

Configurations of Identity Among Sexual Minority Youth: Context, Desire, and Narrative

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Abstract Youth with same-sex desire undergo a process of narrative engagement as they construct configurations of identity that provide meaning and coherence with available sexual taxonomies. This article presents a theoretical analysis and four case studies centering on the relationship among context, desire, and identity for youth with same-sex desire. Through an interpretive, holistic analysis of the personal narratives of youth, we examine the integration of same-sex desire, behavior, and identity in the general life story and the selective appropriation of elements of “master narratives” of sexual identity development. Narratives were characterized by challenges to integrate desire, behavior, and identity into a configuration that conformed to the received sexual taxonomy. Implications for theory and further research on sexual identity development are discussed.

Keywords Identity · Narrative · Sexuality · Gay/lesbian · Interpretive

Introduction

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the science of sexual identity development has been confronted with a number of significant challenges. Foremost, social scientists who study the development of sexual identity and the experience of sexual minorities have had to reconcile early paradigms that relied upon an ontogenetic, ahistorical approach to the life course with the realities of lived

experience for sexual minorities—realities that have changed markedly in the twenty-first century (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2008). Even as heterosexism, homophobia, and victimization continue to characterize the experience of many sexual minority youth (e.g., D’Augelli et al. 2006; Herek 2007; Ryan and Rivers 2003), the context for identity development has shifted dramatically for a new cohort of youth with same-sex desire.

Most notably, significant political gains for lesbian and gay rights, coupled with a dramatic increase in visibility of same-sex desire and identity through media outlets, speak to a changing cultural context for the development of sexual identity in the United States and elsewhere (Driver 2006; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Raley and Lucas 2006). Contemporary youth now have immediate cultural resources and sources of support that were lacking in prior generations, such as access to communities online and in high schools through gay-straight alliances (Russell 2002). Savin-Williams (2005) argues that, as a consequence of these major cultural changes, we live in a “post-gay” era—a time in which prior paradigms that emphasized the centrality of sexual identity in the lives of same-sex attracted youth have waned in significance. As having and expressing same-sex desire become less counterhegemonic—that is, as same-sex desire becomes more culturally normative—the need for a distinct social identity as a sexual minority becomes less salient for youth (Savin-Williams 2005).

Cohler and Hammack (2007) argue that understanding the identity development of contemporary sexual minority youth requires examination of their process of *narrative engagement* (see also Hammack and Cohler, in press). They posit that youth currently negotiate at least two “master narratives” of sexual identity in the course of

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development, rooted in discursive shifts in the construction of same-sex desire. The first narrative they term a narrative of *struggle and success*. This master narrative was constructed as the field developed and evolved beginning in the late 1980s, with the explosion of work on gay and lesbian adolescents (e.g., Hetrick and Martin 1987; Martin and Hetrick 1988; Savin-Williams 1989a, b). The “struggle” part of the story related directly to internal and external challenges to self-acceptance, but the “success” part of the story revealed the possibility of redemption from suffering through “coming out” and becoming a part of the lesbian and gay community (e.g., Herdt and Boxer 1993; Savin-Williams 1998).

In contrast to this classic master narrative of sexual identity, historical shifts in the cultural and discursive context of sexual identity have resulted in the emergence of a new narrative, which Cohler and Hammack (2007) term a narrative of *emancipation*. The notion of emancipation suggests liberation from the rigid categories of sexual identity and a critical perspective on society’s need to create a sexual typology to regulate sexual desire (Foucault 1978; see also Muehlenhard 2000). The narrative of emancipation has emerged from scholars associated with queer theory (e.g., Butler 1990; Seidman 1996; Warner 1999; Whisman 1996), but it has also emerged from youth themselves, who defy the pathways mandated by a previous master narrative to chart their own course of sexual identity development (Savin-Williams 2005).

Scholars of sexual identity development have proposed a number of new paradigms to address these historical shifts in sexual identity development. Savin-Williams and Diamond have both argued for the need to view sexual identity through a “differential developmental trajectories” lens (e.g., Savin-Williams 1998, 2001a, 2005; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000), through which it is acknowledged that youth with same-sex desire do not conform to a single developmental “pathway.” In other words, their same-sex desire is not *determinative* of the trajectory their life course will assume. This view challenged earlier paradigms for understanding the development of sexual minority youth, which tended to chart specific milestones in an ontogenetic sequence (e.g., Cass 1979).

Hostetler and Herdt (1998) argue for the complete reconsideration of sexual taxonomies and an emphasis on the study of sexual “lifeways” as “culturally constituted developmental pathways, embedded within social and symbolic systems, that provide rich and meaningful contexts for the realization of full personhood in a society” (p. 251). The idea of sexual lifeways, they argue, liberates scholars and subjects from the reification of identity that queer theory seeks to counteract. In other words, understanding sexual identity development in terms of lifeways

increases the inclusiveness of our models by recognizing the diversity of lived experience of sexual desire.

In this article, we examine the lived experience of sexual minority youth through a paradigm that can accommodate these historical and cultural transformations with the individually derived strategies of response to a changing discourse of sexual identity. Our paradigm integrates life course and narrative approaches to the study of identity and applies them to an analysis of the lived experience of sexual minority youth (see also Hammack 2005; Hammack and Cohler, in press). To link this approach to other recent work on identity development, we call upon Schachter’s (2004, 2005) notion of *identity configurations* to analyze and interpret our narrative data.

A life course approach to sexual identity development usefully provides a paradigm that recognizes the significance of history and cohort in human development (Hammack 2005). The life course paradigm developed as a “sociogenic” approach to human development (Dannefer 1984), in large part to counter the hegemony of ontogenetic accounts that claimed transhistorical and transcultural explanatory significance (e.g., Freud, 1905/1962; Piaget and Inhelder 1966). But the life course paradigm developed not only in response to debates within the academy; it emerged through an analysis of major longitudinal studies conducted over the course of the twentieth century (e.g., Elder 1974; see Phelps et al. 2002). With the discovery of differential developmental processes and experiences across cohorts, a paradigm that recognized the salience of social context in the course of development became vital for interpretation of findings.

Our approach synthesizes a life course view of human development with the narrative paradigm (e.g., Bruner 1990; Cohler 1982; McAdams 1996; McLean et al. 2007; Pasupathi et al. 2007) and the “study of lives” approach in personality psychology (e.g., Cohler 2007; Gregg 2007; Josselson 1996; McAdams 2006; Murray 1938; Stewart and Healy 1989; Thorne and Nam, in press). We argue that the development of sexual identity is fundamentally tied to the construction of a personal narrative that integrates desire and behavior into a meaningful and workable configuration (see also Hammack 2005). In this configuration, the individual makes meaning of his or her desire and “performs” an identity through the enactment of autobiography (see Blackburn 2002; Diamond 2006). We recognize that this autobiography is largely a personal construct and that even our agency to construct autobiographies may be illusory (Bourdieu 1986/2000). Yet we believe that the individual’s practice of meaning-making is precisely the most fertile ground for the empirical study of identity development *as a process*, and a momentary *product*, of some sociocultural surround.

