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Changes in coming out milestones across five age cohorts

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ABSTRACT

This quantitative study examined differences in the coming-out process between self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) participants in five age cohorts. An Internet survey and convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit 1,131 participants (ages 18 to 85). Participants provided demographic information and information about their home environment growing up, completed the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), and shared ages that they achieved important milestones in the coming-out process. ANCOVA of differences between men and women in the five cohorts on the age that significant milestones were achieved resulted in significant findings for all comparisons ($p < .001$). In post hoc analysis, 52% of the 450 pairwise comparisons were significant at at least the .05 level. Generally speaking, two significant trends were found in this sample: (a) that the average age of achieving milestones has decreased over time; and (b) that a gender gap in the age of achieving milestones between men and women has disappeared. The current study supports and extends research that suggests a strong connection between social acceptance of LGB people and coming out at younger ages.

Introduction

Coming out has been described in various way over the past 50 years. Generally speaking, early theorists viewed the coming-out process as a series of developmental stages. Same-sex-attracted people might first realize an important difference in themselves, and then experience dissonance as they try to make sense of this difference, until finally some degree of internal balance is achieved (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). Postmodern and feminist conceptualizations of same-sex attraction aimed to update essentialist models of coming out by describing routes of development that were placed within a social context and did not assume a positivistic view of linear and prescribed change (Broido, 2000; Diamond, 2003; Rust, 2000). Movement away from stage models has evolved into a consideration of milestones as they apply to the individual and their coming-out experience (Savin-Williams, 2005). A consistent factor in this evolving conception of coming out has been the influence of the

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social environment on this process. Changes in the coming-out process seem to be related to changing social conditions.

Literature review

In 1969 the modern gay rights movement was born in Greenwich Village, New York, with the advent of the Stonewall Riots (Duberman, 1994). Prior to 1969 gay and lesbian life was almost entirely closeted by both social dictate and legal statute. One result of the struggle for equal rights was an incremental shift in acceptance of gay and lesbian people and the beginning of a decline in social stigma associated with same-sex attraction.

Dank (1971) was one of the first to postulate that the reduction in social stigma for same-sex-attracted people would make it easier for individuals to change their cognitive category about "homosexual" from one of "dirty and perverse" to one that was more socially acceptable. He found that men born before 1951 came out on average at the age of 21. Those born after 1951 came out on average at 17 years of age. Dank believed that a "greater tolerance of society for the freer circulation of information concerning homosexuality and homosexuals has definite implications in reference to coming out" (Dank, 1971, p. 194).

Troiden and Goode (1980) built on Dank's research by sampling four age cohorts of gay men: born 1960 to 1955; born 1954 to 1950; born 1949 to 1945; and born 1944 to 1940. They found significant differences between cohorts on five developmental milestones for same-sex- attracted individuals: the age that participants thought they might be gay; the age that they first labeled their feelings as gay; the age they labeled themselves as gay; the age they first associated with two or more gay people; and the age that they first had a homosexual love relationship. They also found that these milestones were achieved at earlier ages by younger cohorts and linked in sequence, one occurring reliably after another. Troiden and Goode (1980) also echoed Dank's (1971) assessment that younger cohorts of gay men in their study were able to navigate these milestones at earlier ages because of a greater acceptance of same-sex attraction, decreased social stigma, and an increase in accurate information about homosexuality. Other researchers have confirmed the finding that younger cohorts reached significant milestones at younger ages and that chronological age alone could not account for cohort differences (McDonald, 1982). These researchers found that having worked on "congruence" (Cass, 1979) for a longer period of time did not necessarily seem to account for fewer difficulties in the coming-out process. Historical context seemed to account for variation in difficulty in the coming-out process.

Just as the Stonewall Revolution profoundly changed the experience of same-sex-attracted individuals, so too did the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. Most researchers at this time shifted to an investigation into the sexual behaviors of gay men in an attempt to understand and prevent the spread of HIV. Cohort studies of this era tended to focus on differences in sexual behaviors between groups (Deenen, Gijs, & Naerssen, 1994). In his study of gay and bisexual men (ages 16 to 39), Dubé (2000)

postulated two tracks of coming out: (a) sex-centered development and (b) identity-centered development. He found that a greater percentage of men in older cohorts (born approximately between 1961 and 1978) developed through a sex-centered model than the youngest cohort in his study (born between 1979 and 1984). Like other researchers in this vein, he postulated that greater access to positive social messages and associated decrease in stigma attached to same-sex attraction made it easier for younger cohorts to develop a positive self-identity through diverse means (e.g., reading about other gay men, watching movies with positive gay characters, knowing older men who have publicly self-disclosed and could serve as role models).

Researchers in the 1980s and early 1990s also began to deploy postmodern frameworks to investigate the experiences of same-sex-attracted people. An anthropological construct—the "rite of passage"—was used to conceptualize the coming-out process for same-sex-attracted youths (Herdt, 1989). A life course model, shifting from cross-sectional to longitudinal studies, helped to uncover trends in the developmental experiences of same-sex-attracted people (Boxer & Cohler, 1989). Researchers attempted to investigate multiple factors in identity development, such as cohort differences brought on by greater acceptance of homosexuality and the impact of the AIDS crisis on coming out (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Watney, 1993), and generally assumed a more culturally relative perspective on the question of homosexuality. These researchers followed the postmodern trend and interrogated several assumptions about the nature of same-sex-attracted youths (e.g., that they are heterosexual to start with; that they are all homogenous; and that an individual's cultural background has no impact on sexual identity) (Herdt, 1989). Like much postmodern inquiry, this body of research raised many important questions and suggested avenues for future research.

