

## CHAPTER 25

# Linking Life Course and Life Story

### *Social Change and the Narrative Study of Lives over Time*

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Human development is embedded in the life course and historical time. Consequently its proper study challenges us to take all life stages into account through the generations, from infancy to the grandparents of old age. (Glen Elder, 1998, p. 9).

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a life course perspective in the study of human development has provided a means for addressing the interplay of lived experience and socio-historical context, and the intertwining of subjective and shared meanings that shape lives over developmental and historical time. Grounded in the pioneering work of social theorist Karl Mannheim (1928), the life course approach may be contrasted both with life-cycle perspectives, which have tended to focus on relatively invariant, age-graded stages or phases, and with life-span perspectives,

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which have typically not acknowledged the far-ranging impact of “generation units” spanning some number of contiguous birth-years (Mannheim, 1928) or cohort-generational factors (Elder, 1995, 1997; Kertzer, 1983; Troll, 1970). The life course perspective maintains that developmental pathways reflect the distinctive social and historical changes experienced by members of particular generations and cannot be understood apart from this social and historical context (Dannefer, 1984; Denzin, 1989; Elder, 1995, Settersten, 1999).

Unfortunately, although the life course perspective offers conceptual tools for understanding the collective impact of historical change, there has been relatively less study of either inter-cohort or intra-cohort variation in the ways in which socio-historical circumstances are related to particular lives (Elder & O’Rand, 1995). As George (1996), Rosenfeld (1999), and Settersten (1999) have observed, members of a given cohort react in diverse and often unpredictable ways to social and historical circumstances. For example, the timing of transitions into and out of expectable roles—early, late, or on-time—can influence the ways in which those roles are experienced and can alter the timing of other expectable role entrances and exits. Similarly, individuals react differently to collective misfortune. Further, subgroups of individuals may hold many of the basic values and commitments of their generation-cohort, and yet have a somewhat different outlook relative to their larger cohort. Rosenfeld (1999) referred to such groups as “identity cohorts.”

Study of the life story provides the theoretical and methodological complement to life course study and is necessary for understanding the course of individual lives. Accompanying the shift from a static to a dynamic approach to the study of lives is an increasing interest in the individual life story, which emerges in the interstices of socio-historical conditions and individual life-circumstances. Systematic study has illustrated the ways in which accounts of both the personal and collective past are rewritten over time (Barclay, 1996; Bruner & Feldman, 1996; Schiff & Cohler, 2001; Singer & Salovey, 1993). From earliest childhood to oldest age, we continue to tell stories of our lived experience in order to create and maintain a sense of coherence, integrity and/or identity (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; Bruner, 1987, 1990; Crites, 1971; Gergen, 1980; Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Linde, 1993; McAdams, 2001; Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001; Ricoeur, 1977; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, 1989). Individuals construct meanings from the stream of daily experience, integrating both positive and negative chance events and expectable role transitions (Pearlin 1980; Pearlin & Lieberman, 1979) into a narrative which itself changes across the course of life as a consequence of social and historical circumstances. Even narrative genres and the conventions for telling life stories at particular points in the life course are subject to social change (Elder & Caspi, 1990; Plummer, 1995a; Tonkin, 1992).

This chapter explores the significance of the life story method, incorporated into a broader life course perspective, as a means for understanding the structure and meaning of adult lives. While cohort or generation represents the more general level at which culturally and historically embedded “plots” of the life course are enacted, intra-cohort variation and idiosyncratic life-events give shape to the “differential developmental trajectories” (Savin-Williams, 2001) that make each life story unique. The present chapter focuses on one such differential trajectory, highlighting issues of intimacy among self-identified, single (i.e., without a primary relationship) gay men. Gay and lesbian lives have been among those most affected by the dramatic social transformations of the past half century, and the meanings and experience of intimacy between members of the same-sex have been particularly subject to change (Loughery, 1998). From this example emerge important insights regarding the relationship between socio-historical context and lived experience.

## STUDYING SOCIAL CHANGE: THE EMERGENCE OF A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE

In general, the human sciences have been much more successful in explaining the functions of social norms and institutions than in understanding the impact of historical change upon lived experience. Over the past three decades, however, several related factors have conspired to move issues of social change to the center of social-scientific study. The first factor concerns the rapid changes that gripped American society from the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s. The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War protests, and a major transformation in values relating to gender and sexuality contributed to an unprecedented level of social change in this tumultuous decade, creating a sense of urgency and underscoring the general importance of understanding such change (Gitlin, 1987; Tipton, 1982). One effect of anti-war protests, in particular, was to raise difficult questions regarding constancy and change in values across generations within families and within the larger society (Smith & Haan, 1969; McAdam, 1989). These social upheavals also inspired a new brand of critical social theory, including the important work of Foucault (1973, 1976), which challenged the assumptions of more traditional approaches to the study of social life.

A second contributing factor was the publication of findings from major longitudinal studies (Kagan & Moss, 1962; Jones, Bayley, & MacFarlane, 1971), initiated many decades earlier, which collectively questioned the degree of stability in lives over long periods of time. For example, the work of Brim and Kagan and Kagan challenged the widely accepted notion that the course of development is regular and predictable. Perhaps even more influential was Elder's (1974/1998) integration and reformulation of findings from the several studies at the Institute of Human Development at The University of California, Berkeley. His restudy of two groups of research participants born nearly a decade apart transformed the general approach to birth cohorts from a problem of method (Baltes, Cornelius, & Nesselroade, 1979; Schaie, 1995) to a substantive recognition that social and historical changes, taking place at a particular point in the life course of a particular generation, govern the manner in which members of that generation make sense of a presently remembered past, experienced present and anticipated future.

Extending Troll's (1970) review of the several uses of the term "generation" in studies of the family, Kertzer's (1982, 1983) critique of the concept of generation in the social sciences addressed the confusion in using this term. It has referred to any succession through time, including both ranked descent within the family and also generation unit (Mannheim, 1928). The latter usage failed to recognize that not all those born within some particular span of birth years necessarily share a similar outlook. Kertzer notes that such factors as social stratification and cultural background may lead to somewhat different perspectives on particular historical events among members of a generation unit. However, the quote from Mannheim which he provides (1982, p. 28) clearly presages what Settersten (1999) has portrayed as intra-cohort variation.

