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Coming Out with Stories:
Macrocontextual effects on the coming out
stories of young gay men

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Abstract

Many theories of self-construction in memory narratives point to their potential for making sense of major identity changes. Across multiple narrative tellings, individuals' stories are shaped by selective encouragement and suppression of story elements in relation to the social contexts of storytelling. While previous contextual work has concentrated on the effect of listeners, other important contextual factors include shared beliefs and understanding about how identity changes occur. Repeated sharing may result in stories that increasingly reflect those shared beliefs about identity, evidenced in the stories told by individual group members. Thus, the longer an individual has identified as part of a particular group, the more his or her narrative will reflect the shared beliefs of this group. The present study examines whether the coming out stories of gay men (aged 18-28) increasingly reflect shared beliefs about the coming out process as length of time since coming out increases. Results (N=21) suggest that time since coming out positively predicts the degree to which individuals' stories reflect group beliefs. Individuals whose stories more closely reflected shared group beliefs reported greater levels of integration into the gay and lesbian community. Results are discussed in terms of theories of storytelling and identity development, as well as implications for social support.

Introduction

Many theories of self-construction in memory narratives (e.g., Pasupathi, 2001) point to the potential for constructing major identity changes. People use storytelling to remember and interpret periods of major change in their sense of self. While recent literature has begun to give attention to the more interpersonal and contextual aspects of these conversations, the predominant focus has remained on contributions of the listeners and speakers in pairs (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000; Manier, Pinner, & Hirst, 1996; Pasupathi, 2001). While larger contextual features such as shared beliefs undoubtedly play a role in these conversations (Pasupathi, 2001), explicit examination of these effects is lacking.

The objective of this thesis is to better understand the influences of shared culture as a macrocontextual effect in the individual stories of the members of that culture. Such effects are hypothesized to have implications for how speakers think about and remember past experiences. Specifically, the coming out stories of gay men are the focus of this study. Coming out stories not only represent the personal understandings of the storyteller's identity shift, but also the shared cultural knowledge of that process as understood by the gay and lesbian community of which the individual becomes a part. The degree to which stories reflect those shared beliefs, however, is likely to be related to the individual's duration of time since coming out and degree of enculturation within the gay and lesbian community.

Coconstruction of Autobiographical Narratives

Remembering as a form of social construction is not a new premise. Social constructivists, social cognition researchers, and psycholinguists have all provided

empirical work on the ways in which speakers construct stories of the past, but without significant attention to listener and larger contextual influences. Other researchers have acknowledged the importance of autobiographical memory and narrative within specific areas. They include self-memory, childhood development of autobiographical memory, and personal storytelling and development. Self-memory theorists have presented an interaction between the self-system, which manages current concerns, objectives and goals, and the autobiographical knowledge base, that likewise handles memories of the past (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Childhood developmentalists have emphasized the early existence of a carry over effect in narratives from one telling to another (Fivush, 1994), and personality theorist Thorne (2000) acknowledged the potential effects in personality development due to listener influences.

Pasupathi's (2001) model of memory and identity suggests a developmental process by which this effect occurs. Pasupathi outlined coconstruction as the fact that "any autobiographical recollection in conversation is the product of both the speaker and the context" (p. 652). Reconstruction of the narrative is influenced not only by the speaker and the setting, but by the listener as well. The situational context in which the conversational tellings are made is largely dependent on the interaction between the goals, values, knowledge and personalities of both the speaker and listener. That is, speakers try to tailor the story to the recipient, accentuating details and focusing on some events, while diminishing the importance of, or omitting others (Pasupathi, 2001). Meanwhile, listeners not only question facts, finish sentences, and reinforce a good story, but also express their boredom, confusions and disapproval throughout the telling. It is within this interaction between speaker and listener that potential for development appears. Because

retellings on one occasion influence later memory (consistency), that potential can be realized across repeated retellings of a memory.

Macrocontextual Effects: Narrative Socialization & Socialization through Narratives

Traditional research provides explanations for consistency of memories over time (Swann, 1989). Pasupathi (2001), however, emphasized distinct areas in support of this consistency for autobiographical memories, as well as ways in which consistency is diminished. As memories are condensed, categorized, falsely recalled and rehearsed, source memory (the memory of the place and time in which, for example, a conversation occurred) fades (Schacter, Norman & Koutstaal, 1998), increasing the chance for changes in the way that events are recalled. In this way autobiographical memories are socially constructed. As narratives are delivered, new memories of the telling are created. These new memories encapsulate both the act of sharing one's narrative as well as the way in which it was delivered as influenced by the listener and the larger contextual environment.

Pasupathi (2001) notes that as the narrative is repeatedly shared, changes in the way that the narrative is recalled may occur. Memories repeatedly coconstructed with listeners across time are likely to change across the span of adulthood (Pasupathi, 2001). Indeed, individuals can arrive at strikingly different meanings and understanding of past events on different occasions (Sehulster, 2001).

