Identity and Story
Creating Self in Narrative

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MAKING A GAY IDENTITY: LIFE STORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A COHERENT SELF

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More than most people... we had to invent ourselves out of whole cloth... We had the freedom to self-define, a sense of ourselves as recording and witnessing what had only been shadows before, present at the creation of something unheard of. (Monette, 1994, pp. 205–206)

Social and historical circumstances provide the fabric through which life stories are woven. Life writer Paul Monette (1994), consistent with the observations of sociologist Ken Plummer (1995, 1996), is keenly aware that his personal narrative is grounded not only in remembered personal experience. Rather, his identity—as realized in his life story—is uniquely constructed in a particular time and place, a cultural and historical context that allows for particular identity possibilities.

The construction of a personal identity, as with all aspects of human development, occurs within a distinct historical, social, and cultural context (Elder, 1974, 1996; Elder & Caspi, 1990; Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Identity represents a historically relative measure of the meaning made of life experience, always infused with context-dependent possibilities and endlessly diverse forms. Nonetheless, shared understandings of the meaning
of life experience emerge among members of a generation-cohort who share particular historical, social, and cultural contexts of development (Elder, 1974, 1996; Mannheim, 1928/1993). There is also intracohort variation that is based on such factors as gender, social status, geography, and sexual orientation (Griffin, 2004; Sears, 1991; Settersten, 1999). Possessing and embracing an identity of contested social status, gay men and lesbians have developed a particular narrative of development counter to that of the master heteronormative narrative (Bamberg, 2004; Plummer, 1995). These counter narratives, which focus on the emergence of a gay identity, are rewritten by subsequent cohorts of sexual minorities in the context both of social and historical change and the prevailing counternarratives of gay identity available at a particular cultural moment.

This chapter explores the interplay of social change and life writing in the construction of a gay sexual identity through the life stories of three men of different generations. We suggest that these life stories reveal the social, cultural, and historical basis of gay identity. We define a gay identity as the assumption of a particular sexual story, one in which same-sex desire is fully realized and integrated into the life story through social practice. Rather than being an achieved status, we view gay identity as a narrative rooted in sexual desire but motivated by social practice. Our approach to the study of these life stories follows that portrayed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) as holistic-content analysis. This approach views the narrative of a life as a whole and identifies themes, turning points, important characters, key relationships, and key events.

Following a brief theoretical overview in which we further develop a life-story perspective on gay identity and demonstrate its relationship to other social science perspectives, we consider in detail the life stories of Paul Monette, Tim Miller, and Kirk Read. We have selected these particular narratives following guidelines suggested by Plummer (2001), choosing life stories of men writing about self and sexual desire that are information rich within a readily identifiable historical context. In this way, we were able to focus on the role and salience of generational cohort in constructing gay male identity. Clearly, no claim can be made that the self-authored accounts chosen for analysis in this chapter are representative in any statistical sense of their generation of self-life writers seeking sex with other men. Rather, our analysis is meant to both develop and illustrate a particular theoretical perspective on gay identity and the gay male life course. In addition to being information rich, the accounts selected for discussion have been included on the basis of two other criteria. First, the personal account had to be entirely self-authored by a man living in an American community. Second, the life story had to include the course of life as a whole from childhood to the time at which the account was written, based on a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future. An analysis
of these three narratives reveals the cultural and historical nature of gay identity in late modern times. We conclude with a discussion of the changing gay and lesbian life course, which itself creates a new context within which narratives of identity are constructed, maintained, and shared.

**LIFE STORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF A GAY IDENTITY**

Bridging psychological and social perspectives on identity, the narrative framework of identity emphasizes the significance of social context in the agentic process of narrative self-construction from adolescence through later life (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 1983). In particular, the life-story narrative approach to identity has gained considerable prominence in the psychological study of lives in context (e.g., McAdams, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2001; Mishler, 1999). In this perspective, identity is maintained over a lifetime through the activity of telling stories about ourselves (Bruner, 1987; McAdams, 1997). Personal identity itself is constructed in the creation and sharing of the life story.

Beyond this psychological perspective, this performative or social practice theory of identity, which we argue is fundamental to the narrative construction of gay life stories, resonates with recent important scholarship in anthropology (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998), sociology (e.g., Plummer, 1995), and gender studies (e.g., Butler, 1990). Reminiscent of earlier sociological perspectives (e.g., Mead, 1934), these perspectives are united in their vision of the self as socially understood and socially maintained in reference to a larger collective. The discourse of a given culture, which itself reveals systems of social power and organizes spheres of personal and collective identification (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978), infuses the life stories of individuals who share particular experiences. The act of writing the life story mobilizes the discourse of identity in social and historical context and, in the process, itself represents a performance of self.

