

Becoming and Belonging in Gay Men's Life Stories: A Case Study of a Voluntaristic Model of Identity

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Abstract

This article contributes to sociological studies of identity by shedding light on concrete social identification practices and placing these practices in cultural context. Gay men's autobiographical accounts, gathered in 28 in-depth interviews, show consistent use of a long-held feature of American culture: a voluntaristic trope of personal striving through social attachments. Citing examples from stories about friendship, love, role models, city life, identity politics, and religion, the analysis shows how gay men frame their life stories using a voluntaristic model of identity. The study also provides evidence of change over time in the practices through which gay men construct social identities. Younger men report greater ease in finding gay role models, especially in professional settings, than do older men. Their accounts also support the notion that a therapeutic ethos is becoming ever more pervasive in American life.

Keywords

identity, narrative, American culture, voluntarism, sexuality

Introduction

The sociological study of identity is overdue for critical reflection. In their 2000 article, "Beyond 'Identity,'" Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper complained that the term had lost its analytical utility, remained conflated with vernacular usage, and had taken on too many meanings in sociological theory and research (they counted five). Brubaker and Cooper argued that sociologists should abandon the term *identity* for more specific practices or qualities that can be observed and measured. This article takes up Brubaker and Cooper's call for a more concrete approach to identity, using the case of sexual identity. It demonstrates the centrality of identification practices within gay men's autobiographical narratives, as accounts of these practices animate stories about *becoming*, through interpersonal relationships, and *belonging*, through engagement with collectivities.

Analysis of autobiographical accounts provides more than examples of interactive identity building, however; it also suggests one way to place identification practices in a broader cultural framework. Throughout their life stories, the gay men interviewed for this study employ shared cultural tropes of self and personhood, presenting a voluntaristic understanding of the self that is characteristically American. The voluntaristic self that emerges in these accounts combines

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beliefs about personhood that are historically rooted in American culture with therapeutic models of the self that have become institutionalized since the 1970s. In making this connection, the study complements recent work in the sociology of sexualities by adding a broad and nuanced account of cultural context.

In addition, these stories provide evidence of changes in the gay experience over time. The men interviewed for this study range widely in age, so their narratives suggest how identification practices may be shifting as the social climate becomes more accepting of homosexuality. Younger men report greater ease in locating gay role models and increasing familiarity with psychotherapy and a therapeutic vocabulary. At the same time, there are many consistencies in the men's stories across age groups, such as shared struggles with religion, identity politics, and attachment to places. A voluntaristic framing of identity is a constituent feature of all these accounts. Thus, in picking up Brubaker and Cooper's call for studies of concrete identification practices, this article presents voluntarism as a cultural resource that gay men use to craft a cohesive self amid changing circumstances.

Literature Review: Sexual Identity, Narrative, and American Voluntarism

Brubaker and Cooper (2000:14) unpack identity into three concepts that they find analytically useful. The first—and the one that will be drawn on most heavily here—is “identification and categorization.” This concept is itself complex, describing recognition or naming of oneself, by oneself and others, through processes that are either relational (based on mutual connection) or categorical (based on shared membership in a type). It shows that the meaning of groupness is articulated in sets of social practices that are more or less institutionalized, such as when social movements question categories and suggest new ones. Identification also includes psychodynamic processes, as Brubaker and Cooper elaborate: “While the classificatory meanings involve identifying oneself (or someone else) *as* someone who fits a certain description or belongs to a certain category, the psychodynamic meaning involves identifying oneself emotionally *with* another person, category, or collectivity” (2000:17, emphases in original). They argue that transforming identity into identification avoids the term's reifying connotations, redefining it as a mode of social practice.

This argument resonates with a long-held tenet of microsociological theory, that people construct their identities interactively in social relationships. It is useful to the extent that it clarifies earlier work of the pragmatist-interactionist tradition, such as that of George Herbert Mead ([1934] 1967), Erving Goffman (1959, 1963), and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). Identity as identification is also complementary to the “practice turn” in sociology broadly, especially in cultural sociology, where interactive meaning work (Rambo and Chan 1990) comes into focus. In this subdiscipline, there are many examples of the effort that people put into molding their own and others' identities, for example, in work on boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002), narrative (Somers 1994), and the institutions to which communication practices are “anchored” (Swidler 1986, 2001).

Telling life stories is an identification practice that incorporates and draws upon diverse cultural resources. A central tenet of social science studies of narrative is that stories make experience understandable (Bruner 1987; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008; McAdams 1993; Polkinghorne 1988). The sequence of a story's parts—setting, characters, and events—connects them to each other through time; standardized plots make the sequence intelligible (Somers 1994). Sociologists emphasize that stories are a means by which people shore up understandings of self and identity interactively (Fine and Fields 2008; Somers and Gibson 1994) and that they do so in ways that vary by sociohistorical context. Anthony Giddens (1991:7) writes that

in modernity, “self-identity becomes a reflexively organized behavior”; the self-as-project actually “consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives” (see also Zaretsky 2005). Moreover, stories work at multiple levels. “Formula stories” operate institutionally to set expectations of what identities are possible, whereas personal narratives reflect individuals’ efforts to put formula stories to use in their own sense-making practices (Loseke 2007).