While previous work on speaker/listener exchanges has concentrated on listeners as a contextual factor (e.g., Pasupathi, Stallworth, & Murdoch, 1998), the process of storytelling also occurs in a multi-layered social context that extends beyond the explicit influences of the listener (see Figure 1). Contextual factors that may be important include the shared cultural beliefs, knowledge, understandings and meanings held by the various

groups to which an individual may belong. More specifically, different social groups have a variety of beliefs about identity transformations and individual development.

North Americans typically share several beliefs about development, beliefs that are readily evident in stories about their lives (Thorne, 1995). A story of turning 16, for example, can not avoid the contextual influences derived from the shared cultural knowledge and experiences related to receiving one's driver's license. That is, the prototypical story for a North American who turns 16 includes experiences and themes related to this major rite of passage. Additionally, the prototype can include both explicit experiences (i.e., passing the driver's test) as well as implicit (i.e., increased independence). More specific cultural groups will have other accounts of personal development that draw largely from a shared context. Religious and culturally specific rites such as a Bar Mitzvah or Quinceañera would fall within this category.

According to my theoretical framework for the thesis, over time, as people tell their stories about identity shifts, the process of narrative socialization may result in stories that increasingly reflect the beliefs shared by the cultural group in which they are told. In other words, all else equal, the older the individual or the longer he or she has been in a group, the more his or her stories should reflect shared group beliefs. As memory is relevant in terms of forming, expressing, and consolidating one's sense of self (McAdams, 1996; Thorne, 2000; Pasupathi, 2001), I will be examining how a change in identity that involves connecting with a new community can be reflected in the way that an individual's identity-change story increasingly reflects that community's beliefs. I refer to this phenomenon as 'narrative socialization.'

Other conceptions of narrative socialization do exist, but are primarily focused on the use of narratives to socialize children and adolescents. Thus, these approaches do not examine how stories are changed over time by macro-contextual influences, but rather how stories are told with the intent to teach others, and how those stories in fact do (or don't) influence others (Pratt et al., 1999; Fiese et al., 2001; Webster, 1999). Thus, the present study view of narrative socialization focuses on narratives as the targets of socialization.

Gay and Lesbian Community as a Context. While any number of micro-social groups could be used to demonstrate the influence of context on narrative memory, we chose the gay and lesbian community as the coming out period is particularly rich with narrative (Savin-Williams, 1998) and the potential for coconstruction is strong. Exploration and examinations of the past are unavoidable aspects in the development of a gay identity and assessing new meaning in past experiences becomes an especially prominent part of the coming out process (Plummer, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1998). My assumption is that this exploration and narration occurs in conversations, in part, with other gays and lesbians who can communicate that group's shared beliefs about 'becoming' gay.

Theories on Coming Out: Stages and Milestones

The experiences of gay and lesbian individuals have been assessed in a variety of ways in an attempt to capture and explain the prototypical coming out experience. Recent attention has been given to this community narrative including its existence, purpose and functioning (see Rappaport, 1998). Divided more by methodology than

dissent, prominent developmental theory and research falls into two categories: stage theories and milestone theories (see Figure 2).

The main focus of stage theorists is on the intrapsychic and personal development of individuals. For example, the “Identity Comparison” stage in Cass’s model of Homosexual Identity Formation (1979) focuses on the act of comparing oneself to others and the recognition of one’s difference. On the other hand, milestone theorists focus on shared experiences that are commonly present in coming out stories as well as the age at which they occurred. Savin-Williams (1998) presents the clearest work on milestone theory. Milestones of his such as “First disclosure to other” and “First same sex romance” focus on memories of interpersonal experiences, while “Applied ‘Homosexuality’ to attractions” and “Recognized self as gay” represent memories of internal realizations. While some of his milestones include internal processes that seem similar to stage theories (for example, his milestone “Feeling Different”), the aim of his milestones are to assess experiences.

These two approaches to studying gay identity development provided unique ways of looking at the same process and they each have their merits. While stage theories provide an excellent overview of the developmental process and provide fluidity in the way in which an individual can traverse throughout the model, the milestones capture not only the typicality of an experience as well as developmental trajectories, but also the range in which these experiences occur. Together, these approaches represent both the range and typicality of experience in the coming out stories of gay men.

It should be noted that among these models and theories, many differentiate identity processes according to gender. Modern day theorists have recognized the

differences in the experiences that gay men have as apposed to lesbians and bisexuals men and women. For this reason Savin-Williams' (1998) research was focused solely on the experiences of men, and while Cass' (1979) model was originally intended for both men and women, many alternatives and modified theories have appeared to capture the different experiences and processes commonly expressed by women (see Golden, 1996; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). In this thesis, I concentrate on men, and the assertions made should not be taken to generalize to lesbian women.

Stage and Milestone theories typically include questioning and exploration in pre-gay, coming out, and post-coming out stages (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). While both approaches recognize coming out as a unique psychological process, both tend to focus on development as an individual and insular event, placing responsibility and action in the hands of the maturing individual. Interpersonal components that may be included limit external influences to a supportive social environment. These environments are typically conceived of as the understanding friend or supportive family member. These people, viewed as in support of the process, aiding in the coping with stress and affirming of the individual (Jordan and Deluty, 2000), are not considered active participants in the construction of the person's new social identity. However, to the extent that coming out involves storytelling with these individuals, they may well play direct roles in the construction of the new identity.

