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CLAM. 2013. Sexuality, Culture and Politics - A South American Reader. Pp. 260-283.

ISBN 978-85-89737-82-1

Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

Male homosexuality and the life course: thinking about age and sexual identities*

Júlio Assis Simões**

This article takes stock of ideas and reflections mainly related to the United States and British fields of research, in the broader area of humanities, which link the study of male homosexuality with discussions concerning the periodization of life. These studies explore processes of construction and attribution of identity due to age within homosexual “cultures” in large cities. I seek to situate and analyze two linked movements in the course laid out by these reflections. On the one hand, a movement that highlights the centrality of the “coming out” process in the modern homosexual’s career, proposing varied conceptual models for its analysis and understanding. On the other, a movement that uses renewed notions of “life course” and generational cohorts to affirm the importance of the connection between the changes that occur throughout life and the socially shared meanings that specific age groups attribute to such changes. My overall objective here is to highlight historical and cultural transformations of the patterns of human development and adult life, pointing to new experiences of maturity and aging.¹

I will first present the problem, delineating the so-called “life-course paradigm” which has reoriented recent research about life periodization. Following that, I will use this “paradigm” to criticize and reevaluate works that have dealt with the development of homosexual identity and have proposed two hypotheses—“accelerated aging” and “crisis competence”—in order to characterize specificities of aging among men who have sex with men.

Every work on homosexuality must engage with the controversy involving the forms of categorization used to refer to and classify same-sex erotic and sexual practices. This work does not escape the risks of ambivalence with which these terms are used. I consider expressions such as “men who have sex with men” or “same-sex eroticism”—used, among others, by Green (2000)—more adequate to maintain the specificity of the analytical language employed here, given the cultural and political meanings of terms such as “homosexual” and “gay”. Even when these terms are used to refer to a specifically metropolitan and contemporary “socially constructed” form of expressing

* Translated from Portuguese by Thais Camargo. Originally published as: SIMÕES, J. A. 2004. “Homossexualidade masculina e curso da vida: pensando idades e identidades sexuais”. In: PISCITELLI, A.; M. F. GREGORI & S. CARRARA (Eds.). *Sexualidade e saberes: convenções e fronteiras*. Rio de Janeiro: Garamond, P. 415-447.

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¹ This article raises preliminary insights and hypotheses to orient more specific research about the experiences and representations of middle-aged and elderly men who have sex with men in São Paulo and other Brazilian metropolitan areas.

meanings, sensibilities and identities associated with sex among men (which is the case in the present text), they always contain essentialist connotations. I hope that my argumentation makes clear that I do not intend to endorse these connotations, but rather to critically highlight how understandings of homosexuality and aging are impregnated by them.

1. Aging and male homosexuality

Aging and sexuality are themes that refer to the confluence of and confrontation between body and culture. Thinking about both invariably leads us to consider the tensions between the body's materiality and its social construction. When seen from the dominant Western view of human life development (that is, life as the movement of the corporeal being through time, understood as a chronological progression toward finitude), aging and sexuality become mutually exclusive themes. The decline of desire, the loss of physical attractiveness and the virtual erasure of the sexed person are among the main traits and conditions of aging that sustain the generalized repudiation and fear of the degenerating body and, conversely, the positive assessment of youth.

“It is not easy to imagine that our own bodies, so full of freshness and, often, of pleasant sensations may become slow, tired and clumsy. We cannot imagine it and, deep down, we do not want to.” So wrote Norbert Elias (Elias, 2001) when he was over the age of eighty, reflecting on the problem of old age. Dealing with the biological limitations of existence and accepting one's degenerating body continue to be central challenges in contemporary life, as shown by the obsession with the body's shapes and youth, part of a whole complex of fashion, gyms, steroids, cosmetics, plastic surgery and other body maintenance technologies (Goldenberg, 2001).

Certainly, the association of aging with death has much to do with the rejection of old age. Nonetheless, familiarity with death currently permeates the experiences of many people in different age groups: in contemporary life, AIDS, traffic accidents and violent crimes tend to victimize young people. More than death, what provokes depression and horror about aging is the risk of physical decay taken to the extreme, with loss of control of motor skills or body fluid retention, of cognitive skills and expression of emotions—the loss, in short, of basic attributes that make a person be acknowledged, valued and taken into account in any social interaction (Elias, 1990; 2001; Featherstone, 1994).

If preference for youth and antipathy towards old age are recurring in the history of Western conceptions of aging, or at least constitute widespread feelings in so-called contemporary consumer culture, these feelings seem to reach their culmination when one considers the so-called “male gay culture” of urban centers and metropolises. In that setting, apparently marked by complacent hedonism and by the obsession with physical attributes capable of evoking attraction and desire, in which everything

seems to revolve around a sexual market that establishes a hierarchy based on youth and beauty, there would apparently be no place for older people, who embody the stereotypes derived from the depreciation of their attractiveness as desirable sexual partners and their resulting marginalization by those who are younger. To those who are older, the only thing left would be to pay to enjoy fleeting and risky sexual company.