Sexual identity is an interesting case for the study of identity because it is an ascribed characteristic that must nonetheless be reflexively accomplished. That is to say, one’s embodied experience of homosexual desire must be made meaningful in the course of social life. Feelings and experiences must be explicable, that is, understandable and communicable in shared terms. They must also be actionable, or able to provide motivation for planning the future and frames for making sense of the past. Thus, the development of sexual identity has been studied as a narrative construct, its development occurring in patterned and predictable ways (Hammack and Cohler 2009; Rust 1993). The formula story that maps gay men’s and lesbians’ experiences on to institutionalized understandings of collective identity is “coming out.” Ken Plummer (1995:50) writes of coming out as one of several modern “sexual stories” that share certain features: “The narrative plot is driven by an acute suffering, the need to break a silence These are always stories of significant transformations.” For Plummer, coming out is a crucial form of ritualized identity formation.

Arlene Stein (1997) expands on this interactionist approach with a sensitivity to cultural context. She writes:

One is not born a lesbian; one becomes a lesbian through acts of reflexive self-fashioning. The formation of a lesbian identity is at least partly a matter of developing proficiency in manipulating codes and symbols. It involves conforming to historically specific and localized norms of identity and culture. (1997:89)

Stein pays attention to the cultural resources (codes and symbols) that people use in their identification practices. Yet, because Stein’s study addresses a localized culture, it does not speak to the broader contexts that also influence the meaning work that women do to become lesbians. The cultural meaning systems with which people are raised do not cease to exist as identities adapt to new imperatives; rather, meaning work is devoted to reckoning new truths with the old.

More recent studies of sexuality build on Stein’s work, showing how variation in social context affects identity-related understandings and practices. For example, recent work looks at how gay and lesbian identities may be changing in the twenty-first century (Ghaziani 2011; Seidman 2002) and how a sense of place shapes identity among suburban gay men (Brekhus 2003) and rural gays and lesbians (Kazyak 2011). Elizabeth Armstrong (2002) considers both time and place; her important study shows how a specific understanding of gay identity (the community characterized by its “unity through diversity”) is anchored to public ritual and modes of organizing that developed in 1970s’ San Francisco. While all of this research draws us closer to Brubaker and Cooper’s notion of identification as a concrete practice, it leaves out a set of cultural resources that may also inform gay people’s identification: shared understandings of self and personhood that are distinctly American.

The coming-out story is powerful not only because it functions to explain the development of the gay or lesbian self, but also because it resonates with a longstanding feature of American culture: a voluntaristic understanding of identity. The term *voluntarism* (Lipset 1963) originally described an ambivalent stance between individualism and community participation, one that deeply impressed Alexis de Tocqueville ([1835–1840] 1990), as well as later foreign observers (e.g., Varenne 1977). In this sense, voluntarism refers to Americans’ zeal for participation on a free, or voluntary, basis—a habit Claude S. Fischer (2008:358) describes as the “love it or leave

it principle.” Sociologists have studied this tendency mostly in relation to civic participation, such as in cultural work on social inequality (e.g., Swidler 1992).

Claude S. Fischer highlights another aspect of voluntarism: a utilitarian and socialized approach to reaching one’s personal potential. For Fischer (2010:10), voluntarism means “believing and behaving *as if* each person is a sovereign individual”—and, simultaneously, that “individuals succeed through fellowship.” This latter aspect of voluntarism provides a powerful model of the social self that is directly applicable to the study of autobiographical narrative. It captures the work that narrators do *to become*—an aspirational model of the modern, reflexive self—and *to belong*—to accomplish self-making in relation to social values and institutionalized routines. It reminds us that becoming and belonging are two sides of the same coin, and in doing so, provides a useful analytic frame for understanding American autobiographical conventions.

A cultural trope that is intimately related to voluntaristic identity is the framing of the life story as a therapeutic journey of self-discovery. Psychiatric notions of the self and identity have evolved from the time when Freud’s work was first introduced to American audiences into a diverse array of institutional forms (Illouz 2008; Tavis Thomson 2000). A central component of what Eva Illouz (2008) calls the “therapeutic ethos” is the “perfectibility of the self”—a distinctly American take on Protestant self-improvement through discipline. Illouz traces the expansion of these ideas beyond therapeutic practice and into social and professional life. For example, she notes the rise of human resources professionals and the discourse of “emotional intelligence,” in which the ability to manage one’s emotions is seen as a key to social success (Illouz 2008:202). The therapeutic understanding of the self is tied to life stories that are “retrospectively emplotted,” such that the goal of self-improvement is applied after the fact to create compelling accounts about one’s experience (Illouz 2008:273; see also Taylor 1989). Thus, the therapeutic understanding of the self dovetails with voluntarism to provide a culturally salient model for contemporary American biography and identity.

This article provides a typology of identification practices while also locating these in a broader cultural framework. Although sociologists may be used to viewing identity as an interactive accomplishment, meaning is not simply located within the situation in which participants are interacting. When people engage in identification practices, they draw upon a wide range of cultural resources that are readily available. For example, they activate semiotic codes (Swidler 1986) and narrative conventions (Somers 1994) that provide a sense of order to events that may be experienced as random. In the American context, voluntarism is a broad cultural trope that has proven to be both durable and adaptable in shaping understandings of the social self. Locating voluntarism in gay men’s life stories enriches the sociological understanding of identity by showing how a constituent feature of American culture figures in the concrete meaning-making practices of one social group today. At the same time, it provides new ways of understanding gay identity more specifically. Recent decades have seen substantial shifts in both public acceptance and institutional accommodation of homosexuality. Observing how identification practices are framed in gay men’s life stories suggests some of the reasons why young gay people’s lives may be easier than those of their older peers and what remains difficult about coming out today.

