutely love it!” As to whether he would ever marry, he adds “I guess I would have to wait and see the guy I’m with and if it felt right...I would just have to find the right person I guess.” Ray also offers an interesting twist on the semantics of gay marriage, and thinks “the heterosexual world should take at least one chapter from us in that we refer to each other as partners.” Commenting on the high incidence of divorce among those who marry heterosexually, he comments:

I definitely think there would be a hell of a lot less divorce if people regarded their relationships as partnerships as opposed to husband and wife...because it is a partnership—if you truly consider the person an equal partner, there would probably be less arguments and that kind of crap going on...maybe they should start to think that way as well. They probably would get along better if they did.

For many of the participants, the rights and benefits accorded by marriage are considerably more important than the term itself, even for those who have been partnered for many years. Some recognize this may be less than fully equitable, but looking through a mid-life lens, acceding to heteronormative demands in the short run to better prepare for a safe and secure older age becomes a more palatable option.

HIV/AIDS

Few would dispute that many gay men in the generation currently at midlife have been profoundly impacted by HIV/AIDS. Based on this single issue, the developmental pathways and lived experiences of these men may be considerably different from those of any preceding cohort. For many gay men of this generation, HIV/AIDS has claimed

numerous friends, partners, or other people important in their lives who might otherwise have served as sources of caring, support, and learning; and left complicated issues of grief, anger, and survivor's guilt in its wake. Others may themselves have a positive HIV status. Fed by the insatiability of heteronormativity, stereotypes and misinformation surrounding HIV/AIDS are rampant; and discrimination and prejudice based on an actual or perceived HIV-positive status remain a very distinct reality. Shifting political, legal, social, and intimacy terrains have presented gay men with altered landscapes to be negotiated—not only as part of development up to and through midlife, but on a daily basis as they live their lives. Furthermore, these men will continue to face these and other uncharted and unique concerns, and complex choices and decisions as they plan for and progress into older age. The narratives of the men in this study attest to the role of HIV/AIDS in their respective developmental journeys, and to its ongoing—yet often subtle—influence on their lives.

In reflecting on the role HIV/AIDS has had on him, Andy says “I guess it's had more of an impact on my life than I think about on a daily basis. I think that's probably true of a lot of people in our generation.” He recounts that he lost a former partner and a very dear friend, and “with both of them it was very, very painful...what a terrible waste.” He adds that he feels “very fortunate that somehow I managed to stay healthy.” He attributes that in part to staying in his small hometown as opposed to moving to a larger city, and becoming an art teacher rather than going into theater professionally—those things “probably saved my life.”

As a funeral director, Mike is used to dealing with people's grief, but he notes “we all lost friends, and that's something we'll never get over. I'm not sure that I've ever

dealt with all the grief that was associated with it.” Explaining that is difficult to lose so many people even though “sometimes you only wrote to them a couple times a year or you called them, but they just disappeared all of a sudden.” He goes on and states:

That’s a factor that I’m not sure you ever come to terms with because they were such vital, living, loving people. Most of the gay friends I’ve had have always been all out there, and to have that life just snuffed so prematurely is something that...I almost don’t want to deal with it. I want to remember it and just put it away in a drawer and not have to think about it.

In discussing that he had his first AIDS test three months ago, Mike says “I was so scared...boy, what a sigh of relief when I found out I was negative.” He hadn’t done been tested previously because he feels there is still stigma in the gay community against those with a positive status although it is lessening. However, he asks rhetorically “by knowing if you were positive, do you have, then, an ultimate responsibility to come out there and tell everyone, or at least your sexual partners?” To Mike, this had been “a bridge that you’d rather not cross.” While he’s happy that he tested negative, he’s conflicted and thinks “how crude to feel that way when there’s positive people that are living healthfully and they have to deal with that every day of their lives. It’s not fair to rejoice over a negative result, really.” As Mike’s comments indicate, gay men of this generation faced the loss of many contemporaries earlier than is usually experienced in the lifecourse. Situated in a context of stigma associated with both HIV/AIDS and with being gay, many of these men are left with deep-seated feelings surrounding survivorship guilt and unresolved grief.

Like Mike, Scott feels AIDS has affected his life a lot, and having “friends in college that didn’t live to be 25 years old” was devastating. Regarding his HIV-negative status, he says “to me, it’s a shocker. I don’t know why I am. I feel very lucky I’m here, because I was very promiscuous” for the first few years after coming out at 18 in the late 1970s. He adds he has “a real perspective that I’m lucky to be middle-aged--and to enjoy it, because there’s a lot of people that didn’t get to enjoy this part of life.” He notes that his generation was devastated, and a lot of people died, and are still dying—“they’re just living longer and healthier lives.” However, he’s concerned that “society’s gotten a little complacent to it; and I’m really scared there’s going to be a whole other generation that’s devastated.” He also expresses anger at how HIV/AIDS has been addressed at broader societal and political levels as he states:

I get really get pissed off because how much more could have been done. Where would we be if more resources would have been put to this disease? Would we have a cure by now? Because we know for many years money wasn’t there. And is it even there at the level it should be now? I mean, ‘a gay disease, an African disease,’ and then you’ve got the whole ‘it’s God’s way of punishment.’ You know, all that kind of crap going on, which is bullshit.

Steed displays a similar emotion when reflecting on the impact of having seen the AIDS quilt when it was on display in Washington, D.C.:

To think back that Reagan did nothing; nothing; and all the key people who run the country, it was no big deal because it was dealing with gays. It was way in the back burner...you know. Yeah, you get pissed off at that. But, like everything else that riles you up, you get a dose of reality.

For Duncan, the lack of attention in the early days of HIV/AIDS didn't lead as much to anger as it did to cynicism as he explains:

People were saying this was God's justice on gay people and all this stuff, and there really was not that much being done by government or anything else until you had a few...well-known people die from it. So it made me see what government was, really; it tended to make me a little cynical on a lot of things-- anything a politician says, basically. Other than that I don't know if it changed me a lot. I mean, it didn't turn me into an activist or anything.

Like many of the men interviewed, Duncan felt the traumatic loss of "a lot of good friends." He also feels fortunate that he wasn't infected with HIV, and attributes that to having a partner: "I'm not saying in our time together we never fooled around, but by and large for the most part we have been a monogamous couple. It had to be something pretty extraordinary to have a third person go home with us or something; and then it was always, if that did happen, it was always done safely." Jeff espouses a similar viewpoint. He points out that many gay men have chosen to be proactive and try to "figure out ways to not get it. Whether that means we enter into a permanent relationship, whether that means we practice safe sex, or however we go about doing that, we've learned how to deal with it." Noting that he is "scared to death of getting AIDS," he intends on staying in a committed relationship. "While there may be temptations," he adds "I think it drives you to a more solid relationship--at least that's what it has done for me."

Not all of the men in this study felt that HIV/AIDS had significant impact on their personal lives. George explains that because he didn't have any close friends in the gay community when AIDS began to decimate the gay male population, it didn't have as

much personal impact on him as on those who were more out. “Obviously I knew people that were dying with AIDS, just like we all did--people that were in the public life and in the spotlight. When I did have my sexual gay flings, I was always very careful.” Even since coming out, he says:

I guess the thought’s always there in the background. You better be careful with what you’re doing. And if it does happen you deal with it; but to say that it has impacted my life one way or the other, I won’t say that.

Referring to what some have called the “AIDS epidemic,” Ben makes a distinction none of the other men made. “You know, that didn’t touch my life,” he says; “The epidemic didn’t change me.” He explains “when everyone was losing lots of friends in the gay community to death because of AIDS, I lost one friend; because I was not in the gay community.” This was a close friend, and “then it touched my life in a very different way...and changed me on a personal level. I’ll tell you, I’m HIV positive.” Ben has come to see his HIV-positive status as a source of tremendous learning and personal growth, and credits it with his finally achieving self-acceptance.

The Internet

During the past generation, the Internet has become a revolutionary force in transforming and reshaping almost every aspect of modern society including communications; the marketplace; media and other forms of pop culture; and, even more fundamentally, the ways in which people learn and interact socially. Online social interaction using the Internet has changed, and is continuing to influence, how millions of people relate to one another in their daily lives. Technology continues to advance at an astonishing rate making it even more feasible to interact with, learn from, and develop

social networks with people from a variety of backgrounds and lived experiences from almost anywhere in the world. In many ways, virtual communities are becoming normative as they supplement or displace face to face interaction. Some fear a resulting degradation of community life while others argue that technology offers new options for integrating society.

While debates ensue regarding the globalizing impacts of the Internet and its broad potential for both liberation and exacerbation of existing systems of oppression, transformations are also occurring at more micro levels. Online social interaction offers new avenues of learning, support, and belonging that can impact how individuals make meaning by stimulating them to reframe experiences and to construct new identities and realities in concert with knowledge produced in new online relationships. For this reason, the participants in this study were asked to reflect on the relevance of the Internet at this point in their lives. Their responses run the gamut from “not much at all” to “a tremendous amount.”

Several of the men are basically “functional users” and report that the Internet does not have much impact on their lives, especially the social aspects of their lives.

Duncan’s response is typical of these:

I don’t go on to meet people in chat rooms and that kind of stuff. I just haven’t seen the need to sit down and spend time doing that. I’d rather go visit somebody face to face, or actually interact, cook a meal together or go to a show. I’ve made use of it...but mostly for practical kinds of things though like looking for parts to restore my classic car.

For others, the Internet has played a significant role in the path to who they are today. Mike asserts “I blame or thank the Internet for why I started rediscovering my sexuality; my sensuality, my ability to have sexual relationships with other men again” after more than nine years in a monogamous relationship. He explains that the Internet and the “accessibility of sexual talk and sexual encounters” are changing standards of society and relationships and offers his own experience as an example: “You start chatting. You start masturbating while you’re chatting. You get your little camera, your web cam, and then you play with other guys on cam. And from there you’ve got to meet someone.” His first Internet-engendered encounter, with a married man with 2 children, occurred after 2 years of online chatting. He recounts meeting another man after chatting online:

He wouldn’t tell me who he was online until we met in front of the school because he’s married, has a family. But he has a gay interest. We’re talking about a town of 2500 people; and something like that can happen here. It’s happening everywhere.