Whisman (1996) has reported findings that speak to this possibility. In her qualitative study she interviewed 72 individuals about degrees of "choice" individuals saw in their sexual identity. The three categories she identified from these interviews were "Determined", where individuals saw little choice or control over their sexual

identity, “Chosen”, where individuals indicated that they had in some way chosen their preference, and “Mixed” accounts, where individuals combined elements of choice and determinism, typically by expressing a choice of behavior within their determined orientation. Whisman makes an interesting observation about individuals’ degree of involvement with the gay and lesbian community. In her sample, men who identified as having “always been gay” (a Determined account) were more frequently integrated into the gay and lesbian community, while individuals having “chosen” their orientation remained isolated. Interestingly, she found that both categories come out in an isolated context, but the determined men successfully integrate into the gay and lesbian community, while the chosen men do not. Whisman suggests that there is a connection between telling the accepted story and successful integration within the gay and lesbian community. Her work did not explicitly look at how people come to tell the accepted story. That’s the topic of this thesis. .

Measuring Socialization: Time vs. Involvement

If construction of one’s narrative within a cultural context leads to greater group socialization, it is important to estimate the extent to which individuals are engaging in construction. Relying simply on time as a measure of the potential for coconstruction disregards the degree to which individuals are involved in the communities with which they identify. Additionally, that degree of involvement can fluctuate across the individual’s period of group identification. Some individuals may submerge themselves into the gay and lesbian community after first coming out, but later decrease their overall involvement (Cass, 1979). Others may come to identify with this community, but without any substantial degree of community involvement. For this

reason, I use time and involvement as separate ways in which to measure the degree to which narrative socialization may be occurring.

Hypothesis and Predictions

This thesis attempts to assess the narrative socialization within the microsocial context of the gay and lesbian community. The gay and lesbian community as a microsocial context should reinforce group members narratives of coming out towards the prototypical story. Drawing on milestone and stage theories, narrative prototypicality in this study is measured across four variables: *Canonicity*, the number of milestones presented in a narrative, *Order*, the sequence in which the milestones were delivered, and *Struggle for Internal Acceptance*, as well as *Struggle for External acceptance*, both of which aim at assessing important developmental themes as presented by stage models of identity development.

Our major goal is show that duration of time involved with the gay and lesbian community correlates with narrative prototypicality. We expect that individuals who have been out for longer periods of time will have had more opportunities to collaboratively construct their coming out story with other gays and lesbians, leading to more influence from the gay and lesbian community on that story. We also expect that the degree of narrative socialization should be positively correlated with the degree of enculturation and integration with the gay and lesbian community. What is the effect of this increased narrative socialization? My exploratory hypothesis predicts that narrative socialization will be positively correlated with measures of well being.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects were 21 gay males recruited via gay organizations, flyers, and solicitations at gay and lesbian related listservs. As required for participation, subjects were between the ages of 18 and 28. The age of participants was limited to avoid generational confounds in coming out experiences. The mean age of participants was 23 years old ($SD=3.09$). Participants' provided a self-identified age of coming out. For most participants this was closely related to the point at which they reported full disclosure of their sexual identity; that is, coming out most frequently was reported as being an openly gay man. The mean self-identified age of coming out was 19.1 ($SD=2.96$) and the average length of time since having come out was 3.71 ($SD=2.37$). Participants were predominately Caucasian (91%), college students (71%) and approximately half were in relationships (48%) of varying lengths ($M=15.6$ months, $SD=19.2$).

Participants also identified along a variety of sexual identity labels, predominately gay (91%), and queer (29%), where participants could select multiple labels. Participants were also identified in terms of their stage development in terms of the model of homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1979) as ascertained by the *Gay Identity Questionnaire* (Brady & Busse, 1994). 71.4% of participants identified as stage 6, "Identity Synthesis", followed by 19% in stage 5, "Identity Pride." The two exceptions were placed in stage 3 and 4, stages related to self-acceptance. In a composite score from the *Klein Sexual Orientation Grid* (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985) indicating orientation related preferences across attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, self-identification and lifestyle, participants strongly indicated a homosexual orientation

($M=6.36$, $SD=.49$) on a 7 point likert scale where 1 indicates completely heterosexual and 7 indicates completely homosexual.

Procedure

Participants arrived at the lab and were immediately taken into a private interview room. After completing informed consent, participants were asked if they had any questions. After questions were answered, participants were given a basic demographic questionnaire amended to include details on sexual identity labels and romantic relationships. The experimenter then explained the participation procedures to the participant in further detail, saying: “This study breaks out into several parts. First is the interview portion which is followed by some questionnaires. In the interview, there are two parts: a non-directed portion, where you are free to say anything that you think is related or comes to mind, and a more directed portion in which I have some more specific questions - mostly related to memories about particular events that you may have experienced, including at what age they occurred.” After asking if they had any additional questions, the experimenter began the interview.