With the new millennium came a surge in research focused on both the experiences of contemporary same-sex-attracted youths and differences between age cohorts of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Researchers also again focused on the achievement of specific developmental milestones for same-sex-attracted people and suggested that the fundamental nature of coming out had continued to change over time. Grierson and Smith (2005) investigated generational differences between gay men. They grouped their subjects by cohort: pre-AIDS crisis (born 1953–1962); peri-AIDS crisis (born 1963–1969); and post-AIDS crisis (born after 1969). They found that for the youngest cohort, coming out was characterized more as a developmental moment to be shared with family and friends rather than an isolating crisis necessitating a break from previous support networks.

Drasin and colleagues (2008) found that milestones viewed as more socially mediated (e.g., recognizing same-sex attraction, self-labeling as gay, etc.) had decreased in age at a much faster rate than milestones seen as more biologically mediated (e.g., having sex with someone of the same sex). Same-sex-attracted youths did not seem to be having first sexual encounters at younger ages, but did seem to be self-labeling at younger ages (Drasin et al., 2008). Younger cohorts born between 1972 and 1990 have also been characterized with an avoidance of labeling of sexual

orientation, fluidity of sexual orientation, and a greater propensity toward ambisexuality (Entrup & Firestein, 2007).

An emerging body of psychosocial research assuming a positive developmental model is promising and long overdue (Elze, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2008). While this kind of research does help to understand the experience of today's same-sex-attracted youths, it is just as ahistorical as generalizing results from older studies that capture the developmental experience of a more oppressed population of sexual orientation minorities. In addition, most research has tended to focus on differences between straight and gay, not within same-sex-attracted populations, and little research has been devoted to explicating historical differences in the coming-out process. Also, the bulk of research on same-sex-attracted individuals has focused on the experiences of men who identify as gay. The experiences of bisexuals and women have not been well represented (Diamond, 2006; Rust, 2000). The current report contributes to this line of inquiry by investigating differences in the coming-out process across cohorts and genders.

Methods

Design

This study was part of a larger research project focused on understanding changes in the coming-out process over time (Dunlap, 2011). The study used a convenience sample generated via the Internet. The survey and associated pleas for participation utilized a tailored design method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) aimed at increasing participation by disclosing the researcher's membership in the LGBT community and also viewing potential participants as experts on the topic of coming out. This study attempted to capture a representative sample of ages and genders by dividing respondents into historic cohorts (see Figure 1) suggested by the literature.

Participants

Before soliciting any responses, institutional review board approval was obtained for this study. After applying screen-in criteria, 1,131 people who self-identify as members of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community were recruited for this study. Respondents who were under the age of 18 were screened out. Transgender persons were screened out, as their sexual orientation experience is likely more complex than the current study is designed to evaluate. General population trends for

	Years born	Current ages	Historical frame of reference**
Cohort A	Before 1951	60 and older	Pre-Stonewall Generation
Cohort B	1951 – 1962	59 to 49	Stonewall Generation
Cohort C	1963 – 1969	48 to 42	AIDS Crisis Generation
Cohort D	1970 – 1988	41 to 23	Post AIDS Crisis and Millennial Generation
Cohort E	After 1988	22 - 18***	Youngest Cohort

Figure 1. Cohort distribution. *Notes.* Please see Literature review section for full explanation of cohort groupings. Respondents under age 18 were screened out.

Table 1. Age and gender with five cohorts.

	Female		Male		Total
	N (%)	*M*; *SD*	*N* (%)	*M*; *SD*	*N* (*M*; *SD*) %
Cohort A	47 (7.2%**)	66.8; 5.4	80 (16.6%)	66.6; 5.1	127 (66.7; 5.2) 11.2%
Cohort B	113 (17.4%**)	53.8; 3.6	124 (25.8%)	54.3; 3.4	237 (54.1; 3.5) 21.0%
Cohort C	68 (10.5%)	45.3; 2.0	51 (10.6%)	45.4; 2.1	119 (45.3; 2.1) 10.5%
Cohort D	282 (43.5%)	30.2; 5.1	151 (31.4%**)	31.8; 5.7	433 (30.8; 5.3) 38.3%
Cohort E	140 (21.5%)	20.5; 1.2	75 (15.6%**)	20.9; 1.1	215 (20.6; 1.1) 19.0%
Total	650 (100%)	36.3; 14.7	481 (100%)	43.2; 16.2	1131 (39.3; 15.7)

Note. **Chi square analysis indicates that these cells contain greater or fewer numbers than would be in a random distribution.

race, gender, and socioeconomic status were used as a guide to recruitment of this sample. The large size of the sample has helped to increase its generalizability; however, because of difficulty in defining this population, no research on this topic can truly be said to be representative of the population. The majority of participants lived within the United States, but a portion ($N = 53$, 5%) participated from outside the United States. Since the majority of these international participants were of European descent, their collective experiences were viewed as similar enough to a diverse United States-only sample and they were included in analysis.

Demographics

A chi-square test of associations was conducted in order to determine if the number of female and male respondents were statistically random across cohorts (Table 1). There was a significant association of genders across age cohorts in this sample ($X^2 = 46.585$; $p < .001$). Fewer women over the age of 49 were represented than would be expected in a random distribution and fewer men under the age of 41 than would be expected are represented in this sample. In addition, as a whole, Cohorts B and D are overrepresented within the sample as a percentage of responses. The range of ages was between 18 years of age and 85 years of age.

See Table 2 for information on racial and ethnic diversity of the sample. Because respondents were able to select as many labels as applied to their racial/ethnic

Table 2. What is your racial/ethnic background?

	Female $N = 718$	Male $N = 510$	Total $N = 1,230$
Asian or Asian-American	8	13	21
Black or African-American	26	20	46
Native American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or other Pacific Islander	22	5	27
Multiracial	36	16	52
White or European (Hispanic)	63	36	99
White or European (non-Hispanic)	528	405	933
Other	38	15	53
Australian/New Zealander of European descent			25
Other			6
Other European Descent			10
Other Latin American Descent			10
No Response			59

Note. Categories presented in alphabetical order.