In the early 1970s, in a pioneer work on the dark specter of old age that allegedly hangs over homosexual men, John Gagnon and William Simon claimed that homosexual men had fewer resources than their heterosexual counterparts to deal with the crisis of aging. Gagnon and Simon situated the beginning of the feelings of decline for homosexual men in their 30s or, at the latest, in their 40s, an age at which the decline of sexual activity comes into growing conflict with a lifestyle centered on sexuality. An especially negative impact would be provoked by changes in physical appearance: gray hair and wrinkles may make up an attractive aesthetic pattern for heterosexual men, as indicators of character and success. Among homosexual men, however, they are considered repulsive. Ultimately, in this later period of life, the reduction of life opportunities is understood as triggering heavy feelings of depression and solitude, similar to what presumably affects single or divorced heterosexual women. A successful transition of this crisis phase depends upon the affection and support of one's family, which would leave homosexuals at a serious disadvantage, given that they have no children or spouses—in short, no family ties from which to expect support.

The heterosexual has his children, whose careers assure him a sense of future, and he has his wife, whose sexual availability mitigates the impact of the decline of sexual attractiveness. Additionally, the aging crisis comes later to the heterosexual, at an age when his sexual potency has declined and expectations regarding the significance of his sexuality are considerably lower. (Gagnon and Simon, 1973).

According to these authors, then, solitude, isolation, depression and growing psychological distress would thus be the destiny of homosexual men, from early middle-age until old age—and the bitter end. Oscillating between the image of the “old aunt” (exaggeratedly effeminate, devoid of appeal and partially senile) and that of the “horny old man” (capable of suddenly attacking unwary young men), older homosexual men represent one of the most salient forms of abject and excluded alterity within the modern and “positive” experience of visible male homosexuality. If, on the one hand, the identities developed within “gay culture” may be seen as the learning and development of bodily lifestyles resulting from a simultaneous movement of expulsion and creation of alterity with regard to hegemonic heterosexual-reproductive discursive practices (Butler, 1990), on the other, they also reinforce the contrasts between the resplendence of youth and darkness of old age. This contrast increases the fear of aging and the social stigmatization of the elderly; as well as stereotypes and stigmas of bodily, cognitive and moral decadence that underscore losses, disengagement, suffering and abandonment as the inevitable components of the drama of old age.

Facing this scenario, one question comes to mind: are things really like that? In the 1970s, another duo of researchers, Weinberg & Williams (1974), used a broad survey to study homosexual men in New York, Copenhagen and Amsterdam. These researchers observed that older men showed a higher level of satisfaction and well-being in their lives than younger men, even though the researchers had expected the opposite to be true. Currently, in São Paulo, whoever walks by Vieira de Carvalho Avenue at night, especially on Fridays or during the weekend, will not find it hard to identify several men who could be classified as middle-aged or elderly; and who are often referred to as “*coroas*”,² especially by those who gather along the sidewalks between República Square and Aurora Street.

The “*coroa*” is a character of undefined age, who bears visible signs of the “mask of aging”: gray hair, wrinkles, a thick waist and somewhat slower movements. The “*coroa*” typically seems to be a mature man with virile manners, who is healthy enough and has sufficient physical disposition, personal presentation and money to frequent certain spaces in the so-called “gay circuit”, find friends, drink, have fun and also try their luck in the flirtation market. “If you see two *coroas* talking loudly on these sidewalks, at any time, you can bet they’re arguing over a man”, said Carlos, 64, one Sunday afternoon, while we talked at one of the tables of the “Lord Byron” bar on the corner of Vieira de Carvalho and Aurora. This bar is a gathering point for apparently rich “*coroas*” (although it is not exclusive to them), the successor to the traditional bar “Caneca de Prata”, which still exists across the street. About ten years ago, the place where the “Lord Byron” now stands was occupied by a bar that also attracted a nocturnal crowd of “*coroas*” and was known as the “Caneca de Lata” due to its run-down aspect.³ Currently, the successor to the “Caneca de Lata” is a diner situated on the opposite sidewalk, closer to the corner with República Square.

Just like the other gay-circuit-goers, the “*coroas*” here are probably the visible tip of an iceberg made up of middle-aged and elderly men who have sex with other men. What this tip seems to signify is another contemporary movement of a more general nature, which seeks to change conceptions of aging as a decadence, melancholic process. Instead, this movement casts a vision of old age as “enriched with distinctively creative possibilities” (Featherstone and Hepworth, 2000). It seeks to replace the pessimistic inheritance for an alternative based upon the idea of “improving” oneself (Gullette, 1988). A new attitude towards time and aging, it emphasizes the possibilities of maintaining one’s identity, discovering new sources of personal power and, with these, being socially and psychologically triumphant and happy, despite reduced biological capacities. It draws attention to the possibilities of reinterpreting and reconstructing the body and aging, which are no longer considered to be biologically determined realities, but as open to diverging interpretations and in constant change. Aging thus becomes

² Literally ‘crown’, colloquial term used to refer to older men and women. (Translator’s note)

³ Literally “Tin Cup”, a pun on the name of the other bar, “Caneca de Prata”, which translates to “Silver Cup”. (Translator’s note)

an arena with a series of political struggles (Katz, 1996): struggles around legitimate narratives regarding the relation between body, aging and sense of self; struggles against culturally constructed concepts of inevitable personal degeneration; struggles against the denial of the potential of positive changes in the later stages of one's life.