Non-Directed Interview. The general structure of the interview was intended to imitate a quasi-naturalistic setting in which an individual could share the details of his sense of identity development and coming out story. The non-directed portion was started by asking the participant, “When you think about the past, what prominent experience, memories and realizations do you feel have brought you to identifying as a gay man?” In this way, the participant was able to think about and share a wide range of coming out themes, both internal (i.e., feeling of difference, awareness of same sex

attractions, labeling self as gay) and external (i.e., same sex sexual experience, disclosure of identity, same sex romance).

The typical and preferred response of the experimenter to any information shared by the participant was to ask for additional information. Prescribed reflective responses included questions such as “Would you tell me more about that?”, and “When did that happen?” to more complex questions including “So in what ways do you see that as having influenced you?” and “How did you make sense of that at the time?”

In order to prevent any unintentional biasing of the non-directed interview structure, several noteworthy interview rules and protocol were developed. Foremost, the coding system was not developed until after interviews preventing any probing that might lead to elicit information specific to the coding system. The experimenter was to ask as few questions as possible in order to give the participant maximum control in the direction in which the telling progressed. Additionally, the experimenter was never allowed to ask a question related to a theme that had not already been mentioned by the participant. For example, the participant must have made reference to disclosure before specific questions related to that disclosure could be asked. When necessary, the preferred prompt was the shortest, asking for elaboration and clarification about the information being shared by the participant at that time. By and large, the simplest questions easily facilitated the continuation of the participant’s telling.

Non-directed portions varied from approximately 20 to 75 minutes as dictated by the participant. When a natural end came to the narrative, the experimenter asked: “Is there anything else that comes to mind that you want to share?” If at that point the narrative continued, the experimenter proceeded as before, and once again asked the

same question at the next natural ending. When the participant indicated that there was nothing additional that he wished to share, the experimenter moved on to the directed portion of the interview. The experimenter repeated the structure and purpose of the directed portion of the interview and explained that “if anything comes to mind while we are going through these questions, please feel free to go ahead and share it.”

Self-Identified Age of Coming Out & Gay Age. The participants were asked to provide a self-identified age of coming out. “If you were asked to give the age at which you feel you came out, what age would that be?” After answering, participants were asked to explain the significance of that age. All participants’ reported age fell between milestones of disclosure and labeling self as gay. “Gay Age”, which was calculated by taking the age of the participant and subtracting the participant’s self-identified age of coming out $M(SD) = 3.71(2.37)$ provided us with the number of years in which the participant has had the opportunity to coconstruct his coming out story within the context of the gay and lesbian community.

Semi-Directed Interview. The remaining questions were intended to obtain information related to the 13 milestones proposed by Savin-Williams (1998), as well as the ages at which they occurred for the participant. Each question was phrased in an open-ended fashion in order to elicit an explanation of the event (e.g., “Tell me about the first time you disclosed your sexual identity to another individual”). Content from this portion of the interview is not being used in the scope of this thesis.

At the end of the directed portion of the interview, the experimenter again asked if there was anything else the participant wished to share and proceeded in a non-directive fashion again until the participant indicated that he was finished. Finally, participants

were asked to rate the degree to which they felt they had shared information related to their coming out and identity development. Participants indicated to the experimenter on a 7 point likert scale the frequency (1 = Never, 7 = Frequently) since coming out, as well as just the last year.

Questionnaires. The participant was then given a packet of questionnaires to complete. The questionnaires were a combination of more specific measures related to identity, orientation, attitudes about and involvement with the gay community, and sexual behavior, as well as variety of personality and well-being measures. Those measures included in this thesis are described more fully below. The participants were told to read the instructions before completing each questionnaire, and to ask the experimenter any questions they might have. Upon completion of the questionnaires, participants were debriefed, thanked for their time and allowed to ask and discuss any questions they had related to the study.

Measures

For this thesis, all non-questionnaire measures were derived from only the non-directed portion of the interview. The semi-directed portion of the interview was used to verify the occurrence of milestone events, and to provide individuals an additional opportunity to share content-specific information when prompted. The author coded the non-directed portion of the interview from audio tapes. A second undergraduate coded 12 interviews to provide estimates of reliability, which are reported below for each of the four measures derived from coding. The coding of the thesis author was used for data analysis.

Canonicity and Event Order. Two measures in the coding system were designed to capture narrative prototypicality. *Canonicity* measured the number of themes in the narrative, while *order* measured the sequence in which they were delivered. A list of predominant coming out experiences was created based on a compilation of stage and milestone theories (Cass, 1979; Savin-Williams, 1998; Troiden, 1989). Six local “community experts,” selected for their high-frequency in hearing coming-out stories, were also interviewed and asked to share what they saw as the prototypical coming out story for young gay men. Content from these interviews were used to compose the list of experiences. The coded themes were Feeling of Difference, Awareness of Same-Sex Attractions, Applying “Homosexuality” to Attractions, Same-Sex Sexual Encounter, Labeling Self as Gay, Disclosure, and Same-Sex Romance.

