Cohort Effect on the Coming out Experiences of Bisexual Males

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This article examines bisexual men's experiences of coming out across three age cohorts, and documents generational differences in the reception from friends and family regarding this disclosure. Drawing on in-depth interviews with an ethnically diverse sample of 60 openly bisexual men from the United States, we find that the oldest cohort of bisexual men encountered the most stereotypical views and prejudiced behaviour, while those of the youngest cohort expressed predominantly positive coming out stories. We attribute the cohort differences in these experiences to a decrease in cultural homophobia, alongside changes in the social organisation of masculinities.

Key words: Bisexuality, Coming Out, Homophobia, Masculinity

Introduction

Research on sexual minorities in Anglo-American cultures has shown that their lives have often been defined by social marginalisation (Herek, 2004), living within societies that privilege heterosexuality (Wilkinson and Pearson, 2009). Sexual minorities have also been denied equality under the law (McGhee, 2002). While experiences in such a culture will vary according to the category of one's minority status, research has regularly examined the experiences of sexual minorities as a homogenous group (Worthen, 2013); often failing to recognise important differences between them.

It is the experiences of bisexuals that have been most frequently erased in the academic literature on sexual minorities (Burleson, 2005). This is significant because research indicates that heterosexuals may have more negative attitudes toward bisexuals than gays or lesbians (Herek, 2002), and that bisexuals suffer discrimination from gays and lesbians as well (Weiss, 2003). Bisexual youth have also been found to experience higher levels of harassment than their lesbian and gay peers (Robinson and Espelage, 2011), and male bisexuals face more discrimination than female bisexuals (Klein, 1993). Given the need to provide separate analyses of men's and women's experiences of bisexuality (Brown, 2002), and given our expertise as masculinities scholars (Adams, 2011; Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2012a), we examine the coming out experiences of bisexual males in this research.

Drawing on 60 in-depth interviews with openly bisexual men recruited from public areas in New York and Los Angeles, we strategically explore generational differences in their coming out experiences across three age cohorts. Finding that the experiences of the oldest cohort are substantially more negative than those of the youngest cohort, we argue that the combination of the liberalisation of attitudes toward homosexuality (Baunach, 2012; Keleher

and Smith, 2012) and the expansion of gendered behaviours for men in US metropolitan cultures (Anderson, 2009) has improved the social environments for our participants.

Bisexuality as a Stigmatised Sexual Identity

There has been a tendency to examine bisexual identities through poststructural frameworks in the social science literature (e.g. Angelides, 2001; Gammon and Isgro, 2006). With bisexuality characterised as a 'middle ground' between sexualities (Hemmings, 2002: 2), the 'deconstructive impulse' (Green, 2007: 32) of poststructuralism may seem to synchronise with the categorical indeterminacy of bisexuality. However, this perceived synergy is problematic, as it may influence scholars to emphasise issues with personal identifications above the everyday social practices of bisexuals (Jackson and Scott, 2010). As Plummer (1995: 86) argues, coming out as a sexual minority is a way to 'develop a consistent, integrated sense of a self' and it is through this identification that experiences are socially mediated. Accordingly, we adopt a social constructionist framework to understand the experiences of coming out; recognising that while identity categories are always in some way fictions, people live in and through these identities as if they are real (Jackson and Scott, 2010); we thus view identities as 'necessary fictions'(Weeks, 2007: 84).

Bisexual identities have often been either erased or marginalised in Anglo-American cultures (Garber, 1995; Weinberg et al., 1994). They have been undermined primarily through the prevalence of negative stereotypes, including beliefs that bisexuals are unable to admit to having a homosexual orientation (Burleson, 2005), and that bisexuality is a transitory experiment with same-sex intimacy or a transitional stage before fully coming out as gay (MacDonald, 1981). Research has also documented the prevalence of sexual stigma regarding promiscuity and non-monogamous relationships (Klesse, 2005; McLean, 2004). Eliason's (1997) findings that stereotypes about bisexuals are more focussed on sexual acts

than those about gays and lesbians supports the notion that prejudice against bisexuals is linked with a particular form of conservative sexual morality (Hemmings, 2002); one situated within a monogamous norm that bisexuals are seen to transgress by nature of their desires (Paul, 1984).