Particularly relevant for the present discussion, Mannheim's (1928) concept of generation unit does recognize variation in meanings held by some members of the generation unit, such as sexual minority men. However, in other respects these men may share certain meanings of particular historical events with the rest of their generation-cohort. Kertzer (1982) also maintains that the concept of generational unit doesn't allow for the possibility that lives and outlooks may be altered by subsequent historical events. Mannheim (1928), however, recognizes

that members of a generation unit or cohort may change their outlook on life as a result of subsequent historical and social change taking place across the course of adult life. The meaning of these social changes may be conditioned by historical events that take place at a particular age for members of a generation, typically events during young adulthood. Events occurring during young adulthood may be particularly salient for the formation of identity, including sexual identity (McAdams, 2001; Schuman, Belli, & Bischooping, 1997).

Referring to Elder's approach in formulating the concept of generation-cohort, Kertzer (1983, p. 143) has noted the application of the term generation to individuals living at particular historical periods (and spanning some birth years) in order to facilitate an understanding of the effects of social change on lived experience. The term generation is used in a similar manner in the present chapter. Introducing the concept of "generational cohorts," Elder (1974/1998, 1995, 1996, 1997) has demonstrated that persons of approximately the same age respond similarly to socio-historical change. Elder further distinguishes between *period effects*, or the shared reaction to socio-historical events of everyone encountering them, and *cohort effects*, which reflect the differential impact and interpretation of events depending on membership in a particular generation-cohort and the point in the life course when the events are experienced.

Elder and Caspi (1990) have suggested that there is a range of events likely to have an impact upon individual lives, linking persons to historical context and creating some shared consciousness or collective mentality (Esler, 1984). However, certain events and time periods may be particularly significant for subsequent experience and development. For example, Schuman and his colleagues (Schuman Belli & Bischooping, 1997; Schuman, Rieger, & Gaidys, 1994; Schuman & Scott, 1989) have presented evidence for a "reminiscence bump," wherein historical events occurring in late adolescence and young adulthood remain highly salient in the subsequent personal accounts or narratives of members of a particular generation-cohort. Although everyone presently living constructs meaning out of the stream of historical experience, different generation-cohorts—which experience these events at different points in the life course—may do so in distinctive ways. Another significant contribution of the concept of generational-cohort, then, is that it sensitizes us to the importance of place in the life course for understanding the differential impact of social change.

However, as Ortega Y Gasset (1922), Mannheim (1928), and others (Berger, 1960; Braungart & Braungart, 1986; Knoke, 1984; Rosow, 1978) have observed, the definition of a generation is a complex issue. For example, questions remain regarding the range of adjacent birth-year groups that comprise a generation. Questioning the intellectual justification for using a particular span of years to distinguish between generations, Rosow (1978) has pointed out that it is unlikely that a single year would make a difference in terms of outlook on self and social life. Further, a series of rapid and/or cataclysmic historical events, such as characterized the period between 1965 and 1975, can compress generations, reducing the range of birth years comprising a generation. Settersten (1999) has drawn attention to the intra-cohort differences that are inevitably glossed over in discussions of generation. He suggests that as advantages and disadvantages accumulate over the course of life, intra-cohort variability becomes ever greater. However, there is some agreement that adjacent birth cohorts over a period of roughly 15 to 30 years experience events more or less in common and therefore constitute a generation, distinguished at least somewhat by its fresh or innovative solutions to the problems of social life (Esler, 1984; Kertzer, 1882, 1983; Mannheim, 1928; Rosow, 1978).

Tied to the recognition that development is much less predictable than formerly presumed was the discovery that much of the appearance of order within lives over time was largely a consequence of method of study. For instance, Gergen (1977, 1994) and Gergen and

Gergen (1997) have posed the dilemma of an “aleotoric” account of human development which suggests that lives are founded on unpredictable events that are subsequently reordered so as to render an account of a life story which is experienced as coherent over time. Schafer (1980, 1981) suggested that, even within clinical psychoanalysis, what had been assumed to be a faithful reconstruction of a life history, was actually a collaboration between analyst and analysand that served to transform the latter’s fragmented narrative (Freud, 1909) into a coherent sense of self. Similarly, the emergence of the concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Shay, 1994; Sturken, 1997), and its more general extension to memories of childhood trauma (and particularly sexual abuse), raised important questions about the validity of “repressed” memories. Indeed, research has demonstrated that memories can be induced by suggestion and then integrated into a coherent history (Fivush, Gray, & Fromhoff, 1987; Halbwachs, 1950, 1980; Loftus, 1993, Loftus & Ketcham, 1994; Schachter, 1995; Singer & Salovey, 1993).

In general, shared understandings of the past are reshaped over time as a consequence of social and historical change (Halbwachs, 1950; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Schwartz, 1982, 1993, 2000). Hence, the effort to understand the shared elements of self-consciousness and/or common identities of a generation is greatly facilitated by the comparative study of the life stories of members of different generations (Denzin, 1989, 1997; Dunne, 1995; Plummer, 1995a). Moreover, realizing that each life story is unique, narrative study can illuminate the space between shared understandings and subjective experience. Indeed, in an intellectual climate characterized by post-modern skepticism and the demise of grand social narratives, the life story has emerged as perhaps the exemplary form of contemporary social inquiry.

## THE LIFE STORY METHOD IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

In his review and analysis of the life story approach in the behavioral sciences, Handel (2000) defined the life story as the currently available autobiography reflecting present interpretations of self, others, and relationships and events, which both explains the past and guides future action and intent. McAdams (2001) portrays the development of the ability to construct a complete life story across the years of adolescence. He also shows that we revise our life stories across the course of life in order to maintain a sense of narrative coherence. Moreover, such social factors as gender and social status influence any telling of a life story.