The Internet has also been very significant for Ben who exclaims “The Internet actually changed my life!” After being given a computer by a straight friend who he had helped out, he explains:

It opened my life. I mean, I got into chat rooms and began just talking with other gay men. And it wasn’t even the promiscuous kind of talk or that aspect. It was just socializing which I had never done before. I never got to know people as people. They were always objects until then. I learned the fine art of conversation through the computer...I met some friends and started socializing,

really socializing--meeting with gay couples, friends, you know, gatherings of people; and made what I call normal relationship friendships. So that when I finally got to this partnership, this felt like I dated and we became partners. It seemed more normal to me.

For most of the men in the study, the Internet seems to fall somewhere between a strictly functional use and a life-altering vehicle. Many sometimes use it both as a source of learning, and as a potential avenue for meeting other gay men for socializing, dating, or sex. For instance, when Scott and his partner Alberto travel, he likes to research the area ahead of time to learn what he can about the local environment, but he usually tries to befriend a local gay man with whom they can get a better understanding of local culture and experiences. Mitch falls into this category as well. He's noticed over the past year or so that he is going out to the bars less. Sometimes he wonders about spending so much time on the Internet since he'll "probably never meet any of these people because they're all in different states," but he enjoys being online and adds:

It's nice to actually be able to sometimes just chat, or send emails back and forth. And just know that some of the same things are happening somewhere else than they are here. Things aren't that much different from area to area. I've met a lot of people just for chatting purposes; just to be able to talk about everyday things or just crazy things.

It's not that the bars don't interest him, but he finds he has met a lot of interesting people on the Internet. "Maybe they're more free to have an open discussion than somebody that you may know personally or somebody in a bar" he explains; "and some of the

conversations actually get very interesting. It's amazing how many different views that people have."

In a similar vein, Joe appreciates the "educational value" of the Internet, and likes to read about different topics that interest him. However, acknowledging that he has "social anxiety" in public settings, the Internet affords him opportunities to interact socially and to chat with people from all over the world and to learn about different ways of life. He's developed some meaningful and caring friendships in the process.

Several of the participants commented on what they see as the ageist nature of the Internet. Ben notes that the only place he has seen ageism in the gay community is "in the chat rooms on the Internet--where it actually is more sexually oriented and it seems there's more of a likelihood of people there being very focused on their interests--their age interests or whatever it is." Steed echoes this perspective and says:

The Internet really brings out age discrimination just because they can specify age limits [on profiles or personal ads]...but that can eliminate a whole group of people that are fantastic; it cuts out a whole group of people that have experience and you can learn so much from...that's a major thing about the Internet—it eliminates interaction with a whole segment of fantastic people.

Mike has noticed some ageism during online chats as well and says "with so many of them that you chat with online...it's like if you're over 30 they don't even want to talk to you." This doesn't make him angry; rather, he explains "I just get, I feel sad by it...we have a history, and they can learn from that and grow upon it. I mean, they and we are going to benefit if they continue to grow upon our wisdom." A broader discussion of the issue of ageism within the gay male community is addressed next.

Ageism

Society places an emphasis on youth, and anecdotal evidence and conventional wisdom would indicate that this is worse in the gay male community almost such that an ageist caste system exists. However, with one notable exception, the men in this study do not perceive ageism in the gay male community as a major concern. While most don't discount that it exists particularly in online environments, they feel it is no more prevalent or different in the gay community than in society in general society.

"I've never experienced any ageism," Ray says while laughing, "other than maybe fewer people look at me in the gym now that I'm older." He adds "I don't think this is any different than straight society though...I find people very accepting of me and talking with me regardless of what their age is." Joe also says he's "never had problems as far as age discrimination." More of a concern for him is guys thinking that "I'm looking for somebody to support me because I'm on disability. But that's only my theory. I could be wrong about that."

Some of the men do see or even experience some ageism, but it's not a big deal to them. Jeff acknowledges that sometimes younger gay men don't want to interact with older ones, but "there are situations that I can think about where young guys like older guys; you know, that's all a matter of preferences." Duncan echoes this notion of preferences and says:

I think at times maybe I've had that myself a little bit. I mean, it depends on the person, and not so much the age. I've seen younger people make a comment like "the old queens", and maybe they don't want to hang around with them or even be talk to them, or talked to by them.

Scott reflects a slightly different viewpoint. He says “I’m sure if I still wanted to be a social butterfly at the bar and nightclub scene, my age and physical appearance would probably keep a whole set at bay,” and with “a good percentage of the young people, there probably would be no social interaction.” However, he adds “I don’t think anymore than a 25-year-old straight woman may not talk to a 47-year-old straight man in a bar, or approach them or be receptive to being approached. I don’t think it’s any different.”

After reflecting a bit, Scott expands on his perspective:

You know, everybody says gay people have to be beautiful and fit, muscular. I really don’t think that’s any different than in straight society. Beautiful people are beautiful people, either way. I don’t see it any differently. I think in more metropolitan areas fitness and good looks and toned bodies are probably emphasized. People in a straight and gay community--as you get more rural, I think the straight community kind of relaxes those expectations, some of the people; but the gay community, I think, keeps them up a little bit more. So it might be a little harder...to be gay and get older than it would be--actually, it might be a little easier, I don’t know. But I don’t think it’s that much different than a straight community. I really don’t.

Steed has always had friends of all ages. As for ageism, he says “It certainly exists, but I’ve just never experienced it. That’s probably the same in society overall, gay or straight it doesn’t matter--older people always get discriminated against.” He continues by discussing a favorite bar he visits on vacations to Fort Lauderdale:

I love to see these old guys in their 60’s, 70’s, or 80’s, they are just loving life--loving it. So they don’t need the kids and the punks and the little ones with the

bodies and all that. They just don't need it...they don't need the attention from the young kids. They're happy...and they have their act together. I don't know if that happens in straight life or not. Are there bars where old people go to? I don't know.

One participant, Andy, does see ageism as a significant problem in the gay male community. His primary way of meeting new people for social interaction is through the Internet, and while he agrees with some of the others who point out ageism online, he doesn't restrict it to that environment. He explains: "My feelings and experiences, as I've gotten older, I've gotten more negative, more frustrated because of ageism in one form or another. I mean, sometimes it cracks me up and sometimes it angers me or depresses me." Perhaps he can take heart in Scott's assessment when he says:

I think that's probably gotten better with more openness about towards gayness in general. There's more interaction among different ages now; people are exposed to gays of all ages if they go to a gay bar, a gay beach or a gay hotel; so as things become more open there is more chance for the different generations to interact. Maybe there wasn't that much mixing before but now if you want to, it's all out there.

Chapter Summary

The various themes presented in the first section of this chapter reflect widely disparate developmental paths that the participants traveled en route to midlife. The influences and impacts of heteronormativity are evident throughout the narratives, both in regards to developmental processes (e.g., the high incidence of heterosexual dating) and to lived experiences at midlife (e.g., tension between fitting in and being too out).

Nevertheless, these men have maneuvered through heteronormative barriers and arrived at a point of contentment and satisfaction at midlife. As the discussion in the second section of this chapter indicates, midlife for these men entails new or radically changed issues than was the case for previous cohorts of midlife gay men. As the first cohort to encounter such issues as gay marriage, HIV/AIDS and the Internet, these men offer insights into how their development has postured them as they venture into unfamiliar and unknown territory. The next and final chapter will discuss the implications for the themes and insights presented in this chapter.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how self-identified gay men negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society. This qualitative narrative inquiry was posited on the following research questions which established a guide for the data analysis yielding the findings presented in the previous chapter, and served as a foundation for the ensuing discussion: (a) what is the subjective experience of aging in contemporary midlife gay men? (b) what life opportunities have been affected either positively or negatively by being gay; and in what ways did these men either adhere to or resist society's expectations for what it means to be a gay man? and (c) how do these men make meaning of their own developmental histories in a heteronormative social context; with the social stigma associated with being gay; and in light of age cohort effects that included significant events such as the Stonewall riots, AIDS, and the growing visibility of sexual minorities in contemporary society?

This chapter accomplishes several purposes. First, it briefly revisits the topic of heteronormativity from the conceptual framework undergirding this research. It then illuminates and examines major points resulting from the study, highlighting any relevance to existing literature; and includes a discussion as to the salience of narrative inquiry for this study. This is followed by a discussion of the implications for the field of

adult education. The chapter then concludes with recommendations for further research across various disciplines.

Discussion of Findings

None of the men in this study would likely characterize themselves as courageous or daring; yet these men have dared to negotiate through the impediments imposed by heteronormativity as they traveled pathways to mid-life and self-acceptance; and in so doing, they have dared to be actively engaged in determining their own lifecourse. Midlife finds the majority of these men living happy and fulfilling lives in which they both accommodate and resist the dictates of heteronormativity to some degree. Often with the support of others, they have learned to mitigate much of the constant barrage of heterosexism and homophobia. To varying degrees, these men have created new meanings and self-narratives, and are engaged in an ongoing process of re-formulating knowledge, and creating new realities in which to live out their daily lives. From a sociocultural and social constructivist lens, these can be viewed as socially constructed outcomes of intersubjectivity, the shared understanding among individuals whose interaction is based on common interests and assumptions (Rogoff, 1990). Interaction with other gay men, with whom they share a common bond of a non-normative sexual identity, has supported the participants in coming to see things differently through reframed lenses as they age, and as the social and cultural context around them changes.

An Uneasy Truce with Heteronormativity: Revisiting the Conceptual Framework

The overall framework of the study was based on social constructivism; secondarily, it was informed by some aspects of queer theory. From a social constructivist perspective, members of a society create the properties of the world which

is then assumed to be reality (Kukla, 2000). The importance of culture and context are emphasized with knowledge being seen as *socially constructed*; that is, it is developed, transmitted, and shared within an essentially social context. Using this lens, heteronormativity can be understood as a set of socially constructed institutionalized societal rules embodied in cultural ideologies that define categories of sexual identity, and ascribe different levels of worth or value to those categories. Of note, however, social constructivism also recognizes that knowledge is dynamic and ever-shifting, thereby implying a notion of agency that can counter heteronormativity and the reality it seeks to impose. Since they are human products, shifting contexts and changing patterns of social interaction can result in new interpretations, new socially agreed-upon meanings, and reconstructed views of reality to displace heteronormative ones.

