Gay Men at Midlife and Adult Learning: An Uneasy Truce with Heteronormativity

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Abstract: Thirteen gay men between the ages of 40 and 60 relate stories of their lived experiences, demonstrating both adherence and resistance to heteronormative societal expectations regarding aging gay men. Their stories have implications for adult development and adult education, two fields in which this group has largely been ignored.

Introduction

The influence of adult development literature on the field of adult education is widely acknowledged (Hoare, 2006; Merriam & Clark, 2006). Tennant and Pogson (1995) espouse the view that the very process of promoting adult learning inevitably engages adult educators with adult development. Clark and Caffarella (1999) make a similar point in noting "many aspects of our thinking about adult learners and the learning process are shaped by our knowledge of how adults change and develop across the life span" (p. 1). However, adult development research has been almost exclusively heterosexual in its focus (Kimmel & Sang, 1995). As a result, traditional notions of adult development cannot be presumed to be applicable to *sexual minorities* (a collective term for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans-identified and transgender persons, and others outside the norm of heterosexuality); furthermore, adult development theories and models may be largely irrelevant because they fail to take into account historical events, social context, and lived experiences of sexual minorities (D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Kertzner, 2001).

This historical inattention to sexual minorities in adult development research is rooted in *heteronormativity,* the deeply ensconced and taken-for-granted societal norm of heterosexuality which has also been referred to as *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1980). Together with *heterosexism*--"a belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, procedures, events, or activities" (Sears & Williams, 1997, p.16), heteronormativity serves to denigrate, oppress, and marginalize those who are not heterosexual. The heteronormative demand to exact silence and invisibility upon sexual minorities has contributed not only to the longstanding lack of consideration of sexual identity as a developmental component; but to its relevance to adult learning and meaning making being overlooked as well. As sexual minorities have become more visible in society, some scholars and researchers in both fields have begun to recognize that their lived experiences are worthy of increased attention (e.g., D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995). However, research related to sexual minorities at midlife remains sparse; and the negotiation of midlife in a heteronormative society remains unexplored. Gender, irrespective of sexual identity, is an important consideration in the exploration of lived experiences (Caffarella & Olson, 1993; Kertzner, 2001); and the lives of lesbians and gay men are "so distinct that to suggest otherwise would be to blur profound differences and do injustice to those in both groups" (Nimmons, 2002, p. 223). As such, and assuming the

same holds true for bisexuals and transgender persons, this research focused on gay men. Specifically, the purpose was to explore how self-identified gay men experience and negotiate midlife within a heteronormative society.

Conceptual Framework

With its focus on the social, cultural, and historical contexts as determinants in growth and learning, social constructivism served as the overall frame for this research. Such a perspective holds that knowledge is *socially constructed,* that is, developed, transmitted, and shared within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998). Using this lens, heteronormativity can be understood as a set of socially constructed institutionalized societal rules embodied in cultural ideologies that define categories of sexual identity, and ascribe different levels of worth or value to those categories.Yet social constructivism also implies the notion of agency. As individuals interact socially, new interpretations are possible; and views of reality can be re-constructed. This research was also informed by some aspects of queer theory which builds upon the implicit sense of agency in social constructivism through its explicit and expressed spirit of dissonance, its oppositional stance, and its challenge of heteronormative cultural and societal practices.

Research Methodology

Purposeful sampling, including Internet-based strategies, was used to recruit self-identified gay men between the ages of 40 and 60 to participate in a qualitative narrative inquiry "revolving around an interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (Chase, 2005, p. 651). In their own words and through their own stories, the 13 participants related lived experiences which explicate ways in which they both adhere to and resist societal and cultural expectations and understandings as to what it means to be an aging gay man. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method. As an additional source of data, each participant provided one or more photographs, pieces of art, prose, or other cultural artifacts of personal significance. Discussion of these items afforded a deeper exploration into their relevance and significance at this stage of the participants' lives. Themes were distilled across the whole of the data while also acknowledging and recognizing the depth and intricacies of the participants' unique and idiosyncratic lives.