From this point of view, the "*coroa*" seems to be presently associated with recent and more "positive" representations of aging that seek to emphasize the advantages and personal enrichment brought on by maturity. This view questions the social formation and political commitments of medical and gerontological discourses on aging and the notion of "elderly". The cliché that "youth is a state of spirit" reflects dimensions of this new social sensibility toward the later stage of life, which implies the possibility of converting old age into an "indefinitely extensive plateau of active and enjoyable consumption" (Featherstone, 1994). Research into the experiences and representations of maturity and aging among men who have sex with men should therefore situate them in the tense and moving crossroads between old and new conventions regarding the periodization of life, aging and old age and their relations to sexuality and homosexuality. This means taking into account, in short, the possible arrangements, combinations and transitions between the image of the depressed and solitary "old aunt" and the well disposed "*coroa*" surrounded by good company.

2. The life-course paradigm

Let us return to the idea of a "plateau", alluded to by Featherstone, which seems central to a more recent conception of life as a performance delimited by the nature of the body, in which notions of form, development and decline, as well as differentiations and cut-off points between different age periods, have become blurred. In this conception, an initial phase is assumed: one of increasing control over one's body, emotions and cognitive skills—three spheres of control and competence that one needs to master in order to become an accepted, trustful human with full citizenship rights. From this follows a general view of life as a plateau with no defined form, stretching from the beginning of adult life until prolonged middle age, in which emphasis resides on variable trajectories, on flexibility, on each person's ability to construct their own biography. In this representation, youth is the motor of life, of the movement of permanent construction, exploration and renovation of identity. Old age, in turn, ends up being defined by the failure of those three levels of control and competence.

It is possible to place this emerging conception of the life process as a plateau with indefinite form, open to variations and invention, in opposition to other representations that are based precisely on the recognition of life stages that differ in terms of development and decline. By way of contrast, we can consider three of those representations (Featherstone, 1994). The idea of the life cycle itself presumes phases of growth, maturation, reproduction, decline and death that are successively reproduced through

generations. The idea of life as a continuous, linear progression is characteristic of developmental psychology and is based upon a notion of constant progress toward an established goal. More recent versions of this concept understand even the biological losses of old age as being compensated by cultural gains specific to that stage of life (Baltes, 1995). Finally, the romantic idea of “the fall” values childhood and youth as high points in life, with the remaining stages marked by a frustrated search to regain those values.

The conception of life as a plateau does not substitute these other representations, but seeks to dislocate them through criticisms regarding their division of the life process into discontinuous stages and values. This can also be observed in the emergence of the so-called “life-course paradigm” in the humanities, which confronts previous narratives of cycle, development and fall, questioning their assumptions of order and predictability in the human life process. The central point of these critiques is to highlight that historical and cultural changes alter patterns of development and transition in adult life for different groups, generations, or cohorts. The life-course paradigm is presented as an alternative geared toward the acknowledgement that any point in a life trajectory must be analyzed from a dynamic perspective as a consequence of previous experiences and future expectations and integrate personal motives and the limits of the corresponding social and cultural context.

Giele & Elder (1998) analyze four important elements in the definition of the life course as an investigative method: situation in time and place, which points to contextualization in social structure, history and culture; the intertwining of lives, which highlights the relevance of interactions between people who share similar experiences; human agency, which highlights the way in which individuals’ movements toward accomplishing personal goals influence the configuration and direction of their life courses; and the synchronization of life, in which chronological events in personal lives combine simultaneously with events that are characteristic of the referenced group and are peculiar to the historical times. Emphasis here is no longer placed on the individual who goes through pre-established, universal stages of human development. Instead, it is placed on the interrelations between personal trajectory and the historical and cultural structuring of experience. Instead of assuming we know what tasks and issues will be faced or negotiated through time, it situates people in relation to the relevant challenges and interests within their own lives, as a consequence of their present social life.

In the life-course perspective, concepts of generation and generational cohort gain relevance and are reclaimed in a perspective that dates back to Mannheim’s classic view, expressed in his famous essay “The Problem of Generations” (Mannheim, 1982). The central issue here is the similarity of situations within the same historical period, which is created by age stratification and generates particular understandings of the self and others based on shared collective interpretations of historical events. The emphasis here is not so much on continuity and reproduction, but on the hiatuses,

ruptures, improvisations and inventions that singularize generational experiences. Under specific historical circumstances, certain cohorts may show themselves to be extremely active in directing changes in behavior and in producing a “memory” or “tradition” of collective reference. This seems to be the case with the post-war, baby boom generation in Western countries (including Brazil), which is also the generation that decisively contributed to producing the modern “gay cultures”, as well as new discourses and images of aging.

If there is no single process of life for all, if it is necessary to analyze different sets of people and different historical, social and cultural contexts, the consequence is that studying today’s elderly may say very little about what tomorrow’s elderly will be like. To understand tomorrow’s elderly, we must look at those who are in middle age today. Another problem, however, is wanting to understand today’s elderly based on the references of tomorrow’s elderly, when the later generation’s power of vocalization is much greater. The risk here is that the elderly of today will be erased (cf. Cohen, 1994). I will now show how these emphases have played out in part of the production that sought to periodize the stages of construction of the homosexual identity and how they have been employed in investigations about aging among homosexual men.

3. Homosexual identity and the life course

Research into processes of developing a peculiar sexual identity has marked a good portion of the studies about homosexuality in the social sciences since the 1970s. As Weeks (2000) shows, the idea of sexual identity is surrounded by ambiguities: it can be an absolutely fundamental declaration of belonging, having important connotations both in terms of a sense of personal unity and of political commitment. On the other hand, identities are historically and culturally specific, being selected from a range of possible options. They are not essential parts of each individual’s personality. In anthropology, identity analyses increasingly remove any illusion of a lasting substrate that the concept may imply. Identities are thought of as situational, relational and contrasting; they are affirmations of political responses to given conjunctures, linked to other identities, composing a “strategy of differences” (Carneiro da Cunha, 1985). In this perspective, identities don’t exist in themselves; rather, what exists is the political problem of identity delimitation. For this reason, there are those who believe that we can adequately replace the concept of identity with other formulations such as “affinity” (Haraway, 2000; Corrêa, 2003).