Much existent literature regarding adult development, particularly as related to sexual minorities, stems from a psychological or psychosocial framework. Utilization of some aspects of queer theory as a lens informing the data collection and analysis is a strength of this study. Queer theory is a complex set of concepts that is difficult to articulate. Particularly germane to this study, queer theory capitalizes and builds upon the implicit sense of agency in social constructivism through its explicit and expressed spirit of dissonance, its oppositional stance, and its challenge of heteronormative cultural and societal practices. Furthermore, notions of power being infused in all aspects of life including the sexual sphere, and sexuality serving as the basis of much of social, community, and political life (Gamson & Moon, 2004) were instructive in the analysis of participants' narratives.

A major conclusion of this study is that despite the swift and powerful currents of social and cultural change over the last several decades, heteronormativity and its ramifications remains rampant, pervasive, and largely unexamined—certainly by the participants in this study; but in a much broader sense as well. A corollary finding is that the participants both acquiesce and contest heteronormativity in varying degrees and depending on context. This latter finding was not unexpected since few would have the emotional wherewithal and stamina to challenge or confront every instance of heteronormativity.

Another finding which emerged from the data is that the participants do not have much of a personal sense of being oppressed. Some of the narratives acknowledge early pain or struggle in dealing with the impacts of heteronormativity, but seem overall to minimize its effects on their development and in their lives. Their stories indicate that recollections and memories of episodes or events of marginalization and oppression continue as shapers of midlife; for instance, what is seen as initial slow and uncaring governmental response to HIV/AIDS leading to cynicism towards politics. One conclusion is that the men in this study tend to discount or dismiss counter-hegemonic strategies with long-term or potentially troublesome outcomes; rather, they opt to secure and maintain a sense of self, of value, and of merit—ignoring heteronormativity when they can, and challenging it when they must.

At this point, it is useful to consider these conclusions in light of the conceptual framework of the study. From a social constructivist perspective, the determination of whether one contests or concedes to heteronormativity in a given context or situation is based on narratives—both those at the societal level, as well as those self-narratives co-

constructed with others while journeying through life. Through such interaction, co-constructed *counternarratives* emerge as oppositional responses to the “official” narratives and hegemonic practices of every day life (Chase, 1995). These counternarratives are the “little stories” of those individuals and groups whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, denigrated, and excluded—intentionally or otherwise—in the telling of broader societal and cultural narratives (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren, & Peters, 1996). By negotiating the gaps between their lived realities and these broader heteronormative narratives, these men have established a subtle, uneasy truce with heteronormativity. The terms of this truce are ill-defined, and its strength is contingent on learning and co-constructed knowledge. For the men in this study, such learning and knowledge creation appears largely uninformed by notions of hegemony, oppression, and emancipation; and unexamined by other readings (e.g., critical, feminist, post-structural, or queer). Of importance, however, this study also demonstrates some degree of resistance is widely practiced by midlife men who happen to be gay as they live out and make meaning in and of their everyday lives. The narrative of each participant revealed some degree of agentic capability in the face of heteronormative demands. A social constructivist reading of this might be that this is a function of the social environments in which a given individual has developed and currently interacts. However, alternate readings are possible. A perspective more fully embracing queer theory would grasp these seeds of inherent agency, nurture and develop a fuller sense and consciousness of heteronormativity and its relationship with other oppressions, and actively foment resistance and challenge to its deleterious effects. Although the primary conceptual framework of this study was social constructivism, it

was informed by some aspects of queer theory; as such, it is useful to consider some of the findings from a queer theory lens.

Queer, as used in queer theory, is defiant, oppositional, and subversive. It entails a decidedly dissonant and political stance against hegemonic societal structures and cultural practices that deny agency and full citizenship—not only to sexual minorities, but across the spectrum of oppressions based on positionalities which grant privilege to some while marginalizing and oppressing others. This understanding or sense of queer was not expressed in any of the narratives; in fact, the participants feel the term is derogatory and typically use it only in jest with other gay men or lesbians. The whole notion of being dissonant as a means towards social justice was outside the bounds of how these men live their lives. Several made comments such as “I hate radicalism of any kind,” and “what bothers me most about a lot of the gay community is its radical attitude toward things.” With many of the men, there was a real sense of anathema towards the notion of being considered “political” or “an activist.” With the exception of long-brewing cynicism and anger engendered from the government’s lack of response in the early days of HIV/AIDS, these men did not feel being gay had any bearing on their political views; and several expressed this point emphatically. This belies the subtle and “all-pervasive, blanket nature” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 102) of hegemony in which people willingly assume dominant ideology believing it to be in their best interests. Like fish in water never knowing they are even wet (Minor, 2001), the continual reinforcement and reinscription of hegemony through dominant social structures and cultural practices keeps people from becoming aware of and pursuing alternatives. This might explain why there is no real sense of feeling oppressed expressed by these men, and why homophobia is

accepted as “just the way it is.” From a critical and queer perspective, the participants have not yet learned they are wet.

While some comments indicated reflectiveness regarding the similarities among marginalized groups; and to some degree, the participants have learned to challenge and even discard heteronormative societal views that do not fit with their own lived experiences, there was little if any acknowledgement of structural components of their own marginalization and its relationship with other types of oppression such as racism, sexism, or ableism. Furthermore, evidence of having reached a critical awareness of the insidious role power and privilege play in the continued marginalization of oppressed groups is lacking. The tension between gay men and lesbians about which several of the men commented is one example that elucidates this. Despite well-intended concerns and intentions on this issue, the men did not address male privilege (extended even to gay men in society), hegemonic masculinity, or any of the other structural elements that lead to the oppression of women; and, importantly, result in very different lived experiences for lesbians than for gay men. Other examples in which a queer reading might assert these men are awash in heteronormative and hegemonic waters include men in long-term relationships commenting that they don't know many gay men for whom marriage would be appropriate; a former soldier who thinks the military's “Don't ask; don't tell” policy is wrong, but feels gays in the military shouldn't talk about it; and misgivings about the media and pop culture “forcing” gay characters or representations onto society.

Diverse Developmental Pathways

The results of this study lend credence to those who have postulated that traditional models of adult development do not adequately address developmental

patterns of gay men (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Cruz, 2003; Kimmel & Sang, 1995; Kooden, 1997). The men in this study described widely diverse life experiences as components of their individual developmental processes, confirming previous research that gay men follow a developmental path than their heterosexual peers (e.g., Kooden, 2000). Numerous factors have resulted in essential distinctions in how these men have progressed to midlife, and in how they continue to compose and reframe their lives. This study confirms findings of other research (Adelman, 1991; Cain, 1991; DiPlacido, 1998; Herek, 1998; Kertzner, 2001) that gay men faced additional challenges such as risk of stigmatization and discrimination based on having a minority sexual orientation. For example, most, but not all, of the participants described an early sense of feeling different or being disconnected from others or even themselves, with little social support for mediating such feelings. Virtually all succumbed to societal pressure to date heterosexually. Furthermore, a large subset had been heterosexually married, and several of the men are fathers. While these latter factors are certainly inherent in the developmental process for many heterosexuals, undertaking them with an expressed or developing sense of a gay identity selectively influences their meaning in one's life. Mitch, for instance, was completely honest with his wife regarding his sexual orientation prior to their marriage; yet he struggled for years to be "faithful" to her since that was his understanding of what marriage entailed. Similarly, after his divorce, some of his gay friends didn't seem to grasp that he had certain financial responsibilities and time commitments in regards to rearing his four sons.

This study also confirms the importance of coming out, that is, acknowledging and accepting an identity other than heterosexual (Eliason, 1996; Kimmel & Sang, 1995),

which is often seen as a critical factor in the developmental process for any sexual minority, and as integral to a healthy development and higher levels of self-esteem for gay men (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Cruz, 2003; Gabbay & Wahler, 2001; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997). While the findings of this study indicate that having come out was a key component to a current positive sense of self, the wide age range during which the participants came to a self-acceptance of a gay identity (from the mid-teens to the mid-50s) argue against linear, stage-based models—whether they be of coming out or of adult development. The stories of these men indicate that Harrison’s (1995) definition of a gay identity as “the emergence of a self-identified subset of persons who repudiate inferiority by virtue of their minority status as persons who are erotically attracted to persons of their own sex” (p. 373) is apropos; however, it is worth noting that many of the participants recognize that being gay only defines part of who they are. Their narratives demonstrate a perspective that acknowledges various, multifaceted, and idiosyncratic identities as opposed to a single primary identity focused on sexual orientation. Importantly, this finding argues against the notion of an essential “gay identity,” and lends support to a social constructivist perspective of multiple identities that are ever shifting and contingent reflecting an infinite array of personal and social variables, attributes, and contexts.

This study also revealed that cultural, societal, and other foundational lessons learned in youth remain as key influences at midlife. The men’s narratives typically depicted childhoods in socially and religiously conservative contexts. This was particularly the case with early religious exposure. The developmental stories of some of these men implicate religious doctrine and dogma as the source of much angst and

struggle on the road to self-acceptance, and as an impediment in the development of coping strategies in response to the stigma of having a non-normative sexual identity. While some of the men find religious faith to be a source of solace and often interrelated with their spirituality, comments by several participants reflect vestiges of religiously-inspired guilt and shame that exacerbate the tension engendered between dogmatic indoctrination and an inherent desire for authenticity and full self-expression; and complicate the process of ongoing growth and development. Joe's feeling that maybe he "was being punished for being gay" by losing his eyesight is one salient example. A queer theory perspective on religion might argue for the right of sexual freedom similar to that of religious freedom; underscore the connections between religion and normative constructions of sexual morality; and question if a constellation of norms or ethics can be described "without at the same time producing or requiring deviants who must be disciplined" (Schipper, 2005, p. 94). Nevertheless, the findings also are consistent with the growing evidence in the literature (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Thompson, 1997; Thumma & Gray, 2005) that spirituality is very much a part of how many gay people make meaning, and is often an integral component of one's sense of self.