Canonicity was measured by counting the number of coming out themes spontaneously presented. One point was given for each theme spontaneously presented by the participant, for a maximum of 7 points. Interrater reliability, assessed by Pearson’s r on 12 of the 21 interviews was good ($r = .74, p < .01$). *Order* was scored by giving 1 point for each theme present in the narrative given in the correct hypothesized chronological order. For example, presenting information about “Labeling Self as Gay” followed by “Disclosure” would equal one point, while “Same-Sex Romance” followed by “Awareness of Same-Sex Attractions” would not result in any additional points. Participants could obtain a maximum of 7 points and reliability was good ($r = .82, p < .001$).

Internal/External Struggle for Acceptance. The non-directed portion was also rated for internal aspects of a prototypical narrative on two 5 point scales, *internal*

struggle for acceptance and *external struggle for acceptance*. Examples of *internal struggle for acceptance* would include themes related to self-acceptance, internal religious and personal beliefs, and concerns over the possibility of external retribution. Examples of *external struggle for acceptance* include conflict with friends, family, and society as a whole. Participants were scored on the degree to which the non-directed portion of the interview focused on these two types of struggle. Interrater reliability for *internal struggle for acceptance* was $r = .86$ ($p < .001$) and *external struggle for acceptance* was $r = .76$ ($p < .01$).

Involvement with the Gay Community. Involvement was assessed using the *Involvement with the Gay Community Scale* (IGCS) contained eight self-report items. Four items required participants to rate their level of agreement with attitude statements regarding the importance of self-identifying as gay and associating with the gay community. Three additional items obtained the frequency with which participants read gay and lesbian periodicals, attending gay and lesbian related community activities, and how often participants went to a gay bar. The final item assessed the overall number of gay friends in the participant's social network. Vanable and colleagues (Vanable et al., 1993) reported an internal consistency of .78 and a one-year retest correlation of .74.

Well-being and Social Support. The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS) contained five items and assessed global life satisfaction. Diener and colleagues (Diener et al., 1985) reported an internal consistency of .87 and retest correlation of .82. Participants in this study also reported a high level of internal consistency (.87). The *Multidimensional Scale Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS) contained twelve items and assessed subjective levels social support across three subscales: Significant Other, Family,

and Friends subscales. Zimet and colleagues (Zimet et al., 1988) reported an internal consistency of .88 and a retest correlation of .85. Participants in this study also reported a high level of internal consistency (.93).

Results

Analytic Strategy

Measures of gay age and enculturation were correlated with all four measures of narrative socialization. Additionally, measures of narrative socialization were correlated with measures of perceived social support and well-being. All comparisons were conducted using one-tail bivariate correlations and a significance level of .05. In the case of substantial effects sizes that were not significantly significant, samples sizes as estimated by Cohen (1977) have been given in order to obtain a power level of .80.

Preliminary Analyses: Intercorrelations

Intercorrelations Between Measures of Narrative Socialization. Descriptives and normality tests were calculated for each of the narrative socialization measures (see Table 1). The mean score for participants' *canonicity* was 4.76 (SD=1.00) and for *order* was 2.62 (SD=1.02). The mean scores for *struggle for internal acceptance* was 3.05 (SD=1.32) and *struggle for external acceptance* was 3.33 (SD=.97). Intercorrelations between *canonicity* and *order* were strong ($r = .692, p < .001$). Correlations between *canonicity* and ratings of *struggle for internal acceptance* and *struggle for external acceptance* were $-.11$ ($p = .65$) and $.24$ ($p = .29$) respectively. Additionally, intercorrelations between *order* and ratings of *struggle for internal acceptance* and *struggle for external acceptance* were $-.13$ ($p = .56$) and $.03$ ($p = .89$). Intercorrelation

between ratings of participants struggle for internal acceptance and struggle for external acceptance was .53 ($p = .02$). All measures of narrative socialization were normally distributed.

Intercorrelation between Gay Age and Enculturation. There was no significant relationship between *gay age* and the *Involvement with the Gay Community Scale* ($r = -.09$, $p = .71$).

Narrative Socialization as a Function of Gay Age vs. Enculturation

Gay Age. Correlations with narrative socialization scores indicated a substantial correlation between *gay age* and *canonicity* ($r = .40$, $p = .04$). This result suggests that the number of themes/milestones spontaneously presented in the non-directed portion of the interview does increase with increasing *gay age*.

Additional correlations between *gay age* and measures of narrative socialization did not prove significant (see Table 2 for a summary of results). Correlations between *gay age* and *order* ($r = .13$, $p = .29$) suggest that if any true effect is present, it is quite small. Power analysis reveals that a sample size of approximately 400 participants would be required in order to detect such an effect. The correlation between *gay age* and *struggle for internal acceptance* was $-.20$ and *gay age* and *struggle for external acceptance* was $-.05$ (p 's non-significant). Power analysis suggests that a sample size of 98 would be required for the correlation between *gay age* and *struggle for internal acceptance* to prove significant. This finding suggests that while any increases or decrease in an individual's narration of struggles for acceptance as *gay age* increases cannot be confirmed, it is premature to conclude that there is no effect of *gay age* on this aspect of coming out stories. By contrast, it seems unlikely that *gay age* makes any

difference in an individual's representation of their struggle for external acceptance, even given a larger sample.

