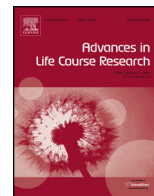




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Turning points in the lives of lesbian and gay adults age 50 and over

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about how lesbians and gay men perceive the turning points that define their life trajectories. This study uses qualitative interview data to understand which experiences lesbian women and gay men age 50 and older identify as turning points and explore gender differences. In depth, face-to-face qualitative interviews were conducted with a subset of participants ($n = 33$) from the Caring and Aging with Pride survey. The most common turning points identified were relationship and occupation-related. Lesbians more frequently identified the break-up of a relationship and occupational and educational related experiences as turning points. Gay men more commonly indicated that the beginning of a relationship and HIV/AIDS related experiences were turning points. The turning points were analyzed according to principles of the life course theory and narrative analysis.

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1. Introduction

Turning points are events that have unfolded within specific social and historical contexts that are central to understanding one's life course. According to life course theories of human development, turning points mark a change in one's life course, where a person shifts directions or feels there is a new sense of self that emerges from an experience or set of experiences (Clausen, 1995, p. 371). The socially constructed self is constituted by language, sustained through narrative (Foucault, 1988; Kvale, 1992) and revealed in life stories, which reflect how an individual perceives and experiences her or his life (Frost, 2012). As narrative events, turning points are "defined as having happened only by observing things that occur after them in time" (Abbott, 1997, p. 95). Thus, turning points are subjective and retrospective reconstructions of life narratives (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988). Personal narratives reflect a social context and are shaped and constructed by the actor and audience (Plummer, 1994, p. 23–26); as such social identities and dominant narrative structures shape peoples' articulations of turning points.

This study analyses the most important turning points identified by lesbian and gay male (LG) participants, age 50 and older, in face-to-face interviews; we posit that the experiences they identify as turning points not only reflect their perceptions of their shifting senses of self over time, but reveal how turning points reflect normative gendered expectations of the life course. Life course studies of midlife and older lesbians and gay men are a growing and important area of research. Some studies estimate that 2.4% of the U.S. adult population self-identifies as lesbian and gay (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). All adults born before 1965, the birth years of people aged 50 and older in 2015, have lived through major and rapid shifts in social context (i.e., the Gay Liberation, Civil Rights, Women's, and Anti-War Movements), but they differently experienced these changes according to their identities and the surrounding social contexts. In particular, midlife and older lesbian and gay adults have been subject to political exclusion throughout their lives (Hammack & Cohler, 2011) and have fought against those injustices: they have lacked legal employment protections, only recently secured same-sex marriage rights, and have experienced other challenges. Midlife and older lesbians simultaneously navigated social contexts that allowed legal discrimination of women in the workplace and in educational attainment. Though the body of research about lesbian and gay older adults is growing (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010), we do not fully understand how sexual minority populations may uniquely experience the life course (Herdt & DeVries,

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2004). Examining the experiences that midlife and older LG adults identify as turning points can help us to understand how they perceive the paths of their lives as part of dynamic collective within broader social and historical contexts.

1.1. Background

Dannefer and Settersten's (2010) approach to the life course, which notes that the process of aging is shaped by the cumulative experiences that people have over their lives, guides this study. According to life course perspectives, patterns of aging are "dependent on one's social circumstances, opportunities, and experiences over prior decades," and in order to fully understand their consequences, we must consider the significance of structural elements, like social institutions and cultural practices, in shaping individual lives (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010, p. 4). This model of the life course also focuses on how close social ties affect the circumstances and actions of individuals throughout their lives (Dannefer & Settersten, 2010).

1.2. Turning points

Turning points define the important transitions that alter people's lives (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988), provoke shifts in social identities and roles and force people to recognize that they are no longer the individuals they used to be (Strauss, 1959; Clausen, 1995). Turning points reflect an event or period of time that changes one's life perception, yet allows them to maintain a sense of self-continuity (Sutin, Costa, Wethington, & Eaton, 2010). One study of turning points characterized them as reflecting "individuals' subjective assessments of continuities and discontinuities over their lives" (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988, p. 272). The few existing studies of turning points examine general populations and focus primarily on gender differences, identity and social role processes, and life events (Cappeliez Beaupre, & Robitaille, 2008; Martin daRosa & Poon, 2011) for presumed heterosexuals, as LG individuals are not identified in the samples. Life stage affects the transitions identified as significant or meaningful; three later life transitions identified by both men and women in prior research are end of marriage, living alone, and loss of independence (Johnson & Troll, 1996). Each of these transitions represents a shift in identities and social roles, which is consistent with other prior findings (Cappeliez et al., 2008).