Political concerns are evident in most studies of homosexual identity emphasizing the dimensions of resistance and choice through the struggle against the weight and pressure of social conventions. Concepts drawn from symbolic interactionism, such as “stigma”, “labeling”, “development of stigmatized identities” and “the perpetual career of the self” (Goffman, 1968; 1975; 1976) have been highly influential in these studies,

as have been perspectives related to personal change in adult life (Becker, 1970). Also highly influential was the view that the processes involved in constituting a sexual identity are closely connected to the socially available possibilities of affirming those identities in terms of McIntosh's pioneer 1968 discussion of the "homosexual role". Based on these concerns and concepts, authors have developed formulations that seek to outline the processes through which one reaches an existence that is personally and publicly acknowledged as being "homosexual", with a decided emphasis on the process of coming out (Dank, 1971).

The four-stage interactionist model proposed by Plummer (1975)—sensitization; signification and disorientation; coming out and subculturalization; and stabilization—set the general discussion in those terms. It was based on the conception of homosexual identity as a life trajectory involving the adoption of a self-defining homosexual, learning the corresponding roles and deciding to live one's adult life as a practicing homosexual.

In Plummer's model, each stage of this process is associated with a life stage. "Sensitization" would thus correspond to certain childhood experiences concerning interests, emotions and activities (including, but not limited to, erotic and genital activities) considered inadequate in the face of expectations regarding gender roles. "Signification and disorientation" occur during adolescence, when interests and feelings towards other young and adult men are accentuated and evaluated in terms of their potential relevance for self-awareness, anxiety generation and confusion. The coming out stage—later referred to as "subculturalization" (Plummer, 1995)—typically occurs in mid- or late adolescence, when young men begin to establish contact with other young and adult men who self-define as "homosexual" or "gay". They thus learn "homosexual" or "gay" roles and come to define themselves as such. Lastly, the fourth stage corresponds to maturity, in which the individual feels at ease and comfortable with his own homosexuality, committing to it as a lifestyle.

Authors who developed the model outlined by Plummer, such as Troiden (1988) and Cass (1979; 1984), offer some criticisms of Plummer's work, especially regarding the absence of a definition of homosexual identity. Following a theoretical perspective affiliated with the generation of "ideal types", Troiden modifies Plummer's four-stage scheme, generalizing it to female homosexuality and suggesting a slightly different sequence of stages whose very names seem to make explicit the normative bias to which I alluded earlier: sensitization, identity confusion, assumption of a gay identity and commitment to homosexuality as a lifestyle.

To Troiden, sensitization occurs before adolescence and involves feelings of marginality associated with perceiving oneself to be different from others and "atypical" from the point of view of gender interests. Awareness of that marginality is retrospective, however, and develops in adolescence, when boys and girls provide new meanings to their experiences. Adolescence is thus a period of inevitable turbulence and confusion,

of awareness of stigma, but without the knowledge of what it means to be gay or lesbian. Different strategies may be used to deal with this period of distress. One can deny or attempt to eradicate it and even assume homophobic attitudes; one can, alternatively, redefine the distress as a “temporary phase” based on the discovery that others share the same kind of desires. This may represent an effort towards self-acceptance. Reaching the third phase, which requires means of reducing and managing feelings of alienation, guilt and stigma, involves increasing positive contacts with others who make up the “gay and lesbian community”. The fourth stage is characterized by more or less openly maintaining homosexual relationships and by the deliberate effort towards broadening self-acknowledgement as homosexual to people outside the community, directed toward reducing stigmatizing perceptions of others. In this stage, any regret of “coming out” disappears and homosexual relations are defined as a legitimate source of love, sexual satisfaction and romantic involvement.

A still more detailed exposition of the perspective of development by stages may be found in the works of Vivien Cass (1979; 1984). Emphasizing (like the others) the impact of stigma on life trajectories, Cass postulates a six-stage model, with each stage associated with a set of possible alternatives. The first stage is one of tension between commitment and identity confusion. In this stage, there’s the perception that one’s thoughts and actions are in disagreement with those of the broader society. In the second stage, internalization takes place and the subject accepts that being “gay” means being part of a discriminated and marginalized group within society. Faced with this understanding, different paths may be followed: one can persevere in one’s homosexual identity despite acknowledging its costs; one may claim a bisexual or heterosexual identity; finally, one can maintain a negative attitude, which may lead to suicide. The third stage is that of identity generalization or tolerance, in which different alternatives for reconciling personal needs and social demands are also present. In the fourth stage, the process by which tolerance evolves into identity evaluation or acceptance is revealed. The fifth stage is one of “identity pride”, resulting from growing contacts with others identified as “homosexual” and the concurrent adoption of a perspective of valuing homosexuality that takes the shape of “us” versus “them”. In this perspective, heterosexuals become the disqualified “other”. Finally, in the sixth stage, “identity synthesis” occurs. Feelings of anger and frustration are replaced by a superior form of personal and public acceptance of the gay or lesbian identity, along with integration and self-esteem, which also make it possible to value even those who are different from oneself.