Enculturation. Correlations were performed between the measures of narrative socialization and the *Involvement with the Gay Community Scale* (IGCS; see Table 2). A significant correlation existed between *order* and the IGCS ($r = .58, p < .01$). Additional correlations did not prove significant. This finding suggests that number of narrative themes presented in the prototypically correct order increases with increased community involvement.

Exploratory Hypotheses: Well-Being and Social Support

Correlations were also performed between measures of narrative socialization and measures of well-being (see Table 2). A significant correlations was found between *order* and the *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* subscale for friends ($r = .552, p < .01$). All correlations between the other measures of narrative socialization and well-being did not prove significant. This strong correlation suggests that individuals' level of perceived support from friends is higher when they tell their story in the right order.

In sum, individuals who had identified with the gay community for longer periods of time were more likely to present more coming out themes in their coming out story. Individuals who were more involved in the gay community also presented these themes in a more prototypical order. Lastly, individuals who presented their narrative in a more prototypically correct order reported increased social support from friends. Other relationships between gay age and narrative socialization, between narrative socialization and involvement with the gay community, and between narrative socialization and well-being did not prove significant.

Discussion

In this study I looked at macrocontextual effects on the autobiographical stories of young gay men. I was able to show that the inclusion of canonical coming out events in coming out stories was more likely among individuals who had been out longer. Additionally, more prototypical ordering of coming out events was more likely among individuals with more involvement within the gay community. This suggests that the inclusion of events and the order in which they are presented in one's coming out story may reflect the shaping of one's story by the shared beliefs of the larger social context. Lastly, people who presented their stories in more prototypical order reported higher perceived support from their friends.

Is narrative socialization occurring? In terms of the number of canonical events presented in individuals' narratives, as well as the order in which those themes are presented, narrative socialization does appear to be taking place. Individuals who have identified as gay for longer periods of time report additional canonical coming out events. Additionally, individuals who report higher levels of enculturation within the gay community order their themes in a more prototypically predicted fashion.

Correlations of *gay age* and enculturation, however, were statistically significant with difference measures of narrative socialization, namely the number of coming out themes presented (*canonicity*) and the sequence in which those themes were presented (*order*) respectively. This may be due to the differences between individuals who have had more opportunities to coconstruction their narrative in the gay community due to time versus degree of involvement.

While the narrative socialization themes *internal and external struggle for acceptance* were not significantly correlated with either *gay age* or participants' degree of enculturation, explanations beyond an insufficient sample size are worth considering. While not statistically significant, a moderate correlational effect size suggests that individuals who had been out longer scored lower on their rating of *internal struggle for acceptance*. *External struggle for acceptance*, however, remained consistent. The saliency of an individual's struggle provides a potential alternative hypothesis explaining this trend. It may be that over time the prominence of an individual's personal struggle decreases as he becomes increasingly established in his identification and acceptance of himself as a gay man. Narration of external struggle, however, may remain consistent across gay age, representing the individual's continuing struggle in a heterosexist society.

It is important to note that many other paths to narrative socialization may exist. Narrative socialization may not be solely dependent on coconstructed conversations in the context of the gay and lesbian community. Individuals can reflect on their developmental processes in a variety of ways. For example, with an ever growing body of available media on the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals, the opportunity for external influences on an individual's experiences outside direct conversation continues to grow.

Does narrative socialization have positive implications for social support and well-being? While my hypothesis predicted positive correlations with both well-being and perceived social support, overall no significant effects were found. Examination of the correlations in Table 2 actually show substantial negative correlations between well-being and both *order* and *Internal Struggle for Acceptance*.

A significant correlation, however, was detected between *order* and perceived social support from friends, suggesting that storytelling may relate to support in some interpersonal relationships, while not in others. Perceived social support from an individual's current peer group may increase as individuals provide a more prototypical narrative. Alternatively, as an individual comes out and a more prototypical narrative is obtained, individuals may also be restructuring their peer group to include more supportive friends. This new peer group most likely will include more gay individuals, all of whom potentially share the predominant beliefs articulated in the more socialized narrative.

Limitations

Sample Size. Several null findings complicate these findings. Measures of narrative socialization did not correlate consistently with time since coming out or enculturation. This might mean that different aspects of a narrative may be more or less prone to socialization, or that measurement related methodology could be improved. However, the major limitation in this thesis was the small sample size. This resulted in an inadequate power for most tests. Effects of socialization may be more apparent given a sufficient sample size. However, it would take a sample size of approximately 100 participants before any additional correlations between measures of narrative socialization and either gay age or enculturation proved significant. This suggests that regardless of correlation effect sizes, these non-significant findings are most likely due to sample variance. The effect of additional participants on these measures can not be predicted.