Ours is thus an approach that privileges history, culture, and discourse, while also maintaining a strong sense of agency among individuals to construct narratives that provide a sense of unity, purpose, and coherence to their lived experience (Cohler 1982; McAdams 1990, 1997). The idea of an identity *configuration* resurrects an important idea central to Erikson's (1959) theory of identity. In one of Erikson's (1959) defining statements of the concept of identity, he speaks of identity formation as "an *evolving configuration...gradually integrating constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations, and consistent roles*" (p. 125, italics in original).

Schachter's (2004, 2005) reconceptualization of the theoretical construct of identity configuration is particularly relevant to sexual identity development, even though his work does not focus on sexuality. For Schachter (2004), an identity configuration represents "the different possible ways in which individuals configure the relationship among potentially conflicting identifications in the process of identity formation" (p. 167). In other words, individuals develop a workable configuration of identity through a process of integrating at times conflicting values, beliefs, and experiences. Schachter's (2005) case study of a Jewish Orthodox young man demonstrated the construction of a workable configuration that reconciles conflicting discourses on science and religion. In the realm of sexual identity development, we suggest that individuals develop a configuration of identity that integrates their lived experience in general, but also a configuration that integrates and reconciles conflicting *discourses* or *master narratives* of sexual identity.

The Current Study

Our aim in this article is to exemplify an approach to the study of sexual identity development that, through a focus on the voices of sexual minority youth, perhaps transforms our own discourse on the nature and meaning of sexuality (Sampson 1993). Given the centrality of theoretical constructs like narrative and identity configuration, ours is necessarily an *idiographic* approach to the study of identity development (Allport 1962; Hammack 2008). That is, we are more interested in what is "unique" about sexual identity development, as revealed through a substantive analysis of individual cases, than what is necessarily "generalizable" to an entire population of youth, the categorical stability of which is highly questionable (Diamond 2003a; Savin-Williams 2001a, 2006). We believe an *idiographic* approach to the study of sexual lives provides valuable theoretical insights about the experience of sexual minority youth, as well as about human development more broadly.

Method

Overview

Given our theoretical approach, the current study was more concerned with *description* and *interpretation* than prediction or hypothesis testing (see McAdams 1995b; Meyer and Ouellette, in press; Tappan 1997). Furthermore, our interest centered on the *whole person* as an analytic unity (Allport 1924; McAdams 1995b), consistent with the "study of lives" tradition in personality psychology (Murray 1938). This approach seeks to fully contextualize lives by avoiding the aggregation of data across individual cases. In personality research, such an approach has often been called *idiographic* (Allport 1937, 1962; Hammack 2008; cf. Lamiell 1981, 1998) or *person-centered* (Gjerde 2004).

An analysis of case studies, with the personal narrative as the primary focus, thus characterized our general methodological strategy. Following the hermeneutic approach advocated by Tappan (1997), we treated each personal narrative as a "text" that represents an individual's momentary *understanding* and *expression* of lived experience (see also Dilthey 1900/1976; Ricoeur 1984). Our primary descriptive and interpretive interest centered on (a) the integration of same-sex desire in the personal narrative (*identity configuration*), and (b) the process of engagement with sexual taxonomies and master narratives of sexual identity development (*narrative engagement*), as revealed through personal narrative construction.

Participants

The narratives of four youth with same-sex desire who were participants in a larger study of sexual identity development were selected for their ability to address the theoretical questions we raise. The four cases offer a clear set of contrasts that speak to our theoretical questions about narrative and sexual identity development. We present and analyze the narratives of two self-identified men and two self-identified women, all of whom express same-sex desire but whose narratives reveal the rich interaction of context and lived experience in making meaning of desire. Demographic details about each case are provided as we present the narratives.

Procedure

Potential participants were recruited through undergraduate psychology courses that required participation in research for course credit. A pre-screening questionnaire administered to all students in these courses determined eligibility for the current study. To be eligible, participants must have

been 18–25 years old and must have experienced same-sex desire at any point in the past or present. Lifetime same-sex desire was assessed by a single item on the pre-screening questionnaire. Eligible students were notified via email, without mention of the criteria that made them eligible for the study.

Participants who responded to the email scheduled their own interviews through a computer-based scheduling program available online. All interviews were conducted by two researchers, a male and a female, and ranged in length from two to four hours. Participants signed an informed consent form in order to participate in the study. The form described the purpose of the study as follows: “The purpose of the research is to understand how young people form their identities, or ‘senses of self.’One of the most central aspects of life experience we are interested in is your relationships and sexual behavior, so there are many questions about these issues as part of the interview.”

Interview Protocol

Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of three distinct parts. In the first part, the participant was instructed to draw a line that represents his or her life, with the line moving up and down to correspond with life’s ups and downs. This exercise was modeled upon Runyan’s (1980) Life Satisfaction Chart and allows participants to construct the form of their personal narratives. Following construction of the “life-line” and brief demographic questions, the interviewee was instructed to explain the life-line drawing in detail, thus providing an initial life story.

The second part of the interview consisted of McAdams’ (1995a) Life Story Interview. In this protocol, a number of questions assessing the participant’s integration of life experience were posed, but no direct questions regarding sexuality were present in this part of the interview. Therefore, the first two parts of the interview did not necessarily query experiences related to same-sex desire, behavior, or identity. Given our interest in integration of sexuality into the personal narrative, the lack of explicit focus on sexuality in the first two parts of the interview allowed us to determine the level of integration in the current identity configuration.

The third part of the interview directly addressed questions related to sexual identity development, including questions about first same-sex desire and behavior, relationship and sexual history, views about sexual identity labels, and experiences with victimization and personal distress related to sexual identity. To address recent theoretical advances in the field of sexual identity development (Diamond 2003c, 2004), questions that sought to tap the distinction between romantic love and sexual desire were

included. Questions about resilience associated with sexual identity were also posed during this part of the interview, as were questions about public policy issues related to sexuality (e.g., same-sex marriage).

Analytic Strategy

Given our focus on the theoretical concept of identity configuration and our interpretive approach, it was vital for us to preserve the integrity of each interview as a whole. Therefore, our analytic strategy for the narrative data was characterized by hermeneutics (Tappan 1997) and holistic content analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998; see also Gergen and Gergen 1983). Hermeneutic analysis is an inductive method that centers on the interpretation of texts (Tappan 1997). Each personal narrative was thus considered a fixed “textual expression of lived experience” (Tappan 1997, p. 648), and the focus of analysis was on the interdependence of narrative elements. This approach was fused with holistic narrative analysis (Lieblich et al. 1998), a method in which cases are examined as a whole, and coding across narratives is not employed (e.g., Schachter 2005). A focus on within-person dynamics and processes speaks to our concern for integration of sexual desire, behavior, and identity with the general life story.

The first two authors analyzed the form and thematic content of each narrative and consulted one another to resolve discrepant interpretations. The formal analysis of the life story followed taxonomies developed by Gergen and Gergen (1983) and Lieblich et al. (1998). *Progressive* narratives assume a general upward trajectory, whereas *tragic* narratives assume a general downward trajectory. Narratives that contain a mixture of high and low points, in which struggles are preceded by cumulative gains or mastery, assume a *descent-and-gain* (Lieblich et al. 1998) or *redemptive* (McAdams 2006) form.