Table 3. Income within five cohorts.

	Under 20K N (%)	21K to 39K N (%)	40K to 69K N (%)	70K to 99K N (%)	100K to 150K N (%)	Over 150K N (%)	Total
Cohort A	11 (10%)	10 (19%)	26 (23%)	25(22%)	25 (22%)	15 (13%)	112
Cohort B	11 (6%)	21 (10%)	38 (17%)	43 (20%)	63 (29%)	42(19%)	218
Cohort C	6 (6%)	12 (11%)	20 (19%)	28 (26%)	25 (23%)	17 (16%)	108
Cohort D	74 (18%)	110 (27%)	101 (25%)	60 (15%)	42 (10%)	16 (4%)	403
Cohort E	43 (23%)	25 (13%)	51 (27%)	34 (18%)	15 (8%)	19 (10%)	187
Total	145	178	236	190	170	109	1,028
No Response							103

Note. "K" in table head = "thousand."

background, these responses are not mutually exclusive and are reported as demographics only.

Socioeconomic diversity of the sample is displayed in Table 3, which illustrates average income across cohorts. An analysis of variance on the categorical variables of income and cohort revealed significant differences ($F = 39.130$; $p < .001$) between several groups. Post hoc analysis using the Bonferroni procedure indicated significant differences between the older cohorts (A, B, and C) and the younger cohorts (D and E) (all at $p < .001$).

A chi-square analysis of association on the question "Where did you grow up?" across the five cohorts (Table 4) found a significant association between the location in which the respondents grew up and cohort membership ($X^2 = 44.463$; $p < .001$). Urban environments were significantly associated with cohorts A and B. Suburban locals were associated with cohorts B, D, and E. Small towns were associated with cohorts A and C, and rural environments with cohorts C and D. Finally, multiple/other locations were associated with cohorts D and E.

A chi-square analysis of association on the question "Where do you live now?" across the five cohorts (Table 5) found a significant association between the location where respondents live now and cohort membership ($X^2 = 117.533$; $p < .001$). Urban environments were associated with cohorts A, B, C, and D. Suburban was associated with cohorts B, C, and E. Small towns were associated with cohorts C and E and rural environments were associated with cohorts A, B, and E. Finally, multiple/other locals were associated with cohorts A and E.

Table 4. "Where did you grow up?" within five cohorts.

	Urban N (%)	Suburban N (%)	Small Town N (%)	Rural N (%)	Other and Multiple N (%)	Total
Cohort A	31 (25%)	37 (30%)	38 (30%)	12 (10%)	7 (6%)	125
Cohort B	52 (23%)	93 (40%)	51 (22%)	20 (25%)	14 (6%)	230
Cohort C	12 (11%)	40 (35%)	36 (32%)	18 (16%)	8 (7%)	114
Cohort D	57 (13%)	178 (42%)	96 (23%)	50 (12%)	46 (11%)	427
Cohort E	30 (14%)	86 (41%)	42 (20%)	19 (9%)	31 (15%)	208
Total	182 (17%)	434 (39%)	263 (23.8%)	119 (11%)	106 (10%)	1,104
No Response						27

Table 5. "Where do you live now?" within five cohorts.

	Urban N (%)	Suburban N (%)	Small Town N (%)	Rural N (%)	Other and Multiple N (%)	Total
Cohort A	68 (54%)	21 (17%)	20 (16%)	8 (6%)	8 (6%)	125
Cohort B	116 (50%)	60 (26%)	38 (16%)	13 (6%)	5 (2%	232
Cohort C	56 (49%)	33 (29%)	22 (19%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	115
Cohort D	234 (55%)	91 (22%)	60 (14%)	15 (4%)	24 (6%)	424
Cohort E	35 (17%)	64 (31%)	62 (30%)	18 (9%)	28 (14%)	207
Total	509 (46%)	269 (24%)	202 (18%)	57 (5%)	66 (6%)	1,103
No Response						28

Measures

Using a Likert scale, participants were also asked to rate how socially conservative or socially liberal their household was while growing up. Similarly, respondents also rated how important organized religion was in their household growing up. After identifying their primary caregiver growing up, participants were also asked to provide data on the degree of initial and current support from their primary caregiver regarding their sexual orientation.

Participants completed the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). The developers of the scale relied upon correlations between established measures of self-esteem, LGB identity development, investment in LGB identity, and degree of interaction with non-heterosexuals to establish validity of the measure (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000, 2003). The LGBIS is a 27-item measure composed of six subscales, using a 7-point Likert scale. The LGBIS measures six dimensions of identity development (internalized homo/bi negativity; need for privacy; need for acceptance; identity confusion; difficult process; superiority). As reported by Mohr and Fassinger (2000), reliability of individual subscales ranged from an α of .65 (Superiority) to an α of .81 (Need for Privacy). In this study, subscales varied in reliability with one weak outlier (Superiority) having an α of .55. The other subscales ranged from an α of .75 (Need for Acceptance) to an α of .87 (Identity Confusion). The inter-item reliability of the LGBIS with this data set was adequate ($\alpha = .627$). Please see Mohr and Kendra (2012) for the most current version of this measure.

Finally, and of primary interest for this report, participants were asked to indicate at what age they achieved milestones in the coming-out process (Figure 2).