The first-person account, personal narrative or life story is shaped by a complex interplay of distal and proximal social forces, told or written in the context of a particular time and place, and mediated through the relationship between teller/writer and listener/reader. The life story is successively told and retold across the course of life, into oldest age, always with a focus on maintaining narrative coherence (Ricoeur, 1977). Underlying this search for narrative coherence is the presumption that we need to realize order in our lives and are unable to live with uncertainty, ambiguity or radical discontinuity. At the same time, understandings of what constitutes ambiguity or discontinuity may vary across cultures. Moreover, factors such as education may somewhat increase tolerance for ambiguity (Ochs & Capps, 1996, 2001). Nevertheless, within the constraints imposed by culture, we strive over a lifetime to maintain a coherent life story. A life story that is disorganized or rigidly maintained, even in the context of social and historical change, poses problems for adjustment (Ricoeur, 1977; Schafer, 1980, 1981).

Behavioral science study has long relied on life story accounts as evidence, from the traditional research interview (Mishler, 1986) to self-life writing, including memoir and autobiography (Bruner, 1987, 1990, 1993; Bruner and Weisser (1991); Plummer (2001).

Following Bakhtin (1981) and others (Briggs & Bauman, 1992; Schely-Newman, 1999), Smith (2001) observed that stories told to another, in the context of life story interviews (Atkinson, 2002) or oral histories (Tonkin, 1992), represent a genre that is relatively distinct from self-life writing (Cohler, in preparation). Plummer (1995b) further distinguishes between the total life story, which attempts to grasp the whole of a life and/or the essence of the person, and the more focused topical life story that is organized around one or more specific events or issues over the course of life.

Notable contributions grounded in study of personal accounts include: Thomas and Znaniecki's (1918) collection of letters and diaries from Eastern European immigrants to America, and the critique of this work (Blumer, 1946); Dollard's (1935) systematic study of personal narratives; Allport's (1965) publication of letters from his college roommate's mother; Franz (1995), Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph's (2000) presentation of the diary of the 19th century Indian nobleman, Amar Singh, and Stewart, Franz, and Layton's (1988) careful analysis of the writings of Vera Brittain, an Oxford educated feminist scholar; Berman's (1994) discussion of the work of the author May Sarton and other notable women authors; Clausen's (1993) detailed review of the lives of six men and women over the period of more than half a century, and Handel's (2000) report on the life of an urban working-class man. Among the important collections of narrative research are those edited by McAdams and Ochberg (1988) and Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), and the six volumes in the series edited by Lieblich and Josselson.

In general, narrative study has been guided by methodological and epistemological assumptions quite different from the hypothetical-deductive perspective that has characterized so much of social and behavioral research (Mishler, 1990). Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, (1998) identified four distinct approaches to the study of life story narratives. The *holistic-content* approach is grounded in a close textual reading and focuses on salient themes in the life story as a whole. This approach is represented by the case-study or detailed life history, and examples include Lieblich's (1993) account of a young woman's experiences immigrating from Russia to Israel, Cole's (1997) conversations with a troubled civil rights leader, and the above-mentioned work of Berman (1994) and Handel (2000). This is contrasted with a *categorical-content* or "content analysis" approach, which focuses on tagging text and assigning codes to specific content largely irrespective of place in the account. Franz (1995) and Stewart, Franz, & Layton (1988) employ this method in their study of Vera Brittain. This second approach is facilitated by the application of computer programs such as the General Inquirer (Stone, 1966), which codes text into categories based on an internally stored dictionary, or The Ethnograph (Qualis Research Associates, 1999) or NVIVO (Richards, 2002), which provide ready access to particular codes or summaries of codes either within or across life stories.

A third, *holistic-form* method focuses on the structure rather than the content of an account, for instance charting the high and low points in a life story (Back & Bourque, 1970; Chiraboga, 1978; deVries, Blando, Southard, & Bubeck, 2001; Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988; Runyan, 1980; Whitbourne & Dannefer, 1985-1986) or graphically representing the distance between events and/or relationships described in first-person accounts, as subjectively understood by the storyteller and using a particular metric (Josselson, 1996a). Finally, Lieblich et al. (1998) identify the *categorical-form* or "discourse analysis" approach, which focuses on the structure of narrative discourse as contained within the interview transcript and which is most characteristic of the linguistic study of personal accounts (Mishler, 1999; Schely-Newman, 1999; Schiffrin, 2000).

Regardless of the particular approach adopted, much of narrative study has proceeded according to what Mishler (1990) has termed an inquiry-guided perspective, which highlights

the means by which individuals maintain a sense of continuity over time, construct identities, and manage tensions in personal and social life. Inquiry-guided research (Mishler, 1990) is grounded in the close study of evidence as the only appropriate basis for theory, with particular attention to the relationship between author and informant or text. Concerning the veracity and general epistemological status of self-reports, Mishler (1990) has suggested that “trustworthiness” rather than truth must be the fundamental requirement for validation in the social sciences. Given the likelihood of disagreement over the meanings of social life, this perspective allows for a range of possibilities with respect to acceptable evidence and interpretive techniques within a given field of inquiry. This approach to validation assumes that change over time—in what counts as evidence and what constitutes a “good story”—is inevitable, despite the fact that life stories themselves tend to reflect narratives of continuity. Issues of statistical representativeness are not of paramount concern. For example, Bertaux (1981) has observed that life stories become somewhat repetitive in content after a certain number has been collected, suggesting that saturation has been reached and that sufficient evidence has been obtained to address the particular research question.