With this in mind, one conclusion of this study is that religious doctrine and dogma largely remain as key structural factors in the maintenance of heteronormativity. Jeff's decision to marry a woman despite having been advised by both his pastor and a psychologist to accept his being gay is a strong case in point. However, given the different developmental responses to dealing with heteronormative demands, a related conclusion is that patterns of adaptation to heteronormativity (that is, resisting or accommodating) can also be incorporated into one's identity as a gay man. This may

explain, in part, a related but contradictory finding that the majority of the participants in this study do not see heterosexism, stigma, or other byproducts of heteronormativity as having precluded or impeded full realization of their individual potential; or as having impacted many life decisions such as occupational or career choice. Rather, despite the hassles and inconveniences engendered by heteronormativity, the stories of the participants portend a sense of fulfillment and purpose in life. Similarly, these findings contravene some life event models of adult development (e.g., Havinghurst, 1972) that propose that developmental tasks occur at different ages based on social expectations and biological development; and failure to achieve them as prescribed results in disappointment, societal disapproval, and difficulty with later tasks. Furthermore, the majority of the participants did not indicate any sense of ever having experienced feeling “off-time” with societal expectations regarding age-appropriate behavior or life events (Neugarten, 1976). One notable exception, a 52-yr old participant who came out to his family last year after decades of compartmentalizing his life, feels he is enjoying a “delayed adolescence” and participating in activities that he feels he missed out on by being so deeply closeted.

This study makes a very significant contribution by adding empirical evidence—albeit from a sample size of only 13—to a point of contention and debate in the literature regarding *accelerated aging*, Minnigerode’s (1976) term to reflect anecdotal notions that gay men perceive themselves as old and experience midlife and old age earlier than their heterosexual counterparts. This concept has been criticized as a myth without empirical support (Berger and Kelly, 2001); and, at best, any supporting evidence is contradictory and inconclusive (Bennett & Thompson, 1990; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Kertzner,

2001). A very important finding of this study is that these men do not feel older than their chronological age, and do not show any wide deviation from commonly held notions as to what age ranges (e.g., 40 to 60) they perceive as related to midlife. Their personal sense of arriving at midlife was well within this age range. Indeed, several of the men in their late 40s and early 50s commented that they are “probably” at midlife or “are approaching” midlife. Furthermore, many of the men’s comments reflected that they feel younger and believe they both look and act younger than they are.

A related, and equally significant, finding is that with one exception, ageism did not seem to be a major concern to these men. Interestingly, none recalled any myths or stereotypes about aging gay men. The narratives of the participants call in to question the notions of a midlife crisis and an epidemic of ageism in the gay community. These results refute the conventional wisdom widely expressed in the popular press, and well as refute previous discussions in the literature (Bergling, 2004; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997). While many of the participants do see evidence of ageism in the gay male community, particularly in online chat rooms, most feel it is no more prevalent than in society in general. Similarly, the preponderance of the men highlighted an interest in planning for and effecting healthy and satisfying transitions in growing older. Furthermore, many explicitly expressed the sentiment that they are not afraid of getting older. In this instance, Kooden’s assertion (2000) that “many gay men continue to compare themselves to nongay standards, which leads to the feelings of fear, confusion, and terror many of us feel at the mention of aging” (p. 2), would seem not to apply.

Discussions of qualitative differences between among age cohorts based on historical or sociopolitical events are frequent in the adult development literature as well

as in LGBTQ-related literature (Cohler & Hostetler, 2002; Kertzner, 2001; Thomas, 1996; Wahler & Gabbay, 1997). Though unexplored in this study, the contemporary socio-political issues (gay marriage, HIV/AIDS, the Internet, and ageism) discussed in the previous chapter might well be experienced differently by this generation than by prior or subsequent ones. HIV/AIDS and the Stonewall riots are oftentimes considered as likely having considerable impact for gay men currently at midlife. For many of the men in this study, HIV/AIDS has indeed influenced such developmental aspects as sexual activity and relationship patterns. On the other hand, Stonewall is largely a historical footnote at best for virtually all of the participants. When asked to reflect on broader societal, cultural, or political issues that they felt made some sort of impact on how they developed or see themselves now, almost all of the men were at a loss to name anything. Of those who did, a number of factors were identified to include the Nixon resignation, the music of the disco era, and Provincetown. Such a wide range of responses points to the diverse and idiosyncratic nature of developmental patterns among gay men. It also reaffirms that, irrespective of age cohort effects, considerable intra-cohort variation exists among gay men (Cohler & Hostetler, 2002). The narratives of these men suggest that some of the variation can be explained in part by the dramatic social transformations (e.g., increased visibility of gay or lesbian characters on television) and tremendous technological advancements (e.g., “The Internet has changed my life!”) that have occurred during their lifetimes, and which are continuing to impact their daily lives even now as they progress through midlife.

Convergence of Disparate Pathways at Midlife

Adult developmental models and theories typically characterize midlife as a period of significant transition across many realms of life including the physical, social, and psychological. Not surprisingly, this study reveals that the participants are encountering issues and concerns commonly associated with midlife (e.g., health concerns, caring for parents, planning for retirement). However, this study confirms that heteronormativity imposes additional hurdles with which these men must contend. Their stories were replete with examples of “everyday compromises” (Adelman, 2000, p. xv) that have long been, and remain, a routine aspect of their lives. Narratives reflected both implicit and explicit understandings of societal proscriptions against, and condemnation directed to, those who aren’t heterosexual; as well as examples of prejudice, workplace discrimination, and homophobic physical assaults. It’s important to note that the participants’ comments regarding these sorts of lived experiences did not entail any sort of melodrama; rather, the more typical reaction is an acknowledgement that “that’s just the way it is.”

A related and significant finding is that despite these additional hardships, these men do not seem to be experiencing any undue angst or struggle that is sometimes associated with middle age when “the realities of one’s present life [confront] the myths and dreams of one’s youth” (Hayslip & Panek, 2002, p. 36). In fact, far from being riddled with self-doubt, the majority of the participants, all of whom self-identify as gay, are quite happy and very pleased with their lives. Furthermore, the narratives of the participants yielded little personal sense of having lived diminished lives or having scarred dreams as a result of being gay. Having largely resolved the internal struggles

engendered by societal, cultural, and religious admonitions and prescriptions, these men have adapted well to their surroundings including the demands and hassles of heteronormativity. This holds true even for those participants who are living somewhat compartmentalized lives; and supports the findings of previous studies (Adelman, 1991; Berger, 1982, 1996; Berger & Kelly, 2001; Brown, Alley, Sarosy, Quarto, & Cook, 2001; Friend, 1980) in which gay men at midlife were found to be psychologically well-adjusted, self-accepting, and comfortable with whom they are. Furthermore, they bolster theoretical concepts that suggest that going through the coming out process and dealing with the stigma of having a non-heterosexual orientation engenders a resilience that may better prepare one to better adapt to the aging process (Berger & Kelly, 2001; Friend, 1991; and Kimmel, 1978).

Another important finding of this study is the strong tendency exhibited by these men to actively avoid conflict and controversy related to their sexual orientation. While some gay men may choose to be quite ardent and explicit in fighting against heteronormativity and homophobia, and undoubtedly there are others who are unable or unwilling to contest it at all, these men seem to occupy a middle ground. None make a concerted effort to challenge homophobia, although in certain contexts or if pushed, most would take a stand and challenge it. This leads to the conclusion that these men have established, and seek to maintain, a sense of balance or homeostasis at midlife. This finding brings to mind Hostetler and Herdt's (1998) concept of "developmental agency" in which individuals negotiate the tension between cultural demands and deeply socialized life desires—some discordant, and others concordant with cultural norms--to devise personal solutions or create innovations "in the face of the existential concerns

shared by all humans” (p. 261). The stories of the participants indicate they have juxtaposed heteronormative myths with the reality of their lived experiences; and, to some extent, no longer feel compelled to believe what doesn’t fit those experiences. Having achieved self-acceptance, and aware of the societal costs and risks associated with a non-heterosexual identity, each individual attempts to “carve out his own niche” and to live a happy and fulfilling life despite facing disparate treatment and consideration resulting from heterosexism and homophobia.

This implicitly means that the lives of these men routinely entail compromises and contradictions, such as deciding whether or not to challenge homophobia in a given situation or context, as they negotiate through conflict in facing the challenges imposed by heteronormativity. Their narratives are replete with instances of what has been referred to as *little murders* (Maya Angelou as cited in Greene, 2000); and as *microaggressions*, cumulative subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, visual) which are often automatically or unconsciously directed at those outside the dominant culture (Boyd-Franklin, 1993). The incident in which Andy’s neighbor muttered a pernicious epithet when he asked that a car that was blocking his driveway be moved is but one of many examples from the men’s narratives. Speaking out in or confronting such situations takes energy and resources that over time can throw one off balance; so although Andy chose not to do so in this case, many times the men opt to ignore it. Such is the nature of the uneasy truce with heteronormativity—skirmishes are inevitable. Some will be contested while others are accommodated given differing circumstances and contexts; furthermore, when confrontations do occur, they may be muted.

Participants' stories revealed various approaches to negotiating the shaky terms of this truce while attempting to strike a balance and to mitigate the tension between fitting in (assimilating) and being too out. A few men made comments to the effect that society has already progressed more than they had anticipated it would within their lifetimes (even is still less than desired), and perhaps gays should "settle for" what has been achieved even if not fully equitable. Such a perspective--that getting past outright discrimination should suffice--believes how insidiously embedded heteronormativity is in the socialization process and in societal structures and institutions. One balance-seeking strategy utilized to varying degrees by many of the participants is compartmentalization of their sexual identity in different aspects of their social life. Being as open as possible but closed if one feels threatened or a need to protect oneself from discrimination, what Gonsiorek (1993) refers to as *rational outness*, is instructive in understanding why sexual minorities may choose not to be out in every situation or context. However, confirming previous research findings (Berger & Kelly, 2001), concerns about "being found out" or "who knows and who doesn't" became considerably less of an issue during midlife for the men in this study as the need for external legitimacy and external validation decreased.