Gay and lesbian life stories reveal significant transformations in the cultural context of identity construction. Life stories of gay identity have shifted dramatically across the post–World War II period as a consequence of larger social changes (Cohler, 2006; Parks, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2003; Sadownik, 1997). In particular, the emergence of the gay civil rights movement following the Stonewall Inn riots in 1969 (see Clendinen & Nagourney, 1999; D'Emilio, 1983/1998; Duberman, 1993) and the AIDS pandemic within the gay community circa 1981 (see Odets, 1995; Shilts, 1987) fundamentally altered the gay and lesbian life course. These significant historical events, then, created three distinct generations of gay men.

Gay men born in the 1930s and 1940s, coming of age in the time following World War II, experienced a time of social conservatism and
stigmatization that fostered a hidden, subversive sexual identity. Men born in the decade of the 1950s who came of age in the 1970s experienced a time of enhanced acceptance for gay identity, as well as a series of political changes that led over the ensuing decades to "virtual normality" (Sullivan, 1995). Tragically, large numbers of gay men from these generations succumbed to AIDS before the emergence of life-prolonging treatments. A third generation of men, born in the 1970s and 1980s, came of age during the 1990s and for the most part have been spared the ravages of AIDS (now largely controlled in the United States and throughout the western world through antiviral medication) and have enjoyed a time in which being gay is but one of several (relatively) permissible sexual "lifeways" (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998). From the mid-1990s to the present, the emergence of the Internet as an interactive media form has provided a number of sites in which gay men and women have archived their own life stories (Cohler, 2006). The possibility of new technologies, which unite marginalized communities, creates yet another historical shift in gay and lesbian life experience.

THE GAY SEXUAL IDENTITY STORY: GENERATION AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

Narratives of sexual identity represent constructed stories of self-in-action. A central focus in gay and lesbian identity narratives is frequently the disclosure of same-sex desire, commonly referred to as "coming out" (Savin-Williams, 1998, 2001). Whether represented as a choice (as is more common in the lesbian life story) or as the realization of some intrinsic process (Whisman, 1996), the gay identity story is learned through discourse, including both conversation with others and reading about gay identity. When speaking of gay identity, it is important to note that we refer not to the internal sociosexual affect that determines one's sexual orientation. In arguing that gay identity is constructed in the discursive act of storytelling, we refer not to the construction of internal desire. Rather, we are concerned with gay identity as a culturally and historically bound narrative of self maintained in social practice (see Hammack, 2004). This practice, we argue, is always historically situated and dependent on the cumulative social and political activity that transforms societal attitudes toward homosexuality. As a consequence, gay and lesbian life stories reflect changing narratives of identity that are rooted in sociohistorical processes.

The very act of telling or writing the identity story is thus itself a social practice. Extending the position adopted by McAdams (1997) in his discussion of the identity narrative, we argue that telling or writing an identity narrative constitutes a performance or social practice. Writing their
life stories backward, gay life writers have an opportunity to remake their own identities in the light of social change taking place across their life time. At the same time, these life writers also understand social changes based on their own life experiences growing up in a particular generation (Bruner, 2002; Cohler, 2006). The act of writing the gay life story, of making public one’s narrative of identity, both reveals and contributes to the cultural transformations that provide the foundation for new life stories.

STIGMA AND MAKING A SUBVERSIVE GAY IDENTITY: THE TROUBLE LIFE OF PAUL MONETTE

The decade of the 1960s marks a turning point in American society. The optimism and social commitment of John F. Kennedy’s “Camelot” at the beginning of the decade turned into a time of brooding reflection by the end of the decade in the wake of controversy over the Vietnam War and multiple political assassinations, including the president himself and leading civil rights scholar and activist Martin Luther King Jr.

The cultural zeitgeist in American society was highly charged with political and social liberalism, which resulted in such cultural phenomena as gender-role questioning and sexual liberation. Into the midst of converging social movements emerged the gay civil rights movement, commenced with the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969 following patron resistance to police harassment of a gay bar and characterized by a growing sentiment toward political activity among gay men and lesbians (D’Emilio, 1983/1998; Loughery, 1998).

The homophile movement, which sought acceptance of gay men and lesbians as legitimate members of society, shifted from the secrecy and social integrationist stance of the Mattachine Society to a politically active, visible stance characterized by the Gay Liberation Front. This era also witnessed the emergence of social science research on homosexuality, with the widespread view of homosexuality as mental illness, despite Evelyn Hooker’s (1957) pioneering study revealing no relationship between sexual orientation and mental health.