Research Method

This project offers an analysis of brief life histories collected in a series of 28 in-depth interviews with gay- and queer-identified men. The primary criterion for participation was to live—or have lived for a significant period of time—in San Francisco, California. This geographic continuity creates an important shared context among the interviewees. Participants were recruited in three ways: (1) an intergenerational discussion group organized by a gay-community-based organization ($n = 5$); (2) referrals from eight community members who were not themselves interviewed ($n = 12$); and (3) subsequent referrals from interviewees ($n = 11$). Interviews were conducted

between April 2009 and January 2010 in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland, California. Interviews consisted of a life history timeline, including targeted probe questions on personal background, community involvement, and identification with gay subcultures. Interviews were semi-structured, built around major life events that were shared in common, as well as each interviewee's identification of significant turning points. They lasted one to two hours, were digitally audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed. During transcription and analysis, I masked information that could reveal participants' identities and assigned a pseudonym to each.

Data analysis followed the models of "interpretive biography" (Denzin 1989) and the "sociology of accounts" (Orbuch 1997). I proceeded in two stages. First, the *content* of the men's stories was analyzed inductively by collecting notes on themes that emerged during the interviews. Notes on themes were collected throughout the interview process and refined into analytic memos focusing on specific domains of social practice (e.g., the closet, religion, and subculture). The second stage of analysis looked at the *form* of autobiographical narratives by treating individual interview transcripts as life stories in brief. Whereas the first stage involved cutting across the transcripts to identify themes, this stage analyzed the features of each interviewee's narrative as a whole. Notes on narrative structure and tone were assembled for comparison; these notes joined the thematic memos from the first stage, to serve as the foundation for the findings presented here.

Interviewees ranged in age from 24 to 72. The sample was stratified into two age cohorts, referred to simply as "younger" (less than 40 years at the time of interview; $n = 14$) and "older" (over 40 years; $n = 14$). Although it is somewhat arbitrary, this division allows the clustering of these men into two generation-like groups. In terms of race/ethnicity, the sample consists predominantly of white Americans (22 of 28), but there are also five men of color—two African Americans, two Asian Americans, and one Latino—as well as one white European immigrant. The sample is highly educated: all but one has some college education and 10 have postgraduate degrees. While 15 of the 28 report middle-class upbringings, all but three of the men are on middle-class trajectories. That is to say, despite divergence in parents' education and professions—as well as the social conditions in which they were raised—nearly all either have now, formerly had, or are preparing for, careers as white-collar professionals.

Although there is some racial-ethnic diversity among the participants, the study's sample is too small—and the diversity among the men of color themselves is too great—to explore these dynamics in the detail that they deserve. That this article does not contain an analysis of sexual identity by racial-ethnic groups is a practical consideration, not a reflection of the importance of racial-ethnic hierarchies in gay men's experiences and life stories. Anecdotally, the differences between the life stories of the men of color versus their white counterparts suggests an added layer of complexity in accomplishing gay identity for these men (see also Han 2009).

Findings

The men who participated in this study offered their life stories not as a unified narrative following a standardized "mode of emplotment" (White 1973), but rather as a collection of anecdotes. Presented with the opportunity to talk about their lives, they told stories; stories about growing up, first love, changing jobs, and moving from place to place. The stories fall into themed clusters that serve as the basis for the presentation of findings here. The first section, *becoming*, depicts the work that gay men do to seek out and form interpersonal relationships as they navigate gay identity. The second section of findings illustrates the theme of *belonging*, or attachment to places and ideological discourses such as identity politics and religion. The themes of becoming and belonging are presented here separately to bring focus to each type of story and the meaning work that takes place within it. In a voluntaristic autobiography, however, becoming occurs *through* belonging. The themes represent two sides of the same conceptual coin.

Becoming

Voluntarism refers to a typically American form of striving: the deliberate shaping of the self through social means. For the gay men interviewed in this study, it is in stories about interpersonal relationships that the salience of a voluntaristic model of identity is most apparent. In this section of findings, the men negotiate gay identity through relationships with significant others, such as friends, romantic partners, and mentors at work. In addition, several discuss their participation in psychotherapy, a structured shaping of the self that is also an identification practice.

One important set of narratives depicts the men's relationships with other gay men, friends, and acquaintances with whom they identify and imitate. Michael (white, age 55) captures the importance of mutual recognition in a story of meeting another gay man soon after his move to San Francisco from a nearby suburb during college. Michael recounts, "He picked me out immediately. He knew my story *immediately*." Their subsequent friendship was formative, opening doors to a social scene and an expanded sense of the possibilities of urban gay life. Michael's story points out the importance of simply locating another gay person through eye contact or body language (Nicholas 2004). Thus, mutual identification is a skilled social practice that serves as the foundation for all other forms of belonging.