Yet another frequently mentioned strategy was avoiding people who are homophobic. Typically, the narratives indicate that the participants choose to include in their lives others who bring joy or add meaning, while disassociating from those with whom they have little in common or whom they find to be narrow-minded. Similarly, these men eschew any sort of protest or confrontation, and explicitly avoid involvement with anything that they perceive could be construed as activism. It's important to note

that for the men in this study, the word "activism" seems to be very narrowly defined as a synonym for protest or radical dissent. This common understanding of the term is beset by binaries such as "conservative/liberal" and "left/right" and oversimplifies the complexities of the real world; nevertheless, it is propagated and reinforced by political rhetoric and by media images of protest rallies; police in riot gear; unruly mobs hurling rocks or Molotov cocktails, and so on. Certainly, these are examples of situations in which people want change and are demanding action. However, in a more general sense, activism can be considered as any intentional action to bring about social or political change in support of or opposed to a given side in a controversial issue. Such action need not be broad in scope or in scale; furthermore, there are many dimensions and layers of activism reflecting a wide range of advocacy, actions, feelings, and social involvement. While these can include civil disobedience, demonstrations, and other means which may be categorized as direct action, there are numerous types of non-confrontational activism as well. These may include efforts at community building, participating in formal or informal boycotts, lobbying one's political representatives, consciousness-raising, and a host of other activities which are not necessarily commonly associated with activism. In many respects, the men in this study are indeed activists. One could well argue that just by living one's life as a sexual minority, one is contesting heteronormativity, and therefore is taking action on one side of a controversial argument. This contradiction of existing social structures, institutions, and ethics is inherently transgressive (Jordan, 2002), which in the context of contemporary political parlance, makes it activist as well. Having achieved contentment also is an activist stance, as it is diametrically opposed to the mandates and dictates of heteronormativity. Obviously, the sexual activities and

experiences of these men run counter to heterosexist demands; and the participants reflect a broader range of relationships than might be readily apparent in the larger heterosexual community (Wierzalis, Barret, Pope, & Rankins, 2006). While some of the men's relationship patterns mimic those of heterosexual couples, others unabashedly enjoy sexual activities in ways and with various partners that fly in the face of heteronormativity with Steed's discussion of "DBT" (doorbell trade) perhaps the most salient example. The types of one-on-one interactions described by many of the participants, such as Scott's contesting homophobic jokes in the workplace or Steed's discussions of his sexual orientation in the "redneck" bar, can also be viewed as activist in nature. When one confronts homophobia, he or she is participating in activism. By living their lives without apology for their sexual identity or orientation, by "just being," these men have taken a decidedly activist stance. Learning about and taking pride in lesbian and gay history is activism, as is simply caring about and supporting those who society would prefer to render silent and invisible. Many of the men underscore that they are involved in trying to make a difference on a personal level through voting, donating to LGBTQ groups, by just being themselves, and even by participating in this study. In these and other innumerable ways, and without full appreciation of their own efforts, these men are seeking to change the contexts in which they live their lives—and in their own ways, are desirous of and engaged in working to change societal norms and beliefs that result in inequality and oppression. It's worth highlighting that a number of participants pointed to concerns about what they see as a growing resentment and backlash to increased calls for full citizenship and equity for LGBTQ persons. Despite

these concerns, the preponderance of the participants are optimistic about the future and perceive that things will be better for younger gays as they mature.

Generativity and Integrity

Implicit in this optimism and comments about making a difference is Erikson's (1968) concept of generativity, which he sees as the primary developmental concern associated with midlife. Generativity is seen as the desire to produce or pass along something that outlasts oneself, and is often considered in terms of having and raising children. Failure to achieve generativity leads to stagnation indicated by bitterness, isolation, and self-indulgence. Comments by the fathers in this study certainly reflect generative concerns. However, Erikson did not limit the concept of generativity to parenthood; rather, it can be found in a large variety of life choices to include occupation or vocation; volunteer activities; group memberships; friendships; and leisure pursuits (deVries & Blando, 2004). Ostensibly, the drive to be generative is as inherent in gay men and other sexual minorities as in their heterosexual counterparts. Indeed, Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998) contend that gay men at midlife provide fertile ground for exploring the dialogic process between person and social order with respect to generativity and contribute to "the broader study of adult lives within contemporary bourgeois society" (p. 273). Furthermore, deVries and Blando (2004) state the analysis of generativity in the lives of sexual minorities "prompts the questioning of the heteronormative language" (p. 18) associated with this and other developmental concepts. With such a lens, very clear and explicit examples of generativity--such as care giving for partners, and friends--emerge from the data in this study. In addition, narratives of the participants reveal that they are indeed involved in a number of diverse activities,

interests, and beliefs that contribute to the world around them; and may be interpreted in terms of generativity. These involve home restoration; involvement with theater groups; volunteering with church or civic activities; and occupations skewed towards customer service, teaching, and other fields with high public contact.

Using this broader notion of generativity as “creating for the self and others a better place to be” (de Vries & Blando, 2004, p. 17), it is also likely a factor in the frequency with which participants equated friends with “family” or “community.” Friendships and social networks are central to many of the stories related by the participants, and play a major role in the lives of these men; thus reaffirming Nardi’s (1999) findings that friendships are essential in the development and maintenance of gay identity and community. Such social networks serve as buffers against societal oppression; and provide vital avenues for vital caring and support, feelings of connectedness, and opportunities for improved quality of life. This study revealed that, in particular, the process of coming to self-acceptance was very much shaped and influenced by others. Through interaction with and building on the insights of others, these men were able to chart and navigate their own paths to arrive at and come to terms with a gay identity.

As this study has pointed out, these men did not follow a single, easily defined pathway to midlife, calling into question the applicability of traditional (and often revered) adult development models including Erikson’s. A critical stance, and certainly a queer theory lens, would contest the whole notion of identifying and categorizing stages with requisite binaries to be resolved (for example, intimacy vs. isolation; generativity vs. stagnation; integrity vs. despair). Furthermore, although Erikson did recognize that “an

individual life cycle cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context in which it comes to fruition” (Erikson, 1997, p. 114), a queer read of his work disputes the conceptualization of a normative series of discrete life stages as an oversimplification of adult development—which fails to sufficiently take into account numerous idiosyncratic and sociohistorical circumstances and complexities, as well as cultural and societal pressures towards conformity. More palatable would be the assertion that “all persons confront a variety of challenges throughout life, made more or less difficult by the resources at their disposal” (Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998, p. 300). Importantly, as Cohler, Hostetler, and Boxer (1998) also point out, generativity is significant across one’s life. Given that many of the “traditional” and normative expressions of generativity are socially regulated with more restrictive availability to sexual minorities and coupled with the lived experience of stigma, their “generativity may be experienced in distinctive ways and at different points in the adult life course” (p. 300). This echoes McAdams’ (1996b) earlier proposition of generativity as “a quality of living that can be manifest at virtually any point in adulthood” (p. 145). It’s reasonable to assume that the same may hold true for others of Erikson’s stages, presumably including the last stage--integrity vs. despair.

From an Eriksonian perspective, one achieves integrity through the process of introspection and being able to integrate a lifetime full of successes and failures such that death is viewed as the inevitable end of having lived. In contrast, despairing individuals fear death as a premature end to a life for which they have not been able to take personal responsibility. While Erikson posited the resolution of this dichotomy as the task of old age, Vaillant (as cited in Cohler, Hostetler, & Boxer, 1998) discusses a successful midlife gay man named Poe, who faced considerable struggle and strife in his life. Poe was

profoundly introspective, and “had achieved a sense of integrity that contrasted markedly with the experience of many of his contemporaries” (p. 299); and, despite his personal suffering and turmoil, “achieved a remarkable sense of peace with himself” (p. 300). Calling to mind their introspective nature about which several of the men in this study commented (and which others expressed more implicitly), this example gives pause and offers for consideration that for some of the participants in this study, the high degree of contentment with their lives and their predilection to avoid confrontation and controversy may actually be reflective of a deepening of personal integrity.

Midlife as a Context for Ongoing Learning and Continuous Change

At this point, it is worth reiterating that among “the resources at their disposal,” friendships and other social relationships are key aspects in the lives of these men. It is also important to highlight a point that might otherwise be taken-for-granted--it is through these relationships that much learning occurs. As evident through their comments, these men have come to know themselves differently in a continual process of learning, growth, and development. To the extent that these networks include others who are similarly marginalized, one can begin to gain some sense of gay history which has been rendered largely invisible due to heteronormativity, as well as insight as to how others have faced the heteronormative impositions on daily life. Furthermore, in a process that may itself be viewed as generative, sharing of knowledge and lived experiences with others in the larger gay community allows for re-learning, and the co-creation of new knowledge that counters (as well as potentially supports and reinforces) broader societal narratives regarding those with a non-heterosexual orientation. In turn, this new knowledge enables the construction of new realities based on new and dynamic

co-created knowledge. An important aspect of this finding is that the friendships and support networks of sexual minorities are not solely comprised of gay men. Many of the participants underscored the importance of having diversity across both gender and sexual orientation dimensions within their social networks. The ongoing and dynamic process of sharing of lived experiences, co-creating knowledge, and constructing new realities is germane in those relationships as well.

A number of participants pointed to changes they are becoming aware of, or have noticed in themselves as they are progressing through midlife. The most commonly mentioned, and perhaps most significant, of these involve decreases in overall social interaction in terms of both frequency and breadth of friendship networks. Most of the men described caring more about quality of friendships than quantity of friends, and attributed this to growing older. Correspondingly, many of the men spoke of an increasing appreciation for solitude and of being comfortable with spending some time alone. Several of the men also noticed intra-personal changes such as becoming calmer, more introspective, or more reflective upon reaching midlife. This seems consistent with the notion of greater interiority and differentiation from others appearing at midlife (Hoare, 2006a; Jung, 1993; Labouvie-Vief, Chiodo, Goguen, Diehl, & Orwoll, 1995). However, it is important to note that while such changes were components of shifting identities of some participants, others reveled in their friendships and indicated a “the more the merrier” attitude; and didn’t perceive any appreciable change in attitudes, beliefs, or interactions upon reaching midlife. As the narratives of these men illustrate, just as was the case with developmental pathways leading up to it, midlife is experienced differently by gay men as understandings of self shift and change based on new

knowledge and new experiences. One can conclude that the journey through midlife for gay men is beset by numerous forks in the road—with the paths chosen leading to diverse developmental pathways for the remainder of one's life course.

Given the contexts of rapid technological advancement, changing social norms, and increased LGBTQ visibility in which the lives of contemporary gay men are situated, another conclusion of this study is that the experiences of gay men currently at midlife differ vastly from those of previous cohorts of gay men. This generation of gay men wrestles with the personal, social, and political implications of a wide range of disparate issues such as gay marriage, gay adoption, portrayals of sexual minorities in pop culture, and gays in the military. This study provides a beginning level of insight into the perspectives of these men on these sorts of issues, and how they are integrated into a sense of self. The use of the Internet is yet another example of widely diverse and distinct patterns through which the participants avail themselves to the wide range of opportunities it offers. With its development and astronomical expansion during the past several decades, the Internet presents new avenues for social interaction and for learning that were relegated to the realm of science fiction in previous generations. The participants' stories reveal that for some, the Internet is no more than a useful tool; however, for others, it has been life-changing and transformative.