Monette came of age in this era and died of AIDS in 1995. Having buried two partners, only to succumb to AIDS himself, he was at the very epicenter of the epidemic. Monette first wrote an account of the illness and death of his lover Roger (Monette, 1988) and then a National Book Award Prize memoir of his life from childhood through young adulthood (Monette, 1992), even as he was suffering the ravages of AIDS. These two volumes and a posthumous collection of essays (Monette, 1994) reflect what Plummer (1995) has characterized as establishing a “home” that leads to a new identity and a new community. Monette’s writing is replete with discussions of homes, both literally and figuratively.
Most significant to his identity was Monette’s role as a gay activist following Stonewall. Providing enhanced freedom to self-define oneself as gay, Stonewall was, for Monette, accompanied by “a sense of ourselves as recording and witnessing what had only been shadows before; present at the creation of something unheard of” (1994, p. 206). Central to his identity was the assumption of this role as gay activist. Monette was born just after World War II, and came of age as a gay man in the late 1960s, and was a part of the visible gay sexual community emerging in the 1970s. Thus, Monette was in the midst of the generation of gay men at maximum risk for AIDS, which was silently transmitted across the 1970s and identified as the “gay cancer” in 1981.

The course of Monette’s life, however, reveals a troubled internal struggle to reconcile his gay desire and a persistent self-denial. This struggle, which was so characteristic of gay men in Monette’s generation, is not surprising in light of the highly stigmatized nature of gay identity at the time. Social stigma continues to influence the course of gay lives, complicating the possibilities of optimal development (see Plummer, 1975). But gay identity was particularly stigmatized and largely clandestine in Monette’s time. Considering his own life and that of his generation, Monette noted that he “wrote from a place of invisibility. . . . We had to invent ourselves out of whole cloth. . . . In those early years of the seventies a literature slowly began to coalesce around our fundamental uniqueness” (1994, p. 205). The invisibility of stigma among gay men creates what sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) termed a spoiled identity—one in which there is a discrepancy between one’s actual identity and one’s virtual or perceived identity. The keen awareness of one’s identity as in part spoiled in social interactions, in which heterosexual identity is typically assumed by the performers in an interaction, created within Monette a deep internal conflict.

As a youth, Monette realized that his life story could not accommodate his gay identity, and he thus disguised his sexual identity over a number of years. Outstanding school performance, popularity with classmates, and a charitable attitude toward everyone characterized his attempts to fit in and meet the expectations of family and school. A “townie” from a working-class family, Monette attended Andover, where his talent for classical languages led to a scholarship to Yale. At Yale, he carefully avoided any association with the furtive gay community. Monette lamented his missed opportunities at escaping from his pose as a heterosexual man. He reported that he yearned to go into a local gay bar but was terrified that he would be seen by someone who knew him. His adolescence and early adulthood were thus characterized by self-denial, suppression of sexual desire, and the false assumption of a straight identity.

Monette’s final year at Yale marked the height of his loneliness. Just shy of his 21st birthday, he narrated his autobiography in a senior ceremony
at his club, acknowledging his frustration with prep school, his struggles with his brother's infirmity due to a birth defect, even hinting at his own dark mood. The one aspect of his life that he could not reveal, which remained silent, was the one that would make the story complete: that he was gay. It would be another 8 years after this ceremony before he could acknowledge his same-sex desire. Selected to write the senior poem for graduation at Yale, he noted that only a gay reader would have been able to decode the messages of his lost loves across his Yale years (Tierney, 2000). Monette's narrative of this period of his life reveals the inner turmoil that characterized many gay men of the Stonewall generation. At a time of heightened sexual exploration for heterosexual men, gay men in Monette's generation experienced adolescence and the college years as highly problematic, unable to reconcile their desires with the social identity categories available to them and the accompanying behavioral possibilities.

Gay men of Monette's generation, coming of age before the era of the "sexual revolution" in the United States, suffered from the absence of any available social role for their identities. Their spoiled identities were founded on a deep division between their internal, psychological experience of self and the role possibilities of their culture. If identity is understood in and through social interaction, as sociologists have long argued (e.g., Goffman, 1959; McCall, 1987; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Mead, 1934), a particularly strained identity formation process is intrinsic to those who cannot escape a spoiled identity. The roles available to an individual are always historically and culturally bound, and they reflect the structure of society in the identity possibilities they confer (Brekhus, 2003; McCall, 1987; Stryker, 1987). In the absence of any positive social role to assume, Monette's narrative of self-suffering seems socially inescapable and is representative of the experiences of his generation of pre-Stonewall gay men.

The experience of a spoiled identity seems likely to create states of internal discordance, as one works to manage the discrepancies of inner and outer spheres of experience. Following graduation from Yale and becoming an instructor at a New England boys' school, Monette found himself obsessed by a handsome, successful, and heterosexual aspiring young poet. Driven nearly mad with desire for this young man, Monette reported that he hit bottom. He sunk into a deep depression, which he connected with being gay. His confidantes urged him to begin psychotherapy. Monette was mesmerized by his sessions. He found the source of his shame connected with the body shame his family expressed when his younger brother was born paralyzed.