For those struggling to reconcile homosexual desire with heteronormative stigma, role models are not always easy to find. This is particularly true for the older men in this sample, whose reflections on adolescence often exhibit confusion over sexuality that was experienced in isolation. In contrast, most of the younger men in the sample knew, or knew of, other gay boys or adults growing up; their desire for mutual recognition was more easily fulfilled. Younger men frequently refer to gay celebrities and characters on television shows such as "Will and Grace" and "Queer as Folk." The Internet is also a major factor in the coming-out stories of Stephan (white, age 24), Branden (white, age 27), and Nick (white, age 31), all of whom used chat rooms to gain exposure to gay people and ideas about gayness. Typically, older men worked harder, over longer periods of time, to identify gay role models. Even Brian (white, age 52), who was raised in an affluent and culturally sophisticated household, lacked gay role models until he was in his 20s. "That's what made it challenging," he adds. When identifying other gay people takes sustained effort, the process of becoming is more painful and takes more time.

Older men's difficulty in finding role models early in life may be one reason why Anthony (white, age 55) and Don (white, age 62) spoke of romantic partnerships in early adulthood as crucial to their coming-out process. Anthony's romantic relationships changed him gradually, instilling an ethic of self-care and a countercultural attitude. He speaks lovingly of a couple he met in the 1970s, both of whom he was subsequently involved with. "These guys really opened my life up," Anthony says. "They were both older than I, more experienced." One of these partners "showed me yoga . . . he talked about health, he was studying nutrition." The other "helped me find music . . . We used to dance together." Similarly, Don spoke of a college romance as an "erotic-pedagogic relationship." The slightly older man introduced Don to smart, cultured people; by cultivating relationships with them, Don identified potential paths for his own self-development. Don recalls, "He was a wonderful mentor to me." For these men, love provides a social means of cementing identity, confirming what one already knows and offering new sets of possibilities. These accounts resonate with an essay by Ann Swidler (1980:121), who writes,

In loving and being loved, people give themselves over, at least for brief periods, to intensely moving experiences through which they achieve new awareness of self and others. Love can make possible periods of crystallization or reformulation of the self and the self's relationship to the world.

In a voluntaristic autobiography, love stories are one mechanism linking everyday social interactions to a narrative of personal growth.

While the love stories that populate the older men's narratives are rarely found in younger men's, members of both groups identify life-changing role models among their friends. Interestingly, many men speak of friends as *emotional* role models. Jamie (white, age 26) describes the qualities he looks for in a friend: "Smart, driven, successful, in long-term relationships, levelheaded. They just seem to have a balanced lifestyle and want things—want to get a lot out of life." Similarly, Dale (white, age 27) recalls a relationship with a somewhat older gay man (in his thirties while Dale was in college), saying: "I looked to him—the gay dad—for advice . . . I was a little drama queen and I didn't know how to handle my emotions." Glen (white, age 49) also recalls an older friend and companion who taught him "that you could be gay and have self-esteem, have success . . . and be respectable . . . Because when you grow up, being gay is not respectable." Like Jamie and Dale, Glen stresses the emotional qualities that he sought out in others while cultivating them in himself.

Meanwhile, George (white, age 63) invokes the concept of the "chosen family" (Weston 1991), highlighting the work that some gay men do to recreate kinship ties. Friends guided and supported George when he moved to San Francisco in the mid-1970s, following years of personal struggle. At last, he says, "I had friends that watched over me. And sort of shepherded me through my pitfalls." Clearly, there is emotional content to these family-like relationships, but George does not emphasize skills or mentoring. What he valued most about his new family was that they represented "somebody to talk to that didn't laugh at you . . . that just had been there. And would be there." That is, they personified the possibility of a safe haven in an unsafe world. The dramatic nature of George's story—featuring several instances of escape from homophobic violence—as well as his emphasis on friendship as a haven, is unique. But it is notable that the younger men tend to emphasize emotional role modeling among their friends rather than the safety of family-like bonds.

For the men in this predominantly middle-class, well-educated sample, workplaces also provide a venue for rewarding mentor relationships (Rumens 2008). Amal (Asian American, age 27) mentions the human resources manager of a large accounting firm where he works as being a gay role model: "He's older, he's really put-together, he's experienced life, he knows what's right." Ben (white, age 38) describes a former boss as "really good looking and a really nice guy, and gay . . . [W]e kind of had a winking kind of relationship, of like, 'We're secretly on the same team.'" He also notes that these relationships are imbued with social capital: "I kind of felt like I had an in with—there was like a shadow network of . . . power gays at work." Thus, these mentors model career success, as well as responsible gay adulthood. The lack of older men among these examples also suggests that workplaces, at least in San Francisco, have become more useful contexts for building this kind of mentoring relationship over time. George, for example, found his corporate work in the 1970s and 1980s very challenging despite his status as an executive. Although several older men mention using connections to gay peers to help secure jobs, these relationships tended to be strictly practical, lacking the component of emotional role modeling.