Salience of Using Narrative Inquiry

This research illustrates the vital importance of giving these men an opportunity to discuss their lives in ways often prohibited in other social forums. Many commented that they enjoyed the interview process and that it helped them to see things in a new light; in George's case, it provided the opportunity "of looking at myself differently."

Several commented that this type of research was something long overdue, and they were very pleased to be part of it. Mitch saw it as his chance “to help make a difference.” Mike found the process to be fun and added “we all need to sometimes rediscover who we are, and this was a good self-discovery.” These and numerous similar comments validate the use of narrative inquiry as an important and productive methodology for research with gay men, and presumably for other sexual minorities.

One consideration in any such research is the sexual orientation of the researcher, “an issue deserving more investigation” (Hash & Cramer, 2003, p. 60). In this study, I opted to share my status as a gay man with the participants, and typically did so while arranging or at the beginning of the first interview. Upon conclusion of that interview, I generally asked each man if the interview process would have been any different or if he would have reacted differently had I not been a gay male. First reactions were usually that it wasn’t a factor in how questions were answered, and didn’t really influence the interview one way or another. However, after brief reflection, most of the participants recanted and said that they probably answered more freely and “without filtering” based on my sexual orientation. Some offered that they used terms they might not have used otherwise; and one even said he “would have asked for credentials” to make sure it wasn’t a set up for a gay bashing had I not first informed him I was gay.

To appreciate the relevance of this issue, it is useful to briefly address “emic” versus “etic” perspectives. An emic perspective represents the viewpoint of the members of a culture being studied or observed, that is, the “insider” standpoint; while an etic viewpoint is one that represents more the perspective or values of the researcher, that is, an “outsider” stance (Pike, 1990). Inside researchers studying their own groups start

with certain advantages as they can use their emic understanding arising from shared group membership to communicate the expressions, sentiments, and goals of the group; to establish rapport; to formulate salient questions; and to capture emic perspectives of the participants (LaSala, 2003; Meezan & Martin, 2003). Furthermore, some participants may be more open to engaging in research and be more honest in their reporting with an inside researcher (Hash & Cramer, 2003). Inside investigators also bring special knowledge to their research, which can facilitate data collection and analysis (LaSala, 2003). Such knowledge may be as simple as using context-appropriate terms so as not to be offensive (e.g., *queer* versus *gay*) to recognizing, appreciating, and contributing to fugitive knowledge (Hill, 1996). Fusco (1993), a gay male researcher, provides a salient example in discussing that some gay men in his study “shared confidences about gay life in ways that another gay man could appreciate” (p. 46).

Despite these apparent advantages, being an insider may also present concerns. Inside researchers may mistakenly assume that LGBTQ research participants share common understandings of gay culture, terms, or meanings (LaSala, 2003). Such assumptions may lead to a loss of objectivity on the part of the researcher and a failure to explore each respondent’s unique perceptions. Inside researchers need also have a heightened awareness regarding potential social desirability effects due to LGBTQ participants’ concerns that the researcher will judge them negatively or compromise their anonymity; or given that “oppressed minority respondents may want to participate in research done by an inside investigator because they perceive that the researcher shares their desire to rectify societal misperceptions of their group” (LaSala, 2003, p. 18). Furthermore, in acknowledging the great diversity in the sexual minority communities

and the interplay of other social locations and factors (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, educational level, etc.), Wheeler (2003) reminds us that “even when researchers are members of the target group, based on demographics or other characteristics, the process of conducting the research places them in somewhat of an ‘other’ category” (p. 67).

The point is not to privilege either perspective; indeed “each is weak in and of itself, and if one is favored over another, the research can seem shortsighted or biased” (LaSala, 2003, p. 16). Recognizing the potential influences of both emic and etic perspectives and striving not to operate from either exclusively would seem to be a prudent approach when involved with research on sexual minorities or other marginalized groups. Establishing and sustaining relationships with others—including those with whom we share insider status as well as those whom we might consider as outsiders—may help provide clarity and insight should we attempt to cross borders or navigate insider-outsider tensions involved in such research; for as Narayan (1993) cautions: “all researchers are simultaneously insiders and outsiders to varying degrees” (p. 27).

Sexuality as a Site of Learning

Merriam and Clark (2006) remind us that significant learning in adulthood is most likely to occur informally through making sense of life experiences that occur in the context of social life; consequently, “*any* life experience, then, has the *potential* to be a learning experience”(p. 30). This is as germane to the lives of and experiences of sexual minorities as well as to their heterosexual counterparts. Given that educational institutions and other formal sites of adult learning often mirror dominant societal views and values, issues surrounding sexual minorities are often ignored or regarded as of interest only to those who are other than heterosexual. As a result, nonformal learning

may take on even added significance in the lives of sexual minorities. As this study reveals, learning is infused in each man's narratives indicating that sexuality is indeed an appropriate and essential site of learning (Brooks & Edwards, 1999). This learning is inextricably intertwined with development. These men learned how to struggle through a feeling of difference, and in a sense, to live in and negotiate through two worlds. With typical sources of social support potentially compromised due to a sexually minoritized status and with few publicly out role models, friendships typically served as sources of support and caring; but, importantly, also as sites of informal learning where heteronormative messages and expectations could be unlearned and replaced with new knowledge, new meanings, and new realities that fit their lived experiences.

In many cases, comments about learning were explicit such as recollections of young adulthood and sitting and talking with older gay men to "hear their stories" and "to learn from your elders and appreciate what they went through." Some men described their coming out process as entailing meeting others and "learning how to be gay." The learning encompasses much more than that however, as Joe's examples of making a bed and what type of shirt to wear illustrate. Similarly, Duncan describes just learning "practical stuff" like what his parents had taught him but it took on a different meaning when he learned it from his friends. Scott's increasing interest in learning about gay history that was so effectively rendered out of public consciousness by heteronormativity is yet another example. Much of the learning evident in the men's stories is inextricably intertwined with their developmental pathways—each influencing and being influenced by the other. Furthermore, these men recognize that both learning and development are

ongoing. As Mike notes, he's not afraid of midlife—"it's another learning experience." So too is George's coming out in his late 50s and seeing his life as "a new adventure."

Now at midlife, these men represent survivors of their cohort. Lost forever are many of their peers who for various reasons were unable to successfully navigate through the additional burdens and strife wrought by heteronormativity, and the stigma imposed upon those with a non-normative sexual identity. These men now have tales to be told and scars to be touched. This is what motivates Duncan in trying to advise and mentor his 29 year old nephew, and why it's important for Mike, Steed, and others "to have friends of all ages." Their lived experiences have provided them with ample lessons they can, and are sometimes anxious to, pass along to those who will follow them—and to all who are willing and unafraid to listen.

Implications for Practice

By establishing a link between social science research and adult education regarding the developmental processes and meaning-making strategies of middle-aged gay men, the findings in this study may be useful to practitioners across a wide variety of disciplines to include health care and social services providers; pastoral care counselors, and human resource professionals in workplace settings. Additionally, this study provides insights into the subtle manifestations of prejudice and heterosexism, and on issues and concerns of midlife gay men that can be used to inform corporate boards and policy makers in various fields, government entities, and academia.

In particular, however, this study has tremendous implications for adult educators. It introduces a long-overdue addition to the adult education body of knowledge, and brings often-unsought perspectives into the open. As Hoare (2006b) notes, adults

become more heterogeneous as they age due to differential roles, education, experiences, environments, and inclinations. The findings of this study indicate that with the addition of heteronormativity, such heterogeneity may be even more pronounced in the lives of gay men. The sense of what it is to be gay; the expression of a sexual identity other than heterosexuality; and decisions as to whether to be out in any given context are idiosyncratic and often personal. Nevertheless, adult educators should strive to create a learning environments and curriculum with a broad range of topics to reflect individual experiences.

One key implication for adult educators, then, is the need to recognize the wide diversity among gay men; and to remember that gay men, and presumably other sexual minorities, follow different developmental paths than those typically described in the adult development theories and models which inform adult education. Adult educators must be prepared to meet individual gay men wherever they happen to be on their developmental journeys. Gay men may not be comfortable with the idea of being out in a learning environment; and even if out, might still face difficult dilemmas (Bettinger, Timmins, & Tisdell, 2006). Furthermore, they may still be in exploratory stages or seeking their own personal clarity about expressing a gay identity, or struggling with coming to terms with having a non-normative sexual orientation. As such, this requires awareness, if not a sensitivity, on the part of the adult educator as to unique characteristics or attributes of sexual minorities in general.

From a practical perspective, this includes the challenge of creating supportive environments that create space for varying views and perspectives; yet do not condone or reinforce discrimination, disrespect, or ill treatment; and developing and utilizing

educational strategies and activities that are neutral with regard to sexual identity. One significant aspect of this is the use of non-offensive terminology. Seemingly innocuous words are oftentimes fraught with implicit and unexamined heterosexist and homophobic notions. Thus, it would be prudent for adult educators who are unsure or tepid regarding terms that may be unintentionally defamatory to seek out opportunities for dialogue with gay men and other sexual minorities. Adult educators might also consider capitalizing on the epistemic knowledge of sexual minorities through collaborative activities such as team teaching or through guest presenters when specifically discussing LGBTQ issues. At the same time, adult educators must have a willingness to try to understand the learning needs of gay men on an individual basis—just as is the case with any typical adult learner. Practically, what this means is that it is imperative that gay men not be essentialized and seen primarily in terms of sexual identity with other attributes and aspects of identity overshadowed. Also, as this study has demonstrated, the community of gay men is widely diverse. The experiences of a given gay man should be appreciated and understood as his own, and not necessarily as representative of the entire gay community. As an example, rather than embrace a sense of resistance, the participants of this study largely disavow what they deem to be activist; thus, they might likely find the complexities of queer theory irrelevant to their daily lives. Importantly, the lives and experiences of gay men and other sexual minorities should not be seen through a lens of pity or victimization, nor addressed gratuitously; indeed, the benefits perceived as a consequence of non-normative sexual or gender identity should be acknowledged and celebrated.

