

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course

EDITED BY PHILLIP L. HAMMACK AND BERTRAM J. COHLER

FOREWORD BY KEN PLUMMER

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The Story of Sexual Identity

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The Story of Sexual Identity

To our students

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Foreword On Narrative Pluralism

World is crazier and more of it than we think, Incorrigibly plural...The drunkenness of things being various.

-Louis MacNeice, Snow

We live in a pluralistic universe.

-William James

A homosexual is not a homosexual is not a homosexual.

-John Gagnon and William Simon

I came out as a gay man between 1966 and 1970: between the swinging sixties of underground queer coffee bars in Soho and Carnaby Street of 1966 and the London School of Economics—based Gay Liberation Front of 1970. I moved from being an outlawed, criminalized, and sick little teenager to being an out proud gay man. In the same period, I got my first degree at Enfield College, started my Ph.D. on homosexuality, got a job as a sociology lecturer, and found my first serious boyfriend.

I had been born into a London working-class family—with no books but lots of loving aspirations. Before 1966, I cried and suffered the pangs of outlawed gay youth. I had had enough of this by 1966—when I was 20. I started going to gay bars in Soho (and by the way, I counted around 100 at that time!). I told close friends (and

some turned out to be gay themselves). And finally I told my parents, who took me to the doctors! And all of this in the summer of 1966, a memorable period in the annals of my life. Homosexuality then was against the law, and it was also considered a mental illness. I had a short flirtation with psychiatrists and mental hospitals—well, that was the way of that time. It made me suspicious of much psychiatry, psychology, and even sociology. The social sciences were definitely not as neutral as they seemed, I learned. But by 1967 I had sorted all this out and had cheerfully started my gay career.

I decided to do a thesis on homosexual life in London, and as the law in England changed in 1967, I decided to give this a focus. In November 1970, I was amongst a very small group of people at the London School of Economics for the first meeting of the Gay Liberation Front—called by Aubrey Walter and Bob Mellors. I recall meeting Jeffrey Weeks there, and we became good friends.

The stories continue. Stories of my coming out then in the 1960s soon became embellished and changed. I have many versions of it. And indeed, I recall—20 years on—at a conference in Utrecht in 1988 (when I was speaking to a cluster of very keen neophyte lesbian and gay European students) announcing that I was postgay (Twenty years further on, it seems people are claiming this anew). Stories do not take a naturally linear form, nor do they develop in naturally linear ways. They bump you around and are contingent upon the events of everyday life. They change from place to place and from time to time. They offer you moments of choice and moments of utter fatalism. And stories themselves are never free-floating and random. They have historical roots, connect to wider patterns, cluster into structures and habits, and indeed become (often much loved) habits—part of what some sociologists now call our habitus.

Coming Out and Telling the Story of a Life

Here then is a highly truncated account of my coming out in the 1960s and a little glimpse of its aftermath. I could expand those years into a book or contract them into the opening line. Stories are like that. They are "incorrigibly plural." They can be long or short, focused or rambling, dense or thin, realistic or fictional, pedestrian or inspirational. And I find that I have been rewriting the stories of my life for all of my life.

We are, of course, meaning-creating animals, and we need to make sense of our lives. Stories and narratives are a major way we do this. As Joan Didion says, we need to tell our stories in order to live, hence the importance of stories and narratives for the human sciences. Making sense of our stories is one major key to understanding our humanities. More and more contemporary social thinkers, analysts, artists, and activists have come to identify with the importance of both the narrative and life-story telling traditions even as they seep back gently into history.