Based on our theoretical questions, our primary interest in thematic content analysis within each narrative concerned the integration of same-sex desire, behavior, and identity into the general life story (*identity configuration*), as well as the selective appropriation of master narratives of “gay adolescence” (*narrative engagement*) (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2005). Thus our analytic strategy was designed to speak to our theoretical concern with the personal narrative as an integrated product of identity development at a given moment in time, supplying a workable configuration of identity that reconciles conflicting discourses and life experiences. We present each narrative in its chronology, concurrent with our interpretations. All names used are pseudonyms. Possible identifying details are changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Results: Narratives of Youth

“I Just Happen to Like Guys”: Hector’s Story

Hector is an 18-year-old Latino originally from a city with a sizeable Latino population. He now attends a university in a predominantly European American community. Hector’s currently constructed narrative assumes a generally progressive form, with one major point of descent followed by considerable gain, revealing an overall *redemptive* form (McAdams 2006). He begins his life story, referring to the initial period of stability in his life because of his “close relationship” with his family. Referring to the descent in his life-line that corresponds to the start of elementary school, Hector acknowledges his recognition of feeling “different”:

And then elementary and high school was like a decrease, because I knew I was different, at a young age, so I was, always like, I knew I was different. ...But I couldn’t... I didn’t identify as anything, just like, I know this is wrong. ...So, it was like, I could never be comfortable. I was comfortable, I loved school, but I was always, like, on the edge. ...You know, I felt, I just knew I was different. The littlest things I would question. Like, why am I different than these people? Or why, I don’t know, I just felt different.

Hector’s early feelings of “difference” echo one of the most common tropes in narratives of men who identify as gay (e.g., Flowers and Buston 2001; Savin-Williams 1998).

In Hector’s story, the acceptance of peers and the culture of his high school assume prominent roles in helping him to negotiate his feelings of “difference.” Speaking of his high school, he says,

...My high school was so diverse, and like they encouraged diversity, and it was like, we always had this saying, “Be proud of who you are and what you represent.” ...So no one in our high school was really teased for being different.

While the culture of Hector’s high school may have helped him to internally negotiate his feelings of difference from his heterosexual peers, he reports that he did not “come out” in high school.

I mean, I didn’t totally act different, but I just knew that, I mean, now I identify myself as gay. ...Because, like, back then, I knew I was attracted to men, but I was always, like, I dated girls, and I went to prom. ...I did everything, but it didn’t feel right. It was always just to do it because, and um. ...I wasn’t [out], [but] I guess I felt more comfortable because

there was other people, and like our student body president was gay. ...And so I felt more comfortable there, ...but um, and then college, is when I actually came to the conclusion...

For Hector, the high school years were a time of managing feelings of difference without actually assuming an identity as a sexual minority. The changing cultural landscape of high schools in the United States, with the emergence of Gay-Straight Alliance organizations beginning in the 1990s, offers a relatively supportive social ecology of schooling for youth of Hector’s generation (Blumenfeld 1993; Russell 2002).

Though he did not rush to assume a gay identity in high school or to get involved in the community of same-sex attracted youth at the school, Hector began to engage in same-sex romantic and sexual relationships in high school. The impetus for his official “coming out” was a romantic relationship that began his junior year of high school.

We met in choir. ...We just started talking, and then we became really good friends, and then, it was the end of the year trip, to go to Europe, and we competed in the national something. We had a big invitation.... It was then that like, we roomed together, and like, I don’t know, I guess we started experimenting. ...It was different, but like, we were like, at that point, we were already best friends. ...We clicked like that.

What began as mutual experimentation based on sexual desire between close friends emerged into a full-fledged romantic relationship over the course of a year.

And, um, so it was like, it happened really fast, but we took it slow. And then we finally made it official, like, you know, and it was different because I had never, like, you know. It was just like, whoa. ...But, like, it felt right, you know? ...And, but we kept it closed because, you know, we kept it hidden because not everybody is, like, I don’t know, we just didn’t know how people would react. ...And we weren’t even sure about ourselves. ...And then it got to the point, like, during the summer of, he was going off to college, and I was, you know, going into senior year, where he started coming over a lot, and I just introduced him as my best friend. ...My family got to know him, and, you know, they liked him, so he was always at my house, to the point where he was always staying the night.

Hector’s significant romantic relationship toward the end of high school propelled him “out of the closet,” even as he was in the midst of an active process of exploring his sexual identity.

...And so eventually in senior year, my mom was like, one day, she sat me down in the room. It was like a Saturday, and she was like, "Come in, I want to talk to you," and I was like, "Okay," and she was like, "Do you know what this is about?," and I was like, "No," and she was like, "Well, sit down." So I sat down, and she was like, "Me and your dad know that you are seeing him." But she's like, she goes, she goes, "But we don't want you to hide that. We know and we've known, we knew for a long time already." She was like, "But we don't want you to hide that, cause that is the ugliest thing to have to hide, when you love someone." ...And, like, for me, it was bittersweet, like I was happy, but then I was like, "Oh my god, is this happening?" ...I felt shocked. So I just started crying. I was laying on the bed, and she was rubbing my head, and she was like, and my dad had taken out my brother and sister for ice cream, or something, and so, she was like, "We knew and we support you and your dad likes him, he's a great kid, and you're a great kid. You never give us any trouble, and we just want you to be who you are and know that we support you, and if anybody has anything to say, you know, we have your back."

Hector's forced disclosure of his relationship, and hence his same-sex desire, to his parents contributes to the positive trajectory of his present life-story narrative. The fact that this information was solicited in the first third of Hector's interview, when there are no specific questions about sexuality, reveals the extent to which sexual desire, behavior, and identity lie at the forefront of Hector's current identity configuration. In other words, sexuality is integrated into Hector's overall configuration of identity in such a way as to bring together a number of key influences in his ecology of development—his family, his peers, the institutional culture of his school and his larger community. Though he acknowledges that the reconciliation of his same-sex desire with a larger context of heterosexism framed his early internal consciousness of self, at age 18 he has begun to construct a personal narrative that brings this once internal struggle to a place of self-acceptance, primarily owing to the social acceptance Hector has received for his same-sex desire from his family, peers, and community.

Hector's narrative in many ways conforms to Cohler and Hammack's (2007) account of a narrative of struggle and success, with the struggles of acceptance of same-sex desire redeemed through the experience of coming out to self and others and achieving positive affirmation. Yet Hector has assumed the sexual identity label "gay" with great reluctance, in spite of his own and others' acceptance of same-sex desire.

...I don't even like the term gay. I really don't. But I think I just identify with it because it describes, you know, it's something other than heterosexual, you know. And I know that I like guys, and like, that's just what the label means, you know? Just, but I just, I don't, I don't know. I don't like to associate myself, like I really don't have a lot of gay friends. I don't like to associate myself with them, and like the ones that I do have I'll tell them too, I'm just like, I don't know, I just don't get along with them. I don't, I like straight people, like, I like hanging out with straight people. But I like, you know, I'm not saying that I hate gay people, you know. I have nothing to, against them, I just, I prefer hanging out with straight people, and then the gay people I do hang out with I'm really comfortable with them.... But I just don't want to get into, like, the whole, I don't know, the whole stereotype of what gay is, you know? I don't want to be drawn into that and be like, well, you do this and you do that, and cause that's not me, you know. I'm just me and I just happen to like guys, you know.