Consistent with Mishler’s (1990) approach, several other scholars have drawn attention to the reflexive dimension of life story research, suggesting that any account must be understood in terms of the full context of its writing or telling, including time, place and the interpretations made by the listener or reader (Iser, 1978; Kaminsky, 1992). Contemporary study of the life story recognizes that teller and listener are intertwined as a part of a shared activity, co-constructing meaning as a result of their collaboration (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Myerhoff and Ruby, 1982/1992; Ochs & Capps, 2001; Plummer, 1995b; Smith 2001; Tedlock, 2000). Following Bakhtin (1981), Josselson (1996b), and Kaminsky (1992) have both emphasized the plurality of voices that enter into an account, including but not necessarily limited to tellers and listeners. In keeping with reader response theory in literary criticism, which acknowledges that interpretation is not necessarily dictated by authorial intent (Denzin, 1997; Iser, 1978), the post-modern, post-realist social scientist is understood to be an active participant in the research process, a competent interpreter of social life who is reflexively aware of his or her own world view (Geertz, 1973, 1974) and place in the social world, including membership in a particular generation (Mannheim, 1928; Ortega y Gasset, 1921–1922). As Plummer (1995b) has observed, “No life story is simply that: a story. Instead it is built out of a series of social domains surrounding the life story-teller, the psychologist who is collecting the story, and the interaction between them (p. 56).”

Further, the life story changes over time with each successive telling or writing, as a function of both aging and social change, indicating the need for longitudinal study. For example, Novick (1999) and Schiff & Cohler (2001) have documented shifts in the narratives of Holocaust survivors, noting important differences between those accounts collected in the wake of the Eichmann trial and those collected several decades later by Steven Spielberg following release of the film, “Schindler’s List.” Subsequent tellings of collective narratives reflect prior accounts, of course, as well as the confluence of individual-developmental, and socio-historical change (Schiff & Cohler, 2001; Schiff, Noy, & Cohler, 2001). Similarly, the stories of a particular generation-cohort are shaped and reshaped by the shared understandings of both previous and successive generation-cohorts. From a life course perspective, there is little value in assigning causal primacy to either personal life-circumstances or socio-cultural context in the structuring and restructuring of life stories. Plummer (1995a) has suggested a bi-directional causal relationship in which personal stories can also provide a foundation for collective movements and social change, as appears to have been the case with respect to the both the “coming out” stories of gays and lesbians and the survival stories of

victims of sexual abuse. Hence, context, lived-experience and life story are all intertwined in the meaning-making projects of individuals and generation-cohorts (Cohler, in preparation; Schiff & Cohler, 2001).

As an interpretive method, it has been somewhat difficult to integrate narrative study with quantitative social science inquiry, although several researchers have achieved some promising results in this direction. Baerger and McAdams (1999), for example, showed that it is possible to code life story narratives with satisfactory inter-rater reliability on an index of coherence (based on social and temporal orientation of the action, explicit goals and intentions, etc.). Interestingly, this index of coherence was negatively associated with depression scores and moderately positively associated with measures of happiness and of life-satisfaction.

The categorical-content approach to the study of life stories is generally compatible with quantitative analysis. Examples include the work of McAdams and colleagues on generativity (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, Hart & Maruna, 1998), and analytical treatments of the life story of Vera Brittain (Franz, 1995; Patterson & Stewart, 1990; Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1989; Stewart & Vandewater, 1998). Among other things, statistically reliable coding categories enable researchers to study changes within personal accounts such as diaries, fictional writing, or repeated interviews. In the case of Vera Brittain's diary, for instance, a categorical-content analysis revealed a shift from an early-adulthood focus on identity concerns to a mid-life preoccupation with issues of intimacy and generativity, consistent with Erikson's (1982) model of psychosocial development. However, Mishler (1990) has questioned the level of standardization of this coding procedure, and he concludes that such efforts at quantification tend to be somewhat arbitrary and context bound, and hence less generalizable than investigators typically claim.

The holistic-form approach also lends itself to quantitative analysis, since estimates regarding high and low points in the life story can be studied both within persons over time and across groups. The important contributions of an ipsative, idiographic, or morphogenic analysis of holistic-form or life-chart methods have been reviewed by Allport (1965). It is somewhat more difficult to reconcile quantitative perspectives with the holistic-content or categorical-form perspectives, which focus on the integrity of the story as a narrative totality, and which highlight the relationship between listener and teller (Kaminsky, 1992; Tedlock, 2000; Tonkin, 1992) and the manner in which the life story is told.

We applaud the efforts of narrative researchers to formalize the life history method, and while we attempted to be systematic in our own research, we are careful not to sacrifice the integrity and the singularity of the individual life history. With this goal in mind, we attempt in the final section of this chapter to achieve a more thorough integration of the life course perspective and the life story method. Employing an example from the study of lesbian and gay lives, including a narrative illustration from our own research, we explore the intersections of social change and individual subjectivity.

### **LINKING LIFE STORY AND LIFE COURSE: AN EXAMPLE FROM THE STUDY OF GAY AND LESBIAN LIVES**

As we have suggested, the comparative, cohort-generational study of life stories highlights the impact of a changing social context on the shape and course of individual lives. Not only do socio-historical events impact lives in specific and tangible ways, but shared, cohort-and period-specific social understandings and interpretative frameworks also establish the definitional

boundaries of roles, relationships, identities, and hence subjective experience. Graff (1995) beautifully illustrates this perspective in a study of adult memoirs of childhood written between the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, narratives that reflect the increasing subjective salience of categories of social class, ethnicity, and gender in American society.

Moreover, the impact of events cannot be understood apart from their social framing. For example, Elder and his colleagues (Elder, 1987; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Elder, Shanahan & Clipp, 1994) found military service during World War II to be a particularly meaningful and, in retrospect, "peak" experience for many returning veterans. On a structural level, service in the war delayed such expectable transitions as marriage and the completion of formal education, and it provided material support in the form of the G.I. Bill and a booming post-War economy, facilitating a comfortable middle-class life-style. On a symbolic level, participation in the "Good War" provided an enduring sense of pride and source of positive identity. This contrasts sharply with the experience of Vietnam veterans, who were generally younger, and who received an ambivalent and sometimes hostile reception when they returned home from an international conflict increasingly unpopular with the American public. Developmental outcomes for these men in the Vietnam cohort included high rates of homelessness, substance abuse and mental illness, raising important questions about the relationship between social context and psychological well-being.