In addition to their social relationships, many of the men also report participating in psychotherapy. While it is a structured and professionalized practice, therapy involves the intentional shaping of the self through interaction and is therefore akin to identification. In these stories, the relevance of Illouz's work on American identity and self-improvement is apparent. Men in both age groups spoke of therapeutic practices called upon in times of emotional uncertainty, but their stories echo the changing strategies of mental health professionals regarding homosexuality. There has been a broad historical transition in the psychological approach to homosexuality, from curing what was formerly considered a mental disorder, to helping gay men and lesbians cope with social stigma (Bayer 1987; Cain 1991). These men's life stories contain evidence of that transition. Tom (white, age 72) sought advice from a psychiatrist to resolve misgivings about his impending marriage. The doctor's psychoanalytic approach—he "didn't say anything . . . he

didn't answer any questions"—left Tom feeling distraught. Gordon (white, age 69) also pursued psychoanalysis as a young man, a process that gave him a diagnosis—"obsessive-compulsive"—that he found inaccurate and oppressive.

In contrast, men who used therapy after the 1970s found support in treatment. Ben's (white, age 38) affluent parents encouraged him to see a therapist while he was struggling with coming out as a teen. The therapist helped "with my internalized homophobia"; soon, "everything was okay." In describing these experiences, Ben and other young men use a distinctly therapeutic vocabulary. Aaron (white, age 38) says, therapy has been "incredibly important" in working on "my own homophobia, my own self-acceptance." For Robert (white, also 38), therapy is one of many strategies he has used in a "total overhaul" of his life. He says, "I was undoing a lot of the stuff that—undoing some of who I was at the time, so that I could become who I wanted to be, instead." These excerpts suggest that therapeutic language is a resource that has become available to gay men as stigma has receded and professional practices have changed over time. If the features of a voluntaristic autobiography are consistent across these age groups, some of its constituent parts reflect normative and institutional shifts.

Another theme related to therapy is the belief that the struggle associated with becoming gay is advantageous to personal growth. Ben says,

[E]very gay person . . . [has] become a much stronger person than they would have been if they were straight. They've gained a little bit of wisdom, they've become a little bit hardened for battle I guess . . . It changes you, for the better, I think.

Aaron agrees: "Being gay forces you to figure out who you really want to be. Forces you to not take the easy path through life." Similarly, Jason (white, age 37) believes that emotional growth is stunted before coming out begins. He says, "emotional intelligence and development is something that I think is delayed for a lot of gays and lesbians." The outcome is a "lack of self-esteem. Lack of self-confidence. Lack of a really strong identity." In this understanding, gay young people start life with a lack that they must overcome in deliberate strategies of self-change and self-development. There is an expectation that the stigmatized person will play an active role in his own healing—to make of himself a self-improvement project. Indeed, it is remarkable that, as Illouz (2003, 2008) notes, therapy places the locus of the problem within the patient—in this case, each man finds his own homophobia, not society's or other people's, as the ailment in need of remedy. That each of these accounts came from younger men reinforces the notion that, over time, therapeutic language is becoming still more closely tied to a voluntaristic model of identity.

Thus, therapy joins role model relationships as an identification practice that the men use to frame their life story as a journey. As in discussing therapy per se, younger men often use therapeutic language to describe these practices. They frame emotion as a skill set that can be pursued in many types of interpersonal relationships. They often have the luxury of choosing role models—or if they do not, they recognize the absence of aspirational exemplars. And a few of the younger men also embrace the suffering that they experience in coming out as a source of necessary growth. Although older men also use the language of self-improvement, they tend not to speak of their social relationships in terms of emotional aspiration. Both groups of men craft voluntaristic autobiographies, but the patterns found within them show how decreased institutional stigma opens access to new resources for understanding one's life experiences.

Belonging

A second set of accounts concerns gay men's engagement with places and ideologies—with communities in a broad sense. Whereas the first section on becoming featured stories about

one-on-one social relationships, this section highlights more diffuse social processes. As they sort through social relationships, people are introduced into, and remove themselves from, disparate social groups. In sorting out their place in the city and its neighborhoods, for example, gay men are exploring how they fit into gay and non-gay subcultures. In negotiating their beliefs about politics and religion, they sort out their responsibilities vis-à-vis communities of practice, collectivities whose members negotiate shared understandings as they work toward common goals (Wenger 1998).

The first theme of belonging concerns attachments to place. Most of the men in this urban sample moved to San Francisco from elsewhere in California or the United States. Only two were raised in the city proper, whereas nine others hail from nearby Bay Area suburbs. San Francisco carries a strong cultural mystique, home of the Beat Generation and the Summer of Love. Glen (white, age 49) echoes the city's association with self-actualization. "I have a San Francisco identity," he says, which means simply, "you are free to come here and make your identity." Brian (white, age 52) echoes the city's role as a destination for migrant outsiders. "San Francisco has always been a draw for people . . . almost a black sheep haven," he says. This is particularly true for gay men. George (white, age 63) recalls the excitement of his first visit to the Castro neighborhood, which in the 1970s became the city's most visible center of gay social life. "Oh!" he says, "It was like coming to Disneyland." Dale (white, age 28) also uses a language of wonder to describe his first visit more than 25 years later, showing that the city retains its power to evoke a mythic gay homeland. "[There were] pride flags running up and down Market Street. It was just heaven. I was like, 'Oh my God, how can this be?'"