In this excerpt from his narrative, Hector reveals that, although he has developed a workable configuration of identity in which his same-sex desire is fully integrated into his life story, he does not see his personal narrative as conforming to what he perceives as the master narrative of gay identity. That is, based on his exposure to a narrative of what it means to be "gay" and to be part of the "gay community," Hector does not see his own narrative as fully consonant with that script. He labels himself as "gay" only out of a sense of social necessity to indicate to others the focus of his desire. Like others of his generation, Hector may long to see his story of desire considered "normal" (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2005), and thus to minimize his affiliation with a marginalized social identity. Hector's lack of identification with the gay community might also simply stem from the fact that he has had very little exposure to a larger gay community, as he acknowledges in his narrative.

What is interesting about Hector's narrative, though, is that he has constructed a configuration of identity that does not necessitate that he fully identify with the gay community and embrace its master narrative of identity. Rather, he has constructed a narrative in which he is simply a "guy who likes guys," whose desires are known to and accepted by his family and peers. And he has been able to realize his desires through the practice of sexual behavior and the formation of significant romantic and sexual relationships. Hector has, in this way, begun to construct a sexual "lifeway" that provides a sense of coherence, purpose, and meaning to his lived experience.

“My Attraction to People is Weird”: Oscar’s Story

The personal narrative of Oscar at age 19 offers a stark contrast to Hector, despite their demographic similarities. Like Hector, Oscar is also a young Latino male with same-sex desire. In addition, he hails from the same community as Hector: a predominantly Latino community in a working-class urban center. Unlike Hector, though, Oscar’s life story does not assume a progressive, positive trajectory. In contrast to Hector, Oscar’s current identity configuration fails to provide a coherent narrative that integrates his same-sex desire, behavior, and identity with his general life experience.

The first third of Oscar’s interview (the review of the life-line, with no specific questions about sexuality) contained no references to his sexual desire, behavior, or identity. He made only a brief allusion to his sexual identity in discussing the difficulty he experiences going home for Christmas, because, “It’s like you’re here [at college] kind of doing your own thing, you know, being who you are, and then sometimes you have to go back and be what they want you to be or what people expect you to be or something like that.”

Oscar immediately reveals the ambivalence he experiences about his current identity configuration as we begin to discuss his life-line drawing. He says, “I don’t think, like, that’s an accurate version. ...I didn’t know what to draw....” The form of Oscar’s narrative at this point is somewhat tragic, with a major descent in early adolescence that is never fully resolved through a sense of gain or success in his story. He identifies this moment of descent as his parents’ divorce, but Oscar’s struggle with his parents’ divorce is closely connected to his assumption of blame for their break-up.

...It didn’t affect me, the divorce, but it affected everyone else. It wasn’t like the divorce that affected me. It was just like how people reacted to me...saying it was my fault.

Though it emerges much later in the interview, during the part that explicitly addresses sexual desire, it turns out that the timing of his parents’ divorce corresponds to Oscar’s “coming out” to his mother, which results in his mother’s attempted suicide.

A second major allusion to Oscar’s sexual identity occurs during the second part of the interview as we discuss Oscar’s moments of happiness in life. He refers to his time at college, away from his family, as a high point so far in his life story, even though it appears to have a stabilizing, rather than ascending, effect on the form of his narrative. Yet his happiness at college is disrupted by phone calls from his family, expressing concern about his friends and the “liberal” character of the community in which Oscar’s college is located.

...Sometimes, like, [my family will call and tell me] what they would want me to do. And what they said I should do or, like, who I should be around or shouldn’t be around. ...Yeah, like, growing up mostly, like, you had to fit the specific image, and, like, you can’t be who you want to be, you have to, like, listen to the rules. So it’s more of a release [at college]. ...It’s like a transition, like, you have to be one person here and then another person there.

It is clear from this part of Oscar’s narrative that his life story is currently in a place of fragmentation, rooted mostly in his inability to view the story he is attempting to construct as continuous with his childhood and adolescence. He constructs his present narrative as a *disruption* from the narrative of his past; his narrative is replete with contrasts between his home and university communities. But, again, at this point in his narrative there is no clear indication of *why* Oscar struggles to integrate his life experience. He alludes considerably to feelings of “difference” relative to others in his social ecology of development—difference that his family members perceived and rejected. Yet he does not explicitly mention sexuality as a source of difference, and we deliberately probe him only so much at this part of his interview in order to see at what point sexuality will emerge in his present life-story narrative.

Sexual desire, behavior, and identity are absent from Oscar’s present narrative until explicitly asked in the third section of the interview. Discussing his sexual desire in middle school and high school, Oscar says,

I don’t know, it was weird, like, my attraction to people is weird. Like especially my sexuality, it’s weird. I just like leap from whatever I like, it could be either guys or girls. ...So, like, I guess it went from, like, liking nobody, to liking girls, to liking guys, and then to liking girls.... Then to liking, I was like, “What am I?”

Oscar constructs his desire at this point in his life as “weird”—diverging from a “normative” course of sexual desire and identity development that he witnessed among his peers.

Beginning in middle school, Oscar began to engage in same-sex sexual behavior with older men. He describes this period of sexual experience as a source of “confusion” for him. He attributes his motivation to his desire to “rebel” against his family, though he says, “I was curious about it too.” A significant relationship he began senior year of high school with a college student (“Joe”) was one that Oscar describes as the first time he had strong same-sex desire, despite a number of sexual encounters with men in middle school and high school. While Joe was someone

Oscar met in eighth grade and had a sexual relationship with, the relationship that began at the end of high school was one that Oscar reports as being more than “just physical.”

At this point in Oscar’s narrative, his sexual and relationship history are constructed apart from his general life-story narrative. This lack of integration is most apparent as Oscar begins to discuss his family’s reaction to his relationship with Joe beginning in eighth grade. He reports that his family disapproved of his friendship with Joe because they perceived Joe as gay. Oscar reports that his family’s reaction to their friendship was very negative, and the timing of these events corresponded exactly with his parents’ divorce.

When I came out to them, like I came out, like, I did it on accident.... We were talking about, like, me and my mom were watching something, and then I was talking to this other guy. And, uh, she thought he was gay, like, well, I mean, yeah, ...[and] we saw something on TV and it was like, so I guess it was two guys or something. And she was like, you know, “That’s disgusting. That’s horrible.” ...I was just like, “It’s just two guys kissing. You know, it’s nothing really big.” And she was like, “What, what?” And I kinda, it kinda slipped, like, she was like, “Would you ever kiss a guy?” I was like, “I guess.” So...oh my God, that was bad.

This portion of Oscar’s narrative, which emerged very late in the interview, represented the first instance in the interview that he had clearly suggested the assumption of a sexual minority identity. His mother’s extremely negative reaction to Oscar’s admission of same-sex desire was characterized by her attempted suicide shortly thereafter, concurrent with the break-up of his parents’ marriage. As a consequence, Oscar associates his disclosure with the divorce and his mother’s mental health problems, and he even assumes some level of responsibility for both.

As the part of the interview focused on sexual desire, relationships, and identity continued, it became clear that Oscar currently identifies as a sexual minority. He proceeded to discuss the coming-out process with other family members and friends, and he detailed his extensive sexual history with men. When directly asked about sexual identity labels, Oscar reveals a deep sense of confusion and ambivalence about his own self-identification.