What is interesting in Cass’s sequential model is its explicit acknowledgement of different possibilities for development, connected to the more general point of view that processes of constructing sexual identity are closely connected with the socially available possibilities for affirming those identities. Social circumstances that enable the affirmation of a gay or lesbian identity are thus more important to the process of adopting those identities than sexual behavior itself. This model seems more open to changes in sexual orientation throughout one’s life trajectory.

Despite their nuances and distinctions, these models share a recurring set of assumptions. The first stage is invariably postulated as the moment in which children and adolescents block the acknowledgement of their own sexual desires. What follows is a period of experimentation and signification, necessarily marked by turbulence and tension, which may lead to a sense that the subject's desires are acceptable and "normal". With the partial exception of Cass, these models also tend to recognize adolescence as a privileged, critical stage in defining sexual orientation. They implicitly assume that the biological changes associated with puberty are a decisive impulse in increasing awareness of desire for people of the same sex. The process of "revealing oneself" to be homosexual appears as the next stage and will be successful as long as it happens under favorable conditions of self-adjustment and social support. It is assumed, therefore, that most (if not all) men and women who will "reveal" themselves as "homosexuals" during adulthood are those who necessarily already began to see themselves as such since adolescence—which may reflect the fact that the vast majority of sexual orientation studies focuses *a priori* on adolescence as a critical phase and pay less attention to other life stages. It is thus also assumed that creating a positive self-image as "homosexual" is an identical process, regardless of whether it occurs during youth, middle or old age.

The "life-course paradigm" criticism of stage models argues that these models tend to follow the conception bias of life-cycle theory, seeing life as a process in which individuals go through defined transitional periods until they reach a stable identity. These models follow an interactionist tradition in which personal identities are not seen as based on inscribed personality traits, but as theoretically open processes that develop during the course of particular experiences. Their formulation, however—perhaps as a result of combining emphasis on sexual stigma as a necessary molder of experiences associated with homosexuality, with efforts to articulate each phase of the homosexual "career" with a life stage—can be read as an attempt to found a normative model of the homosexual life cycle or progression. The interactionist perspective, in effect, remains trapped in an individual-society dualism that constructs the problem of identity as a relationship between two connected but distinct entities. If attention is drawn to sociocultural constraints and patterns in these models, they still do not call into question sexuality as a natural substrate, leaving the path clear for narratives that consider homosexuality to be based on the blossoming of some innate, "given", "natural" predisposition. Stage models thus end up imposing an abstract and artificial order to life histories, tending to reify and simplify transitions that, in real experience, can be far more complex and which take place at different times during one's existence.

Some findings from recent research oppose the development stage models. Empirical studies in the United States (Boxer, 1990 apud Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1995) have shown that many adolescents go through a phase of homosexual and heterosexual experiences before establishing a sexual orientation for themselves. Furthermore, among more recent adolescent cohorts, tensions regarding sexual

desires and feelings have more to do with revealing that self-acknowledgement to others, which brings to the forefront the social implications of self-definition (Herdt & Boxer, 1996). Research on some contemporary youth cohorts in the United States has observed that a growing number of adolescents and young adults show a preference for the term “bisexual” in order to refer to their desires and lifestyles, acknowledging an attraction to both sexes (Savin-Williams, 1995). This may, in fact, be connected to the so-called “queer critique” of identity politics. Gender marks must be taken into account in the processes of homosexual “coming out”, as well as in different contexts of class and “race”, even when considering contemporary cohorts of a given historical period (Herdt, 1989). The issue becomes more complex when we consider those cultural contexts in which the categorizations “homosexual”, “gay” or “lesbian” are not the only ones available, nor are necessarily predominant, when designating same sex desires and practices (Carrier, 1989; Murray, 1979; Fry, 1982a; 1982b, Parker, 1992).

Even if these inferences based on empirical studies reflect local experiences, they draw attention to the variation and diversity of processes of elaborating and expressing sexual identity related to homosexualities, indicating a greater fluidity in their definitions than is acknowledged by the stage models outlined above, which assume a nearly irrevocable transformation of the doubting heterosexual into a “gay” or “lesbian”. Progressions are not automatic. Transitions depend on many other circumstances besides individual decisions and there is no necessary acceptance of a final destiny (Weeks, 2000).

Faced with these considerations, we can consider the hypothesis that stage models tend to reflect the developmental experiences of a particular cohort. In this sense, what they seem to show is a recurring way of structuring shared facts and experiences of “coming out” and “assuming” the homosexual identity which has formed a kind of collective memory of those who lived as adolescents and young adults in the 1960s and 1970s—what Plummer himself, in a more recent work (Plummer 1995), has called a “master narrative” or a “dominant narrative” referring to the origins and development of sexual orientation directed toward the same sex. Here is an illustrative example of the master-narrative:

“I always knew I was different. I hung out with other boys, but in every way there was something different. When I was in second grade, my teacher warned my mother that I was going to ‘become a fag’. She was so scared that she put me in every sports activity in the city. My true interest was the theater. I was a good athlete, but I didn’t like it. In college, I was able to work in theater, where I met a guy and started a relationship. It lasted until graduation. After that, I came to Chicago to work in the theater and he went to the West Coast to work on movie scripts. At that point, I knew I had been gay my whole life.” (apud Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000)

These narratives, more clearly constructed by men than by women, postulate that one is born gay and that gay boys show “atypical” gender inclinations and behaviors from

childhood on. It presumes that they already feel “different” from their companions, that they are “sensible”, interested in art and studying and do not enjoying sports activities and athletic competitions, even if they are occasionally forced to participate in them. The gay identity, in this perspective, develops from childhood on with the incipient awareness of erotic fantasies associated with young and adult men, an awareness that is consolidated in adolescence through homosexual activities. This growing realization of one’s homosexual desires is accompanied by manifestations of intolerance from the surrounding society, through condemnations, recriminations and teasing by classmates. This, in turn provokes feelings of shame and self-criticism, which are minimized as the “gay world” is discovered and contacts with others who share a similar sexual identity are intensified. Then follows a struggle to “come out” to family and friends outside the gay community, the search for affective relationships and, finally, meeting one or more people who become “life partners”.