The study of gay and lesbian lives is particularly well-suited to a comparative life history approach for two primary reasons. First, the social transformations of the 20th century had particularly dramatic effects on the lives of lesbians and gay men. Indeed, in some respects gay history is 20th-century history writ small: from rural isolation to the social realignments associated with processes of industrialization and urbanization; from wartime persecution, imprisonment and torture in the Nazi work camps to the post-war emergence of vibrant gay urban enclaves (Bérubé, 1990); from the heady, indulgent days of "free love" and Gay Liberation to the unimaginable devastation, renewed social stigmatization, and, ultimately, the cultural and political rebirth that followed in the wake of the AIDS pandemic.

Second, the life story has been an indispensable tool in the formation of gay and lesbian communities and lifeways, giving a common, shared voice to a previously unarticulated sense of individual difference and leading to a proliferation of structured opportunities for communal telling and listening. At the same time, the gay "coming out" story has been an exemplar of late-modern narratives, encapsulating themes of "suffering, surviving and surpassing" (Plummer, 1995a, p. 15).

Recent research and theory have highlighted the importance of studying "gay" and "lesbian" lives within the context of shared, cohort-specific understandings of sexual identities and lifeways (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Cohler, in preparation; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Herdt & Boxer, 1996; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). To this end, several life story collections have illustrated important cross-generational differences in the narrative self-understandings of gays and lesbians (Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999; Stein, 1997; Sadowick, 1997). However, with the exception of Sadowick's (1997) report on archival material, this research has relied on present-time accounts, obscuring the impact of developmental and age-related factors on the narration of past events. Indeed, the longitudinal study of life story telling within a given generation is necessary to more thoroughly comprehend the dynamics of change, and to distinguish between cohort- and developmentally based differences.

Nevertheless, given the sheer magnitude of the social shift in understandings of homosexuality, even cross-sectional study can reveal the boundaries of gay intergenerational difference. Following a series of more gradual shifts in the social organization of sexuality during the first half of the 20th century (Chauncey, 1994; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1997), gay

and lesbian life exploded into public consciousness following the advent of the Gay Rights movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s (D'Emilio, 1998; Kaiser, 1997). Inspired by and modeled on the Civil Rights movement, Gay Liberation was ignited in the aftermath of patron resistance to a June, 1969 police raid on the New York gay bar, The Stonewall Inn (Duberman, 1993). This spontaneous protest and the overzealous police response led to a series of riots over the course of several days, inspiring further community activism among a new "gay" generation (although Murray [1992, 1996] and others have argued that the direct influence of the Stonewall Riots has been greatly exaggerated). An anniversary parade and celebration one year later drew a crowd of several thousand men and women to Central Park and became the forerunner of the annual gay pride parades held in many major cities across the United States each year over the last weekend in June.

Although the Gay Rights movement, most potently symbolized by the Stonewall Riots, forever altered the shape of gay and lesbian life, its impact was largely cohort-specific. Not only are different generations defined by different historical moments, but they also react in somewhat distinct ways to the same historical events. This is no less true of individuals who express a same-gender preference (Cohler, in preparation). Herdt & Boxer (1996) identified four distinct historical cohorts of American homosexual men and women, defined by the eras in which they came of age: World War I, World War II, Gay Liberation, and the AIDS epidemic. Although homosexual members of so-called "Generation X" coming to adulthood in the 1990s and the "baby boom" generation both experienced the events associated with Gay Liberation, these events had quite different implications for the lives—and the life stories—of the two cohorts. Further, many of those who were in the generation of the "pre baby boomers," already in midlife at the time of the Stonewall riots, men and women who were more likely to see themselves as "homosexual" than as "gay" or "lesbian," had long-since accommodated their lives to the social stigma they believed was inevitably attached to their sexual orientation (Rosenfeld, 1999). These men and women avoided social opprobrium, for instance, by selecting careers that involved minimal supervision or interaction with coworkers, such as accounting or library science, and which therefore allowed them to "fly below the radar."

By contrast, those men and women who first came of age in the era of the Gay Rights movement were much more likely to view their homosexuality as a centrally defining aspect of their identities, an essentially "ethnic" form of difference that entitled them to demand civil rights and social respect (Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 1999; Sadownick, 1997). While a more confrontational style led to increased civil rights for sexual minorities, it also engendered greater social conflict within the workplace and the larger community and to more overt explicit experiences of discrimination. This is also the generation hit hardest by AIDS. The tragic and untimely deaths of far too many members of this generation would give birth to a new generation defined by its "safer sex" practices and its "queer" politics and ethos.

The self-understandings of different generations of gay men and women, and hence the kinds of stories they tell, not surprisingly bear the imprint of these repeated social transformations. As Kenneth Plummer (1995a) has argued, the gay "coming out" narrative is a genre highly specific to the late-modern, Western, capitalist context. And reflecting broader cultural themes of childhood developmental determinism, contemporary gay and lesbian life stories typically begin with memories of a nameless and strongly felt sense of childhood difference. But it is perhaps changing narratives of same-sex intimate and sexual expression that most profoundly communicate the impact of social change on the organization of the life story.

Summarizing the life stories of 23 lesbians, Parks (1999) finds marked generational differences in the experience of desire and intimacy. The 11 women who were middle-aged at the time of the Stonewall Riots reported feeling isolated and alone during their youth and

young adulthood, experiencing a pervasive sense of stigma. Delayed in the realization of lesbian identities, their life stories are organized around themes of silenced desire. The narratives of twelve women who were young adults at the time of Stonewall reflect an increased sense of personal freedom and sociality. These women self-identified as lesbian at a much earlier age, which facilitated a more timely transition into intimate relationships. In comparing women from this same generation to a group of lesbians who entered early adulthood in the 1990s, Stein (1997) reports that the narratives of the younger women are less explicitly organized around themes of political activism, having come of age in a decade characterized by the increasing privatization of experience (Putnam, 2000). This younger generation of women appears more willing to accept contradiction, inconsistency and ambiguity in their sexual identity stories, moving with greater ease between same and opposite gender partnership. Against the backdrop of the "lesbian baby boom" (Patterson, 1995), many of these young women are also making the transition in greater numbers into parenthood in the context of lesbian partnership.