In some of my earliest writing I hover on the edge of all this. In Sexual Stigma (1975), I could sense the early stages of a coming-out story (clumsily called sensitization, signification, subculturalization, and stabilization!). But now we know this to be all far too simple, linear, and monolithic. In Documents of Life (initially 1983), which came out of research I was doing then on the life stories of a range of the sexually different—from pedophiles to sadomasochists—I sensed the power of life stories in social analysis. But now we can find—from Virginia Wolf to Marcel Proust—a much deeper sophistication in the linking of telling to lives, way beyond what I had imagined then. And in The Making of the Modern Homosexual (edited in 1981), we could certainly see that the modern homosexual was indeed a modern invention though it was an argument that caused a lot of controversy at the time. But as we have documented and written about these experiences over the past 30 years, it has become manifest that the languages used and the experiences developed around same-sex experiences have so continuously managed to change and are so overwhelmingly connected to the structured historical moments that have emerged even since then that only the most historically ignorant and socially unaware could really deny it. Our sexualities are always deeply socially contingent. Of course, people come and people go, and nothing much changes. And yet, to be young and have sex with members of the same sex (whatever that might mean) in the early twenty-first century—the media society, the hi-tech society, the liquid society, the postmodern capitalist society—is, I suspect, ontologically very different from what it was even 30 years ago—just as my experiences as a young person were radically at odds with those of my grandparents 40 years before me, before the First World War!

Puzzling about it, I see that throughout my own life I have been many things and had many identities. Even the most coherent lives—and mine has actually and fortunately been quite coherent—are invariably multiple, plural. As a child, I kept thinking—amongst many other things—that I was a little sick queer boy. In my teen years—amongst many other things—I struggled with being a homosexual. After I came out (and for quite a while), I was unambiguously gay—through in a rather feminist, White, British, politicized,

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sociological, and male version! By my mid-40s, during the 1990s, I was often claiming more to be a "postmodern" gay, even truncating it to being "postgay." In the 2000s and approaching my old age, I have tried to give up calling myself anything in particular. Perhaps my central identity now is that of a partner (I have lived with the same partner for 30 years), and it is hard to imagine being without him. After childhood, I never wanted to call myself queer even as all around me did. To do that would have been to return to the pains of my childhood.

Gay Narrative Generations

One theme that comes across clearly within this book is the significance of narrative generations. The stories we tell of our lives, being richly bound up with our experiences and habits, always speak of lives lived at particular moments in history at particular points in the life cycle. Stories have very specific timings and generations, which should never be overlooked. The stories we tell at any time are also bound up with the historical moment and place. They are always tales about a time and a space. These are generational tales. Generations are not the same as age groups and have not been given adequate attention in the social sciences.

Throughout much of recent history, a generation could usefully be designated as a natural descent: a mother, daughter, and granddaughter would be three generations, and it meant approximately a third of a life (in turn, roughly 25 years). It was roughly the time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring. But these days, because change is so rapid, family organization is much less predictable, and birth patterns are much wider, cohorts cannot so easily be named. What seems to matter now are critical changing social experiences that demarcate groups from each other, though even in the same generation experiences are never that unified or held in common (think minimally class, ethnicity, and gender!). Generations are partially defined by a collective consciousness of shared experiences—usually a critical common life experience. It might help, then, to think about generations through shared critical life events—their crises and epiphanies—that are held in common and can generate what might be called generational collective memories. The war generation—living through World War II, for example—must be a critical shape for millions of the Western world. It could even be a key defining fact of identity. Past traumas and crises can help shape a collective memory life project.

Generations can be linked to many concerns—to objective world traumas (depressions, wars, terrorism), to the creation of social movements (the Trade Union Movement, the Black Movement, the Women's Movement), to literature, film, music and other cultural events, and to shifts in intellectual fashions. They can also suggest the "fate" (or the structure of opportunities) of a group: sharing assumptions and ways of lives. Generations may also come to develop distinctive ways of seeing. Vito Russo's (1946–1990) wonderful book and film *The Celluloid Closet* implicitly shows a century's shifting world of gay imagery in film and imagines their multiple audiences. Films can provide memory books for different generations.

Such cohorts, then, need not be—indeed, often are not—linked to the mainstream orthodoxies. There are multiple subterranean worlds of generations, identifiable through their resistances to what is seen as the mainstream. Hence bohemian cultures, criminal cultures, political cultures of the left and right, hippy cultures, women's cultures, Black cultures, migrant cultures, and—of course—queer cultures come into being.