These topics should be seen less as indicators of actually experienced situations and more as components of a plot structuring events into a more or less coherent narrative, capable of offering a sense of continuity of self and place—not only for the person who tells it, but also for the person who hears it. This point is crucial. As Ricoeur has observed, in order to make sense, any life history must adapt to certain general conditions of acceptability that we apply whenever we hear a story. In order to be “tellable”, a story must be “followable” and, in a certain sense, be “self-explanatory” (Ricoeur, 1971, 1977). Stories in general (and life histories in particular) are co-constructed by those who tell them and those who hear them. If coming out narratives may be considered intrapsychic scripts in the terms of Simon and Gagnon (1984)—that is, accounts that reveal the play between cultural meanings and social interactions relevant to the presentation of the teller’s own subjectivity—and if we take into account the consideration that every narrative is also co-constructed by those who hear it (Ricoeur, 1971, 1977), then their analysis may offer important elements for our understanding of the role that elaborating experiences of a generational cohort plays in learning and diffusing master-narratives about the origins of sexual desire.

In the coming out narratives (Hall Carpenter Archives, 1989; Plummer, 1995) in which individuals attempt to construct meaning for their sexual desire through an account of their lives, prejudice and stigma against homosexuality tend to be the great opponent that creates the social environment in which sexual orientation is experienced as a source of distress and suffering. As a result, the bases for a “good” or “followable story” are produced. In the manner of the popular stories analyzed by Propp, the homosexual—as the hero-victim—must fight the villain, represented by social stigma, who kidnaps and represses his sexual desire, nature and inclinations. The hero utilizes magical resources of awareness and critical political commitment—provided, above all, by a supportive community—in order to struggle against the villain and socially produce their gender and sexual identities. The story plays out according to more widely shared cultural presuppositions in which desire for people of the same sex is based

on an innate predisposition that emerges in the child's experiences with family and community (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). Thus, although details related to school, family, community, and work may be important in constructing this social background, the plot does not concern the nucleus of homosexual identity, which is often presented as naturalized or essentialized in these accounts (Lewin, 1991).

What is ultimately suggested is that these self-representations of homosexuality, present in most coming out narratives, are consistent with the experiences of the generational cohort—now in middle age—that fueled the changes which broadened the visibility of homosexuality and made issues related to it a set of political demands of growing importance in public debates in Western countries. This is precisely the cohort that has had a broader range of sensory experiences, from non-alcoholic drugs to the relaxation of attitudes toward sex. It is the cohort that promoted the explicit acknowledgement of homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, started the movement for homosexual rights, transformed the resistance to the police at the Stonewall bar into a powerful symbol and a date of reference for public demonstrations of “gay pride”. It is also, ironically and tragically, the cohort that most suffered from the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. This cohort will arrive at the later stage of life with its peculiar history of trajectories and confrontations, which may lead to new conceptions about aging and homosexuality.

4. Considering the peculiarities of “gay aging”

If theoretical models of stages of the development of homosexual identity tend to crystallize, abstract and normalize narratives of signification of the experiences of what could be designated the “Stonewall cohort” (Cahil, South & Spade, 1999), they can also be used to understand people of other generational cohorts who did not experience the same struggle against stigma or who did not count on the social support given by modern “gay culture”. When these models are applied to these generations, their members tend to be seen as having greater difficulties in facing problems associated with their stigmatized sexual identity. Older gay men then face a double vulnerability, as homosexuals and as elderly, and they can respond to that subjection in two ways. Let us now consider two well-known theoretical reflections on aging and homosexuality.

Accelerated aging

The first hypothesis, that of “accelerated aging”, was initially presented in the work of Gagnon and Simon (1973). It evaluates age stigma by its negative effects and proposes that homosexual men consider themselves to be “old” ahead of time. An episode told by Friend (1980) in the form of an anecdote is usually mentioned as an illustration of this hypothesis. In the late 1970s, this researcher placed an ad in newspapers and

magazines directed towards the gay public seeking “older” gay men who were willing to give interviews for an investigation and was surprised to receive many answers from volunteers who were in their thirties.

Some considerations and qualifications regarding the “accelerated aging” hypothesis need to be raised, however. A comparative study of heterosexual and homosexual men carried out in the United States in the 1970s (Minnigerode, 1976) found no significant differences in the way homosexuals and heterosexuals defined the age milestones expected in the transition between life stages, such as middle and old age. Gay men in this sample defined the transition into middle and old age at 41 and 64 years, respectively, which put them very close to the numbers found for the American population in general in a research coordinated by Berenice Neugarten in the 1960s (Neugarten, Moore & Lowe [1965] 1996).