While much of this stigma may be similar to that which gay men and lesbians experience, bisexuals also experience unique discrimination in the form of 'biphobia' (Eliason, 1997; Page, 2004). One reason for biphobia is that during the early stages of the AIDS epidemic, bisexual men were thought responsible for the spread of HIV to heterosexuals (Stokes et al., 1996). This is despite just one percent of annual HIV infections being transmitted by bisexual men to female partners at the time (Kahn et al., 1997).

In addition to suffering biphobia and stereotyping from heterosexuals, bisexuals were also stigmatised by gay men and lesbians in the 1980s and 1990s (Klein, 1993; Weiss, 2003). Some gay men questioned the legitimacy of bisexuality because they perceived bisexual men to be calling themselves bisexual in the gay community while simultaneously presenting themselves as heterosexual in the straight community (Weiss, 2003). Rust (2009) argues that bisexuals are still perceived as enjoying the pleasures of same-sex sexuality while avoiding the burden of sexual oppression, and that some lesbian feminists have viewed bisexual women as traitors or cowards for not rejecting men entirely.

Bisexuals also face unique issues when coming out (Anderson, McCormack and Ripley, in press; Rust, 1993). Primarily, bisexuals' experiences of disclosing their sexual identity have traditionally been characterised by a consistent expectation to defend the legitimacy of bisexuality (Page, 2004), particularly against the stereotypes that bisexuals are confused, greedy or in denial about being gay (Klein, 1993). This is most evident when in relationships and deciding whether to come out to a partner's friends and family; McLean (2007) argues that some bisexuals decide against coming out to particular groups because of

the pain and anguish this can cause to themselves and their partners. Accordingly, bisexuals are strategic in determining when and how they come out (Brown, 2002): They tend to tell their friends about their same-sex desires before their parents, and are more likely to tell their mothers before their fathers (Weinberg et al., 1994).

The Intersection of Bisexuality and Masculinity

In understanding the experiences of bisexual males, it is also necessary to recognise the intersection of their sexual identities with their gendered identities (Rust, 1995; Schwartz and Rutter, 1995). The experiences of bisexual men will be contingent not just on broader attitudes toward bisexuality and homosexuality, but how these intersect with dominant conceptions of masculinity (Burleson, 2005; McLean, 2007). Thus, in order to understand bisexual men's lives, it is necessary to consider the discourses and stratifications of gender in the broader culture.

Homophobia and sexual prejudice have traditionally served to stratify men and their masculinities (Floyd, 2000; McCreary, 1994). The regulatory power of homophobia has been explained by the concept 'homohysteria', defined as the fear of being socially perceived as gay (Anderson, 2009). In homohysteric cultures, men have to avoid behaviours socially coded as feminine or gay (Epstein, 1997; Kimmel, 1994)—this also restricted how men could dress and who they could socialise with (Plummer, 1999). Given the difficultly of proving one's heterosexuality in a homophobic culture (Anderson, 2008), men would exhibit homophobic, misogynistic and hypermasculine behaviours to prove that they were heterosexual and raise their masculine capital (Floyd, 2000; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). This has been theorised as masculine overcompensation, where men react to insecurity about their own publicly perceived gender identity through extreme behaviours that connote masculinity (Willer et al., 2013). However, as attitudes toward homosexuality improve, the power of

homophobia to regulate masculinities diminishes (Anderson, 2009). Thus, the social organisation of masculinities will be influenced by improving attitudes toward homosexuality (McCormack, 2012a).

Changing Attitudes

While a pernicious strain of homophobia has traditionally been detected in US sexual morality, there has been a positive shift in attitudes toward homosexuality in recent years (Baunach, 2012; Kozloski, 2010). General Social Survey (GSS) data show the proportion of the US population condemning homosexuality has steadily declined since 1987. In a statistical analysis of this data, Keleher and Smith (2012: 1232) contend that 'willingness to accept lesbians and gays has grown enormously since 1990'. They show that all demographic groups analysed became more tolerant, and, importantly, that all age cohorts became more tolerant at the same rate[1]; arguing that 'we are witnessing a sweeping change in attitudes toward lesbians and gay men' (p. 1324). Recent PEW (2013) research found that 70% of those born after 1980 support same-sex marriage, and 74% of these Americans believe that 'homosexuality should be accepted by society'.