Uh, I don’t know, it’s really hard.... We went to this party, and it was just a bunch of lesbians. And they’re like, “What are you?” And I was like, “I don’t know, like, my attraction varies differently.” Or, like, when I like a guy or girl, so it’s just, like, I don’t want to, like, I just want to say gay, but then bi,

but then I don’t know. I don’t know. It’s really difficult.

Oscar’s present narrative is characterized, like Hector, by a reluctance to decidedly identify as gay, despite the fact that his sole sexual experience has been with men and he reports a strong level of same-sex desire.

Our analysis of Oscar’s personal narrative reveals a present identity configuration characterized by fragmentation and a lack of integration. We interpret this configuration as primarily connected to Oscar’s experience with the rejection and traumatic reaction of his mother to his disclosure of same-sex desire (see Savin-Williams 2001b; Savin-Williams and Dubé 1998; Strommen 1989), as well as his own perception of “difference” and rejection by other family members. These experiences have resulted in a deep sense of internalized homonegativity and shame that prevent Oscar from constructing a workable configuration of identity that integrates his desire and his life experience. Instead, his narrative is characterized by struggle, mirroring the master narrative of gay adolescence that emphasizes victimization and suffering. The “success” part of this script (Cohler and Hammack 2007) has not as yet found a place in Oscar’s life story.

In terms of generation-cohort, Oscar’s narrative is more characteristic of a previous generation of men with same-sex desire, for whom labeling of sexual identity proceeded significant sexual experience. Dubé (2000) discovered that men with this pattern of identity development report higher levels of homophobia and more lifetime sexual partners, a pattern consistent with Oscar’s presently constructed life story. Oscar’s story thus illustrates the notion of *narrative engagement* (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Hammack and Cohler, in press)—that contemporary youth have access to a number of discourses on sexuality, and we must query this process for individual youth rather than make assumptions about their identity development based solely on membership in a particular generation-cohort.

The contrast between Oscar and Hector clearly highlights the significance of a supportive family context for the construction of a fully integrative life-story narrative among sexual minority youth (Savin-Williams 1989a, 1998, 2001b). In popular and some scholarly discourse, ethnic minority groups are characterized as, in general, more homophobic. But Hector’s story clearly reveals that such generalities are dangerously monolithic and may contribute to ethnic stereotypes (cf. Guarnero 2007). The clear distinction between the life stories of Hector and Oscar was the family’s response to their same-sex desire, and the two young men have constructed personal narratives that offer a sharp contrast to one another in their form and content.

“When You’re Me, You Like Don’t See Gender, Basically”: Linda’s Story

Linda is a 19-year-old European-American woman who identified on the pre-screening questionnaire as “mostly gay/lesbian.” She grew up in a small, rural town, which she immediately describes as “difficult” because “everyone knows your business.” She describes this community as “conservative” and claims that she eventually wants to settle in a more “liberal” community. Linda contrasts her own desire for a different type of community with her parents’ wishes for her, which she says would be to return home after college to work on the family farm. She describes her current relationship with her parents as “good,” but she reports that “they have sides I don’t like.”

This early framing of the relationship to her home community and her family represents an allusion in her current identity configuration to same-sex desire and identity. The presence of these early markers of differentiation from her past position Linda’s story as currently at a turning point, even as it remains in an early stage of construction. At college, she is in a safe space to fulfill her desire and begin to construct an identity. Yet the context of college presents a liminal moment for Linda—one clearly “in-between” the struggles of childhood and adolescence and the possibilities of an imagined context of adult happiness and fulfillment.

Linda’s life story begins with a progressive and stable form, which continues until age 13, when her narrative descends. After this point, her story assumes a classic descent-and-gain pattern (Lieblich et al., 1998), with challenges followed by cumulative gains. Her story ends on an upward trajectory, even though she describes her life as a “roller coaster” since age 13. In describing the form of her current narrative, Linda reveals the intentionality with which she constructs the present and future course of her story—she “wants [it]” to “shoot up.”

Linda’s current relationship with her parents reveals the liminal character of her current identity configuration. In describing this relationship, Linda reports that the primary conflict between them centers on her same-sex desire. She says, “I’m bi, and they’re really not down with that.” The central moment of conflict occurred between them when Linda’s parents discovered her same-sex desire during her first year of college.

Okay, this’ll be a horrible story. ...All right, so, like, what happened was, like, it was spring break, and I, like, my girlfriend doesn’t live too far away, so I was just, like, “All right, well, my friend’s coming over, and then we’re gonna drive [back to school],” which is the stupidest idea ever [laughs]. Like, don’t ever do that if you’re coming out. Don’t ever bring your

girlfriend over and be, like, “It’s my best friend!” cause parents see right through it. And that’s, like, pretty much what happened.

Upon probing this incident, Linda was unwilling to provide significant detail, though she alluded to her parents catching her and her girlfriend engaging in sexual behavior. Her parents handled the situation in a way that traumatized Linda, forcing her and her girlfriend to leave immediately and refusing to discuss the incident at all. She now constructs this portion of her personal narrative as a “horrible story,” its trauma still raw for her.

In terms of the integration of sexuality into her life-story narrative, it is clear that her sexual desire assumes a major role in the form and content of her narrative. Linda describes the story of her sexuality as “weird”:

Um, ok, I have like a really weird story. All right, so I didn’t like really know when I was younger, because I’m bi, so like, it’s kinda like, it’s kinda hard to explain that if you haven’t been through it. So, it’s like, obviously, like, I’m having feelings for both genders, but you just choose to focus on one. So that’s, like, how I was my whole life, and, yeah, that’s, like, how I was up until my freshman year [of college], when I was just like, “Oh, okay, yeah, so that girl you thought was cute five years ago, let’s give her a call up now.” ...It’s just, like, real. Realization and, like, acceptance kinda hit then.

Linda immediately constructs her story as somehow deviant from what she perceives as a master narrative of sexual identity development, largely because of her identification as “bi.”

Although she reports to have been largely unconscious of her same-sex desire, Linda constructs a particular story about the management of desire and about the meaning of, in her view, being bisexual.

...Okay, when you’re me you, like, don’t see gender, basically. Like, obviously you’re a guy and you’re a girl, but, like, at the same time, like, I can be, like, “Oh, you’re both attractive.” Like, I’m not gonna, you know, single you out because of your gender basically. And then so at the same time, like, in high school, like, you, I don’t know, um, you’re not really given, like, like the framework to have that. So, like, at the same time, it wasn’t, like, really, like, ever really, I don’t want to say it, like, it never entered my mind, cause obviously it did because, like, there is times where, you know, I go home, listen to Michelle Branch, and think about the girl from acting class, obviously. You know, but like, other times, you know, you just are, like, okay this guy...is cute, ...all

right let's date him. But, at the same time, it wasn't like I was dating him because I didn't, I couldn't date a girl. I was dating him because I actually thought he was cute and actually like, you know, like, wanted a relationship with him but at the same time had the desire to be with this other girl, you know, like, and it wasn't like to the point where it was so much of a desire that I had to act upon it because I'm bi so I can, like, you know, accommodate for this situation.