Gray & Dressel (1985) reanalyzed data from an investigation carried out in the 1970s through questionnaires distributed by gay activists in homosexual associations and meeting points and by the gay magazine *Blueboy*, using time of involvement in homosexual activity as a control variable.⁴ The analysis resulted in an association between participation in gay sexual sociability and negative feelings concerning age and physical appearance. In other words, older homosexuals who were sexually active for a longer time period were more likely to feel bad about their age and to evaluate their appearance less positively. Despite this, more than half of the elderly men in that sample expressed positive feelings with regard to their appearance. Gray & Dressel found no significant correlation between expressions of negative self-image and increase in age.

The data revealed no significant difference by age group in the number of partners during a one year period and thus did not corroborate the general idea that older gay men no longer find partners due to their reduced competitiveness in the gay sex market. Another interesting finding is found in Laner’s 1978 comparison of personal ads published by homosexual and heterosexual men in an alternative West Coast newspaper in the United States in the 1970s. Laner did not detect a particular preference on the part of the homosexual men for younger partners; however, he observed that few homosexual men mentioned their age as compared to the heterosexual men. He concluded that homosexual men are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to “omit their own age” in order not to discourage potential partners.

In other, more recent research (Bennett & Thompson, 1990), gay men defined milestones for transitioning into middle and old age in a similar ways the broader population did. They also believed, however, that “other” gay men defined middle age as starting in the thirties and old age as starting in the fifties. Most men in that study claimed to reject

⁴ This research resulted in 4212 responses from homosexual men who were divided, for statistical interpretation purposes, into three age groups: 16 to 29 years (44%), 30 to 49 years (46%) and 50 or more (9%).

categorizing people by age, considering it to be a form of stereotyping inconsistent with their own way of relating to people. On the other hand, those people over thirty claimed to consider themselves to be younger than how they were perceived by “other” gays, who were understood to be more focused on youth and concerned with age.

It is clear that when it comes to early aging among men who have sex with men, the evidence is far from conclusive and open to ambivalent interpretations. It should be noted, in any case, that emphasis on beauty and youth is a broader cultural phenomenon, as is the belief that paying attention and having prejudices regarding age is not a problem for oneself, but for “others”.

Crisis competence

The “crisis competence” hypothesis holds that the battles waged by people of homosexual orientation—both in their personal experience of “coming out” and in their broader struggles against social stigma and “heterosexism”—have had the effect of endowing these people with a special capacity of resistance and determination when facing other crises during the course of their lives. Kimmel (1978) was the first to formulate the idea of the “feeling of crisis competence”, suggesting that crises related to homosexuals “coming out” are more important in homosexual men’s lives and that, once overcome, they minimize the impact of later crises, such as those related to maturity and aging.

Other studies (Francher and Henkins 1973; Friend 1980; Berger 1982), following a similar line of reasoning, suggest that tensions and anxieties associated with aging and arising from changes or losses of social roles have a less dramatic impact on homosexual men since their life trajectories are marked by the adoption of more flexible gender roles. This leads them to be less involved with the usual problems associated with the constitutive status attributions of conventional male identity and contributes to facilitating the development of a sense of independence and self-acceptance.

Instead of the “gay who ages as a victim”, of the accelerated aging hypothesis and its correlated ageism, in the “crisis competence” hypothesis we find the “gay who ages, but resists” and who, because of that resistance, seems destined to become a highly adequate elderly person. However, just as with the previous hypothesis, available studies have shown no decisive evidence that combating stigma and prejudice increases the ability to deal with the physical limitations and suffering connected with aging. Lee (1987), on the other hand, suggested that successful adjustment among older homosexual men would be more associated with their capacity to avoid crises than to confront them. The conclusion, up to now, is that “crisis competence” remains an attractive hypothesis, but its validity has yet to be demonstrated.

Researchers armed with a more positive view of homosexual aging have had another effect: that of questioning the idea that homosexuality itself would necessarily be an additional source of distress and suffering, beyond the characteristic difficulties of old age that affect elderly populations in general. Research comparing attitudes of homosexual and heterosexual older men reveals no significant differences between the two groups concerning the fears, problems, and challenges presented by aging (Kelly 1977; Laner 1978; Adelman 1990). Concerns with health reported by homosexual men and women were likewise very similar to those reported by elderly adults in general (Quam & Whitford, 1992). Complaints of solitude do not appear as an especially negative differential for homosexuals, either: by contrast, studies show that homosexuals' networks of friendship and nuclei of sociability, also called "families of choice" (Weston, 1997), often include people of different generations.

Summarizing these studies findings and suggestions, Kimmel (1979-1980) arguments that homosexuality does not by itself appear to exert a negative effect on his interviewees regarding aging or satisfaction with life. Paradoxically, however, that conclusion collided with the assumption that guided both the "accelerated aging" hypothesis and Kimmel's own "crisis competence" hypothesis. Both of these theories see the differences produced due to social stigmas against homosexuality as a significant factor in producing a singular aging experience for people who share the homosexual orientation.