Procedures

Recruitment for this study was conducted in two stages. The first stage was a snow-ball convenience sample and was gathered via pleas sent to professional contacts. The second stage involved requests to gatekeepers at community organizations around the United States. These gatekeepers were asked to evaluate the appropriateness of distributing the survey to members of their organizations. A variety of

Milestones in the Coming Out Process	abbreviation
How old were you when you first became aware of your attraction to members of the same sex?	Became aware
How old were you when you first concluded that you were not straight?	Concluded not straight
How old were you when you first became aware of a positive non-heterosexual role model?	Awareness of role model
How old were you when you first met someone who identifies as other than heterosexual?	Met non-heterosexual
How old were you when you first went to a social event for sexual minorities? (e.g. bar, student meeting)?	Attended social event
How old were you when you first told someone outside of your family that you were attracted to members of the same sex?	Told non-family
How old were you when you first told someone in your family that you were attracted to members of the same sex?	Told family
How old were you when you first had a sexual encounter with someone of the same sex?	First Sex
How old were you when you first had a romantic relationship with someone of the same sex?	First Relationship
Average of all 9 milestones	Average Coming Out Age

Figure 2. Milestones in the coming-out process.

means of distribution were employed by these gatekeepers, ranging from word of mouth to posting notices on community bulletin boards to distributing the plea electronically to their members. All participants accessed the survey online and the survey was available only in English.

Data Analysis

Analyses related to demographic differences between groups, comparisons of LGBIS scores, and differences in self-labeling are reported elsewhere (Dunlap, 2011). This report focuses on an analysis of variance in important milestones in the coming-out process among the five cohorts. Significant covariates are included in these analyses.

Before conducting factorial analysis, an investigation of covariates determined the appropriateness of including them in the analysis of variance. Since the data on race/ethnicity were not reported in a mutually exclusive fashion, a dummy variable was created by sorting all respondents into two groups: White ($N = 899$) and non-White ($N = 173$). While this variable reduced the complexity of the sample to a race/ethnicity binary, it did make it possible to evaluate differences between respondents who identified as White and those who did not.

A series of analyses of correlations between both demographic variables and LGBIS scores as they apply to the average ages of individual coming-out milestones and the Aggregate Coming-Out Age were conducted. Several demographic factors (Table 6) and LGBIS items (Table 7) were correlated with the average ages of the milestones in question. An evaluation of multicolinearity of these variables by regressing each potential covariate onto each of the 10 milestones was performed. Each factor was individually loaded in a stepwise fashion onto each milestone in the order of the strength of its correlation. All covariates had Variation Inflation Factor (VIF) scores <1.4, indicating that they did not significantly overlap in covariance. Next, the appropriateness of including each covariant was assessed by evaluating the homogeneity of regression (slope) between the factors and covariates. Several

Table 6. Correlations between demographic variables and coming-out milestones.

	How socially liberal or conservative was your household growing up? r value	How important was religion in your household growing up? r value	Initially how supportive was your primary caregiver of your sexual orientation? r value	Now how supportive is your primary caregiver of your sexual orientation? r value	Race r value
Became aware	†	†	†	†	†
Concluded not straight	†	†	†	†	†
Awareness of role model	.167***	.130***	**	**	**
Met non-heterosexual	.203***	.088**	.121***	.083**	**
Attended social event	.127***	.116***	**	**	.076**
Told non-family	.119***	.087**	**	**	.067**
Told family	.122***	.124***	**	**	.088***
First sex	**	**	**	**	.062**
First relationship	.116***	.097***	**	**	.073**
Aggregate Coming-Out Score	.127***	.089***	**	**	**

Note. Correlations that are crossed out did not meet the assumptions of homogeneity of regression and were excluded from use as covariates.
†no significant correlation found.
**$p \leq .05$.
***$p \leq .001$.

factors that did not meet the assumptions of this test were excluded (Table 6 and Table 7).

Once the appropriate covariates were isolated, a series of 10 ANCOVAs were performed in order to assess differences in each milestone across cohorts and genders (Table 8).

Results

Significant differences in all 10 ANCOVAs were found ($p < .001$). In addition, the effect size was at least medium (partial eta squared $> .09$) to strong (partial eta

Table 7. Correlations between scores on the LGBIS and coming-out milestones.

	Internalized Homo-/Bi-Negativity r value	Need for Privacy r value	Need for Acceptance r value	Identity Confusion r value	Difficult Process r value	Superiority r value
Became aware	†	†	†	.138***	†	†
Concluded not straight	†	†	.076**	†	†	
Awareness of role model	†	†	.088**	.108***	.123***	†
Met non-heterosexual	†	†	.079**	.115***	.088**	†
Attended social event	†	†	†	.117***	.095**	†
Told non-family	†	†	.079**	.080**	.136***	†
Told family	†	.072**	.110***	.164***	.099**	†
First sex	.089**	†	.082**	†	†	†
First relationship	.078**	†	.094**	.186**	†	†
Aggregate Coming-Out Score	†	†	†	†	.156***	.104**

Note. Correlations that are crossed out did not meet the assumptions of homogeneity of regression and were excluded from use as covariants.
†no significant correlation found.
**$p \leq .05$.
***$p \leq .001$.

Table 8. Analysis of variance of average age of milestones across cohorts and genders.