Monette's memoir ends in Los Angeles, after he lost two lovers and was himself succumbing to AIDS. He concluded that "it's hard to keep the memory at full dazzle, with so much loss to mock it" (1992, p. 278). He consoled himself with the realization that it is possible for gay men to have
real loving relationships. Monette observed that the inscription “died of homophobia” which he had thought of putting on his former lover’s headstone would instead be put on his own headstone, with the addition “murdered by his government.”

In his posthumously published book of essays, Monette (1994) wrote much more explicitly about the failure of the U.S. government to make known the scourge of AIDS, its failure to act on behalf of public health or to support research on a cure. His identity now was that of an AIDS patient. As he observed, “AIDS has taught me precisely what I’m writ in, blood and bone and viral load” (1994, p. 114). He lamented that the epidemic never need have happened if the federal government had not suppressed the facts to the population at large. He noted that his goal in this final book of essays was “to look at the vectors of my life, the people and the places and politics that had stuck with me, resonant still despite the deluge of the last twelve years of calamity. How had it changed the way I look at things? Had anything survived intact? And did anything mean the same anymore?” (1994, pp. 302–303). Monette felt the pressure to document the impact of AIDS on his generation because, as he observed in perhaps his last published words, AIDS had happened “on his watch” (1994, p. 309).

Monette’s life story centers most prominently on his lifelong attempts to make the invisible visible—first, the process of coming to terms with his same-sex desire and eventually coming out gay, then coming to terms with having AIDS and disclosing it to the gay community in which he became so active. Missing in this discussion is an understanding of the source of Monette’s personal strength that was reflected in his determination to combat prejudice and silence. With his illness, he was able to focus on the importance of finding one’s desire and writing about this desire in the context of his time. The historical conditions of his life course—the intense stigmatization of homosexuality in the social ecology of his youth, the eventual gay civil rights movement, and AIDS—offered the social possibilities within which he made a gay identity. His life story, replete with psychological suffering and culminating in a premature death, typifies the Stonewall-era gay identity.

CREATING THE GAY IDENTITY THROUGH ACTION: TIM MILLER’S PERFORMANCE ART

Born in 1958, Tim Miller came of age in the post-Stonewall late 1970s. Although AIDS is a significant element in his narrative—his fear of becoming infected, his work in ACT-UP, the loss of friends to the
disease—he somehow, almost miraculously, remained negative for the HIV infection. With a background in theater, Miller is best known for his one-person shows based on his life story and for developing a performance art piece that controversially won him a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). However, government pressure led the NEA to withdraw grants to artists and performers with a gay theme in their work. Ultimately, this decision was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled against Miller and three fellow artists on the ground that "standards of decency" are material in the decision to make an award in the arts and that these standards do not violate the constitution’s First Amendment clause.

Miller’s performance art is autobiographical and confessional, tracing his acceptance of his gay identity and his transformation from self-preoccupation with his body and sexuality to the capacity to be a reciprocal and intimate lover. He views his body as an extension of his activity as a performer, and inevitably during the course of his performance takes off his clothes and wanders naked into the audience. Following the performance, he joins his audience in the lobby where he hugs old friends, autographs his books, and continues to regale the gathered crowd with his adventures. Pictures from his performance are included with each chapter both of Shirts and Skin (1997) and Body Blows: Six Performances (2002). Most recently, Miller has produced videos featuring his performance in which he enacts his life story as told in his books. In these ways, Miller has created his gay identity through practice.

In Shirts and Skin, Miller reported that he has kept a journal each day since the fifth grade and views his writing and performance art as inextricably bound to making a gay identity. He writes and performs as an activist, with the goal of fostering both his own and others’ gay identity. Miller shares with Monette frustration and anger toward the U.S. government. Although Monette’s anger centered on the failure to properly deal with the AIDS pandemic, Miller’s is more personally focused on the denial of same-sex domestic partnership. Miller explicitly acknowledged the impact of Monette’s (1992) memoir on his own writing and his own construction of a gay identity. This admission on Miller’s part reflects the intergenerational interplay of reading and writing in the construction of a gay identity. As such, Miller’s story shares some similarities with Monette’s, rooted in a master narrative of gay identity, but it diverges because of its historical context.

Miller’s life story begins at age 5, with the story (and accompanying photo) of him being dressed in a trainman’s coverall. So commences his theme that skin can be changed by putting on a shirt—a metaphor for accepting through practice a gay identity. This theme of clothed and naked, and of making a gay identity through practice, pervades both his memoirs.
and his performance art. Miller grew up in a middle-class community, repressed and conventional. Although he had tried to be heterosexual, kissing a girl on an amusement park ride and spotting the boy of his early adolescent desire at the same moment, he says he knew at that instant that his tenure as a heterosexual boy would be brief.