In Linda's narrative, she constructs her desire as fluid and equivalent for both men and women. Defying the emphasis in social categories of sexual identity on gender as a primary object of desire (Butler 1990), Linda's configuration of identity suggests a mode of desire that transcends the limits of gender dichotomies, not uncommon in narratives of bisexual women (Berenson 2002). In this way, hers is a story that challenges the received taxonomy of sexual identity, with its categorical reification of gender as the axis upon which all desire is experienced and managed. Linda's emerging sexual lifeway (Hostetler and Herdt 1998) integrates her experience in a way that challenges assumptions about desire and identity.

Interestingly, although she identifies as bisexual, Linda reports to be living life as a "lesbian" now, given her close relationship with her girlfriend and their social activities and friendship circle. The current circumstances of her social life may explain why she identified on the pre-screening questionnaire as "mostly gay/lesbian," rather than "bisexual." In spite of her self-identification on the questionnaire, Linda defies categorization as a lesbian, again referring to the way in which she makes meaning of her desire.

Okay, ...I'm not, I'm not a lesbian. Like, you know, like, right now I live the persona of a lesbian because my certain circumstances at the moment. But I can't, like, honestly, like I can't, I don't like being called a lesbian. I don't like being called dyke. I don't like being called—I like femme. I think femme's cute. But, like, other than that I, I feel like I am bi because even, like, even right now I'm choosing to be with a girl, you know, some people say that, even though I don't feel like it's a choice really. I mean I have that, like, I've had that connection with men in the past. Like I feel like it's who I am, which is why I keep bisexual on it. And then, like, I feel like I don't know what's happening in the future, like there could be a guy that comes around, there could be a girl that comes around, but I'm not like, I don't want to narrow it. Like it sounds really bad, and I'm, like, "I don't want to narrow it down to one sex," but like essentially I find enjoyment and fulfillment in both males and females.

Linda's narrative of sexual desire and identity defies the linear master narrative of gay adolescence that describes identity development in an ontogenetic sequence (Cohler and Hammack 2007). Interestingly, even as that particular master narrative was being deployed in the field of gay adolescence in the 1980s and 1990s, it was being contested based on research with lesbians and bisexual women (e.g., Elliott 1985; Golden 1996; Kitzinger 1987; Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995; Rust 1993). Linda's narrative more closely resembles precisely these alternative narratives of sexual identity development, both in the management of her desire and in her construction of a personal narrative that locates her story in a liminal space.

The greatest challenge to the hegemony of a linear master narrative of sexual identity development comes from extensive research with same-sex attracted women. Russell and Seif's (2002) analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health revealed that female adolescents report considerable fluidity of sexual attraction and relationships across an 18-month period. Diamond's 10-year longitudinal study of women has clearly demonstrated that women's lived experience is characterized by the fluidity of desire and, through assumption and relinquishment of sexual identity labels, the defiance of a rigid, categorical taxonomy of sexual desire (e.g., Diamond 1998, 2000, 2003b, 2006, 2008a, b). As Rust (1993) argues, "sexual identity formation must be reconceptualized as a process of describing one's social location within a changing social context" (p. 50).

Linda's story is illustrative of the way in which young women, in the course of their development, must negotiate the discourse and practice of changing social locations in order to construct a coherent, workable configuration of identity. The major shift in social location from her small hometown community to the more ideologically expansive locale of her university has created the context for a personal narrative in process, as Linda seeks to integrate her desires with a new cultural frame of reference. The result is a currently constructed life story that addresses the complexity and fluidity of her desire, defiantly challenging master narratives of "gay adolescence."

"I've Always Intended to Spend the Rest of My Life with a Woman": Francine's Story

The narrative of Francine, a 20-year-old European American female, was characterized by significant openness and candor. She disclosed her coming-out story very early on in the interview, as we were discussing her relationship with her mother. She came out to her mother as a lesbian at age 15, following several years of internal self-examination.

...I don't know, I definitely did, like, when I started to figure out that I liked women in about sixth grade, like it freaked me the heck out..., and I, like, I started going back to church, like, with my friend and her family and [was] like, if I'm Christian enough, God will make me straight. Bad idea. And then preceded to, like, get kicked out of my church when I finally was, like, okay with it and came out to them. They didn't like it so much.

That was about a year and a half. I like really, really tried, not horribly successfully, clearly. But, and then I finally was like, okay, screw it, like this is who I am, like towards the beginning of ninth grade, and that's when I came out to my friends. And, like, I don't know, but that was, I don't know, cause, like, I had been, like, seeing guys before and things like the little, like, middle school stuff that you do. And, like, I don't know, and then I was like, oh no, cause I was like no, I'm a lesbian and, like, really hard-core about it. And so, like, since there were no lesbians, like, I was horribly alone.... Cause just, like, it's really fucking lonely, cause I'm, I'm unable to meet women really.

Francine recognized her same-sex desire at a young age and quickly assumed a lesbian identity, coming out as exclusively lesbian to her mother. However, she now views the assumption of a lesbian identity as premature in her life, as she has maintained a level of attraction to men. Ironically, coming out as a lesbian has decreased her ability to be completely open with her mother about her romantic and sexual relationships since, given that she has only dated men. Francine says, "I've always intended to spend the rest of my life with a woman anyway. Like, whether or not that's actually going to happen, I don't know, but, like I would like it to be that way, and so, like, I'm just hoping I won't have to tell her."

Like most of our interviewees, Francine's narrative assumes a descent-and-gain pattern, with the varying ups and downs of life acknowledged. She views her life as unfolding in a cyclical, rather than linear, process.

I think, I don't know, there's a lot of, like, change in my life, both in, like, my perspectives on things and, like, like, my physical being. I don't know. I think, I don't know, there's a lot of, like, cycles in my life, I've realized. ...Like, my sexuality being, like, like, I'm a lesbian, no but maybe bisexual, no lesbian, no but, like, just going back and forth. Like there's a lot of back and forth in my life. I don't know.

Infused with a sense of ambivalence and a lack of assuredness, Francine's current configuration of identity lacks a clear commitment to a sexual identity category. In

fact, throughout the interview, she intermittently refers to herself as a "lesbian" or as "bisexual." But, similar to Linda, Francine embraces her shifting understanding of desire and identity by constructing a personal narrative characterized by flexibility, fluidity, and cyclicity.

Francine's narrative offers an excellent example of the relationship among desire, behavior, identity, and the opportunities afforded by a particular social location (Rust 1993). During all of her significant relationships with men, she has continued to identify as a lesbian; yet she is finding it increasingly difficult to retain that label because she is coming to terms with her actual sexual attraction to men. Lack of access to same-sex opportunities, coupled with the cultural context of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980), creates challenges for Francine's personal narrative construction. Her idealized vision of exclusive same-sex desire and a lesbian identity causes disruptions in her current life-story narrative. Through her narrative, she highlights a unique configuration of identity that integrates her desire and behavior with this idealized, if fading, vision.