		Cohort A N M (SD)	Cohort B N M (SD)	Cohort C N M (SD)	Cohort D N M (SD)	Cohort E N M (SD)	N	F (df)	Partial Eta²
1. Became Aware	Female	44 19.1 (14.4)	109 17.1 (9.0)	63 16.9 (7.0)	27 14.3 (5.4)	131 12.3 (3.9)	1,084	24.53*** (9 – 1076)	.171
	Male	77 11.5 (4.3)	120 9.7 (4.4)	49 10.8 (4.8)	147 10.6 (3.5)	73 11.1 (3.5)			
2. Concluded not straight	Female	44 27.9 (13.5)	108 22.6 (8.7)	63 21.2 (7.4)	269 18.2 (4.7)	130 15.2 (2.7)	1,066	27.50*** (9 – 1056)	.188
	Male	73 19.3 (11.1)	114 18.1 (8.3)	46 14.6 (5.4)	146 15.7 (4.0)	73 13.8 (3.4)			
3. Awareness of role model	Female	40 31.2 (10.6)	106 23.3 (9.2)	58 20.3 (6.4)	257 17.2 (4.9)	119 15.2 (3.8)	1,010	39.05[a]*** (9 – 998)	.188
	Male	67 25.5 (9.3)	116 21.8 (8.2)	47 19.3 (5.0)	134 18.0 (3.4)	66 15.1 (3.3)			
4. Met non-heterosexual	Female	43 21.0 (9.2)	106 17.7 (6.6)	63 16.4 (5.6)	268 13.4 (5.3)	131 12.0 (4.0)	1,071	13.05[b]*** (9 – 666)	.150
	Male	75 18.2 (5.1)	120 16.5 (5.9)	49 16.5 (5.2)	143 15.3 (4.3)	73 13.1 (3.9)			
5. Attended social event	Female	42 30.9 (10.1)	108 25.3 (8.1)	60 23.1 (7.4)	267 19.9 (3.6)	122 17.4 (2.0)	1,052	33.15[c]*** (9 – 989)	.232
	Male	72 26.6 (9.4)	118 24.4 (8.5)	47 21.1 (4.6)	143 20.2 (3.8)	73 17.9 (1.5)			
6. Told non-family	Female	44 30.6 (12.3)	109 24.7 (8.3)	60 21.8 (6.7)	271 19.0 (4.3)	131 16.1 (2.3)	1,076	29.53[d]*** (9 – 804)	.248
	Male	75 26.3 (10.8)	118 22.9 (8.4)	49 20.1 (5.0)	146 19.1 (3.9)	73 16.4 (2.1)			
7. Told family	Female	40 36.1 (11.3)	107 28.4 (8.7)	59 25.7 (7.8)	257 20.7 (4.5)	115 17.2 (2.2)	1,020	42.66[e]*** (9 – 767)	.334
	Male	68 33.9 (15.0)	115 28.2 (10.4)	49 24.4 (7.0)	142 20.7 (4.2)	68 17.3 (1.9)			
8. First sex	Female	44 27.5 (13.9)	108 24.0 (8.1)	62 21.8 (6.5)	264 19.0 (4.9)	112 16.0 (3.3)	1,046	18.85[f]*** (9 – 784)	.178
	Male	77 17.3 (7.2)	118 17.6 (8.1)	49 16.1 (6.1)	143 17.6 (5.4)	69 16.3 (3.0)			
9. First relationship	Female	44 29.2 (13.1)	108 25.6 (8.4)	60 23.0 (6.9)	252 20.7 (4.5)	98 16.8 (2.2)	996	20.49[g]*** (9 – 743)	.199
	Male	74 27.2 (12.5)	118 25.1 (9.4)	49 23.1 (9.4)	134 21.8 (4.2)	59 17.7 (1.8)			
10. Aggregate Coming-Out Age	Female	36 27.6 (10.3)	95 23.1 (6.5)	53 20.1 (4.7)	222 18.0 (3.3)	71 15.1 (2.1)	840	30.13[h]*** (9 – 689)	.282
	Male	56 22.5 (6.9)	99 20.0 (5.4)	43 18.5 (3.9)	119 17.3 (2.6)	46 15.1 (2.0)			

Note. Actual N, M, and SD displayed for all items.
[a] Covariate religion applied;
[b] Covariate identity confusion, religion, difficult process, and support now applied;
[c] covariate social liberalism/conservatism, religion, and race applied;
[d] covariate social liberalism/conservatism, religion, identity confusion, need for acceptance, and race applied;
[e] covariates religion, social liberalism/conservatism, identity confusion, need for acceptance, and race applied;
[f] covariate internalized bi-/homophobia, need for acceptance, and race applied;
[g] covariates identity confusion, social liberalism/conservatism, religion, need for acceptance, internalized bi-/homophobia, and race applied;
[h] covariates social liberalism/conservatism, need for superiority, and religion applied.
*** significant at < .001.

Cohort A (mean age)	Cohort B (mean age)	Cohort C (mean age)	Cohort D (mean age)	Cohort E (mean age)
1. Became aware (19.1)	1. Became aware (17.1)	4. Met non-heterosexual (16.4)	4. Met non-heterosexual (13.4)	4. Met non-heterosexual (12.0)
4. Met non-heterosexual (21.0)	4. Met non-heterosexual (17.7)	1. Became aware (16.9)	1. Became aware (14.3)	1. Became aware (12.2)
8. First Sex (27.5)	2. Concluded not straight (22.6)	3. Awareness of role model (20.3)	3. Awareness of role model (17.2)	3. Awareness of role model (15.2)
2. Concluded not straight (27.9)	3. Awareness of role model (23.3)	2. Concluded not straight (21.2)	2. Concluded not straight (18.2)	2. Concluded not straight (16.0)
9. First Relationship (29.2)	8. First Sex (24.0)	6. Told non-family (21.8)	8. First Sex (19.0)	8. First Sex (16.0)
6. Told non-family (30.6)	6. Told non-family (24.7)	8. First Sex (21.8)	6. Told non-family (19.0)	6. Told non-family (16.1)
5. Attended social event (30.9)	5. Attended social event (25.3)	9. First Relationship (23.0)	5. Attended social event (19.9)	9. First Relationship (16.8)
3. Awareness of role model (31.2)	9. First Relationship (25.6)	5. Attended social event (23.1)	9. First Relationship (20.7)	7. Told family (17.2)
7. Told family (36.1)	7. Told family (28.4)	7. Told family (25.7)	7. Told family (20.7)	5. Attended social event (17.4)

Order of Milestones Achieved by Cohort: Women

Note: the black bar represents the age of 18 years old

Figure 3. Order of milestones achieved by cohort: Women. *Note*. The black bar represents the age of 18 years old.

squared > .25) (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007) for all analyses. The partial eta squared ranged from .150 to .348 for various milestones (Table 8). This indicated that the interaction between *cohort membership* and *gender* accounted for 15% to 34.8% of the overall variance for each milestone, respectively.