### LIFE COURSE, SOCIAL CHANGE, AND THE STUDY OF SAME-GENDER INTIMACY

Narratives of gay male desire and intimate expression similarly reflect these historical shifts in the meaning and structure of gay life. Employing archival data, Sadownick (1997) contrasts the narratives of homoerotically inclined men from two generations, men who came of age during the post-war era and men who entered young adulthood in the 1970s. The older generation, many of whom returned from war-time service to seaboard cities, offer stories centered around discrete public sexual experiences and nervous visits to bars in a context of periodic police shakedowns and congressional crusades against homosexuality. These men often found themselves playing the role of sexual detective, decoding little signs and bits of evidence to determine which men were potential sexual partners. These furtive explorations of desire contributed to a disconnect between their experiences of sexuality and intimacy (reinforced by gay male sexual culture, this tendency is something against which many gay men of succeeding generations have continued to struggle [Sullivan, 1998]).

Despite the substantial achievements of the Gay Liberation movement, including the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, the Stonewall generation faced their own particular challenges. As Sadownick (1997, p. 107) reports, many of these men arrived at midlife experiencing a sense of guilt, having outlived many of their contemporaries and believing that their own sexual indulgences in the era of "free love" contributed to spread of AIDS. Twenty years into the epidemic, young gay men's narratives of intimacy and sexuality express a range of themes, from "survivor guilt," to reckless abandon and apathy bolstered by the false belief that current drug therapies have effectively ended AIDS, to the super-charged experience of unprotected sex and "semen exchange" in the context of committed relationships (Odets, 1995).

Today, gay dating, romance, and sexual experimentation occur against a backdrop in which long-term partnership is an increasingly expectable feature of the gay life course (Hostetler & Cohler, 1997; Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). Same-sex marriage and domestic partnership have risen to the top of the gay and lesbian political agenda, despite continuing debate within the community regarding the desirability of "heteronormative" relationship models, and an outspoken group of gay neo-liberals/neo-conservatives is publicly encouraging gay men to give up their sexual adventures and embrace the domestic bliss of committed partnership (Baer, 1981; Eskridge, 1996; Kirk & Madsen, 1993; Rotello, 1997; Sullivan, 1995, 1997).

Dating services, chat lines and online chat rooms, personal ads, and “how to” articles in glossy national gay magazines have emerged to assist gay men in the search for “Mr. Right.” At the same time, somewhere in the vicinity of 50% of all gay men report that they are currently single (i.e., without a primary same-sex relationship) (Bell, & Weinberg, 1978; Harry, 1984; Herdt, Beeler, & Rawls, 1997; Kurdek, 1995). Although the increasing emphasis on long-term, committed relationships would suggest that it is becoming more difficult to be gay and single, single gay men are not necessarily reacting to these emergent norms in a straightforward or predictable manner: some bemoan their single status, while others appear to have adapted quite well. Not surprisingly, their responses are often filtered through a cohort-specific outlook.

Tied to a larger, ongoing narrative study of aging and adult development among gays and lesbians, one of the authors (Hostetler, 2001) has been investigating psychological well-being among middle-aged and older single gay men (i.e., without a primary same-sex partner), with particular attention to the ways in which single status is integrated, or not, into the larger life story. As part of this study, 94 men (35 and over) completed a structured interview, and 20 of these men were selected to participate in a follow up life history interview, with an eye toward representing the diversity of the larger sample. Whereas the focus of the structured interview was on identifying statistical relationships (and more specifically on variables that predict psychological well-being among this population), the life history interviews were employed to (preliminarily) identify narrative themes associated with being more or less satisfied with one’s single status, and with one’s life in general.

Although informed by Bertaux’s (1981) concept of saturation, the primary goal of the qualitative analysis was not to establish additional statistical relationships (i.e., between outcome variables of well-being and particular narratives), but rather to examine through “thick analysis” (Geertz, 1973) the ways in which this particular group of men integrate their single status into their life histories. Among the topics of interest were the ways in which these narrative understandings reflect membership in a particular age-cohort. All interviews were conducted in person, either in participants’ homes, at a Chicago-area lesbian and gay community center or, in one case, at a café. The interviews ranged in length from 1 hr and 20 min to almost 3½ hr. Each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Our general approach to life history interviewing and narrative analysis is a hybrid of the approaches described above. We begin our interviews with a life history exercise (Cohler, Hostetler & Boxer, 1998; Hostetler & Cohler, 1997) adapted from Back and Bourque (1970), Runyan (1980), and Whitbourne and Dannefer (1985–1986). This exercise allows participants to think about and organize their life experience in ways that most make sense to them. Participants begin by working with the interviewer to place four or five specific life-events or general time periods, viewed by the former as personally important, on a chart that horizontally registers chronological order and vertically gauges relative mood or morale from low to high (despite the chronological scale, events are elicited in no particular order). They are then asked to fill in other important events/periods, and to discuss these different events/periods in greater detail.

Although this type of interviewing lends itself to an *holistic-form* analysis, our preferred method of analysis combines Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach, and Zilber’s (1998) *holistic-content* and *categorical-content* approaches, discussed above. Accordingly, the life history exercise is used primarily as a means of orienting the discussion, and is followed by a series of questions covering a broad array of loosely structured topics, giving participants the opportunity to highlight what they see as most important in understanding their lives. These general topics include: experience of being gay, “coming out,” relationships with family and friends, work and professional life, involvement in the community, including the LGBT community, religious background and involvement, ethnic/racial background and identity, experience of discrimination and harassment, feelings about aging, and feelings and attitudes about being single.