The gradual recognition that she does indeed have opposite-sex desire has led Francine to consider identification as bisexual over the course of the past year. Based on her current narrative, it seems that Francine, unlike Linda, has not significantly challenged the received sexual taxonomy of identity prevalent in the discourse of her society (i.e., a taxonomy characterized largely by assumptions about desire that do not necessarily cohere with lived experience; Hammack 2005; Hostetler and Herdt 1998). Recent research has highlighted the fluidity of sexual desire among women, identifying various "sub-types" of lesbian (Diamond 2005, 2008b) and heterosexual identities (Thompson and Morgan 2008). Francine's current configuration, though, suggests only the preliminary exploration of sexual fluidity and the contestation of a received taxonomy of desire and identity.

Francine's narrative suggests a level of engagement with the narrative of emancipation that characterizes a new generation of same-sex attracted youth (Cohler and Hammack 2007), but her lack of access to a community of same-sex attracted women influences the extent of this engagement. Her lack of exposure to newer discourses on young women's sexuality has made it difficult for Francine to label her identity at all. While she endorses alternative labels like "homoflexible," "queer," and "bi-curious lesbian"—labels that seem particularly appropriate for her story and that are being endorsed by her "post-gay" cohort (Savin-Williams 2005)—she ultimately appropriates a bisexual identity label, which may serve to isolate her even further from other sexual minorities, because of bi-negativity (Weiss 2003). Francine's lack of involvement in a community of same-sex-identified women does not permit

her to hear other women who are striving to make sense of their desire. Instead, her “lesbian place” is intriguingly lonely, when seeking out “lesbian space” (Eves 2004) might ultimately provide her with the ability to come to understand herself and her sexuality better.

I don't know [what my preferred sexual identity label is now], cause, like, my behavior is certainly, like, actually my behavior is, like, pretty much exclusively heterosexual, but, like, my attraction level is, like, mostly homosexual. Like, and I have, like, people suggesting terms to me all over the place. Like, some people think I should be bisexual, like, other people are, like, homoflexible, which, like, I actually like. ...It's like I, like, I'm very attracted to women and, like, would prefer to be with them, but, like, if I can't, you know, and, like, there's a boy I find attractive, like, I'm gonna do that. So I guess, like, the homoflexible term works for me. But, like, most of the time, like, like, I'll just, like, say I'm a lesbian, or I'll say I'm bisexual. Like, I don't really have like a consistent label for myself. I just kind of, like, or, like, I use queer a lot cause, like, you don't really have to explain that one. ...When I got to college, I was like, okay maybe I'm bisexual, just maybe, like. And then I went to, like, bi-curious lesbian, as, like, well, like, I don't want relationships with men but, like, I'll have sex with them, like relationships with women, kind of thing. And then I was like, no, I'm, I'm bisexual, so. ...Clearly, like, my behavior isn't just opportunistic. Like there have definitely been guys that I've, like, had strong desire for, so that, like, must mean something in terms of like who I am and what label I should give myself.

While Francine believes the label bisexual seems most fitting at this time, she elaborates on how her sometimes present desire for men seems inauthentic to the person she sees herself as. Francine instead provides a very distinct and surprising narrative of always feeling *emancipated* from guilty feelings around having same-sex desire and of not struggling with internalized homonegativity, despite living in a heteronormative culture.

...I actually probably feel more guilty when I'm, like, when I desire men. Cause I feel like that's not who I am, like, even though, like, it really appears to be. Like I think I just, like, have this self-concept of, like, that's not who I am. And so, like, I feel really okay, like openly checking out women.... I think, like, because I've spent so much of my life, like, confirming my, like, queer identity, I feel like I just kind of, like, throw that away when I'm with men, and, like, I just, like, delegitimize those, like, feelings of,

like, attraction towards women, like when I'm pursuing men or, like, being pursued by men or whatever.

Francine's narrative reveals a powerful process of engagement with a number of discourses on desire and identity available in the lexicon of her current social ecology of development (Hammack 2005). Ultimately, though, Francine assumes an essentialist position about her desire, believing that, at her “core,” she is exclusively attracted to women. Hence she only experiences a sense of guilt and shame about her opposite-sex desire.

Francine has constructed a current identity configuration that provides a sense of coherence to her life story, even as her deep ambivalence about her sexual identity is apparent. Francine seems to have embraced a linear master narrative of lesbian identity in her early adolescence. She experienced same-sex desire, interpreted this desire as indicative of an underlying essential lesbian identity, and achieved psychological “success” by coming out to herself and others. Yet now, at age 20, she is in an active process of rescripting her story of sexual identity. Though her same-sex desire continues to be strong, she recognizes that this desire is not exclusive; she continues to be attracted to men, even as she longs to ultimately be with a woman in a long-term relationship. It is now, many years beyond that initial period of narrative engagement, that a narrative of emancipation seems to resonate with Francine's lived experience of desire. We can view her currently constructed configuration of identity as in a process of narrative integration, and it is likely that further opportunities for same-sex romantic and sexual relationships will assume a major role in the evolution of Francine's life story.

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to explore theoretical questions about the role of context, desire, and narrative in sexual identity development through an interpretive analysis of four case studies. A significant metatheoretical issue in research on sexual identity development has concerned the historical and cultural grounding of this process (Hammack 2005). Using a methodological approach that privileges narrative and the holistic study of individual lives, the cases presented in this article offer a rich contextualization of sexual identity development among contemporary youth. This approach offers important insights for theory and research on sexual identity development among youth with same-sex desire.

The narratives of youth reveal configurations of identity in process, offering a window into the process of meaning-

making that individuals undergo in the course of development. The four cases presented here illustrate the idiographic complexity of individual lives, even as themes across narratives suggest points of commonality among sexual minority youth. Most broadly, narratives reveal the significance of *context*—in terms of both a macrosocial (e.g., cultural) and microsial (e.g., familial) ecology of development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). All of the youth in this study share a larger cultural context of increasing visibility and “normalization” of same-sex desire and identity (Savin-Williams 2005, 2008). All of the youth also share the common institutional context of the university. Yet other key features of their developmental contexts varied considerably. In the contrast between Hector and Oscar, the distinction in family context appeared to mark a radical divergence between their configurations of identity. The acceptance of Hector’s parents seemed to facilitate the development of a personal narrative that thoroughly integrated his same-sex desire into a coherent life story. By contrast, Oscar’s familial rejection may explain the fragmentation of his current configuration and his inability to fully integrate his sexual desire into his life story. The contrast between the narratives of Linda and Francine offered similar insights into the process of identity integration: the trauma of Linda’s disclosure of same-sex desire to her parents, in contrast to Francine’s disclosure to her mother, contributes to the liminal quality of her current configuration.

As expected, the narratives of youth illustrate the process of engagement with master narratives of sexual identity and a received sexual taxonomy present in the macrosocial context. For both Oscar and Linda, the lack of identification with a master narrative of “gay” or “lesbian” identity resulted in the presentation of their sexual desire as “weird.” In other words, rather than challenging the received sexual taxonomy, they ascribe their own sexual fluidity with deviance. Yet even as the youth struggled to reconcile their sexual desires with these master narratives, their identity configurations challenged monolithic notions of sexual identity development.

As a broad range of scholars across the social sciences have suggested, the idea of narrative helps to link social and cultural practices with individual experience (e.g., Bruner 1990; Hammack 2008; McAdams 1996; Pasupathi et al. 2007). In other words, conceiving of development as a process of narrative engagement allows us to bridge levels of analysis in social science inquiry and to fully contextualize lives in their historical time and place (cf. Stewart and Healy 1989). In this frame, questions about sexual identity as “essential” or “constructed” become irrelevant, for the historical and cultural basis of human development is acknowledged and integrated into a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of lives (Hammack 2005).