Further post hoc analysis using the Bonferroni procedure determined which groupings were significantly different from one another. Fifty-two percent of the 450 pairwise comparisons were significant at at least the .05 level. A more complete exploration of each data point is available in the full dissertation (Dunlap, 2011). A discussion of significant findings follows.

Women became aware of their same-sex attraction at significantly different ages with the exception of two groups (Figure 3). Women in Cohorts B and C experienced this milestone at similar ages and women in Cohorts C and D also experienced this milestone at similar ages. The youngest women in this sample (Cohort E) became aware of a same-sex attraction at significantly younger ages than all other women in the sample.

In sharp contrast to women, men across all five cohorts had no significant difference in the average age that they first became aware of their same-sex attraction (Figure 4). Across cohorts, there are significant differences between all gender groups save one, the youngest. On this variable, men and women of the youngest cohort are not significantly different.

There were significant differences between all cohorts of women in this sample on the average age that they concluded that they were not straight. There has been a significant change from cohort to cohort on this variable as the average age has steadily declined.

The average age of concluding a non-heterosexual sexual orientation was significantly higher for men in Cohort A (the oldest group) when compared to men in

Order of Milestones Achieved by Cohort: Men

Cohort A (mean age)	Cohort B (mean age)	Cohort C (mean age)	Cohort D (mean age)	Cohort E (mean age)
1. Became aware (11.5)	1. Became aware (9.7)	1. Became aware (10.8)	1. Became aware (10.6)	1. Became aware (11.1)
8. First Sex (17.3)	4. Met non-heterosexual (16.5)	2. Concluded not straight (14.6)	4. Met non-heterosexual (15.3)	4. Met non-heterosexual (13.1)
4. Met non-heterosexual (18.2)	8. First Sex (17.6)	8. First Sex (16.1)	2. Concluded not straight (15.7)	2. Concluded not straight (13.8)
2. Concluded not straight (19.3)	2. Concluded not straight (18.1)	4. Met non-heterosexual (16.5)	8. First Sex (17.6)	3. Awareness of role model (15.1)
3. Awareness of role model (25.5)	3. Awareness of role model (21.8)	3. Awareness of role model (19.3)	3. Awareness of role model (18.0)	8. First Sex (16.3)
6. Told non-family (26.3)	6. Told non-family (22.9)	6. Told non-family (20.1)	6. Told non-family (19.1)	6. Told non-family (16.4)
5. Attended social event (26.6)	5. Attended social event (24.4)	5. Attended social event (21.1)	5. Attended social event (20.2)	7. Told family (17.3)
9. First Relationship (27.2)	9. First Relationship (25.1)	9. First Relationship (23.1)	7. Told family (20.7)	9. First Relationship (17.7)
7. Told family (33.9)	7. Told family (28.2)	7. Told family (24.4)	9. First Relationship (21.8)	5. Attended social event (17.9)

Note: the black bar represents the age of 18 years old

Figure 4. Order of milestones achieved by cohort: Men. *Note.* The black bar represents the age of 18 years old.

Cohorts C, D, and E. The average age of men in Cohort B was also significantly higher than men in Cohort E. The average age of men in Cohort B was also significantly higher than Cohort E men. This overall pattern suggests that the experience of men in cohorts C, D, and E were different from those of older cohorts, with Cohort C (the middle group) being more similar to older groups.

Between genders in the cohorts, there were significant differences. Women in Cohorts A and B reported significantly higher average ages of concluding that they were not exclusively heterosexual than men in all cohorts. The average ages of women in Cohort C were significantly higher than those of all men except for those in the oldest cohorts (A and B). Average ages of women in Cohort D were significantly higher than men in Cohorts C and E. There were also significant differences between women in Cohort E and men in Cohort A. A gradual narrowing of a gender gap is evident in Figure 4. There is no significant difference in the average age that men and women in Cohort E concluded that they were not exclusively homosexual.

On the question of first awareness of a positive role model, women in Cohort A had significantly higher average ages than all other cohorts of women. The average age of women in Cohort B was also significantly higher than women in Cohort D. Women in Cohort D reported first becoming aware of a positive role model at significantly younger ages than women in Cohort C. Women in Cohort E had average ages significantly lower than women in Cohorts A, B, and C.

For men, members of Cohort A had a significantly higher average age than all other men. On the other end of the spectrum, the average age of awareness of a positive role model was significantly lower for the youngest cohort of men than all other groups of men. Also, the average age of men in Cohort D was significantly lower than both men in Cohorts A and B. This pattern parallels that of women and a steadily decreasing age of first encountering a positive role model.

The only significant difference across gender within cohorts on the age of aware-ness of a positive same-sex role model was between men and women in Cohort A. A significant trend downward in average age is better accounted for by cohort rather than gender differences when considering the average age that people in this sample became aware of a positive role model.

The average age of meeting someone who identifies as other than heterosexual has also steadily declined over the years. Women in Cohort A reported meeting a non-heterosexual at significantly higher ages than women in all other cohorts. Women in Cohorts B and C reported this event at a significantly later age than women in Cohorts D and E.

Like the women in the sample, men in Cohort A reported meeting a non-heterosexual at significantly later ages than men in younger Cohorts (D and E). Men in Cohorts B and C experienced this milestone at significantly later ages than men in Cohort E.

Between genders, there were significant differences in average age of meeting a non-heterosexual between women in Cohort A (the oldest group) and men in all cohorts. Women in Cohort B experienced this milestone at a significantly older age than men in Cohorts D and E. Women in Cohort C also reported significantly higher average ages than men in Cohort E.

On this variable, women in Cohort D had significantly lower scores than men in all cohorts except for E. Women in Cohort E also had significantly lower average ages than all men but those in their own cohorts.

On average, women in Cohort A were significantly older than all other groups of women when they first attended a social event for sexual minorities. Women in Cohort E were significantly younger than all other cohorts of women when they first did so. Women in Cohorts B and C reported significantly older average ages than women in Cohort D as well.