Sampling & Measurement. Because neither the length of time one has identified as a gay man or the degree to which the individual is involved in the gay community is an actual measurement of the number of times during which coconstruction was occurring, it is interesting that these two proxy measures of *potential* coconstruction were correlated with different aspects of narrative prototypicality. Additionally, an exact number of the times an individual has shared and coconstructed their coming out story becomes increasingly difficult to assess. While I did ask participants to rate their sense of how frequently they had shared their coming out story on a 7 point likert scale (*never* to *frequently*), the numbers provided by the participants are problematic. Beyond the simple subjectivity in measuring narrative tellings in this way, these numbers represent a participant's subjective sense of his overall level of narrative sharing both inside and outside the gay and lesbian community. In the future it would be beneficial to assess frequency of coconstruction within the gay community as distinct from coconstruction outside of the gay community.

Longitudinal vs. Cross-section. It should be emphasized that while I make developmental predictions, those predictions were measured in a cross-sectional manner. Much could be learned by examining the changes in individual coming out stories over time. In this way, narrative changes could be tracked across time, and more specific measures the degree of coconstruction could be obtained.

Beyond an inability to speak to developmental causality, confounds such as generational differences cannot be ruled out. However, it is my prediction that if any generational effect is occurring, it is the direction of increasing the effect of gay age. With increasing media coverage of gay related topics, as well as easily accessible

information over the internet, I predict that any effect of generation would actually impede this study's findings.

Variety in Autobiographical Sharing

Naturalistic Narrative Tellings. In this study, the act of sharing one's autobiographical coming out story was only limited by the desires of the participant. These longer sharings were used to capture the full scope of the participant's coming out and identity development story. This, however, does not reflect the true nature of the way in which narratives are typically shared.

Foremost, unlike in this study, narratives are rarely delivered in an uninterrupted fashion. Partial narrative deliveries are more common in everyday conversations. Because narrative socialization and the process of coconstruction can only occur during conversation, it is likely that individuals have varying degrees of socialization across different narrative sections.

Additionally, qualities of the specific conversation in which coconstruction may be occurring can not be ignored. The variety in the subjective importance given to the conversation by both the speaker and listener further complicate attempts to measure actual acts of coconstruction. On a related manner, if coconstruction with someone in a shared cultural context socializes stories to that culture's prototype, what is the effect of coconstruction outside of the shared culture? It is rarely the case that individuals are socialized solely in the domain of one specific group. Individuals belong to a variety of social groups that cross a variety of various identities. As Harter (1990) notes, adolescents experience an active struggle across time, situation and social roles in the discrepancies between true, false and ideal selves. Indeed, with this significant number of

selves, frequently with contradictory roles and attributes, adolescents often have concern over which is “the real me.” This flexible sense of adolescent self is more largely affected by listener and context (Harter, 1997).

As the selective interaction hypothesis (Swann, 1989) suggests, individuals may selectively engage in conversation related to group experiences with individuals who also are members of that group thereby limiting coconstruction in contexts that lack or don't support the shared experience and knowledge. Similarly, when outside of the gay and lesbian community, individuals may buffer themselves from both the conversation and coconstruction through the assigning the conversation less subjective importance. Additionally, Pasupathi (in press) suggests that a “dramatic” style of communication may prevent contextual influences on an individual's narrative thereby controlling the effects of coconstruction. Lastly, just because an individual is involved in the gay and lesbian community does not guarantee that he will tell his story. Future studies could benefit from obtaining additional information from participants about the variety of contexts in which coconstruction occurs.

Narrative Goals. The objective of speakers and listeners in narrative sharings must also be accounted. Beyond the goal of good story telling that entertains or engages the listener (Bruner, 1986), culturally specific objectives may also exist. For example, individual who have recently come out may seek social support while individuals who have been out for longer periods of time may be seeking to provide that support. Additionally, examination into the style of coconstruction within a group context that occurs one or both individuals identify with that group could provide an interesting insight into the way in which the actual identity transition occurs. Recent work not only illustrates a

variety of milestone trajectories and paths that individuals may take while developing a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity (Floyd & Stein, 2002), but also suggests that storytelling is one process by which stage and milestone theories come together. People narrate real experiences, telling stories which place those experiences into a meaningful light. Unfortunately, the prospect of recruiting “pre-gay” participant largely bars research in this direction.

What is the gay community? It is important to note that from a theoretical stand point, the gay community in this study was defined as individuals who are themselves gay. But does a heterosexual orientation preclude a listener from coconstructing the speaker’s coming out story towards the prototype? Certainly not. In fact, several of the community experts whose interviews I used to construct the prototypical story were heterosexual. These individuals, selected because of their involvement with the gay community, suggest that classification of individuals as part of the gay community varies across people of any sexual orientation.

Future Directions

Replication of this study with an increased sample size could further substantiate these findings. Expanding the ways in which individual levels of narrative socialization is captured would provide additional insights into what aspects of narratives are more or less subject to the socialization effects of coconstruction. Such an approach may also provide insight into inconsistencies across the measures of narrative socialization used in this study. Additionally, the implementation of a longitudinal study investigating these effects promises to be the most revealing.

Extending this work to other types of identity transformations may also be profitable. Narrations of religious conversion, for example, may provide an interesting comparison to the work done here. However, different types of identity transformations may be narrated in different ways. While these stories of sexual identity development and coming out most frequently expressed changes in how individuals saw themselves, I suspect that stories of religious conversion are more focused on an individual's change in their world view. This particular difference may have direct implications on the degree and content to which coconstruction occurs.