By the time Miller was in high school in the early 1970s, the era of rapid social change in American society had already taken hold. He excelled in school, particularly in German language, where his lesbian teacher taught him the irregular forms of the verb to be: "I am. I was. I will be" (1999, p. 29), which he connected implicitly to his stewing gay identity. However, it was only in 1975, when he was in his senior year of high school, that Miller finally understood that he liked boys. In an incident that is both the title of his memoir and the story of Miller's performance, he tells about his physical education class in which there were two sports teams drawn from the class. To distinguish one team from the other in warm, sunny southern California, one team would remove their shirts. Feeling his body inadequate to display, Miller always hoped that he would be a "shirt," yet he generally ended up as a "skin." He realized then that he was "on the skins' team for life. I could cover up and slip into different shirts and disguises, but underneath it all I would always be there with the other boys who were stripped bare. We would always be recognizable as a different team" (1999, p. 25). This theme of being bare is a major moment in Miller's performance art as well—getting out of his clothes and being naked is understood as being genuine and expressing his solidarity with the gay community, of being on the skins' team.

Meeting a man in college who became his first boyfriend, Miller was encouraged by his boyfriend to take up dance. Later, he moved first to San Francisco and then New York, looking for an affirmative gay community and at the same time developing his theatrical talent. Discovering quite by accident a dance movement studio, Miller was swept up by the combination of movement art and sex; no part of his life or body was off-limits as he and his group explored the outrageous. By the early 1980s, Miller was engaged as a journeyman carpenter by day and performed in ever more radical theater by night. The expression of his gay identity in his performance art was coupled with his increasing political activism.

Miller's portrait of gay desire at this time was of an inevitable, perhaps fatal, attraction between two young men. Getting together with John, another gay radical performance artist, Miller rushed headlong into a relationship. Over the next year, the pair chronicled the course of their relationship in a series of performance pieces. When the relationship ended, the final break-up was portrayed on stage with the pair removing their pajamas, announcing that they were going to burn and bury them, and then walking naked off stage.
During the period of the breakup, after this performance but while they were still having sex, John began to bleed during a routine dentist appointment (a symptom of his disease), was hospitalized, and was dead of AIDS a year later. Believing himself not fit for a stable relationship, Miller sought anonymous sex with men who were strangers on lower East Side rooftops. He went to England for a time, and when he came back the AIDS epidemic had begun in earnest. Sex and death became connected. As Miller so acutely observed, “For gay boys who had always felt ourselves ‘tested’ by parents, priests, and our gender, to have to submit our blood to the big pass-or-fail seemed fit for a soap opera, the Old Testament, or a little kid’s nightmare” (1999, p. 206). Ultimately, Miller tested negative for HIV and began a round of sexual experiences that he believed he made up for the crimped sexual explorations of his early 20s, cautiously engaged in for fear of AIDS.

With friends and former lovers dying in New York, Miller moved in 1986 to Los Angeles and began a complex relationship with a new lover. As the AIDS epidemic exploded nationally and globally, ACT-UP was organized to make the public aware of the danger. Miller and his lover, writer-turned-gay therapist Doug Sadownick, were in the midst of the political movement. Miller used his skills as a performance artist to attract attention to the cause. Anger, rather than fear, represented the sentiment in his art and political work at the time. In the late 1980s, when hospitals were still reluctant to deal with AIDS, ACT-UP forced the issue into the open. For Miller, the ACT-UP demonstrations occurred only months after John’s death—memories of his body a mass of sores—and hence assumed an extremely personal quality.

Miller’s life story shares with Monette’s an early awareness of difference because of same-sex desire, accompanied by feelings of shame. But Miller’s story diverges considerably from Monette’s in late adolescence. Miller accepted his fate as gay—destined to be exposed—and thus constructs his life around realization of a gay self. His decision of where to live and work (New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles) is intimately connected with his longing for an accepting community of other gay individuals. His gay identity becomes the primary organizing element in his life, entirely consuming the nature of his work and his growing political activism in response to AIDS. In this way, Miller’s and Monette’s life stories end up converging again, once Monette had accepted his underlying desire. Key to their divergence in the life story—Monette’s suffering contrasted with Miller’s earlier embrace of his gay identity—is the dissimilar historical and social contexts of important turning points in their life course. Consider the college experience for each man. Monette’s late adolescent years are replete with serious depression over his spoiled identity. For Miller, however, society had changed considerably since Monette’s college years. The inevitability of a spoiled identity
had significantly diminished with rising cultural awareness of sexual diversity and the degeneration of traditional sociosexual roles. By Miller’s time, it was socially legitimate to be gay. By no means was it entirely socially acceptable, but the secrecy of Monette’s era is no longer the modal gay experience. Stonewall and the gay civil rights movement, of which Monette and men of his generation were so intimately a part, had forged a new sociohistorical context for gay identity.