Men in Cohort A, on average, first attended a social event for sexual minorities at significantly older ages than men in Cohorts C, D, and E. Men in Cohort B were also significantly older than men in Cohorts D and E when they first attended a social function.

Between genders, the only significant difference not accounted for by cohort was between men and women in the oldest group (Cohort A). Women in Cohort A tended to attend a social event for the first time at a significantly later age than men.

On average, the age that women first told someone outside their family about their sexual orientation has decreased. Women in Cohort A report this disclosure at significantly later ages than all other cohorts of women. Women in Cohorts B and C also report this disclosure at significantly higher ages than women in Cohorts E. Women in Cohort B also reported significantly older responses than women in Cohort D. The youngest group (Cohort E) of women reported an average age that was significantly lower than Cohort D's.

This pattern continues for men, as men in Cohort A report this disclosure at significantly older ages than men in Cohorts B, C, D, and E. Men in Cohort B,

on average, also made their first disclosure at significantly older ages than men in Cohorts D and E.

Between genders, women in Cohort A reported significantly older average ages of revealing their sexual orientation to someone outside their family than all cohorts of men. The average age of women in Cohort B was significantly older at first disclosure than men in Cohorts C, D, and E. Women in Cohort C tended to make this disclosure at younger ages than men in Cohorts C and E. Women in Cohorts D made this disclosure at significantly younger ages than men in the older two cohorts (A and B). Finally, women in Cohort E made this disclosure at significantly younger ages than men in Cohorts A, B, C, and D.

The average age that the women in Cohort A, the oldest group, disclosed their sexual orientation to a family member was significantly higher than all other cohorts of women. The average age that women in Cohorts D and E made this disclosure was significantly lower than women in Cohorts A, B, and C. The difference between women in Cohorts D and E was also significant.

Men in Cohort A reported disclosing to family at significantly older ages than the others. Men in Cohort B reported this milestone at a significantly higher age than men in Cohorts D and E. Men in Cohort E also reported lower average ages of this disclosure than men in Cohort C.

The average age at which women first report having a sexual encounter with a member of their own sex has decreased over time. Women in Cohort A report experiencing this milestone at a significantly greater age than women in Cohorts C, D, and E. Women in Cohort E also report significantly younger average ages of first same-sex physical intimacy than Cohorts B and C. Women in Cohort B also experienced this milestone at a significantly older age. At the same time, the average age of women in Cohort E is significantly younger than that of women in Cohort D. The average age that men report their first sexual encounter with another man has not significantly changed over time.

The pattern of first same-sex encounter across gender differences reflects this gendered difference. Significant differences are found between Women in Cohorts A, B, and C and all male cohorts. There was no significant difference found between men and women in Cohorts D and E. The average age of women in this sample having their first sexual encounter with another woman has decreased until it has met the trend line of men.

The average age at which people in this sample report a first romantic relationship has steadily decreased over time. Women in Cohorts A and B entered these relationships at significantly older ages than women in Cohorts D and E. Women in Cohort C reported significantly younger ages than women in Cohort A. Cohorts C and D also reported significantly older ages than women in Cohort E.

The downward trend is similar for men. Men in Cohort E, the youngest group, entered first romantic relationships at significantly younger ages than men in Cohorts A, B, and C. Men in Cohort D also had significantly lower average ages than men in Cohort A and B. Men in Cohort C also entered first relationships at significantly younger ages than men in Cohort A. Across gender, there were no
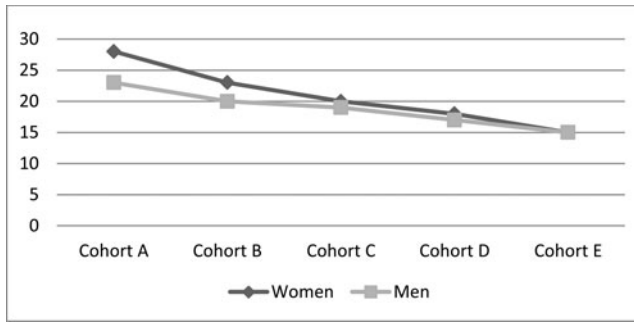
Figure 5. Aggregate coming out age

significant differences not accounted for by cohort differences. Women in Cohort A, the oldest group, reported a significantly older average age of first relationship than men in Cohorts B and C. Women in Cohort C also had significantly younger average age of first relationship than men in Cohort A.

In this sample, the aggregate coming-out experiences of women in Cohort A are significantly different from all other cohorts of women (Figure 5). Equally, the aggregate age of women in Cohort E is significantly lower from all other cohorts of women. The aggregate coming-out age of women in Cohort D is also significantly different from the average age of women in Cohorts B, C, and E.

Differences between men in Aggregate Coming-Out Ages follow this trend as well. The average age of men in Cohort A is significantly higher than men in Cohorts C, D, and E. Men in Cohorts B, C, and D also reported significantly higher ages than men in Cohort E. The difference between men in Cohort B and D is also significant.

Across genders there were significant differences in Aggregate Coming-Out Ages. Women in Cohort A scored significantly higher than men in all cohorts. Similarly, women in Cohort B scored significantly higher than men in Cohorts B, C, D, and E. Women in Cohort C scored significantly higher than men in Cohorts D and E. Women in Cohorts D and E scored significantly lower than men in Cohort A. In addition, women in Cohort E had significantly lower ages than men in B and C. Finally, Women in Cohort D also reported significantly lower aggregate ages than men in Cohort B.

The Aggregate Coming-Out Age reflects the dual trends found in this data. The first is a steady and significant decrease in average age of coming-out milestones over time, and the second is a steadily closing gender gap in coming-out milestones over time.

There was also variation between gender and cohorts in the order that they achieved each of the milestones in question. Figure 3 displays the order for women by cohort and Figure 4 displays the order of milestones for men.