Some prior studies address gender differences in the identification of turning points for general adult populations (Cappeliez et al., 2008). In order of frequency, women cite incidents that are work and family related in greater number as turning points, while men identify work, health, and family related incidents (Cappeliez et al., 2008), though sexual orientation, race, and class are not addressed. Changes in identity and occupational achievements were identified in the sole study that focused on a lesbian population (Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, & Nystrom, 2005). Other research identified future life goals, though not turning points, for midlife and older lesbian and gay populations; these life goals included attaining financial security and a comfortable retirement, maintaining health and well being, and achieving in work or career (Beeler, Rawls, Herdt, & Cohler, 1999). Prior research also identifies leaving the parental home as a key experience of coming out for lesbians and gay men (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001).

Turning points reflect social norms both of the social contexts in which they have emerged and of existing dominant narratives. In life course theories of human development, transitions mark normative structural elements while turning points reflect the individuals' own definitions of the significant experiences that define their lives within a shifting socio-historical context. Turning

points thus reflect not only structural inequalities of the prevailing social contexts, but also represent innovation and resilience in the ways that individuals enact agency despite structural constraints on their behavior. Current cohorts of midlife and older gay men and lesbians who joined the military to leave repressive family situations, for example, had to keep their sexual orientation hidden or be discharged due to the prohibition of homosexuals from military service (Berube, 1990; Clunis et al., 2005). Yet, serving in the military allowed lesbians to live independently and work outside of the family home when there were few options for women's adult lives aside from marriage and motherhood (Clunis et al., 2005). Thus, in order to resist some gender norms and forge different paths, many midlife and older lesbians opted to join the military as young adults. Gay men who served in the military often were drafted, felt social pressure to join or risk being presumed homosexual, or wanted to leave the parental home to explore a gay identity (Berube, 1990). Consequently, these cohorts of gay men endured stringent gender norms that included compulsory military service and the expectations that they would embody hegemonic forms of masculinity.

1.3. Turning points, gender, and sexual orientation

In addition to considering the effects of social context, this study also applies the gendered lens of aging to the life course perspective, which means it highlights the interlocking power relations between individuals and social institutions that shape how people act and perceive themselves as women and men (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). To apply a gendered lens in this context is to focus on the perspectives of gay men, lesbians, and bisexual men and women in their own words and highlight how their experiences expose taken for granted assumptions about gender and sexual orientation. We use the participants' accounts of significant turning points in their lives to explore how gender and sexual orientation have shaped their life trajectories. Prior research has challenged perceptions that the life paths of older lesbian women and gay men are analogous with equal opportunities to participate in lesbian and gay-focused friendship groups and social networks (Cronin & King, 2010; Beeler et al., 1999). As we learn more about midlife and older lesbian and gay populations and the effects of the social and historical contexts in which they have lived, the heterogeneity of their lives becomes more evident.

The study infers that there are likely differences between the turning points identified by midlife and older LG adults and their heterosexual counterparts because of the prior research that illustrates how gender operates differently in relationships and employment by sexual orientation. Older cohorts came of age when homosexuality was criminalized and social norms dictated that adults were to marry and have children. Prior findings from small convenience samples show that from 29 to 50% of older LGB adults previously had heterosexual marriages and 29% were parents; this rate was lower for men who were in young adulthood during the 1970s (Beeler et al., 1999). Blumstein and Schwartz' (1983) expansive study of American couples provides evidence that gay and lesbian couples are different from heterosexual couples in their approach to family and work. Middle and upper middle class heterosexual adult cohorts of the 1980s tended toward stereotypical gendered arrangements of work and parenthood, where men were responsible for providing financial support and women mothered full time while children were young, then sought fulfilling employment outside of the home as children entered school (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). In contrast, people in same-sex couples felt obliged to obtain paid work in order to support themselves and establish adult lives; according to these research findings, "a lesbian sees herself as a worker, not a provider

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