Recognising that decreasing homophobia is an uneven social process, research has also examined the factors that are salient to improving social attitudes. Positive attitudes have been shown to be correlated to contact with sexual minorities (Smith, Axelton and Saucier, 2009), the existence of 'ally groups' within organisational or institutional communities (Szalacha, 2003), early childhood experiences that normalise homosexuality (Stotzer, 2009), and the role of the internet and improving media representations of sexual minorities (Levina et. al., 2006; Netzley, 2010).

Germane to our inter-generational research, and in line with these improving attitudes, there has also been a significant shift in coming out narratives in US culture in recent years

(Anderson, 2011; Cohler and Hammack, 2007), with LGB youth coming out at earlier ages (Grov et al., 2006; Robinson and Espelage, 2011). Savin-Williams (2005) contends that young people in the US are more likely to disclose an LGB identity than at any time previously, arguing that LGB youth are 'not embarrassed by gayness, don't consider it deviant, and see it all around them' (p. ix). Even so, the coming out experiences of LGB people cannot be summarised by a simple narrative of emancipation: Hammack and Cohler (2012: vii) argue that some same-sex attracted youth continue to struggle, 'even as they inhabit a context in which their desires are increasingly viewed as legitimate and normative'.

Improving attitudes toward homosexuality have also had a significant impact upon discourses of masculinities (Anderson 2014; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2012). Decreasing homophobia means that heterosexual males are able to express emotional intimacy and engage in increased homosocial tactility (McCormack, 2011; Roberts, 2013), as well as socialise with sexual minority peers (McCormack, 2012b). This is because they are no longer concerned about these behaviours being interpreted as signs of homosexuality. Significantly, Anderson and Adams (2011) demonstrate that this has led to heterosexual males maintaining sophisticated understandings of bisexuality that recognise its legitimacy as a sexual orientation. Accordingly, the discourses and social stratifications of both gender and sexuality have changed over the past 30 years, and we examine the effect of this on the experiences of bisexual males with this research.

Methods

Participant recruitment

Research on sexual minorities has been critiqued for collecting data with a biased sample of men and women who have had particularly troubled experiences (Savin-Williams, 2001). That is, with researchers frequently using self-help groups, sexual minority political groups or

counselling services to locate LGB individuals, there is selection bias toward those who have experienced discrimination (Hartman, 2011). In order to avoid this issue, we decided to recruit participants in ways that, while not excluding members of these groups, did not directly involve these groups in recruitment. Accordingly, we recruited men directly from busy streets in the city centres of Los Angeles (n=30) and New York (n=30). This had the additional benefits of avoiding snowball sampling, which restricts participants to a small number of social networks (Pahl, 1995), and focussing on metropolitan areas, which some argue are where decreasing homophobia is most pronounced (Gray, 2009).

Knowing that bisexual men represent a small minority of the population, it was necessary to recruit them from places where thousands of people could be solicited. Accordingly, after strategically selecting city centre locations that we knew had high numbers of pedestrians, we stood on street corners announcing, 'Bisexual men, we're paying forty dollars for academic research'. In order to improve the range of people interviewed, we repeated this procedure at different times of the day, including late at night and at weekends. At all locations, interviews were conducted immediately after participant recruitment, in a nearby location that offered sufficient privacy (e.g. a coffee shop or secluded public area).

We have discussed in detail the benefits and limitations of this approach elsewhere (McCormack, Adams and Anderson, 2013), where we argued that while the financial incentive might attract people from lower income groups, this did not appear to be the case as several participants refused the money. We also explored the possibility of individuals 'pretending' to be bisexual, highlighting that this is possible of all interview research, and adding that undertaking an in-depth interview without any time to prepare a false history likely *decreased* the possibility of this happening.