On average, for both men and women, all milestones were achieved before the age of 18 by Cohort E. Coming to understand and accept a minority sexual orientation may have once been an adult process, but for the youngest subjects in this sample it was clearly an adolescent developmental process.

Discussion

It is quite clear from these findings that the average ages at which same-sex-attracted individuals reach important milestones in the coming-out process have changed over time. This is consistent with other researchers' findings (Dank, 1971; Drasin et al., 2008; Dubé, 2000). More recent groups in this sample tended to reach coming-out milestones at younger ages. For instance, on average, the women in the oldest group (Cohort A) first concluded that they were not straight at 27.9 years old, while women in the youngest group (Cohort E) reached this conclusion at age 16. Looking at another example, the differences between all five cohorts in the average ages of attending a social event for same-sex-attracted people has also declined over time. Older (Cohort A) men and women reached this milestone at 26.6 years old and 30.9 years old, respectively. Cohort C men and women, born between 1963 and 1969, reached this milestone at 21.1 years old and 23.1 years old, respectively, and the youngest group attended a social event at age 17.4 years for women and 17.9 years for men.

Another important trend is that significant differences between men and women have disappeared in all milestones. Men and women in Cohort E, the youngest group in this sample, achieved these milestones at ages that were not significantly different. As the age at which important coming-out milestones are reached has decreased, the quality of the coming-out experience has moved from more of an adult activity to an adolescent process. While this may be a more developmentally appropriate shift, it does suggest that coming-out processes are being navigated with less emotional maturity and fewer resources than in the past. Also, the speed at which people in this study have moved through these milestones has also increased. The youngest women in this sample moved through these milestones in an average of 5.2 years, compared to the oldest women, who spent 12.1 years during this process. The difference between the oldest and youngest group of men was even greater at 22.4 years and 6.8 years, respectively. One might interpret this to mean greater ease in navigating coming out, or one might view this as a more expedient and less transformative experience. If one is coming out in the natural course of personal development, then perhaps the need for radical (and prolonged) transformation is lessened.

Limitations

As in all online research, this study was conducted with a convenience sample of people who were able to access it online. This excluded members of the community who do not have Internet access. The survey was also conducted in English, which limited participation to those who have a facility in this language. For the most part, respondents were from the United States of America, which further limits the generalizability of the study. Women who identity as same-sex attracted and are over the age of 60 did not respond as robustly to this study as other groups. It is possible that a research plan including individual interviews and more traditional social history strategies may have been more effective in generating participation from this group.

Areas for further research

Cohort assignment in this portion of the research study was based on socio-historical assumptions about the impact of significant events in the history of the LGB civil rights movement (Duberman, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2005; Shilts, 1987). Further exploration of the membership of these cohorts could help to better understand the meaning of these historical events. Similarly, further exploration of the patterns of cohort change in the nine identified milestones may also lead to a greater understanding of the role of these milestones in personal development. A further contextualization of the coming-out process by performing exploratory research on the identified milestones themselves may lead to a greater understanding.

Finally, more research that investigates the intersections of the coming-out process and adolescent development is needed. These developmental processes, once considered sequential, are now occurring concurrently. Are today's same-sex-attracted youths experiencing significant difficulties because they are hazarding this process during an otherwise frequently confusing development period? If so, there is a serious lack of research exploring this shift in coming out to a younger developmental stage and its intersection with routine adolescent development.

Implications

The age groupings explored in this article (see Figure 1) provide a summary view of coming-out experiences. While the individual experience of any one person will vary, a sophisticated understanding of how the average age of important milestones in the coming-out process has shifted over time is a necessary tool for understanding the interplay of the coming-out process with other developmental tasks. For example, a professional working with an older woman (Cohort A) who identifies as lesbian might lightly assume that the bulk of the milestones in her coming-out process were begun after the age of 19. This means that she likely approached these milestones with a degree of emotional maturity not available to younger cohorts. It also perhaps means that she came out within a context of having to distance herself from an already established heterosexual life (Cass, 1979; Troiden & Goode, 1980). How she navigated this difficulty would be useful to know. She might also be likely to not have reached all of the milestones in question. She may be fine with this, or she may be working on coming out to her family after 50 years.

By contrast, a clinician working with an 18-year-old man (Cohort E) might lightly assume that this young man is in the midst of identity consolidation work (Erikson & Erikson, 1988) that is happening after he has achieved all the identified coming-out milestones. On average, men in his cohort in this sample have come out to parents and had their first relationship before they reach the age of 18. This might significantly complicate things for this young man as he tries to understand his place in the world and decide upon a direction for himself. Of course, it might also have little meaning in his overall work to figure out who he is going to be.

Another example: A clinician doing couples work with lesbians from different age cohorts might have the complicated task of helping them to understand how their differing experiences with intimacy have been influenced by the developmental context of when they first realized a same-sex attraction. If this happened at age 17 (Cohort C) versus age 14 (Cohort D), then this might have had great (or subtle) impact in the lives of these two women. It may be the clinician's task to help contextualize this for her clients.

Developing a full understanding of the historical coming-out experience of any individual as it applies to their developmental context is a useful practice for clinicians. Psychosocial histories are best when they document and explore coming-out histories. Developmental difficulties complicated by a coming-out process should not be over-pathologized, but rather contextualized and seen as developmental issues complicated by cultural bias (Ryan, 2001).

As in all research about minority groups, clinicians should take great to care to treat research about LGB people as a window into average experiences. The full complexity of intersecting identities must always be considered. Great care should be taken to avoid stereotyping individuals. Over-pathologizing same-sex-attracted people is a historical problem that lives on (see most recently Hass et al., 2011). Clinicians should also be aware that the opposite problem can also occur; ignoring problems that LGB people may be having for fear of offending or misinterpreting the cause. Clinicians who work effectively with LGB populations do well to balance a thorough understanding of the research into same-sex attraction while seeing each client as an individual.

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