The narratives examined in this study illustrate the utility of the concept of narrative engagement (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Hammack and Cohler, in press), for such a theoretical framework can aid in the interpretation of diverse configurations of identity. The ways in which the youth in this study were forced to navigate a discourse of identity that often failed to accommodate their desire speaks precisely to the benefits of a narrative approach, with its ability to highlight the process of meaning-making as it unfolds (Bruner 1990). Oscar, Linda, and Francine all struggled to “match” their accounts of desire with the discourse on sexual identity available in their social ecology of development. Yet their narratives revealed a process of engagement with this discourse and their ongoing interpretation of their own desire within this lexicon. Thus Francine and Linda both alternate between identifying as “lesbian” and “bisexual”—even within the single momentary construction of a personal narrative—as they negotiate their desire with categorical notions of sexual identity. Both Hector and Oscar struggle to see themselves as part of the social category of “gay man.” These struggles are subject to a number of possible interpretations, such as Oscar’s perceived familial rejection of his same-sex desire or Hector’s lack of experience and connection with a larger gay male community. But regardless of the *explanation* of this struggle, its mere existence as a major part of the personal narrative reveals the process of narrative engagement that characterizes sexual identity development. Personal narratives thus reveal configurations of identity in the process of construction—configurations in various places of reconciling and resolving divergent discourses.

To conceive of individuals as “subjects” of a particular discourse on desire (Foucault 1978)—and hence of a taxonomy of identity embedded in a larger cultural meaning system (Hostetler and Herdt 1998)—is not to deny them a sense of agency (see Elder 1998). Rather, the recognition that identity development is characterized by a co-constitutive process of narrative engagement reveals the reciprocity of person and culture (Hammack 2005, 2008). It is in the engagement with master narratives of desire and identity that a discourse is either reproduced or repudiated by a new generation of youth (cf. Erikson 1968). The stories of Oscar, Hector, Linda, and Francine suggest that they serve the dual role of “producers” and “products” of particular discourses on sexual identity. Their engagement with the traditional narrative of “struggle and success”—exemplified by Hector’s coming-out story or Francine’s early disclosure of her “lesbian” identity to her mother—reveals themselves as products of a received taxonomy of identity, with its prescribed plotlines and characters. Yet these youth also were clearly in the midst of “reinventing” received master narratives through a recognition of the

ways in which their experience does not “fit” within these storylines. In this way, the personal narratives of youth provide a window into larger processes of social reproduction itself, as they reveal the “improvisations” (Holland et al. 1998) that individuals make in response to cultural possibilities. Youth thus in some ways “lead” social evolution through the agency they express through their own self-construction (see Stetsenko and Arievitch 2004).

In this study, the concept of “master narratives” of sexual identity both facilitated and inhibited interpretation of the life stories of contemporary youth. While the narratives of youth could, in many cases, be contrasted with these master scripts of “becoming gay” (Savin-Williams 1998), it is clear that even the two master storylines identified by Cohler and Hammack (2007) do not sufficiently address the diversity of lived experience or the process of narrative engagement for youth. We suggest that a “bottom-up,” rather than a “top-down,” approach to theorizing the relationship among discourse, culture, and identity might better speak to the intrinsic plurality of sexual lifeways (cf. Gjerde 2004).

The narratives of young women examined in this article speak to the ways in which the narrative of struggle and success is androcentric in its conception, for such a linear, dichotomized view of sexual identity fails to adequately consider female desire (Diamond 2008b; Peplau 2001; Peplau and Garnets 2000; Thompson and Morgan 2008; Tolman and Diamond 2001). Francine’s case offers a good example of this phenomenon. In early adolescence, she internalizes the narrative of struggle and success and “comes out” as a lesbian, realizing in emerging adulthood that, in fact, her desires are not exclusively for women. While Hector and Oscar also challenge the master story of struggle and success in some ways, it is clear that such a storyline maps onto their experience of desire much more closely than for Linda and Francine (see Hammack 2005).

Querying the process of narrative engagement among contemporary sexual minority youth reveals that the conventional categories of sexual identity have limited categorical stability, as the expansion of discourse on sexuality expands narrative options for youth (Cohler and Hammack 2007). As both Diamond (2003a) and Savin-Williams (2005) have argued, the treatment of sexual minority youth as a separate “species” is highly problematic, both conceptually and methodologically. Our approach in this study was to examine the narratives of four youth who report same-sex desire, irrespective of their sexual identity label, and thus to hopefully reveal the diversity of same-sex attracted youth. The narratives of these youth suggest a dynamic engagement with the cultural categories of sexual identity, such as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “queer.” Each youth interviewed for this study constructed a narrative that attempted to

integrate desire, behavior, and identity into a workable configuration—that is, a coherent story that is sensible in the lexicon of their particular American cultural surround (Hammack 2005). Yet the narratives of youth revealed sometimes uneasy configurations—stories that struggled to map desire onto some socially derived category of sexual identity.

The stories of youth revealed unique attempts to reconcile desire with a cultural meaning system that commands the assumption of an identity (Hammack 2005). While configurations of identity varied across youth, they shared features that reveal the impact of social marginalization and heterosexism (Herek 2007). The need to manage difference and stigma at early ages constructs a particular kind of story—a story of deviance and subordination (Foucault 1978; Simon 1994). Youth with same-sex desire consistently realize the “discreditable” (Goffman 1963) nature of their desire, and the need to consciously manage social interactions accordingly forms a part of their stories. Thus the narratives of youth with same-sex desire necessitate the integration of feelings of social exclusion very early in the course of development. Regardless of whether an “emancipated” version of sexual identity has begun to proliferate in American culture (Cohler and Hammack 2007), the larger context of heterosexism remains, highlighting same-sex desire as “deviant” and outside of the boundaries of fully sanctioned, heteronormative lifeways (Herek 2007). The current contestation over marriage rights for same-sex couples is a clear indication of the continued context of heterosexism (Herek 2006; Schmitt et al. 2007).

This study was limited by its small sample size and the use of a college population of youth for study. The purpose of the study, however, was not to make generalizable claims about all sexual minority youth on the basis of the analyses reported here. Rather, our intent is to contribute to theory development on sexual minority youth, as well as to illustrate the utility of a narrative approach to the study of sexual identity development. The rich analysis of individual lives contextualizes development as it is lived and provides access to the active process of meaning-making. Future research might extend this methodological and analytic approach to work with larger and more diverse samples of youth with same-sex desire.

Beyond its contributions to the literature on sexual minority youth, this study reveals the vitality of a narrative approach to the study of adolescent development. The personal narratives of youth reveal the dependence of human development on discourses available in a given social ecology, as well as the limitations to developmental possibilities that received discourses of identity create. An empirical approach to adolescent development that privileges narrative provides a valuable window into active

processes of individual engagement with a social system and the process of personal meaning-making within its boundaries and constraints. By revealing this process, though, as characterized by *engagement*, such an approach also considers the ways in which the received constraints of a social system are in a place of constant evolution as youth negotiate their lived experience with master narratives of identity, generating new developmental possibilities in the process.

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