Conclusion

This thesis represents the first study extending Pasupathi's (2001) model to empirically examine effects of the larger cultural context. As such, it contributes methodological insights, as well as substantive findings on the autobiographies of a particular identity change which may be influenced by coconstruction.

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Table 1. *Intercorrelations Between Measures of Narrative Socialization*

Measure	1	2	3	4
1. Canonicity	–	.69**	-.11	.24
2. Order		–	-.13	.03
3. Internal Struggle for Acceptance			–	.57*
4. External Struggle for Acceptance				–

* $p < .01$

** $p < .001$

Strong intercorrelations were found between the two milestone related measures as well as the global ratings of struggle for acceptance.

Table 2. *Correlations of Narrative Socialization*

Narrative Socialization	Gay Age	IGCS	MSPSS	SWLS
Canonicity	.40*	.19	.21	-.08
Order	.13	.58**	-.14	-.33
Internal Struggle for Acceptance	-.20	.12	-.14	-.33
External Struggle for Acceptance	-.05	.24	.31	.13

* $p < .01$ (one-tailed)

** $p < .01$

Significant relationships were found between *Canonicity* and *Gay Age*, as well as *Order* and the *Involvement with the Gay Community Scale* (IGCS). Relationships between other measures of narrative socialization and the *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS) and the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWLS).

Figure 1

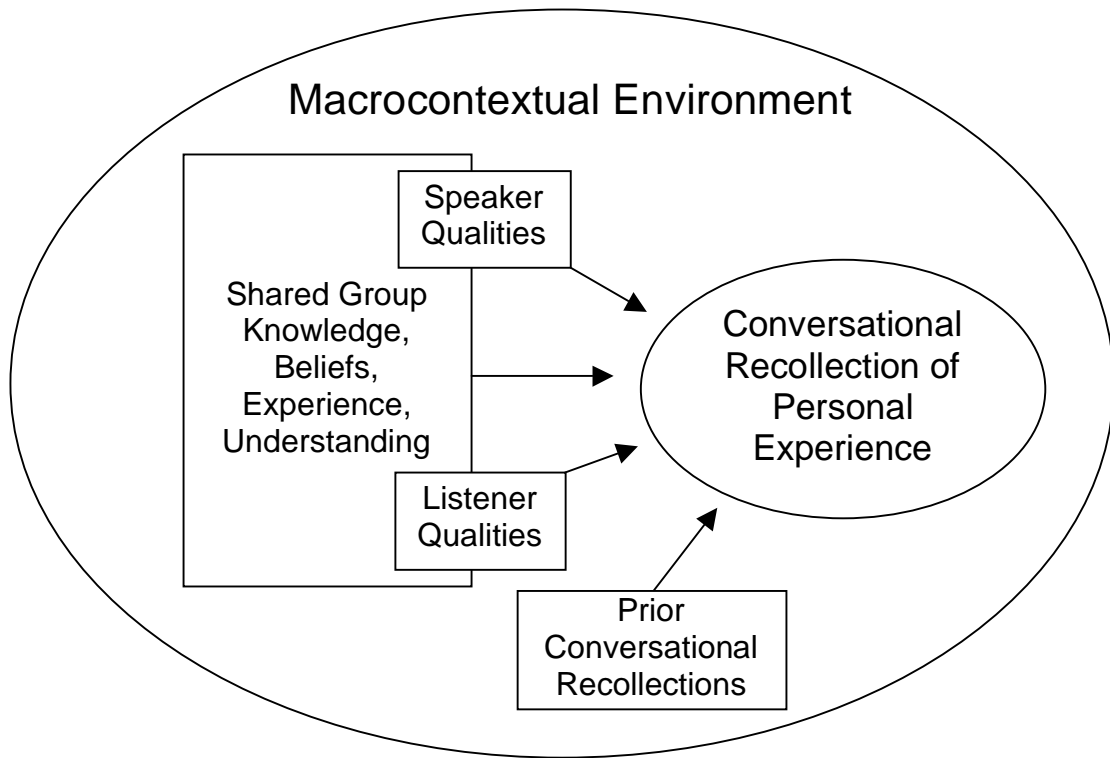


Figure 1. The principal of conconstruction (Pasupathi, 2001) modified to include macrocontextual effects: shared group qualities influence the way in which group related memories are recounted in conversation.

Figure 2

Stage Theory (Cass)	Milestone Theory (Savin-Williams)
Identity Confusion	Awareness of Same-Sex Attractions
Identity Comparison	Knew Meaning of "Homosexuality"
Identity Tolerance	Applied "Homosexual" to Attractions
Identity Acceptance	First Gay Sex
Identity Pride	First Heterosexual Sex
Identity Synthesis	Recognized Self as Gay/Bisexual
	First Disclosure
	First Same-Sex Romance
	Developed Positive Sexual Identity

Figure 2. Outline of Homosexual Identity Formation stage theory (Cass, 1979) and Savin-Williams' (1998) milestone approach (ordered chronologically; abridged).