Yet, the promise of gay acceptance in San Francisco remains empty for some gay men, particularly men of color. Marc (Latino, age 26) also describes the "magical" component of the Castro but adds a bitter twist: comparing the Castro with Disneyland, Marc adds, "It's like an illusion, basically." Although he grew up in San Francisco, he feels excluded from its gay culture because of his social class and ethnicity. He says, "I'm unaccepted from the communities I belong to, you know, Latino, coming from a marginalized community. And then being gay—coming here, being gay in the Castro, it's not easy sometimes . . . It's not a win-win situation, either way." In a different way, Ken (African American, age 27) finds himself falling through the subcultural cracks of San Francisco's gay life. "[T]here's so many subgroups in the gay community," he says, "but I don't fit into any of them. I'm not a bear, I'm not a gay geek, I'm not a twink. I'm not this, I'm not that." He identifies with each subgroup partially, resisting membership that also involves stereotyping.

As Ken's comments indicate, younger migrants tend to describe the city as a field for cultural exploration. They embrace San Francisco not only because it offers a gay enclave, but also a variety of alternatives to "mainstream" gay life. For example, Ben (white, age 38) seeks an "anti-Castro vibe" in his social connections and calls his friends "alterna-gays." Eddie (Asian American, age 32) agrees: the Castro "doesn't really represent the community for me—or the gay community that I think I belong in." For these younger men, the Castro offers just one way to be gay, one mode of identification among many. By debating the status of San Francisco and the Castro as positive and accepting environments for gay men, all of these men show how places can figure into voluntaristic autobiographies: as contested scenes in which the drama of personal striving is played out. Belonging remains central to the stories, even as the boundaries around where one belongs are negotiated.

In addition to negotiating attachment to places, a second theme in the men's stories of belonging concerns grappling with conflicting ideological discourses. These include ideas about civic participation, as well as identity politics. Like many Baby Boomers, Art (white, age 57) became politicized during his youth and was particularly critical of the Vietnam War. When he retired, Art became active in a previous mayor's election campaign. He speaks of his involvement in the campaign with a great deal of pride. "I marched with him every year in the [Gay Pride] Parade,"

he attests. For Art, politics are a topic for debate, something that stimulates his imagination and connects him to other people. In a different way, Dale (white, age 27) recounts his transformation from Republican to “radical queer” during his college years, merging interest in histories of racial oppression with queer history. Dale’s story is framed in terms of the different kinds of work he was doing to accomplish this change: mainly, difficult conversations with friends and mentors. He developed self-awareness and the confidence to pursue his goal: to move to San Francisco and find a supportive political community. For both of these men, gay identities encompass political identities.

As Art’s and Dale’s accounts suggest, a common articulation of identity politics among men in both age groups is the differentiation between “gay” and “queer.” In terms of civic participation, “gay” refers to the discourse of achieving social parity through civil rights; “queer” reflects a critical stance against normalization, questioning civil inclusion as a worthy goal. These labels are frequently presented in opposition, yet in practice, the binary often breaks down. Here, George switches from one semiotic code to the other: “I’m totally, totally in favor of gay marriage,” he says, indicating a typically “mainstream gay” stance endorsing equality under the law. “But,” he continues, “there is a subtext there of, we need to be normalized. And there’s a part of me that just says, ‘Fuck that.’ I don’t ever want to be normal.” George immediately follows a gay evaluation with a queer one. Branden (white, age 27) tows a similar line, adding a nuanced appreciation of mainstream gay culture to his advocacy for a queer community that is both diverse and inclusive. “I’m a gay man, and that’s my orientation,” he says, “but the identity of queer is something more . . . [T]here’s this larger sense of community, of everyone that doesn’t feel included, that—now you are.” On the contrary, Jack (white, age 48) questions the importance of using any of these terms, saying, “I don’t really care about that distinction.” This would be less surprising if Jack had not been involved in the 1990s activist group Queer Nation. Thus, both George and Branden acknowledge that they are gay *and* queer and that each has its own place in their constellations of identification, whereas Jack distances himself from these notions. This form of meaning work allows men to place themselves in relation to social and political events and institutions and to use these as resources for negotiating gay identity.

In addition to identity politics, many of these men also discussed belonging in relation to religious beliefs and faith communities. For Robert (white, age 38), leaving his family’s Christian congregation was essential to his personal growth. He remembers adolescent confusion around faith and same-sex desire: “It didn’t make sense to me why I was feeling this way, because I was such a good Christian.” Similarly, Lou (white, age 72) recalls, “By the time I was in high school, I had definitely realized that Catholicism was not my spiritual path. Because I knew that I couldn’t be a walking mortal sin.” Jamie (white, age 28) had a more violent separation from spirituality, as he was excommunicated from his Jehovah’s Witness congregation and shunned by his devout family. Even as a teen, Jamie suffered privately. “Although I knew mentally that I couldn’t tell my family and they would probably disown me,” he says, “emotionally I felt like, ‘How could I not be me?’”

Robert gives an account that illustrates the striving that drives voluntaristic identity. Although it is not explicitly about religion, it describes Robert’s struggles to construct his own worldview in the midst of a family life dominated by fundamentalist Christianity.

I used to have dreams when I was a kid, when I was really young—maybe around 10 years old—that I was in a room and the windows were high enough that I couldn’t just stand up and see out of them. I had to jump up to see out . . . How I interpret that is that my parents kept me in this box that they called “reality,” and this is what life is supposed to be. And yet, I was getting these small glimpses every once in a while when I—when something drew my attention to the outside world beyond what my parents were trying to contain me inside. And I would jump up and I could see a little glimpse, then it would go away. And then I would get tired of jumping and just go back to being in my box.