Our recruitment process was also valuable in securing another criterion of our research: We wanted to understand the experiences of bisexual men who were *open* about

their sexual orientation. Asking them to identify as bisexual on a crowded street served as one mechanism of narrowing our desired participant population.

Process

This qualitative research utilised in-depth interviews with 60 bisexual men. In order to examine the influence of changing attitudes related to bisexuality and masculinity, we divided participants into three strategically selected age cohorts (18-23, 25-35, 36-42). This is not because of a simplistic notion of a coherent and unified generational experience (White, 2013), but in order to examine the influence of different gender and sexual discourses during adolescence—including the influence of the internet, the emergence of ally groups and other trends pertaining to sexuality that have occurred over the past 30 years. This also corresponds with three of Plummer's (2010) generational cohorts for gays and lesbians; he argues that the unique social and historical context of each generation affects the ways in which society is mediated and sexualities are experienced.

Accordingly, we determined these categories such that the participants experienced their adolescence in particular social contexts: of high cultural homophobia of the late 1980s, decreasing homophobia in the mid-1990s, and more positive attitudes toward homosexuality of the late 2000s (Loftus, 2001; Keleher and Smith, 2012). Thus, we categorised three age cohorts for analysis with men aged 36-42, 25-35 and 18-23. The men in the in 36-42 group were aged 16 between 1984 and 1990; those in the 25-35 age group were aged 16 between 1991 and 2001; and those in the 18-23 year old group were aged 16 between 2003 and 2008.

We interviewed ten men from each cohort in each city (n=60). Each author is experienced in qualitative interviewing, and each conducted 20 interviews split across cohorts. Interviews with these men were largely biographical in nature, tracing participants' experiences across the life course. Our discussions focused on the levels of biphobia; their

experiences of coming out as bisexual; their relationships with friends, partners and family; and their feelings about the term 'bisexual'. Interviews were necessarily retrospective in nature—a data source that has been shown to be valid for research on sexual minority experiences (Rivers, 2001). All interviews were digitally recorded, stored securely and transcribed. Participants were provided with contact details for the research team, and offered the opportunity to review transcripts. All other ethical procedures of the British Sociological Association have been followed, as per the university ethics approval at the time of data collection.

Analysis

A modified grounded theory approach to analysing data was employed (Charmaz, 2006). That is, while we had reviewed the literature prior to data collection, and categorised participants into particular age cohorts, each researcher inductively developed their own themes as they accumulated interviews. At the end of each day we discussed our interviews, the emerging data, and our initial thoughts on potential themes (Urquhart, 2013). This *in situ* coding fed into successive data collection, as we amended the interview schedule to account for the themes that were developing in our research.

Following our return from the field, coding and analysis continued in conjunction with an intensified search for literature on bisexual men's experiences; something Dey (1993) calls middle-range coding. Here, we undertook open and selective coding to identify the patterns within the stories from the transcriptions (Urquhart, 2013). These more detailed themes were then cross-checked by the three authors, with each coding 10% of the others' transcripts. Emerging themes were related back to the original transcripts, and their internal coherence checked (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We then constructed theoretical arguments from our data (Charmaz, 2006) as, throughout our analysis, our primary concern was to

develop a 'theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 80-81). While we recognise the inherently subjective nature of qualitative research, it is through this process of logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigour is assured and that our findings have significance for other bisexual men in these US metropolitan cities and for broader understandings of the influence of decreasing homophobia on bisexual men's lives.

Coming Out as Bisexual: Men Aged 36-42

Research has traditionally found that bisexual men experience biphobia when coming out to their families (D'Augelli et al., 2010; Klein, 1993), and this reflects the experiences of men in the oldest cohort. For example, Andy, white and aged 38, came out to his parents and brother at 22. He described their reaction to the news as 'not good'. He said, 'they weren't very cool with it. You know, they were—disappointed I guess is a good word for it'. Andy recalled his brother's response: 'He said to me, "Why the fuck would you wanna be like that?"' Hopeful that his family would understand, Andy said he told them because he did not want to 'keep it in any longer'. He added that his family gradually became 'accustomed' to his bisexuality, commenting that he is now (years later) 'very close' to his brother and parents again.