Being gay became for both Miller and Monette the dominant feature of their personal identities in its impact on the life story. With their births separated by fewer than 10 years, the course of these men’s lives followed similar but variant tracks. With his resolution to come out earlier in his life than Monette, Miller’s life story is an affirming, vivid story of the possibilities that ensue from a thorough embrace of a gay identity, whereas Monette’s life story is one of quiet self-denial of his gay identity and experience of terrible losses. For both of these men, gay identity assumed divergent elements and, although the master narrative had its sway, created a unique course of life for them both.

DEFENDING THE GAY IDENTITY:
KIRK READ IN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Kirk Read’s life story, How I Learned to Snap: A Small-Town Coming-Out and Coming-of-Age Story (2001), is representative of a new generation of gay men whose families and communities were increasingly accepting of gay identity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Read was born in 1973 and grew up in the South, and his life story culminates in his politically active role in the gay community, particularly his service work with gay and lesbian youth. Read sees his own memoir as a contribution that might help gay adolescents make sense of their sexuality and provide support as they face antigay prejudice at school and in the community.

Read traces his concern for gay and lesbian youth to his childhood wish for an older brother who would rescue him from his feelings of self-defeat. In part, this wish is reflected in Read’s adolescent attraction to older men, including a college student who befriended him and introduced him to gay sex while he was in high school and a middle-aged man working in the theater who became his lover. He grew up in a family and community strongly influenced by the ideology of the religious right. His stepbrothers of his military father’s two previous marriages complied with expectations that they serve in the armed forces. Read’s father was a good friend with the religious right leader Pat Robertson (an outspoken critic of homosexuality), which only added to Read’s burden in dealing with his father’s own militant stance toward the evils of homosexuality.
Despite the ideological context of his childhood, Read’s life story offers an affirming account of gay identity. Read was aware early of his attraction to other boys in his school, particularly an older, obviously gay boy named Jesse. He developed and cultivated many gender-non-conforming interests such as theater and fashion in his youth. Jesse once remarked to him in response to Read’s inquiry about how he resisted the taunts of his classmates, “I am not afraid...Three circles and a snap...snap on the word not. I am not afraid” (Read, 2001, pp. 56–57). The title of Read’s memoir, How I Learned to Snap, refers to this ability to resist the impact of antigay stigma.

Read began to explore gay books, becoming increasingly accessible, in high school in the late 1980s. He spent hours at the local public library, even pilfering the popular book, The Joy of Gay Sex. As a high school junior working on an independent study project, Read wrote his first play, which was gay-themed. The play later won an award in a young playwrights’ competition and was publicized across the county. News of his literary success and his sexuality spread throughout his community, and Read was officially “out.” Read’s parents seemed to have paid little attention to his sexuality. His father did initially fuss about the bad influence on him from his gay theater friends, claimed that he would get AIDS, and ranted about what would become of him. However, his father was pacified by his mother, ever his supporter, and Read set off for the University of Virginia, where his play was to be staged.

While sitting in a coffee shop and struggling to rewrite a critical scene of his play, Read met an older playwright, Walker, with whom he immediately clicked. The two soon became inseparable, and Walker became a fixture in Read’s life and a welcome addition to his family. Read’s father, preferring to deny Walker and his son’s relationship, liked Walker for his patient tolerance of his war stories. Read’s mother was supportive, understanding, and even encouraging of the relationship (when Read turned 18, she sent Walker a card, joking that her son was finally legal). Read alternated between nights making love with Walker and the usual beer parties of high school seniors, including a party after his senior prom (which Walker refused to attend) where Read confessed his love to a straight classmate.

Read’s memoir ends with his high school graduation, anticipating his college years at the University of Virginia. However, he reports that the thought of going away to college and being apart from Walker was too painful to contemplate. His father had a stroke during his senior year in high school and died of a brain tumor his first year at college. Walker was among the constant companions at his father’s bedside during his difficult final days. Although his father chose to never fully acknowledge his son’s gay identity, Read’s experience of relative support from his parents reflects the changing nature of coming out.
Ten years elapsed between the events recounted in Read's memoir and his current life within the gay community of San Francisco where he works as an advocate for gay youth and speaks on this topic across the country. At the same time, he can comfortably return back to his Southern roots and enjoy the company of his former classmates toward whom he harbors lasting affection. His lesson, learned from Jesse, to snap—to say “I am not afraid”—is one that he seeks to pass on to the next generation.