While the field of adult education has seen increased discussion and dialogue on sexual identity and heteronormativity in the past decade, it remains the case that “mainstream adult education mimics the dominant culture in its commitment to heteronormative status quo” (Grace, 2001, p. 267). To rectify this, adult educators need to develop a deepened understanding of their own attitudes towards sexual identity difference and heteronormativity lest LGBTQ persons continued to be excluded from the ethos of inclusivity that is so heralded and celebrated in adult education. This can come about through dialogue as Edwards and Brooks (1999) note: “Adult educators have a unique opportunity to create conversations about sexual identity in the adult classroom...sexual identity discussions can enrich our education of the whole person” (p. 55). Failure to do so may lead to developmental changes that rather than moving towards increasingly higher, more mature, and more integrated levels, would be better characterized as decreasing or slipping backward such that “growth-inhibiting responses are learned to protect the self”; and learning from life experiences “trigger changes that represent perspectives that are more inhibited, restrictive, and less developed than before” (Merriam & Clark, 2006, p.30).

By providing a first step in identifying and understanding the unique issues and concerns of a particular marginalized group not previously addressed in the adult education literature, this study helps to explicate how adult educators may be unintentionally colluding in such marginalization and oppression by having “unwittingly adopted a shared view of gay men... that obscures a far deeper set of more important truths...now going on in these lives and communities” (Nimmons, 2002, p.5). Overall, by making explicit how the lives of these men have been and continue to be impacted by

heteronormativity, this study may encourage adult educators to reflect on whether their own belief systems, values, and practice support and perpetuate heterosexism and heteronormativity; or, instead, engender equitable educational opportunities and experiences for all. Certainly, adult educators are entitled to hold any beliefs they choose; however, having a heteronormative or homophobic belief structure does not exempt one from the responsibility for the consequences of one's practice that jeopardize the well-being of those in the educational environment. Thus another implication for adult educators is that it is incumbent upon them to check their assumptions, such as the heterosexist assumption that everyone in a classroom is heterosexual; to consider how they have arrived at certain beliefs, and how these beliefs influence the lives of those with whom they interact; and to be open to new beliefs that may come to supplement or replace previously held ones.

The benefits of a narrative inquiry approach used in this study point to what is yet another important implication for adult educators-- providing space for new or previously silenced voices (Cunningham, 2000; Sheared & Sissel, 2001). Too often educators remain silent on or aloof to LGBTQ issues (Letts, 2002; Page & Liston, 2002). Yet, inclusion of voices of sexual minorities will "broaden the circle" in challenging hegemonic frameworks that shape adult education and critiquing the "philosophical, sociolinguistic, and historical foundations of the field that have made issues of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation invisible in the current 'mainstream' adult education literature" (Sissel & Sheared, 2001, p. 9). New forms of dialogue can engender the networking opportunities so important to ally and coalition building. It may also help to explicate the connections among all forms of oppression (Bedford, 2002; Young,

1988), thereby encouraging the type of collaborative discussion that “crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention” (hooks, 1994, p. 129); and furthering adult education’s aim of interrupting the “cycle of oppression” (Guy, 1999, p.12).

This study also has a significant implication for those responsible for the education of future adult educators as researchers and professional practitioners. Given that neither sexual minorities nor heteronormativity are likely to disappear any time soon, current information about sexual minority issues should be incorporated as a vital component of any adult education course of studies. More and more sexual minorities are opting to live increasingly open lives and demanding full citizenship, due in part to—but also constitutive of—evolving social norms. Whether or not one agrees with Kluth and Colleary (2002) that the responsibilities of educators include a mandate to “challenge exclusionary philosophies or policies to ensure safe, challenging and equitable educational experience for all students in our pluralistic society” (p. 116), adult educators need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to adapt to the tumult and controversy that is inherent in a context of dynamic and rapidly shifting norms; and to manage classroom conflict such that difference becomes an asset rather than a divisive force. Ultimately, each adult educator makes a choice, consciously or otherwise, as to whether to support and perpetuate heterosexism and homophobia; or to work towards achieving a society premised on freedom from prejudice, injustice, and hate. This decision is not without consequence, for as Heaney (2000) reminds us, “the ultimate outcome of our practice is the social order itself” (p. 568).

Implications for Further Research

As is the case with other complex individual and social characteristics and attributes, incorporating a non-normative sexual identity is multi-determined and multifaceted thereby indicating a need for various layers of research and understanding. Yet little is known about the developmental processes of those who subsequently self-identify as gay. The findings of this study offer suggestions for expanded research to mitigate what remains largely a conceptual and empirical vacuum.

Hoare (2006b) sees the integration of adult development and learning as a new area of conceptualization and study, and calls for “an interstitial discipline of adult learning and development...in which adults are seen as those who develop and learn in unison, attributes that together aid in defining their holistic nature”; she continues that this requires “professionals in various areas of study to think about a future in which there is an interwoven discipline of adult learning and development” (p. 21). This echoes and builds upon Caffarella and Olsen’s (1993) much earlier charge to adult educators to contribute to the expansion of the adult development theory base to include other perspectives, lest they “continue to foster images of growth and change that fit only some of the people with whom they work” (p.126). De Vries and Hoctel (in press) maintain that study of aging and developmental processes in the lives of sexual minorities leads to different questions being asked; new conceptualizations being constructed; and more creative and inclusive research. The net effect is a deeper understanding of adult development in general. Furthermore, this type of research has a role in increasing society’s knowledge about and understanding of LGBTQ people (Herek, 1991). This research effort is but one small and preliminary step in that process. It could be

replicated to seek the experiences of other gay men with more diversity with respect to attributes or characteristics that were relatively homogeneous in this study such as religious background and race; and from a broader geographic area. No longitudinal studies of the lives of gay men have been conducted so it would be instructive to conduct follow-up research with the same individuals after an appreciable time interval.

Interesting and compelling studies of this nature involving intergenerational gay men could also provide rich and deeply useful data. The discussions regarding contemporary socio-political issues (gay marriage, HIV/AIDS, the Internet, and ageism) offer baseline data for those interested in exploring age cohort effects. Based on the findings of this study, researchers may want to consider shorter age groupings when designing similar studies. Growing inclusion and shifting representations of LGBTQ persons in pop culture and the rapidity of technological advancement are impacting societal perceptions in dynamic ways such that a traditional 20 year range (equivalent to a generation) may be too broad for exploring cohort effects for sexual minorities.

Use of different data collection strategies such as focus groups and journaling could yield new insights that might otherwise remain obscured. Large scale surveys to include much larger samples could add to the understanding of the interplay of heteronormativity and various cultural or social factors, and the resultant effects on both development and lived experiences. Certainly such research should not be limited to gay men. There is a pressing need to explore and investigate the lived experiences and meaning making processes of lesbians, bisexuals, transgender or trans-identified persons, intersexuals, two-spirited persons, those questioning what had been a previously accepted identity, and all others who fall outside the bounds of heterosexuality. Design

methodologies could include studies of each of these micro-communities; however, as the rift between lesbians and gay men perceived by several participants in this study indicates, there would be merit to look at these groups cross-sectionally as well.

As is already well-established in the literature, individual differences in development are influenced by a host of other social and cultural factors, including (but certainly not restricted to): family relationships (Anderson & Hayes, 1996; Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998); class, culture, race, and ethnicity (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Greene, 1997; Greene & Croom, 2000); spirituality (Johnson, 2000; O'Neill & Ritter, 1992); and geographic area (Smith & Mancoske, 1997). Although evidence of the impacts of most of these factors were embedded in the participants' narratives, none were the specific focus of this study and all warrant further investigation. As an example, this study was conducted in a somewhat conservative area, both socially and culturally, relatively far removed from major metropolitan settings. Such a context could well influence the daily lives of these men. Future studies could investigate how various contexts and the aforementioned factors intersect either singly--or multiply converge in innumerable permutations--with sexual identity to both affect and effect learning and development. One study participant suggested that more research is needed into how gay men meet and form sustained partnerships. Another line of inquiry suggested by the findings of this study is the long-term deleterious effects of unresolved religious tension.

It is important to point out that those whose lives are stung by both heteronormativity and oppression based on a multiple minority status merit elevated priority. In particular, additional research should address aging issues and developmental pathways of sexual minorities of color who must negotiate the "troubling intersections of

race and sexuality” (Kumashiro, 2001); as well as of those who struggle with hegemonic societal notions of ableism (Fries, 2003). Furthermore, collaborative efforts involving researchers across borders of race, gender, ethnicity, and other social locations could generate new conceptualizations and understandings.

Nonetheless, as is commonly the case in research dealing with sexual minorities, the recruitment of participants is a limitation in this study, particularly in regards to the lack of diversity among the participants as far as race, ethnicity, and religion. The recruitment strategies for this study were intended to extend further than those typically overrepresented in research involving sexual minorities, i.e., urban White males who tend to be highly educated, enjoy higher socio-economic status, and who are connected to LGBTQ organizations. Success along these lines was somewhat limited with only one man of color represented, and virtually all participants sharing similar family histories of involvement with mainline Christian religions. However, the men in this study hailed from less metropolitan areas, and included a broader range of educational levels and socioeconomic classes than is generally the case in this type of research. Additionally, the inclusion of one man who is legally blind offered yet another type of perspective not usually accorded attention. The inclusion of these participants who might otherwise fall through the cracks of more traditional recruitment approaches was aided by the use of Internet. This particular strategy, which is seen as a strength of this study, may be especially salient to broadening the range of participation in research with sexual minorities.

Future studies should also reflect diverse theoretical underpinnings and philosophical perspectives to include among others “feminism (in its multiple forms),

critical race theory, queer theory, and cultural studies” each of which “has developed its own criteria, assumptions, and methodological practices” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 157). It is likely that any appreciable progress towards the interwoven discipline that Hoare advocates will likely require new theoretical rubrics and the “blurring of genres” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 164), and “messy...and new experimental works will become more common” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000b, p. 23). Questions of social, political, and personal agency must be situated in this new framework. Of particular interest and relevance to LGBTQ development and learning is the examination of “systems of power relationships used to control sexual behavior or conduct, and through which sexual lifeways are instituted, enculturated, enacted, and reproduced” (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998, p. 264). This necessitates consideration of other types of research to include action research, in which the goal is to effect some sort of change as a result of the study. This may be particularly salient if one’s research goals include the participants developing a deeper awareness of and fostering an active challenge to heteronormativity and its impositions—both in their lives and in society at large. Such research in and of itself will not reconcile disputes and differing interpretations based on deeply entrenched beliefs and values. Based on a simple notion that what has been learned can be unlearned, it does, however, offer avenues for new understandings and the co-creation of new knowledge that may ameliorate the ad hominem nature of such debates.