The first phase in our data analysis approximated the *holistic-content* approach. We were also guided in this phase by Mishler's (1990) inquiry-guided perspective and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) open coding methodology. We tried to approach each life history interview as if it were a single case study, and not part of larger study, analyzing it on its own terms. However, given our interest in issues of intimacy, we did focus our analysis on some of the following broad thematic areas: satisfaction with single status, overall life satisfaction and morale, perceived social support, relationship history, past and present life goals regarding partnership, and racial and age-related variations in the experience of and attitudes toward being single. One of the authors (Hostetler) was particularly interested in the meaning of being "single by choice," and how this relates to overall well-being. In the second phase we employed a content analysis approach. We looked for common themes in the men's understandings of their single status, and the interviews were then coded with the application of In-Vivo, a qualitative analysis software program (which also allowed us to explore the relationships between different themes and scores on quantitative measures from the structured interviews).

The analysis revealed seven primary themes in the men's understandings of their single status, five of which I discuss here; these themes sometimes overlapped and were not mutually exclusive. The "personal past" and "collective past" themes appeared, respectively, in 11 and 5 of the 20 life histories, and involved the attribution of one's single status to particular developmental/ biographical or historical circumstances (e.g., coming out late in life, the lack of available role models for relationships). Interestingly, while 9 of the 12 white men provided a developmental accounting for their single status, only 2 of the 8 men of color did so, suggesting the hypothesis that the predilection for developmental or ontological explanation may be primarily an artifact of the Anglo-American cultural tradition.

Another theme, "learning from experience," occurred in 7 of the 20 life histories. The men in this category, who were among the most content with their single status, considered themselves to be on a temporary or even permanent relationship hiatus as a result of past experiences (both positive and negative). Although the distribution of this theme was relatively even across age groups, there nevertheless appeared to be a (rather intuitive) age-related dimension. More precisely, the younger men (i.e., under 45) tended to see their single status as temporary, and their narratives express a sense of choice in terms that are more easily recognizable. They are currently "taking a break" from intimate relationships, for one reason or another, but fully expect to freely choose partnership in the future. Unlike their older counterparts, they believe the odds are still in their favor (with an apparently direct relationship between perceived choice and perceived likelihood of finding future partnership, confirmed by the quantitative data).

Another set of themes offer a different perspective on the meaning of being single by choice. The specter of the "loner" looms large in considerations of long-term singlehood, and we might expect the "true" loners to be the most well adjusted to their single status. But although many of the men in my sample possessed characteristics that might qualify them as loners, it was unclear in many cases whether I was dealing with an enduring personality trait or a life-pattern acquired as a result of many years spent alone. Hence, I distinguished between two groups of men, which I label the "loners" and the "aloners." The "loners" (9 out of 20) believe that their single status at least partially reflects a long-standing dispositional or temperamental characteristic, which they trace throughout their adult lives if not back to childhood (and which may or may not be tied to a developmental narrative). These men may see themselves as "too independent," as "control freaks," or they may even be self-defined loners.

The "aloners" (9 out of 20) also fear that they may be temperamentally unsuited for long-term relationships, but, in addition, they report an increasing pattern of social isolation with age that extends beyond the romantic and sexual realms. Hence, it is difficult to determine—perhaps for them as well as for me—which came first, the experience of social isolation or the

posited personality trait. Compared to the “loners,” the “loners” perceive a relatively high degree of personal control over their intimate lives. For the “loners,” being single by choice seems to mean understanding and accepting the limits of their capabilities, taking control by recognizing that they do not have the power to alter the course of their intimate lives.

Although the small sample and the cross-sectional nature of data prevent me from making any general statements about age- and cohort-related differences, many of the narratives nevertheless appear to reflect the individual’s membership in a particular cohort and how this has impacted his experience of being gay and single. Indeed, five of the twenty men explicitly attributed their single status, or at least situated their experience of being single, within the context of particular sociohistorical circumstances. Their narratives illustrate the intersection of idiosyncratic life events and historical circumstances, combining several of the themes discussed above, and they each have a keen sense of historical consciousness.

For example, although Martin and Bennett have very similar narrative profiles in terms of the themes employed, their life histories nevertheless reveal a divergence of worldviews, and their experience of singlehood appears to have been shaped by the era in which they came of age. Martin is a 46-year-old white lawyer who lives alone in a high-rise apartment on the Chicago River. A self-described “party boy” in his youth, Martin has become a bit more socially isolated in recent years, both for reasons of his own choosing and those out of his control. He is somewhat of a workaholic, and he has made a conscious effort to distance himself from his working-class roots (although he is still close to his family). At the same time, he wishes he had more friends with whom he could “just hang out.” Martin’s life has been complicated by a long history of depression and serious health problems, most notably kidney disease and an eventual transplant. Given an uncertain lifespan and a generally negative outlook, he adopted a “live for the moment” attitude with respect to both his career and his personal life, and he never really planned for the future:

I never expected to live much more past 25 ... I decided at 28 that it looked like I would be around for awhile, so I might as well do something.

The arrival of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s only served to intensify his conviction that he would die young:

I think there was an overwhelming sense that we’ll all be dead soon ... One friend of mine used to say, ‘Pass the donuts, we’re all going to die anyway.’

His present-time orientation extended to his experience of relationships, and he claims he never expected nor strongly desired a long-term relationship with another man. Indeed, he appears to have had only one serious relationship, which lasted for approximately 2 years in the late 1970s. But it was not only the sense of an uncertain future, heightened by the cohort-defining AIDS pandemic, that shaped his expectations regarding partnership; Martin “came out” and came of age during the era of Gay Liberation, at which time the idea of “mimicking” heterosexual monogamy was anathema to many gay men and women:

[Same-sex partnership] was inconceivable at that time, the ’70s ... That was the era where 30 seemed incredibly old. I can’t tell you how old 30 seemed ... I never ever conceived of having a husband or whatever. When I was 22 or 25, that part of the community that I hung out with, long-term relationships were just not part of it. The ’70s were for the most part when we all started coming out. A whole lot of that was ‘fuck you’ towards the straight community. ...I’m having a much better time than you could hope to have.