A number of the men from the older cohort explained that they stayed closeted a significant period into their adulthood, when they had some independence from their families (see also Weinberg et al., 1994). Darryn, a 43 year old black man, realised he was bisexual at 15, but did not disclose his identity until he was 28. He said, 'I didn't feel like I could tell anyone. The men in my family were real masculine, you know? It was fear'. Darryn described feeling 'a lot of guilt' growing up, dating women but 'sneaking away' to gay bars to have sex with men. He added, 'I felt a lot of fear of what my father would think about me, about what my friends would say. I grew up in the 80s man. It wasn't cool'. Similarly,

Bernie, white and aged 37, did not come out to his family until recently, saying, 'Telling my parents earlier wouldn't have gone down well'.

Corresponding with the existing literature for men of this age (Harbeck, 1992), friends also exhibited negative reactions with this age group. For example, Simon, a white male aged 39, discussed the impact of his coming out to his neighbourhood friends when he was 22: 'It was hard and I was really depressed'. He recalled:

> It's really one of the reasons why I left that place. I told my friend, Jake, and he told everybody else. I got a lot of disgust from them after…I still miss them to this day but I don't think they miss me.

When asked about whether he tried to explain his sexuality to his friends, Simon answered:

> No. About as far as it got was one of them saying, 'I heard you're gay'. I told him I was bi, but he replied, 'same difference'. That's really the only time I talked with them about it. When I did see them after, we just pretended I hadn't said anything. But it didn't matter, they saw less and less of me.

Likewise, Bernie, white and aged 37, said, 'I only told my closest friends, and that wasn't until I was 24'. His friends' reactions were mixed:

> A couple of them didn't want to admit it. They were like 'we've seen you in [straight] bars and seen you hook up with girls'. One of them bitched me out, saying, 'bisexuality isn't possible'. I was like, 'well, I like men, too'.

Bernie also suggested that his younger friends had more positive reactions to his bisexuality: 'They don't seem to have a problem with it'. When asked about whether it made a difference whether those friends were gay or straight he indicated not: 'No, my straight friends were just as cool with it as my gay friends'.

In addition to finding that they generally had negative experiences of being bisexual, there was also elevated heterosexism among men of the older cohort (Della et al., 2002). For

example, Andy, whose family reacted badly to his disclosure, commented: 'I don't throw it in their face. I don't see a reason to make an issue of it'. When asked if he discusses female partners with his parents, he answered, 'Yeah, sometimes', but said that 'it's not appropriate' to discuss male partners with his family. Andy thus adopted a don't ask, don't tell policy with his parents: 'They don't say anything about it, but they accept it because I'm their son. And I respect their opinion'. Similarly, Darryn suggested that his bisexuality was 'personal'. Adopting a defensive demeanour, he said: 'I keep it to myself, and I don't walk around snapping my fingers and being flamboyant to the world. Coz the world don't agree with that'. Barry, white and aged 39, had internalised a heteronormative form of biphobia, responding to the question of whether he had any romantic relationships with men by saying, 'No. No, no, no, no. I'm bisexual, not homosexual'.

In addition to exhibiting heterosexist behaviours, several men in this cohort expressed misogynistic attitudes. Federico, a Hispanic male aged 37, spoke about his inability to 'pull' women in straight clubs: 'I'll go up to a girl, ask to buy her a drink, and she'll say no. I'll be like, "what are you doing here, bitch?"' Likewise, AJ, a black male aged 38, spoke aggressively about women: 'Sex with men is great, but women can be bitches. You know, not letting you do what you want. Men are easier'. Several other participants in this cohort used the terms 'bitch', 'slut' or 'whore' during interview, too. Given that these men have lived through feminist advances in American culture, these misogynistic behaviours and attitudes highlight the importance of growing up in homohysteric cultures in their formative years (Plummer, 2010), where misogyny raised their masculine capital.