A number of the chapters in this book connect to these different gay generations. For example, Timothy McCajor Hall looks at the developing gay scenes in Prague through fieldwork since 1999. He suggests that the Velvet Revolution in 1989 marked a major generational transition for all Czechs and Slovaks, regardless of sexual orientation, and shows how, since then, gay life has been transformed with new organizations, cultures, and emerging identities. The legalization in 2006 of registered partnerships (as in so many countries of Europe) may well bring another turning point and generational moment for Czechs. Hall argues that "In some ways, gay men in the Czech Republic who came of age in the 1980s resemble gay men who came of age in the United States some 20 or 30 years earlier, while gay teenagers in the Czech Republic today have many attitudes and significant experiences comparable to those of their Western peers" (p. 58). This is a telling start to analyzing the ways in which different gay generations link up and connect across the gay disapora.

Plural and Cosmopolitan Sexualities

Whatever the different global generational gay histories may show, they bring us to a point toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century when any attempts to define gay and lesbian identities as fixed becomes futile. This book is full of examples of new categories and attempts to redefine the gay and lesbian experience—personally, socially, and politically. Alongside the massive informalization and consumerism of modern societies, we see also a bewildering fragmenting of same-sex identities across generations and across

countries. As ever, there are always different and contested grounds both between and across generations that make for a portrait of gay and lesbian life (by whatever terms) as a vast patchwork of plurality of experience and ways of living. To grasp it is a bit like trying to reorder a kaleidoscope.

Over the years, there has been a rich blossoming of ideas around narrative and life story that now enable us to transcend many of the old debates and arguments. In lesbian and gay studies—or queer studies—the coming-out narrative has now become almost archetypal. But it should not be forgotten that this is indeed a very specific type of story that links to lives of people who connect to a specific generation. It is not universal in any way. At present, it hangs omnipresently and omnisciently over many gay lives, but there is no one way, and it is pointless now to remotely suggest that there is. We now know too much, and the chapters in this book amply testify to the growth of our knowledge.

This wonderful book shows a new maturity and confidence. It brings together a collection of elegant essays that provide the most up-to-date understanding of the ways in which stories of gay life are told, mainly in the United States but suggestive for other places too. It replaces older ideas of ages and stages with dynamic links to history and cultural moments. The power of place and history must be recognized in the analysis of stories and identities, and each chapter brings a sharp focus to some aspects that irrevocably fracture the idea that there is any one unitary or universal story to be told. There may be common themes; sameness—absolutely not. Here we have recognition of the many complex and shifting category terms used to describe gay desires and relationships, and detailed accounts of how they change over the same life, over lives through historical generational moments, and across cultures. More, in this book we have identity stories shaped by political conflict, urban change, Internet development, gender differences, ethnic situations. Here these are all explored with diverse forms of data and theory—making major advances in our way of thinking about social psychological realities. Our understandings of pluralistic sexual life and the historical social psychology of identity are richly advanced as a consequence.

Advancing Narrative Work: Narrative Engagement and Embodiment

We now know so much more about lesbian and gay life than the old psychological studies of personality types ever told us. Let us hope that this traditional line of reasoning and thinking amongst psychologists can now be laid to rest

as the red herring it is. This book, by contrast, consolidates so much valuable recent work from history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and queer theory and shows just how important the process of what Hammack and Cohler themselves call *narrative engagement* is. The authors make very clear their position on story, narrative, and identity. As they say:

We view identity and culture as coconstitutive. It is for this reason that we speak of narrative *engagement* as a process of human development. The process of narrative engagement speaks to the ability of an individual or a group of individuals to contest the content of a master narrative from within, and in the process potentially repudiate and reformulate its story line. Hence narrative engagement represents a vitally *social* process and can, in fact, catalyze collective action for social change. (p. 455)

Narratives, then, are dynamic, political, and constantly contested. What I sense more and more in the reading and writing of stories is the way they work to undermine any sense of overarching, overriding consensus about narratives. When taken seriously, we find that many stories of lives are counterstories—they start to break down any claims for grand theories about lives. At their best, they challenge and redirect our thinking. At their worst, they tell us the same old story and utter it in cliché form. So many of the chapters in this book challenge us to think afresh our ideas about what we might now call the *pluralistic cosmopolitan sexual life*.