Although he says he is currently more open to having a relationship than in the past, he isn’t actively looking nor does he expect to find one. He says he only wants a relationship if he can hold onto all the things he enjoys about being single, and he suspects he has become

too independent and too self-centered to make one work. Indeed, he recently came to the conclusion that somewhere along the line he more or less implicitly decided to be single:

I've come to the realization that I'm single because that's what I wanted ... Over the years there were a lot of choices I made that sort of insured that I wound up single. Lots of choices.

Remaining single does not mean that he is alone or lonely. He remains engaged in his work, retains close ties to certain family members, travels frequently, and socializes on a regular basis with his group of seven or so close friends. Despite his apparent disinterest in caring for the next generation as a parent or mentor, he appears to be reasonably content. Although he wouldn't mind having more people to "hang out with," he claims that he has "never been more satisfied." He never expected to live as long as he has, and he is surprised and grateful to still be here. And for the first time in his life he is experiencing a "feeling of completeness, wholeness," which, he says, comes from within.

Bennett is a 77-year-old white, retired social worker who has lived alone for many years in a large apartment in the heart of one of Chicago's most exclusive neighborhoods. Neither Martin nor Bennett could accurately be described as loners, but both men have nevertheless become more isolated as they have aged (hence the classification as "aloners"). Bennett is a Chicago native whose childhood unfolded against the backdrop of the Great Depression. He served in the military during the World War II, at which time he had his first sexual experience with another man. Upon returning from the war, Bennett experimented with several jobs before settling into his career as a social worker.

Bennett's gay life has been very secretive for the most part, and the few relationships he has had with men have been very circumspect. He came of age in the era of the "closet homosexual" (Herdt & Boxer, 1996), and he never expected or desired to lead an openly gay life. Given this cohort-specific outlook, the very idea of a long-term same-sex relationship strikes him as somewhat absurd:

Gay relationships] never had any appeal. Certainly now I know a lot of gay couples, but I don't think I will now throw rocks at the partnership bit, but to me it is too new for me to be identified with ... I think there should be spouse insurance, partner insurance, whatever you want to call it. That's ok, but I suppose for the marriage thing I'm just too old fashioned.

He claims he always "dated girls," but these relationships were non-sexual. Two additional factors shaped his experience of intimacy. Like many of his contemporaries he had an affinity for married men, who were commonly viewed as more desirable than overtly homosexual men (Chauncey, 1994), albeit less obtainable. He reports that he had three "love affairs" with other men, all of whom were married. These relationships were primarily sexual, and included a 10-year, on-again, off-again affair with a man in England. Although many of his gay friends were also married, he claims he never wanted this for himself. He attributes this conviction to his parents' bad marriage—a final factor contributing to his view of relationships:

They stayed married their entire lives. It was a Victorian marriage. They weren't good friends and...they had almost nothing in common...We could never figure out why they got married

He sums up his feelings about intimacy and relationships in the following way:

I didn't want to go into the sunset holding anybody's hand, OK...It's been pretty consistent because the person I was in love with is almost invariably married. I really never have had any desire to get married because my parents made marriage look boring. I've lived alone too long. I couldn't stand it.

Like Martin, he claims to be "perfectly happy" with his present life. He continues to indulge a lifelong passion for travel, and has a particular fondness for London, and he remains

quite involved with charitable work. However, in recent years he mourned the death of his closest friend, and his social network continues to shrink. And there remains the slightest hint of regret in his voice, perhaps expressing a sense of what could have been. This is most apparent in his evocation, on more than one occasion, of the “walking into the sunset” image, as in the following exchange at the completion of the interview:

Q: Obviously you’re not waiting for Mr. Right?

A: Not unless somebody rises from the dead...

Q: By which you mean somebody who you know from your past?

A: Yes. And there could be no relationship that could touch those, straight or gay... I mean I suppose we could hold hands like Brandon Scott and Cary Grant and go quietly into the sunset. No.

The purpose of these two very attenuated life stories is not to examine the reasons or “causes” for the chronic single status of these men, nor is the primary goal to prove that singles can be happy and well adjusted. Rather, the point of this very specific example is to demonstrate the broader value of the life story method for exploring the interplay between individual subjectivity, diverse developmental trajectories and sociohistorical circumstances. Both of these men make sense of their experience as single gay men through a complex interpretive framework that weaves together idiosyncratic live events, particular self-perceptions and shared and largely cohort-specific understandings of a constantly changing social world. The “success” of a life story can be judged, at least in part, by the extent to which the story-teller accomplishes this integration. The success of the life story researcher can be recognized in his or her good faith effort to represent this sometimes fragile, and always dynamic meaning-making process.

## CONCLUSION

The emergence of a life course perspective represents both a methodological and substantive advance in the study of lives, highlighting the ways in which a seemingly natural life course is shaped and reshaped by social and historical forces. Men and women of roughly the same age constitute a convoy of consociates (Plath, 1980) traveling across the course of life, negotiating social change together, and co-constructing meanings from the stream of lived experience. These meanings are reflected in both told and written accounts (Mannheim, 1928; Ortega Y Gasset, 1921–1922), and thus study of the life story provides an important theoretical and methodological complement to the life course perspective.

The life story method highlights the often-ignored problem of intra-cohort variation, and offers a means by which to explore the interplay of sociohistorical context, individual subjectivity and lived experience from childhood to oldest age (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). The life history interview and such forms of self-life writing, as memoirs, diaries, letters, and autobiographies, become important tools in the effort to understand how life-phases and life-transitions are fashioned into a coherent account of a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future to provide a continuing sense of personal integrity. Analysis of life history data can proceed along several different paths, but is typically informed by an inquiry-guided perspective (Mishler, 1990), which focuses on the means by which individuals maintain a sense of personal coherence and continuity over time. Finally, the comparative, inter-cohort study of life history narratives can illuminate the impact of social change on the shape, course and epistemological framework of different “lifeways.” In sum, the life story represents an exemplary method for studying the ways in which history and life course shape subjectivity.

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