Coming Out as Bisexual: Men Aged 25-35

The men in the 25-35 year old cohort described coming out experiences that were less damaging than those of the older cohort. However, this group also feared coming out to

family more than friends. For example, while JP, aged 31 and Hispanic, was open to his friends, he had not come out to his parents. He said, 'being from a Hispanic family, it tends to be frowned on, so I don't wanna jeopardise the love I got from my family with stuff from my personal life'. While other participants spoke of a greater fear of telling family members rather than friends, this did not always reflect the reality of how one's family would accept the news. For example, when Trenton, white and aged 28, came out at 16 to his cousin, who then told the rest of his family, he described a positive response: 'No one ever put me down for it', he said. Similarly, Drew, aged 30 and black, said, 'after all that fear, it went fine. They were fine with it'.

Men of this age cohort also experienced less heteronormative silencing of their identities than those of the older cohort. For example, John, Hispanic and aged 31, said 'We talked about it, mom and I, and my mom told my dad everything'. Even though John's father did not speak directly to him about his bisexuality, he was clear to phrase things in gender neutral language. 'I got to give my dad credit', John said. 'He began saying, like, "are you seeing anyone?" as opposed to "are you dating a girl?"'

Men in this cohort also had improved experiences of coming out to friends (see also Evans and Broido, 1999). For example, Tommy, white and 24, first came out as bisexual at 16 after graduating high school. He told us that, among his friends, it 'wasn't an issue'. He attributed this to this belief that most of his friends 'already knew'. Similarly, Anthony, aged 34 and white, said, 'I had a lot of friends who were girls, they were really happy to know that I was, and a lot of my guy friends were also very understanding'. Eager to find out more about bisexuality, Anthony said that they 'asked me lots of questions…it felt good to be able to share that with them'.

However, not all participants shared this experience. Carl, white and aged 32, said, 'Most people were confused, and I'd say 50 per cent dropped me as their friend, and 50 per

cent stuck by me'. Carl found that telling his male friends was harder than telling his female ones. 'It was more taboo for them', he recalled, 'but they made an attempt to learn and to adapt to it'. Even so, these experiences were more positive than those of several of the men in the oldest cohort. Many of Carl's friends asked him questions about his sexual life, which he enjoyed:

> I felt like I was teaching them something about myself. It felt good to be able to share that with them. It was something they didn't know and couldn't relate to before. So, for them to be curious about me and who I am. It felt good.

There was also more acceptance of campness in this cohort. Sean, white and aged 25, frequented gay bars in LA. He said, 'I didn't really come out to my family, I just emerged. I'm so camp they knew I wasn't straight, so it was more me telling them that I might have a girlfriend at some point'. He continued, 'I think they had spoken about me being gay already, so it took them a little while to get their head around me being bisexual'.

> While Sean's camp gendered behaviours had positive effects, this was not the case for Chris, white and aged 28:

> People assumed I was gay because I'm really feminine, and it took a while for people to get that I'm bi. My dad couldn't understand why I'd be open about being bi if I could just like girls. He was accepting and stuff, I just guess he didn't really understand it all. Things are good now though.

Accordingly, while the experiences of this cohort were mixed, their coming out narratives were more positive than the older cohort, and part of this was related to their exhibiting a broader set of gendered behaviours.

Coming Out as Bisexual: Men Aged 18-23

The collective experience of the 18-23 year old bisexual men was substantially more positive than those in the two older groups (see also Morris, McCormack and Anderson, in press; Savin-Williams, 2005). While many participants still spoke of coming out as an important milestone, the experiences of coming out were improved, concerning both family and friends (Gorman-Murray, 2008). For example, Angelo, aged 18 and Hispanic, came out to his parents at 17, and he said that his parents responded well, after initial hesitancy: 'they went to their room and talked about it, and they came back and said "look son, if this is what turns you on then go ahead"'. Similarly, Joey, white and aged 18, came out to his parents after coming out at school. 'They were fine with it. They just weren't that bothered. They said "whatever makes you happy", and that did'.