Read’s account is one framed very much within the generation of gay men born in the 1970s. In Read’s case, early awareness of his gay sexual desire and his ability to enlist older men as lovers, he reported having benefited from this mentorship. He has written of his gay desire without hesitation and has expressed pleasure in quenching his desire for sex with other men. He even earned the begrudging admiration from his classmates in high school for being himself and not hiding his gay identity. In this way, Read’s life story is representative of a new generation of gay men coming of age in the late 1980s and early 1990s whose identities were far less problematically realized. Following struggles with self-acceptance, Read embraced his gay desire in adolescence and engaged in a meaningful relationship that was known to his parents. He received peer and family support for his gay identity, and he has offered his memoir as a possibility for a gay adolescence free of shame and self-hate.

Read’s life story shares with Monette’s and Miller’s the struggle over feelings of difference—certainly a common theme in gay life stories. It also shares the active making of a gay identity through social practice that explicitly involves a community of other gay men. Central to his understanding of self, as manifested in his life-story narrative, is the practice through which he has constructed, affirmed, and maintained his personal identity. This practice provides his sense of self with a coherence through which he makes meaning of his experience, be it painful or pleasurable. Fundamental to a contrast of these three life stories, however, is the changing cultural context of sexuality and the evolving identity possibilities of American culture.

**THE CHANGING CONSTRUCTION OF GAY IDENTITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

As sociohistorical circumstances alter life-course possibilities for individuals with same-sex desire, life-story narratives of gay men will continue to offer new representations of identity. In the 21st century, three cultural phenomena in particular offer new implications for life-story construction. First, the transformation of HIV from lethal to chronic, manageable illness (in the western world) has fundamentally changed the sexual culture of gay
America. Second, the increasing social acceptance of gay and lesbian sexual
time ways has created new opportunities for life-course development, par-
ticularly with the legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. Third,
the proliferation of cultural globalization—fueled in large part through the
Internet—facilitates intercultural communication among individuals with
same-sex desire, thus enabling the creation of virtual communities and sites
for public performance of gay identity.

Miller (1997) reported in his memoir that in the mid-1990s a seroposi-
tive former boyfriend had been started on the new drug regime and was
still alive. This brief experience presaged a dramatic change experienced
by the generation of gay men born in the 1960s and 1970s and coming
of age after the mid-1990s following the introduction of highly effective
treatments for HIV. The psychological effect of AIDS continues, with sex
ever filtered "through the viral veil of safety and risk" (Rofes, 1998, p. 93),
but the discovery of effective treatments transformed the meaning of HIV.
The eventual public health campaign to prevent AIDS in the late 1980s
and early 1990s resulted in a massive safer sex education movement. As a
consequence, many young men coming of age in the 1990s were taught
explicitly about AIDS, beginning in middle school.

Accompanied by growing acceptance of being gay as a legitimate sexual
lifeway, the transformation in views of HIV from a lethal to a chronic,
manageable illness once again altered the discourse of gay desire and changed
our understanding of a gay sexual identity. The new technology of the
Internet has been critical in this cultural transformation of gay identity
within post-AIDS generations. The Internet has both facilitated discussion
of gay experience and has also provided an opportunity to seek out others
with same-sex desire. The growth of Internet gay culture has provided new
guidance for understanding sexuality, a means for meeting other gay men,
and—most relevant to the present discussion—an opportunity to make a
gay identity through safe, secretive passive or active engagement.

The history of gay and lesbian identity is cumulative, and individuals
with same-sex desire today benefit from the gay cultural infrastructure
within urban centers that emerged from both the gay civil rights movement
and the political movement to combat the spread of AIDS in the 1980s.
Beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s, gay urban youth constructed
their own identities in communal, safe settings (Herdt & Boxer, 1993).
The coming-out "crisis" was forever transformed by the emergence of these
safe contexts for youth to construct their newly embraced gay identities.
Unknown in the adolescence of Monette, gay youth in the 1990s came
out and even had romantic experience on par with their heterosexual
peers before their 20s. Gradually, this safe urban ecology of coming out
spread to the suburbs, and schools across the nation formed gay-
straight alliances.
The 1990s, then, ushered in a new sexual decade that represented the cumulative impact of key historical events such as Stonewall and AIDS. Youth coming of age in this historical era know almost nothing personally of AIDS, most of them having never experienced the loss of loved ones that plagued the earlier generation. With unparalleled support in their ecologies of development, youth with same-sex desire come to identify themselves as gay and begin to engage in the social practice associated with a gay identity unburdened by the emotional turmoil of men in Monette’s generation. Without the immediate threat of AIDS and presumably equipped with an arsenal of safer sex knowledge, these young gay men do not see an inevitable premature death as the men of both Monette’s and Miller’s time had. Rather, they witness the possibilities of a complete life course, approximating more and more those with heterosexual desire, including the freedom of romantic involvement and the ability to have a recognized same-sex partnership. Accompanying the shift in how young gay men views AIDS, however, is the re-emergence of unsafe sex practices and increasing rate of HIV infection, the effects of which remain to be seen. The recent legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, although not without social controversy and protest, reflects the emerging life-course possibilities for gay men and lesbians in the twenty-first century.