New sources of information, new ways of knowing are required to become the kind of person Robert now knows he needed to become. If the box represents one community of practice, Robert willed himself to see beyond it as he gradually sought out alternatives.

Not all engagements with religious communities are experienced as confining; in some cases, spiritual belief and practice provide models for becoming. During a youth retreat around the time of his graduation from a Catholic high school, Stephan (white, age 24) discovered his connection to God. "I fit into the grander scheme of the universe," he says. "And there was a personal connection with somebody who loved me unconditionally." This experience bolstered his confidence about coming out as a gay man. For Stephan, this unity was fleeting, whereas for Scott (white, age 28), who aspires to become a minister, it defines his personal journey. Here, Scott traces this unlikely trajectory back to one of his earliest role models.

I was very, very close to my grandmother, who was the single most spiritual woman I ever met, up until then. And like, she—I knew, without a doubt in my mind—there was no doubt that she loved me absolutely unconditionally. And to me that became very representative of God's love as an unconditional force . . . Even though I still struggled with issues of guilt or self-loathing or whatever, eventually this idea of love prevailed. For me. And I count myself very lucky. Because I know a lot of people who were—who have been hurt by the church.

Scott bridges the divide between Christian beliefs and sexual identity, finding a way to use the church's teachings to understand and explain his process of becoming a gay man. He demonstrates a high degree of skill at manipulating semiotic codes—a skill that is nurtured in American Christianity's oral tradition. William (African American, age 55), on the contrary, experienced coming out as surprisingly easy, given the conservative environment in which he was raised. "See, people always think that because my father was a Baptist minister that it would have been horrible," he says. "It was—it was like changing clothes, I mean it was so simple." William's father never condemned homosexuality, either in private or while preaching. "It wasn't discussed," he says. "We're talking about a different time. We had lesbians in the church. At that time, they were just strong, Black women who lived with other strong, Black women." For William, race trumps sexuality in the practical negotiation of identity.

This set of findings concerns belonging, practices through which the men form and maintain attachments to places, beliefs, and values. City life serves as background for several types of stories having to do with finding oneself in subcultures. Men in both age groups report ambivalence toward the Castro; for younger men, the neighborhood and its particular brand of gay culture are one of many options for self-expression and belonging. When it comes to identity politics, many men endorse one model of collective engagement whereas others tacitly embrace both gay and queer, civil rights and personal liberty. Religion, too, provides a background and a resource for building identities, often as a community of practice that must be rejected, but for some, as a valuable resource of personal meaning-making. These stories contain the conflicting codes found in American civic life at least since the time of Tocqueville's visits in the 1830s: ardent faith in individualism and an equally strong need for community involvement. In the voluntaristic model of identity, it is precisely through engagement with social groups that one articulates the kind of person one strives to be.

Discussion and Conclusion

These findings demonstrate the anecdotes around which life stories are built, grouped together by shared experiences and vocabularies. The first section of findings gives a sense of the meaning work that men do to "become" gay. In stories about relationships with friends, lovers, and colleagues, the men show that significant others provide role-modeling opportunities. They seek out

others with whom they can identify, new experiences to share, and in the process learn styles, belief systems, and ethical stances. In cultivating relationships with significant others, they craft themselves. Many recall seeking out friendships with men who are levelheaded, respectful, and emotionally mature. Romantic relationships inform daily habits and expand their awareness of the world around them. Similarly, the younger men in this predominantly white-collar sample form mentoring relationships with other gay men at work that buffer their sense of respectable personhood. Several men also engage in psychotherapy, a more structured type of identification practice. Younger men, in particular, articulate their coming-out process in a vocabulary that is reinforced in therapy: once suffering and confused, they find in the therapeutic ethos (Illouz 2008) the tools they need to heal and articulate their goals.

The second section of findings deals with belonging, or attachment to places and ideologies. The belief that San Francisco represents a destination for gay men seeking a safe haven remains strong—but at the same time, so do the barriers that have long excluded gay men of color from full access to participation in gay spaces. Stories about identity politics and civic attachment also show the effort that the men put into belonging to communities of practice. Gay or queer, Democrat or Republican, the ideological frames linked to group identities provide the men with cultural tools with which to construct a cohesive sense of self. Similarly, religion provides a deeply felt set of cultural frames around identity and community. For many of these men, leaving the Christian church in which they were raised is a necessary step in charting their own course. For others, becoming gay means negotiating ongoing attachments to faith. Stories about places, politics, and religion all demonstrate that finding and using cultural resources take sustained effort. Trying out an assortment of social ties—and corresponding vocabularies—is a technique that gay men use to recreate themselves.

Taken together, then, these life stories suggest that gay men's sense of identity is a voluntaristic one. I am adapting that term from recent work by Fischer (2010:10), who uses it to describe a distinctive and historic feature of American culture: "believing and behaving" as if we are sovereign individuals who nonetheless find success in communion with others. Like the classic coming-out story, many of the men's recollections have to do with overcoming personal challenges by reaching out and renegotiating interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the strong resonance of the coming-out story itself may be due in part to its reliance on voluntaristic notions. In becoming gay, these men form new ties, move away from home, shift alliances, and join and depart from communities of practice. Finding oneself is a process that is most acute in early adulthood yet continues throughout life. The life story narrator tends not to have a big picture or plot structure in mind. Rather, anecdotes of effortful negotiation of the self are stitched together in a way that retroactively brings an overall sense of coherence, built around the kind of person one believes oneself to be.