Despite some research showing elevated levels of homophobia among ethnic minorities (Negy and Wisenman, 2005), positive experiences were found across ethnic groups with little variation between them (see also Grov et al., 2006). Tyler, 19, who is Latino, had a less extroverted but nonetheless positive coming out experience. Telling his Grandma, who he lived with at the time, that he was bisexual, he said, 'She was like "Oh, okay". We chatted for a bit about it and she was amazing. Then she hugged me'. However, some participants were still concerned about their family. For example, Cole, aged 18 and white, had come out to his sister but not his parents: 'My sister was fine about it and she says I should come out to my parents. She says they'll be fine, but I'm so nervous about it'. Similarly, Jackson, white and aged 21, had also avoided coming out to his family despite being out to all his friends. Thus, coming out is still a strategic process and, as Evans and Broido (1999: 663) comment, not an 'either/or' concept.

While the overarching theme of those who belong to the youngest cohort is one of acceptance, some men of this cohort experienced negative reactions (Cohler and Hammack,

2007). For example, Marco, Hispanic and 18, told his parents six months prior to the interview. He said, 'It was kinda weird at first my mom and dad said "look, I think you're going through a phase". Mom said that I was confused, and I said "no I'm not. This is who I am. Accept it"'. Marco described how his parents gradually became more accepting, saying that 'things between us are cool now'. In addition to just one other participant sharing Marco's experiences, it is also notable that this cohort felt able to come out while still living at home in a manner that the older cohorts did not. Furthermore, some of the negative experiences may be related to participants' age within their family, being a life-course rather than cohort effect.

The experiences of coming out to friends were almost entirely positive for this cohort. For example, it was not an issue for Kevin's close friends. White and aged 19, Kevin said, 'No one judged me. We'd been hanging out for years so they knew I was a good guy and they had got to know that already. They understood that my sexuality didn't affect the type of person I was'. Kevin said he did not have significant problems with people outside his close friendship groups, either:

I'm sure there have been some people who might've avoided talking about it, but as far as bullying or harassment go, no never. I've always believed that if someone feels slightly uncomfortable with it, then it's their problem not mine. Eventually people like that soften up.

Providing further evidence of the positive experiences of the younger generation, white 18 year-old high school student, Paul, described his coming out story. Aged 16, he was scheduled to give a talk in front of his high school:

I was stood in front of my classmates and announced I was bisexual right there. I'd thought about it for a long time, and I read out this speech about homophobia and the

impact it was having on our society. My hands were sweating. I never expected what

would happen next.

Paul described how, as he finished, his classmates stood and applauded him as he left the

stage. Following this, Paul helped set up the first Gay-Straight Alliance at his school (see also

McCormack, 2012b).

Lewie, white and aged 21, came out to his friends a year ago, and their reactions

ranged from 'slightly puzzled' to positive:

They were shocked, yeah, and some were a little weird and awkward, but no one

was like outwardly negative or hostile...And you might think that's not really

acceptance, but for those people I've told it has gone better than I thought it'd

go.

Similarly, Joseph, aged 20 and Hispanic, reflected that his fears of coming out were

exaggerated. By 17, he was out to everyone and accepted among his peers: 'They were like

whatever, he's cool'.

The positive experiences of the younger bisexual men may also have had several

beneficial consequences on their lives, particularly related to their gendered behaviours (see

Wilson et al., 2010). All three researchers noted that the younger bisexual men appeared

more confident, socially competent, and at ease discussing their sexuality; they also exhibited

softer masculinities (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). Compared to the older bisexual men,

the younger cohort were less concerned with being socially perceived as heterosexual or

'straight acting'. Markedly different from the other cohorts, several men in this cohort also

exhibited camp mannerisms. These younger bisexual men also maintained less

heteronormative views and did not use the misogynistic language like the older bisexual men.

Discussion

Research into the experiences of bisexual men has previously demonstrated that

discrimination and stigmatisation are integral components of their lives (e.g. Burleson, 2005).

However, our findings suggest a generational difference in the coming out experiences of

bisexual men which parallels decreasing homophobia in US culture (Keleher and Smith,

2012). Specifically, the experiences of the younger cohort of bisexual men are markedly

more positive than those of the older two cohorts: they suffered less marginalisation and

harassment from peers and family members.

