

*Preface to Phillip L. Hammack & Bertram J. Cohler eds The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course*

**Preface**

**On Narrative Pluralism**

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

Louis MacNeice, Snow

We live in a pluralistic universe

William James

A homosexual is not a homosexual is not a homosexual

John Gagnon and William Simon

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

I had been born into a London working class background – with no books but lots of loving aspirations. Before 1966, I cried and suffered the pangs of outlawed gay youth. I had had enough of this by 1966 – when I was 20. I started going to gay bars in Soho (and by the way, I counted around 100 at that time!). I told close friends (and some turned out to be gay themselves). And finally I told my parents, who took me to the doctors! And all this in the Summer of 1966, a memorable period in the annals of my life. Homosexuality then was ‘against the law’, and it was also a mental illness. I had a short flirtation with psychiatrists and mental hospitals – well that was the way of that time. It made me suspicious of much psychiatry, psychology and even sociology. The social sciences were definitely not as neutral as they posed, I learned. But by 1967 I had sorted all this out and had cheerfully started my gay career.

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

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

### **Coming out and telling the story of a life**

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

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

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

Puzzling about it, I see that throughout my own life I have been many things and many identities. Even the most coherent of lives - and mine has actually and fortunately been quite coherent - are

invariably multiple, plural. As a child, I kept thinking – amongst many other things – that I was a little sick queer boy. In my teen years –amongst many other things- I struggled with being a homosexual. After I came out (and for quite a while) I was unambiguously gay – through in a rather feminist, white, British, politicised, sociological and male version! By my mid forties, during the 1990's, I was often claiming more to be a post modern gay, even truncating it to being post-gay. In the 2000's and approaching my 'old age' I have tried to give up calling myself anything in particular, perhaps my central identity now is that of a partner ( I have lived with the same partner for thirty years) and it is hard to imagine my being without him. After childhood, I never wanted to call myself queer even as all around me did. To do that would have been to return to the pains of my childhood.

### **Gay Narrative Generations**

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

Throughout much of recent history, a generation could usefully be designated as a natural descent: a mother, daughter and granddaughter would be three generations and it approximately meant a third of a life ( in turn roughly 25 years). It was roughly the time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring. But these days, change is so rapid, family organisation much less predictable, and birth patterns much wider, cohorts cannot so easily be named. What seems to matter now are critical changing social experiences which mark off groups from each other, though even in the same generation experiences are never that unified or held in common ( think minimally class, ethnicity, and gender!). Generations are partially defined by a collective consciousness over shared experiences – usually a critical common life experience. It might help then to think about generations through shared critical life events – their crises and epiphanies – that are held in common and which can generate what might be called generational collective memories. The war generation – living through World War 2 for example- must be a critical shape for millions of the western world. It could even be a key defining fact of identity. Past traumas and crises can help shape a collective memory life project.

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

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

A number of the studies in this book connect to these different gay generations. At the simplest level, in the twentieth century gay and lesbian generations fell into six broad clusters in the U.K.

1. Several early 'Queer Generations One' – for much of the twentieth century, there were different generations which could be seen as criminalised, closeted, and 'sick' - and covered several sub generations between at least 1900 and the early 1960's linked to World War 1, the Depression, World War II and its aftermath. All these generations, as the books put it, lived 'in the shadows'. The diversities of these generations are revealed in the accounts of lives in that period like George Chauncey's (1995) *Gay New York*, Laura Doan's (2001) *Fashioning sapphism*, or Matt Houlbrook's (2005) *Queer London*.
2. The Early Coming out Generations -between the late 1950's -1970's. Homophile movements were slowly gathering some strength and there was the beginnings of visibility. With intense stigma, homosexuality was inching open the closet door.
3. The Gay Liberation Generation during the 1970's where gay men and lesbians came out and were both proud and political about it. This explicit and public politicalization of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender peoples certainly worked to transform the experience of 'downcast gays' into a more positive and much more visible one.
4. The AIDS Generation , which started in 1981 and dominated much of 1980's life. The death and dying of notably young men became a central feature (1980's- 1990's)as homosexuality became oddly re-medicalised and the activists started to become highly professionalised (through AIDS work and academic work).
5. The 'Queer Generation Two' started in the late 1980's and aimed to deconstruct any stable sense of gender or sexual category. No longer criminal, or sick, or even a category, gayness became queered. Some of this was academic (queer theory) and some was activist.
6. The Internet Generation gets going really from the late 1990's onwards: here gay/queer web sites (like gaydar) start to play a major role in gay men's lives – for meeting, sex, social and other activities. Lesbian and gay life now starts to get produced and reproduced through internet activity.

Such a simple schema needs fleshing out with case studies from all over the world. Thus for example, in this book Timothy McMajor Hall looks at the developing gay scenes in Prague through fieldwork since 1999. He suggests how the Velvet Revolution in 1989 marked a major generational transition for all Czechs and Slovaks, regardless of sexual orientation and shows how since then gay life has been transformed with new organisations, culture and identities emerging. The legalization in 2006 of registered partnerships (as in so many countries of Europe) may well bring another turning point and generational moment. He argues that "In some ways, gay men in the Czech Republic who came of age in the 1980s resemble gay men who came of age in the United States some twenty or thirty years earlier, while gay teenagers in the Czech Republic today have many attitudes and significant experiences comparable to their Western peers". This is a telling start to analysing the ways in which different gay generations link up and connect across the gay diaspora.

### **Plural and Cosmopolitan Sexualities**

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

both between generations and across generations which make for a portrait of gay and lesbian life (by whatever terms) as a vast patchwork of plurality of experience and ways of living. To grasp it is a bit like trying to re-order a kaleidoscope.

Over the years, there has been a rich blossoming of ideas around narrative and life story that now enable us to transcend many of the old debates and arguments. In lesbian and gay studies – or queer studies - the coming out narrative has become almost now archetypal. But it should not be forgotten that this is indeed a very specific type of story that links to lives of people who connect to a specific generation. It is not a universal in any way. At present it hangs omnipresently and omnisciently over many gay lives, but there is no one way and it is pointless now to remotely suggest there is. We now know too much and the essays in Phillip L. Hammack & Bertram J. Cohler's *The Story of Sexual Identity* amply testify to this.

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

### **Advancing narrative work: narrative engagement and embodiment**

We now know so much more about lesbian and gay life than the old psychological studies of personality types ever told us. Let us hope that this traditional line of reasoning and thinking amongst psychologists can now be laid to rest as the red herring it is. This book, by contrast, consolidates so much valuable recent work from history, sociology, anthropology and queer theory, and shows just how important the process of what the editors themselves call 'narrative engagement' is. The authors make very clear their position on story, narrative and identity. As they say..

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

Narratives then are dynamic, political and constantly contested. What I sense more and more in the reading and writing of stories is the way they work to undermine any sense of overarching overriding consensus about narratives. When taken seriously, we find that many stories of lives are counter stories- they start to break down any claims for grand theories about lives. At their best, they

challenge and redirect our thinkings. At their worst, they tell us the same old story and utter it in cliché form. So many of the articles in this book challenge us to think afresh our ideas about what we might now call the pluralistic cosmopolitan sexual life.

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

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

What has to be realised in narrative theory is that stories are part of embodiment. The telling of stories is not just about the words we speak: it about the ways in which move through the world with hurting and joyful bodies – our feelings, our thoughts, our bodily sensations. Stories are embodied: they are told by tellers with body processes always at work. Narratives do not free float in the world. Future work needs to bring these bodies to the forefront.

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

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

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Wivenhoe, England, May 2008.