Stories, it seems to me, are also embodied. There is a complex linkage of story, identity, feeling, and body. I have become more and more convinced that the stories we tell of our lives are never simply narratives: they are heaving brutish encounters with our emotionally driven bodies. For instance, in the opening chapter of the book, the authors present a specific conflict between David and Paul—two gay men who disagree about the words to use to describe the story of their lives. One is *queer*, and the other is *gay*. But it is a disagreement that goes way beyond a simple conflict of stories, as Hammack and Cohler argue:

Their conflict was not just abstract or intellectual; it was visceral, raw, and personal. The discourse between Paul and David was essentially *threatening* to a sense of enduring coherence and stability afforded by a life-story narrative (mostly to David). (p. 3)

What has to be realized in narrative theory is that stories are part of embodiment. The telling of stories is not just about the words we speak: it is about the ways in which we move through the world with hurting and joyful bodies—our feelings, our thoughts, our bodily sensations. Stories

are embodied: they are told by tellers with body processes always at work. Narratives do not free-float in the world. Future work needs to bring these bodies to the forefront.

And why this is important rests in my concerns over the need for dialogues in many contested situations. When people disagree (and, indeed, when world cultures disagree), they need to communicate with each other, and part of this must be the telling of their stories. But their stories are never just the words they say: they come to their stories in full embodiment—pains and passions are often everywhere. Just watch the faces, the body language, the tones of voice, the hands. People embody stories. So we need to find ways of accessing the embodiment of narrative in our studies.

The study of lesbian and gay lives in all their global richness has, I believe, advanced enormously over the past half-century. History, anthropology, psychology, and sociology—alongside literature—have firmly killed off any idea of the universal or fixed homosexual "species." What we are left with are multiple worlds of ever-shifting and pluralistic sexual experiences, fleetingly grasped through a historically limited language that, in itself, and inevitably, continues to change. A homosexual is not a homosexual is not a homosexual.

—Ken Plummer University of Essex

Preface

This book is the culmination of several years of conversation and collaboration between us. Our idea for the book emerged through our teaching and research on sexual identity and our strong conviction that a paradigm that integrates a narrative and life course approach transcends the boundaries of scholarly disciplines and, therefore, contributes to the evolution of sexual science. We both identify as interdisciplinary social scientists, and we have been frustrated over the years with the ways in which knowledge about sexual identity seems to have been so closely captivated by concerns more connected to ideology and the social control of desire. The obsession with issues such as a gay gene in the 1990s, framed within the unnecessarily dichotomized vision of sexuality as either essential or constructed, overlooked the lived experience of sexual desire because it reduced desire and identity to biological destiny. The approach we advocate, explicate, and explore throughout this volume seeks to move beyond such stifling paradigms by focusing directly on the lived experience of individuals with same-sex desire.

Biology is, of course, just as much a part of sexual desire and experience as it is of any aspect of human development. But we believe that the more interesting and relevant social science questions about human sexuality actually focus on the *meaning* individuals make of their desire in some social, cultural, and discursive context. In our view, a narrative approach restores a focus on the voices of sexual subjects and hence provides access to the

meaning-making process as it is actively lived and embodied in word, thought, and action. This volume is intended to bring together a number of scholars who embrace just such an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sexual identity.

Though a narrative approach is necessarily skeptical of the transhistorical basis of social categories of identity, we do in fact speak of gay, lesbian, and bisexual lives. We recognize that desire does not necessarily map onto such social categories of identity, and we also recognize the historical basis of these categories. We want to acknowledge that the volume does not deal with transgender identity, but we hope that future volumes will do so. Since we view this volume as only the start of a longer and more substantive intellectual conversation, we trust that future conversations will include the voices of individuals whose desires do not map so comfortably onto labels like gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

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