There is significant explanatory power in the fact that homophobia had markedly

decreased during the adolescence of the 18-23 year old men (Loftus, 2001; Keleher and

Smith, 2012; McCormack, 2012). We argue that the decrease in homophobia in the wider

culture impacts positively upon bisexual men, which corresponds with research documenting

a multiplicity of experiences of LGB youth (Riley, 2010; Savin-Williams, 2005).

However, given the intersection of gender and sexuality, the expansion of gendered

behaviours for American men in contemporary culture is also salient in understanding these

changes (Anderson, 2009; Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). With homohysteria decreasing

and heterosexual men both esteeming the provision of emotional support between friends and

being increasingly inclusive of sexual minorities (Anderson, 2014; McCormack, 2011), it is

likely that it is the combination of expanded sexual and gender spheres that results in these

improved experiences; particularly for bisexual men who do not embody orthodox notions of

masculinity.

The difference in levels of misogyny and heterosexism between cohorts is also a

significant finding. We explain it through homohysteria and masculine overcompensation

thesis (Willer et al., 2013) which contends that men react to insecurity about their own gender

identity through extreme behaviours that connote masculinity, and that these acts are

traditionally misogynistic and homophobic (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Having grown up in a homohysteric culture, it appears that men of the oldest cohort felt the need to prove their masculinity (to overcompensate for their bisexuality), while those of the youngest cohort did not. In other words, men who had grown up when a macho masculinity was esteemed felt the need to prove their masculinity, while those whose adolescence was in a period of low homohysteria and more diverse masculinities did not (Anderson, 2009). This again supports the notion that it is levels of homohysteria that has resulted in the cohort differences evident in this research—the combination of attitudes toward homosexuality and changes in gendered behaviours (Adams, 2011; Morris, McCormack and Anderson, in press).

While other research has indicated that ethnicity can be a significant factor in the experiences of sexual stigma (Negy and Wisenman, 2005), analysing our data according to ethnic groups did not prove a fertile exercise. Despite participants being near-evenly split between white, black and Latino (using these terms as simplified categories for a broader range of ethnic identities), we found no evidence that ethnicity was a significant factor in how positive or negative friends and family were to the disclosure of bisexuality.

Another significant finding is that some of the men in the youngest age cohort spoke in similar ways to the oldest cohort about their experiences. This included reporting their experiences of coming out to family as very negative, despite the experiences being substantially more positive when compared to the older cohorts. Several men in the youngest cohort discussed some negative experiences using words like 'trouble', 'difficulty' and 'hurt' in a similar manner to the older men, despite their experiences of prejudice occurring less frequently, with less intensity and lasting for a shorter duration.

This phenomenon can be understood by considering the referent group of the cohort: that members of each cohort are comparing their experiences in coming out to the experiences of their heterosexual male peers rather than previous generations of bisexual

men; a form of relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966). Accordingly, as society becomes less biphobic, standards for judging one's experience of coming out also change. McCormack (2012a) finds a similar generational redefinition when heterosexual male students identified school practices as homophobic that academics have typically described as heteronormative—such as the absence of openly gay teachers or a gay curriculum. Given Hammack's (2011) argument that young people mediate their identities not solely on their experiences but also on the available discourses in their culture, we suggest that the bisexual youth who report their experiences in a negative manner are doing so in part because the victimhood narrative of the older LGB culture is a discourse that is readily available to them. Thus, they draw upon words with particular cultural resonance when understanding the differences between their own and their heterosexual peers' experiences (Cohler and Hammack, 2007). This highlights the importance of multiple narratives of LGB youths lives being heard, including those who have positive experiences.

However, even with positive cultural narratives, minority stress theory highlights it is not just direct experiences of negative events that impact on mental health and well-being, but also 'the incongruence between the minority person's culture, needs and experience, and societal structures' (Meyer, 1995: 39). Accordingly, the experiences of being different may have a significant effect (Flowers and Buston, 2001), even in the absence of bi/homophobia, and this highlights the importance of combating heteronormativity across social institutions. Thus, this research advances not only our empirical knowledge base about the experiences of bisexual males in metropolitan US cities, it also develops our understanding of how broader social trends regarding gender and sexuality impact on sexual minority lives.

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Endnote

1. The demographic variables Keleher and Smith (2012: 1316) examined from the GSS

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