Findings and Conclusions

Adult developmental models and theories typically characterize midlife as a period of significant transition across many realms of life including the physical, social, and psychological. Not surprisingly, this study revealed that the participants are encountering issues and concerns commonly associated with midlife (e.g., health concerns, caring for parents, planning for retirement). However, this study confirms that heteronormativity imposes additional developmental hurdles with which these men must contend. Salient examples include the considerable societal pressure these men felt in adolescence and young adulthood to "fit in" by dating and, in four cases, marrying women; religious dogma and doctrine which castigates non-normative sexual identity; media representations which reinforce negative and misleading stereotypes; and diminished opportunities for external validation given an increased potential for strained family relationships and denigration of same-sex relationships. The widely diverse responses to such heteronormative factors influenced individual developmental pathways, lending credence to those who have postulated that traditional models of adult

development do not adequately address developmental patterns of gay men (Brown, Sarosy, Cook, & Quarto, 1997; Kimmel & Sang, 1995).

Now at midlife, the participants have resolved any ongoing inner struggle with sexual identity. They care less about what others think of them than when they were younger, and have come to a self-acceptance reflected by "this is who I am." Indeed, the majority of these men are living happy and fulfilling lives. This is not to imply that they are unfazed by the ongoing impositions of heteronormativity and heterosexism on their daily lives; indeed, their stories are replete with examples of everyday compromises (Adelman, 2000, p. xv) that have long been, and remain, a routine aspect of their lives. While they have learned to mitigate much of the constant barrage of heteronormativity, these men both accommodate and resist its dictates in varying degrees and in different situations. They prefer to avoid direct confrontation by using such tactics as ignoring people who are homophobic, "walking away," and humor to negotiate through conflict and challenges engendered by heteronormativity; but most will at times contest it based on assessed risk and other contextual factors. In living the tension between "fitting in" and "being too out," these men strive for balance between the heteronormative demands for silence and invisibility, and a desire for full self-expression. In effect, they have established an uneasy truce with heteronormativity--ignoring it when they can, and challenging it when they must. It is through learning—individual, collective, and societal--that the terms and conditions of this shaky truce are mediated. Such learning figured prominently in the stories of these men. It is often informal, and situated in friendships and other social relationships through which they have created new meanings and self-narratives; and in which they are engaged in an ongoing process of re-formulating knowledge, and constructing new realities in which to live out their daily lives.

Participants' experiences and perspectives were also solicited on several contemporary socio-political issues that make up part of the context in which they are negotiating midlife, specifically: (a) gay marriage; (b) HIV/AIDS; (c) the Internet; and (d) ageism. These topics were either not part of the social fabric of the lives of previous cohorts of gay men, or were experienced differently due to shifting social and cultural landscapes. Collectively, the views of the study participants on these issues offer insights into how they are negotiating what is essentially unfamiliar and unknown territory. Each of these topics warrants further research, and is touched on here only briefly. Perhaps no single issue challenges the essence of heteronormativity more than that of gay marriage. Many in the gay community are dismayed at the amount of attention this issue receives, and express serious reservations regarding its diversion of attention from other concerns. By and large, the men in this study reflect the disparate perspectives of the larger gay community. Without exception, they felt that gay couples should have the same legal and financial rights as heterosexually married couples; and for some, this issue has taken on added importance during midlife. However, there was considerable ambivalence about the notion and the semantics of "marriage," and only a few who were strongly in favor of it. As for HIV/AIDS, few would dispute its profound impact on the generation of gay men currently at midlife. As is the case with many of their contemporaries, many of the men in this study have faced and are sometimes left with complicated issues of grief, anger, and survivor's guilt in the wake of HIV/AIDS; although a few indicated it has not had much impact on their lives. Similarly, the Internet has had considerable impact on the development of some of the men who credit it with opening them up to the gay world and

serving as an efficient conduit to meeting social and sexual needs. Others are merely "functional users" for whom it has little life significance. In regard to ageism, the participants' perspectives run counter to the anecdotal evidence and conventional wisdom that would indicate ageism is a considerable problem in the gay male community almost such that an ageist caste system exists. With one notable exception, the men in this study do not perceive ageism in the gay male community as a major concern. While most don't discount that it exists particularly in online environments, they feel it is no more prevalent or different in the gay community than in society at large.