In a similar vein, there are preliminary results from studies on homosexual men in transition from middle to old age. These come from an interdisciplinary investigation coordinated by specialists connected to the University of Chicago (Cohler, Hostetler & Boxer, 1998; Hostetler & Cohler, 1997; Herdt, Beeler & Rawls, 1997; Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2000). The studies are based on an evaluation of narrative themes gathered in life histories with forty homosexual men who were sixty years old or older, most of whom maintain lasting relationships, have no visible involvement with local gay and lesbian institutions and remain distant from or indifferent toward the events that marked the American homosexual movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Most of the men work in discreet middle-class occupations as librarians, civil servants and engineers; others are hairdressers and interior designers. They are not fully "out" at work, but report no significant tensions related to their sexual orientation. Currently retired, they maintain a discreet and conventional social life: they go to the movies, to the theater and opera, participate in gatherings and dinners with friends, spend weekends and vacations at their beach or country houses. Despite their distance from the "gay life", these men don't see their sexual orientation as a shameful secret, nor do they manifest experiences connected to the "double stigma" of being "gays" and "grays". An illustrative example, from a man in his sixties describing his current life:

"We've lived together as partners for over forty years. We met by chance, when we were working for the government as young scientists and it was love at first sight.

Our life is pretty normal. I teach and he still works for the government, though we are both about to retire. We bought land in Santa Fe and we intend to build a house there. Sometimes we invite friends over for dinner; sometimes we spend a quiet evening at home. On weekends, we go to our little house by the lake. Life has been very good to us... we don't have much to do with the gay community. We just carry on with our lives." (apud Cohler and Galatzer-Lévy, 2000).

Many of these men only became aware of their homosexual desires as adults or in middle age. To many of them, sexual orientation does not appear to be a relevant concern. Social stigma does not appear to play a central role in their lives, inasmuch as they worked to keep their personal lives separate from the world of work and the public sphere in general. They seem to expect little from society, in the sense of expecting that it should provide greater understanding and accommodation of their sexual orientation. Although distant from homosexual activism, they acknowledge that social and political changes have made their lives easier.

The Chicago studies present more recent data, post-AIDS epidemic, but still have the same limitations as the other studies discussed regarding the social composition of the research subjects: they all belong to the universe of white, middle-class urban dwellers. They are therefore unable to provide a general picture of the elderly homosexual in the United States. However, when it comes to that universe, hegemonic within research on homosexuality, one conclusion that seems to impose itself is that, regardless of their stated purposes, the investigations in question have not objectively shown that sexual orientation *per se* results in significant differences in the aging experience.

Another point concerns the meaning of "subculturalization" in the process of producing homosexual identity. If sociability with others whose orientation is acknowledged as similar continues to be an important element in maintaining a sense of self-esteem and personal satisfaction (at any age), studies of the older generational cohort indicate that this sociability is far from being restricted to the forms and spaces of the modern, institutionalized gay community and its social and political activities. The older generational cohort studies do away with the idea of some common substrate of homosexuality and underscore the relational constitution of identities through specific bonds kept with "significant others", with the reference groups and with the broader community.

* * *

Maybe the above observations will sound like truisms. However, it is worth noting how much they collide with certain central conceptions in the logic of contemporary politicized discourse in favor of greater attention to the needs of elderly homosexuals. As an illustration, we may consider a document produced by researchers connected to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation Policy Institute (Cahill, South

& Spade, 1999), entitled *Outing Age*, that brings together a broad set of information concerning “GLBT elderly” and “GLBT aging” in the United States. *Outing Age* structures its claims based on some central assumptions that are also dear to the master-narratives of the development of homosexual identity:

1. The elderly have singular and special needs, due to the peculiarity of their sexual orientation;
2. Most GLBT elderly keep their sexual identity secret, live “in the closet”, marginalized from the institutionalized gay community (which also discriminates against them) and in a state of social isolation;
3. As they age, GLBT elderly can only count on the support of welfare agencies—spaces of “institutionalized heterosexism” which cannot offer them adequate access to the services and benefits they need.

Understanding old age as a time of decline, losses, marginalization and suffering is central to this politicized discourse. This conception was very important in legitimizing the rights of the elderly and the institutionalization of social protection mechanisms for the elderly, of which the right of retirement was a major landmark. At the same time, this conception needs to make some concessions to another set of representations of aging which, considering the emphasis on decline and loss as a basis for the very stigmatization of the elderly, attempt to give space to more “positive” discourses and images that underscore the advantages and enrichments that maturity brings, as well as the active role that many older men and women currently play in several associations and initiatives connected to the homosexual movement. When these sorts of discourse are taken into consideration, however, the image of GLBT elderly in need simply disappears. In the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Foundation document, this can be seen in the intersection of the “profiles” of two older homosexual leaders—a 63 year old white man and a 77 year old African-American woman—each of whom relate their respective trajectories as militants and defenders of homosexual rights. Each profile is accompanied by a photograph which shows them smiling and well-disposed: him, in a suit and tie; her in an “ethnic” blouse, hat and necklace.

It is possible to correlate the tension between these opposing representations to contrasting evaluations of aging among homosexual individuals, who at times emphasize social stigma and “accelerated aging” and at other times draw attention to the “competences” and “capabilities” acquired by the homosexual elderly in the course of their life trajectories. Indeed, the two most popular theories on homosexual aging reproduce the central controversy of gerontological studies (Debert, 1999; Simões, 2000), concerning two antagonistic models of thinking about aging. On the one hand, we have a model that accentuates the threats and dangers of loss and abandonment, the absence of family support or networks of friendship; on the other, there is a model that draws attention to original responses that the elderly are able to develop in confronting the challenges and stereotypes connected with old age. We thus return to the tense crossroads between old and new conceptions about the periodization of life, aging and old age, through which middle-aged and elderly people of varying sexual orientations move.

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