Final Reflections

Embarking on a doctoral program culminating in this research effort is, in part, a component of my own midlife journey. It has truly been a remarkable trip. Along the way, I have encountered some wonderful guides, and others who have joined me for part of the journey; and brought nourishment and enjoyment in the process. These include faculty members; other graduate students, including my own cohort as well as those from preceding and succeeding cohorts who also have helped light the way; and many friends and associates that I have met at various conferences.

Through this research study, I hoped to contribute to the bodies of knowledge in both adult development and adult education. In the process I also hoped to find out more about myself, and in so doing, to facilitate my continued growth and development. I leave for others who may come across this document to judge the former. But I alone can attest to the latter, and I do so willingly. Certainly I have come to learn much about the research process, about aging and human development in general, and especially about how 13 special gay men are going about living their lives. Completion of this research effort, and more specifically of a doctoral program, may open up further avenues and pathways to explore and navigate. Perhaps more importantly, however, I have a deeper understanding of myself--of what's important to me, and why--lessons that I expect will bode well as I continue my own progression through midlife and beyond.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

ORP USE ONLY: IRB#22880 Doc.#1 The Pennsylvania State University Office for Research Protections Approval Date: 04/25/06 JKG Expiration Date: 03/27/07 JKG Social Science Institutional Review Board

Title: Following Well-Worn Paths and Blazing New Trails: Gay Men at Midlife**Principal Investigator:** Thomas Bettinger**Advisor:** Dr. Edward Taylor

1. **Purpose:** The purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife in a heteronormative society.
2. **Procedures:** Participation includes completion of two interviews with the principal investigator, which will be audiotaped. You will also be asked to provide several photographs, pieces of art, prose, knick-knacks or other things that you find personally meaningful. You may also be asked to review preliminary findings to verify accuracy.
3. **Discomforts and Risks:** There are no risks to participating in this study; however you may experience slight discomfort in being asked questions about yourself, your relationships, and your experiences.
4. **Benefits:** The benefits to you may include an increased awareness of how being gay—and particularly the societal implications of being gay—has influenced the choices you have made, and your life experiences. The benefits to society include an increased awareness and understanding regarding the experiences of gay men at midlife.
5. **Duration/Time:** The interviews will last approximately 1 to 2 hours each. Any clarification or review of preliminary findings would be expected to take less than ½ hour.
6. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Only the principal investigator (Thom Bettinger) will know who you are. If this research is published, no information that would identify you would be written. The only people who will listen to the audiotapes are Thom Bettinger, the faculty advisor (Dr. Taylor), and a professional transcriptionist who will prepare typed transcripts of the tapes. The audiotapes and typed transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at the principal investigator's home, and will be destroyed 1 year after the research is concluded. Please note that the investigators are obligated by ethical standers to report to the appropriate agencies any concerns for a child's well-being. The following may review and copy records related to this research: The Office of Human Research

Protections in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Social Science Institutional Review Board and the PSU Office for Research Protections.

7. **Right to Ask Questions:** You have the right to ask questions and to have questions answered. Contact Thom Bettinger at (717)545-9285 or via email at tyb104@psu.edu; or Dr. Taylor 717-948-6364 or via email at ewt1@psu.edu if you have questions about this study. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact Penn State's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775. If you are interested in the final results of this study, please inform Thom Bettinger. The final results may be published in professional adult education (or related fields) journals over the next few years.
8. **Compensation:** You will not receive monetary compensation for participating in this study.
9. **Voluntary Participation:** You do not have to participate in this study. You can end your participation at any time by telling the person in charge. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer.

Refusal to take part in or withdrawing from this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits you would receive otherwise.

You must be 18 years of age or older to consent to participate in this study.

If you consent to participate in this study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Participant Signature

Date

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

BACKGROUND

- Demographics
- Reflect on and briefly discuss major events or periods of your life: family, love, relationships, work, educational—you can “bucket” this however you want such as “when I was a teenager,” or perhaps “when I changed careers.”
- What were some major decisions you had to make in your life? Larger cultural or societal factors have any influence?
- Identify personal learning that was especially meaningful, significant, or intense for you. Briefly describe the learning, when it occurred and its significance for you.

SENSE OF SELF AS GAY

- What does being gay mean to you? Have you ever used any other terms to describe your sexual identity? If so, in what context?
- Do you think your life would be very much different if your sexual orientation were different? If so, how?
- Can you describe several experiences or situations in which you feel you’ve had to grapple with, or that helped to re-define your understanding of what being gay means?
- Have you ever felt--or do you currently feel--threatened, unsafe, or insecure about your sexual orientation because of your family, religion, society in general, or the media? Can you tell me about a specific example?
- Try to think of a recent homophobic remark or comment that was made to you or that you overheard; or an instance in which you were experienced discrimination based on your sexual orientation. How was your response (internal, external, or both) different than it might have been at an earlier period of your life?
- What sorts of positive experiences would you have likely missed out on if you were not gay? What have you learned as a gay man that makes you emotionally stronger or healthier? Can you tell me about a specific situation?

- Have certain surrounding events, or people help you learn more about yourself as a gay man, or help you feel more comfortable with who you are?
- Can you identify a time or situation when you revealed your sexual orientation to a particular person and it enriched your sense of self? How would you be different if you had not come out at that time, or in that situation, to that person?

MIDLIFE/ DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAY

- Have you ever felt like you missed out on life opportunities or felt “different” because of your sexual orientation? Tell me about one such situation.
- How do you define middle-aged (or midlife), and how has your understanding of the term changed over time? What is your personal sense of whether this term applies to you at this point in your life? Can you tell me about a time when it hit you that you were middle-aged?
- What are some negative stereotypes that you have heard (or seen or read) about being a gay man, particularly an “older” gay man? What about positive stereotypes? How do you think these stereotypes might influence how you feel about yourself, or have impacted decisions or choices you may have made in your life? What has happened in your life that countered these stereotypes?
- What 3 words or adjectives best describe you at this point in your life? Why? How has this changed over time? Do you think others see you in the same way?
- Can you describe an experience in which you felt creative; what factors contributed toward making this happen?
- How has your social experience as a gay man changed as you approached or progressed through midlife? How have your own values changed, if at all, politically? ...spiritually? ...and socially?
- Looking back over the last 5-10 years, how have the following things changed for you; and can you give me an example of each?
 - beliefs/thoughts
 - feelings
 - behaviors
 - goals
- What is important to you in life now?
- How do you imagine these things changing over the next 5-10 years?

- What societal events or changes have contributed to your understanding and experience of what it means to be a middle-aged gay man? (examples if needed as prompts: Internet, TV, AIDS, Stonewall)

EVERYDAY LIFE

- How important are “hot button” items (gay marriage, adoption, military, partner benefits) to you?
- Who are the important people in your life? How would you describe your current relationship with them? Have there been significant changes in the nature of these relationships? Can you describe these changes?
- Who are the people you feel closest to? How do you feel about these people? What kind of support do you get from them, and provide to them? Are these people aware of your sexual orientation? How might your relationships with them be different if they either did or didn’t know of your sexual orientation?
- What sort of interaction and involvement do you have with gay-oriented organizations or activities? What about non-gay organizations and activities? What cultural and social group memberships have you participated in (whether by choice or fate)?
- Discuss how your awareness of consciousness about these different identities has shifted over time. What is happening in the larger cultural context that affects your participation in social groups (e.g., political movements and social change)?
- Describe your current social network for me.
- Recall a time and place that felt spiritual to you. Describe it in detail. What images come to mind when you think of spirituality? How do you define spirituality for yourself? Have your spiritual and/or religious beliefs and practices influenced your attitudes toward sexuality and vice versa?
- Describe three days in your life during the past year. First, a very special day, and what made this day special. Second, a lousy day and what made it that way. Finally, a typical day.
- Imagine that you have recently been given an award for some aspect of your life. Who is the award from, why was it given, and what does the accompanying citation say?

- Knowing what you know now, how might your life have turned out differently if you had it to do over again (relationships, politically, socially, developmentally, etc.)?
- What surprises you most about this part of your life? What are you happiest about? Most unsettled about?
- Based on your experiences, what advice or guidance would you offer to younger gay men so that they know what to expect, and to help them for their transition to midlife in a heteronormative society?
- Describe your view of an ideal environment be for gay men who are approaching or experiencing midlife. What would be important, and what could you do without? How would you express and celebrate your passions, values, spirituality or whatever else is important to you in such a society?
- How different would this interview be had I not been another gay man?

Discussion of art, prose, or other cultural artifacts provided by participants:

- Can you explain how and why this item is meaningful to you? Was it a gift?
Something you made? An award?
- How does it represent you in some way?
- Do others know of its meaning to you?
- You mentioned xxxx...I'm wondering if any of the items that you brought with you are an example of that.
- It seems to me that this item might be a metaphor for yyyy. What do you think?
- Has the significance of this item to you changed over time?
- Is this item something you can or would share with others? If so, with whom and under what circumstances?
- Do you think there is any sort of theme or themes that links the various items that you've provided?

Include in second interviews:

- Have you thought at all about our earlier interview? Discussed it with anyone? Reflected on any of the topics?
- What was the experience like in retrospect?
- Can you give me any additional examples of metaphors or symbols that are important to you?
- Member checking

VITA

Thomas V. Bettinger

Thom has more than 30 years of professional experience across a variety of disciplines including vocational counseling, logistics management, financial analysis, and information technology. For the past seven years, he has specialized in organizational development and organizational change; in this capacity, he provides advisory and management services regarding organizational culture, knowledge transfer and training, and change management.

He holds a bachelor's degree in psychology (B.S. 1975) from The Pennsylvania State University where he was selected to both *Phi Beta Kappa* and *Phi Kappa Phi* honor societies. He was also awarded a master's degree in health education (M.Ed. 1999) from The Pennsylvania State University; and is a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES). He belongs to several professional organizations related to adult education and human resource development; and has presented at numerous conferences on a range of topics to include workplace diversity, issues dealing with sexual minorities, aging and adult development, computer mediated and distance learning, and factors influencing occupational choice.

Thom also is a member of many socially and environmentally conscious organizations, and has served as a hospice volunteer for 18 years. He has been the recipient of numerous Special Act awards through his employment with the U.S. Government, and was also awarded the 2004 Outstanding Graduate Student Award in Adult Education from *The Learned Society of the Whispering Pines*.