In addition to providing a novel approach to understanding identity as part of a broader cultural complex, this study also contributes to a recent trend in the sociology of sexualities: interest in cultural meaning and the institutions to which meaning is anchored. Examples of research cited above show how place matters in sexual minorities' definitions of self and situation; others show the effects of time, as homosexuality becomes "normalized" (Seidman 2002) to the extent that sexual identity categories are shifting and, perhaps, becoming unstable. My study complements this work by showing some of the concrete ways in which identity is accomplished, but it also shows that these practices are part of broader, historically rooted trends in American culture. People tell the stories they tell not only because of the places and times in which they live, but because they are participants in a distinctive, national culture that permeates local institutions. Certainly, gay subcultures in America have developed their own unique meaning systems that stand apart from, and in many ways serve as commentary on, the heteronormative mainstream. Sociologists have been drawn to identifying the characteristics of these subcultures rather than

studying how they are embedded within broader cultural meaning systems. In the process, the ways in which gay experience is American experience have been obscured.

Gay identity provides a useful example of identification in practice, as it is a personal attribute that is experienced as fixed and immutable, yet must be reflexively accomplished during the lifetime. As Stephan (white, age 24) noted, "Gay people inherit a culture that their parents did not create." Since nearly all gay people are raised with the expectation that they will be heterosexual, coming out can be a dramatic process of reorientation. Gay people must learn and relearn the styles, politics, and myriad other cues and practices that make up gay subcultures. Steven Seidman (2002) points out that heteronormative assumptions remain strong, although there are signs that the power of these assumptions is receding. Still, gay people embark necessarily on a kind of meaning work that their heterosexual peers do not: to bring their sexual desire and identity into account with dominant understandings of the self and personhood. They may not be the only ones doing this kind of meaning work—racial-ethnic minorities' experience with passing as well as certain kinds of religious conversion may provide similar examples—but it is noteworthy that in the case of gay men's identity, understandings of the self and the use of narrative appear to be consistent with broader American understandings of identity as a project.

These findings suggest further research questions about the role that institutions play in reproducing and objectifying meanings about the self. In the course of this analysis, I have suggested one connection between institutional change and personal narrative. Men's differing experiences with psychotherapy reflect changes in the professional standards through which occupational groups interpret state regulation and social norms. As the goals of therapy have changed to a more supportive stance toward homosexuality historically, therapy becomes an institutional prop, supporting voluntaristic notions of healthy gay identity. Illouz (2008) traces the development of a distinctly American version of medicalized therapeutic practice. Along similar lines, one might also look to the practices of public health research to find other ways in which therapeutic models of the self are reproduced and reinforced. HIV prevention programs provide fertile ground for studying understandings of personal responsibility and self-care, as well as how individuals are held accountable to the moral standards of community-based outreach and prevention.

Studying popular culture may also lead us to a better understanding of contemporary understandings of identity. The gay liberation movement of the late 1960s corresponded to a time in American culture when the self-help ethos was especially pronounced. Novelist Tom Wolfe popularized the terms *me decade* and *me generation* to describe the explosion of self-help and self-actualization that accompanied 1960s counterculture. These trends have only increased over time, appearing in new manifestations. Illouz (2003) describes the powerful influence of therapeutic understandings of the self in popular culture, especially in the television talk show. Researchers have traced the development of gay and lesbian movements (Adam 1987; D'Emilio 1998) and the impact of these movements on identity models (Armstrong 2002; Epstein 1987). It would now be instructive to add American culture to the mix by revisiting the lasting, intertwined legacies of the "me generation" and identity-based social movements. Such work would serve to update us on the warning by Robert N. Bellah et al. (2008) that civic culture is corroding under the influence of "expressive individualism." As Americans become ever more obsessed with the self as an ethical project, are these very notions of self and identity propelling us on an undemocratic trajectory?

The case of gay men's life stories suggests that a voluntaristic understanding of the self as a work in progress is an important contribution to studies of identity. As Brubaker and Cooper argue, one of the many connotations of identity in sociological analysis is identification, a set of naming and categorization practices. Here I extend that observation to pragmatist and interactionist theories of the social self as an interpersonal project. Identification occurs in any social practice in which the self is being reconfigured with intention. Pairing microsocial meaning work

with broader cultural meaning systems such as American voluntarism adds a layer of complexity to sociological studies of identity. Looking more broadly also helps to explain the consistencies and differences in the content of these men's life stories, despite the dramatically different social contexts in which the men were raised. What is consistent across these men's stories is a voluntaristic understanding of the self as a work in progress, a project of individual striving pursued through social means. Yet age-based differences also help us understand one way that becoming gay may be easier than was in the past: there is less meaning work to do. Young men expend less effort locating gay social ties and figuring out what it means to be gay, instead concentrating on fulfilling other aspirations. Coming out of the closet still matters, for it remains the dominant way to frame gay identity as a reflexive process of becoming. But coming out is also a variation on the voluntaristic—and quintessentially American—theme of personal growth accomplished through community attachments.

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