Changing cultural understandings of sexual identity has also led to new discourses on identity more generally. Recent scholarship in cultural studies has led to the emergence of “queer theory” (e.g., Butler, 1990; Gauntlett, 2002; Jagose, 1996), a perspective that—in the tradition of Foucault (1978)—emphasizes power and language in the construction of identity in postmodern times. No longer can sexual identity simply be bifurcated along gender and sexual orientation, as the complexity of sexual desire and its relationship to cultural discourse have been more fully realized. The emergence of a diversity of sexual identities—reflected in the growing number of potential sexual life ways culturally available (Hostetler & Herdt, 1998)—suggests new narrative possibilities for the life story.

With cultural globalization comes the infusion of the Western life course in cultures around the world and, perhaps, an increasingly uniform identity development process in adolescence (Arnett, 2002). Across cultures and throughout history, same-sex desire has existed but has frequently assumed different meanings (Chauncey, 1994; Greenberg, 1988; Herdt, 1997; Mondimore, 1996; Weeks, 1991). With the proliferation of Western media throughout the world and the accessibility of Western culture via the Internet, it is possible that culturally diverse narratives of same-sex desire will converge toward a common conceptualization of gay identity. The implications of globalization remain unexplored in terms of gay identity but represent a critical endeavor for twenty-first century social science.
CONCLUSION

The study of identity in social, historical, and cultural context benefits from the narrative approach to the study of lives. The life stories of gay men presented in this chapter reveal most directly the historical specificity of the life course of gay men and lesbians, whose identities are intimately intertwined with the social ethos of sexuality. For the three generations of gay men presented, coming out as gay became increasingly less problematic both socially and psychologically, and it occurred at increasingly earlier points in the life course. Historical events intersected directly with motivated individual social practice to construct gay identity. This practice involved, primarily, political activism. Art and writing, however, both represented practices in which gay identity was created for all three men. In these ways, being gay represented for these men the most salient aspect of their identities. Primacy was accorded to the stigmatized sexual desire underlying their personal compositions, and gay identity was made through engagement with gay culture. The life stories of these men may not be representative of all gay men belonging to these particular generations, but they nonetheless highlight the making of gay identity, rooted in same-sex desire, in social practice.

Erikson’s (1959) vision of the toil of youth—the identity crisis in which one’s goals and ambitions are situated within the expectations of family and society—responded to an increasingly visible alteration in the life course of individuals over the post–World War II period. Erikson viewed identity as an achievement and as a socially negotiated self-constructive process. As part of the larger dialectic between person and society, we view identity less as fixed in psychological time and space than as a narrative rewritten across the course of life, which provides a sense of personal coherence and vitality in the context of social change. Identity represents “a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organize, form and re-form over a personal lifetime and in the histories of social collectivities” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 270).

All forms of identity, including that founded on sexual orientation, are formed through telling or writing a particular life story that injects life circumstances with meaning in a personally coherent narrative. The coherence for which we strive, and which is portrayed as an identity, is realized in and through the stories we tell about our lives. We perform our identities through what we write, say, and do. Identity is made in and through performance, whether this performance is a story told to oneself or another, written for others to read or enacted in an activity involving shared expectations. From this cultural perspective, identities reflect the meanings that we make of self in relation to others at a particular time and place in which our interpretation connects self and social world.

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Although likely rooted in a complex array of biological and psychological factors that organize sexual desire, realization of a gay identity relies on social practice and does not assume an innate, fixed course. Life stories reveal gay identity as a historically situated aspect of self dependent on social practice. Opportunities for social practice—for performing a gay identity—are constrained by the social ecology of development. But the cumulative effect of historical events has resulted in a twenty-first-century context in which there exists unprecedented social support for gay identity. Gay and lesbian life ways are no longer considered subversive by mainstream culture, as in the lifetime of Monette. Rather, they are increasingly visible in the media, with recognition of same-sex unions expanding across the world. The transformation of homosexuality over the past half century has fundamentally altered the gay and lesbian life course and is reflected in lifestyle narratives of gay men from different generations.

The life stories of Monette, Miller, and Read highlight the importance of generational and sociohistorical change in constructing an identity. In addition, these accounts of assuming and enacting a gay identity support the notion of identity less as a stable personality attribute than as a social practice made in and through discourse and action. The goal of this identity narration is always to develop a sense of continuity between a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future. Each life writer, in turn, recasts the narrative of a gay identity in terms recreated and reinterpreted by succeeding generations. In this way, master narratives of identity are forever in a state of renegotiation, as the social changes of a generation mark new frontiers for the identity possibilities of a culture.

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