Significance to Adult Education

While the field of adult education has seen increased attention to sexual identity and heteronormativity in the past decade, Grace (2001) maintains that "mainstream adult education mimics the dominant culture in its commitment to hetero-normative status quo" (p. 267); and many adult educators remain aloof to issues surrounding sexual or gender identity. As a result, such issues are often ignored or assumed to be salient only to those who identify as other than heterosexual. To rectify this, adult educators need a deepened understanding of their own attitudes towards sexual identity difference and heteronormativity lest sexual minorities continued to be excluded from the ethos of inclusivity that is so heralded and celebrated in adult education. Inclusion of previously silenced voices (Cunningham, 2000) will "broaden the circle" in challenging hegemonic frameworks that shape adult education, and in critiquing the "philosophical, sociolinguistic, and historical foundations of the field that have made issues of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation invisible in the current 'mainstream' adult education literature" (Sissel & Sheared, 2001, p. 9). By making explicit how the lives of these men have been and continue to be impacted by heteronormativity, this study provides the opportunity for adult educators to reflect on their own belief systems, values, and practice; and to consider whether they may be colluding in marginalization and oppression by having "unwittingly adopted a shared view of gay men… that obscures a far deeper set of more important truths…now going on in these lives and communities" (Nimmons, 2002, p.5). Doing so may yield new forms of dialogue and engender the networking opportunities so important to ally and coalition building. It may also help to explicate connections among all forms of oppression, thereby encouraging the type of collaborative discussion that "crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention" (hooks, 1994, p. 129); and furthering adult education's aim of interrupting the "cycle of oppression" (Guy, 1999, p.12).

Adults become more heterogeneous as they age due to differential roles, education, experiences, environments, and inclinations (Hoare, 2006). The results of this study indicate that due to heteronormativity, such heterogeneity may be even more pronounced in the lives of gay men. Adult educators need to be cognizant of the wide diversity among gay men; recognize that they (and presumably other sexual minorities) may follow different developmental paths than those typically described in the adult development theories and models which inform adult education. Gay men may be struggling with coming to terms with having a non-normative sexual identity, or otherwise not be comfortable with the idea of being out in a learning environment. Adult educators must be prepared to meet individual gay men wherever they happen to be on their developmental journeys. This requires awareness, if not a sensitivity, on the part of the adult educator regarding unique characteristics or attributes of sexual minorities in

general. From a practical perspective, this includes the challenge of creating supportive environments that create space for varying views and perspectives; yet do not condone or reinforce discrimination, disrespect, or ill treatment. One significant aspect of this is the use of non-offensive terminology. Seemingly innocuous words are oftentimes fraught with implicit and unexamined heterosexist and homophobic notions. Thus, it would be prudent for adult educators who are unsure or tepid regarding terms that may be unintentionally defamatory to seek out opportunities for dialogue with and to capitalize on the epistemic knowledge of gay men and other sexual minorities through collaborative activities such as team teaching and the use of guest speakers. At the same time, adult educators must have a willingness to try to understand the learning needs of gay men on an individual basis—just as is the case with any typical adult learner. As Edwards and Brooks (1999) note: "Adult educators have a unique opportunity to create conversations about sexual identity in the adult classroom...sexual identity discussions can enrich our education of the whole person" (p. 55). As an example, rather than embrace a sense of resistance, the participants of this study largely disavow what they deem to be "activist"; thus, they might likely find the complexities of queer theory irrelevant to their daily lives. Importantly, the lives and experiences should not be seen through a lens of pity or victimization, nor addressed gratuitously; rather, the benefits perceived as a consequence of sexual identity should be acknowledged and celebrated. Failure to do so may lead to learning that rather than moving one towards more mature and integrated development, could "trigger changes that represent perspectives that are more inhibited, restrictive, and less developed than before" (Merriam and Clark, 2006, p. 30).

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

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