GAY MEN’S EXPERIENCE OF THE FUTURE: 
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Imagining the future, envisioning who one will become, is a process at the core of human development, but a process whose specific mechanics remain largely unexamined in the field of psychology. Research suggests that individuals use role models and socio-cultural conventions, milestones, and “scripts” or templates to formulate a vision of the future. However, groups outside the social “norm” may have different access to or attitudes toward these conventions and scripts. This exploratory, qualitative study sought to examine the experience of one such group—gay men in their twenties (emerging adults)—through interviewing them about their current visions of their futures and their insights into how this vision had evolved over the course of their development. Ten interviews were conducted with men ages 22-30 who identity as gay, and who were raised and currently live in the United States. The interview data were analyzed qualitatively, and several themes emerged. These included: (1) Participants’ sense of being “late to the game” or “behind the curve” when they imagined their progress toward the future; (2) Participants recalling points during development when they considered a “heterosexual” future, which was ultimately rejected; (3) Participants feeling at least partially excluded from certain milestones—such as marriage and having children—on the path into the future, yet also feeling liberated from conventions, free to pursue an “unconventional” path; (4) Participants grappling with stereotypes of “typical” gay adulthood and life course, which are sometimes bleak and shame-infused; and (5) Anxiety about “ending up alone.” These findings are discussed, and a stage model of future-thinking among gay men is proposed. The study suggests that developing an image
of the future is a complex process for gay men, often complicated by their experiences as sexual minorities. Psychotherapists have the potential to play an important role in helping gay youth navigate this process.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In September 2010, the well-known columnist Dan Savage learned of the recent suicides of two gay teenagers, Justin Aaberg and Billy Lucas (Parker-Pope, 2010). Savage, who is gay, decided to post a video on youtube.com with his partner, with a message to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) teens. The tagline of the video: It gets better. Today, the “It Gets Better” Project includes approximately 10,000 user-created videos, most of them by GLBT adults. Celebrities and politicians, including President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Ellen DeGeneres, have also created videos targeted to GLBT teens. According to its official website (itgetsbetter.org), the project’s mission is to counter the hopelessness and isolation GLBT teens still face in 21st-century America: “Without other openly gay adults and mentors in their lives, they can’t imagine what their future may hold…. While many of these teens couldn’t see a positive future for themselves, we can.” The creators of the videos offer the promise of a future for those who cannot envision one for themselves. As is evident in the impetus for the project, the creators link this problem to suicide among GLBT teens. They cite grim statistics: More than a third of LBGT teens have attempted suicide (this rate is four times higher than for their heterosexual peers). The perceived need for this project—and its resonance with the thousands of adults who have contributed videos—is
a testament to the existence of a major problem for GLBT youth: An inability to imagine a future, to see beyond their current experience (an experience often characterized by hostility, isolation, and fear) to a better future. But what do we know about this problem of imagining—or not imagining—the future among GLBT youth?

The following study attempts to understand the experience of gay men ages 18-30 as they think about their own futures, and to identify common characteristics among the future “narratives” they imagine for themselves. Thus, this is a study both of gay men’s future-thinking as part of the ongoing experience of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett, 2000), as well as of their recollections and reflections on their future-thinking as children and adolescents.

The study will investigate the various personal and socio-political-cultural influences gay men identify as bearing on their visions of the future currently and earlier in their lives. As theory and research suggest that the development of a future orientation is a relational process, potential interpersonal influences on gay men’s future visions will be examined in particular. These interpersonal influences on future-thinking may be conceptualized in three broad categories: Parents/family, extra-familial role models, and scripts/models of the future promulgated by the culture-at-large. Gay men’s experiences at each of these levels may be affected by their position as a stigmatized sexual minority. Specifically, homonegativity—external and internalized—may disrupt the relational processes which contribute to the development of positive present- and future-self concepts. A qualitative design using narrative and interview methods has been selected.
The study proposes to explore three major questions:

1) How do young gay men describe their futures?

2) What major influences—especially interpersonal influences—do gay men identify as shaping their visions of the future?

3) How do gay men relate their experiences as a stigmatized minority to the ways in which they think about the future?
CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND

Why study futurity among gay men?

The way in which an individual thinks about the future—a phenomenon also known as futurity, future orientation, time perspective, or temporal extension—appears to have significant psychological implications and correlates. For example, Simons et al. (2004) showed that individuals with a longer future time perspective valued their present activities higher, as they tended to see those activities as more instrumental in achieving a range of future goals. Adelabu (2008) studied 661 African American adolescents, and found that a greater orientation toward the future explained a significant portion of variability in academic achievement. In a study of 281 adolescent student leaders, Morris (1992) showed that the leaders differed from their non-leader peers in greater scope and elaborated content of their temporal perspective. Future orientation also plays a significant role in motivation and achievement in schools; without at least some sense of an attainable future, the meaning of the present may be lost, leading to apathy or even depression (McInerney, 2004). This loss of meaning and foreclosure of the future is partially captured in the concept of a “foreshortened future,” one of the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). Indeed, much of the research on futurity examines its conspicuous absence, particularly in PTSD and depression.
Among gay men, disrupting or constricting a sense of the future may be one important mechanism by which minority stress affects mental health and well-being. Minority stress refers to the chronic stress that minority groups face as a result of stigmatization at individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Levitt et al., 2009). Though the concept was developed to describe the experience of racial and ethnic minority groups, the model appears to apply to sexual minorities as well. For sexual minorities, minority stress may be multi-pronged; stressors include not only actual and anticipated stigma, discrimination and victimization, but also negative feelings or self-hate related to one’s sexual identity (known as internalized homophobia or homonegativity) (Meyer, 1995; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle & Hamrin, 2006; Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2002). While research has shown that homosexuality itself is unrelated to mental health, minority stress—and internalized homonegativity in particular—have been shown to be related to negative mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality, among gay men (Rosser et al., 2008; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Safren & Heimberg, 1999).

Meyer (2003) argues that for sexual minorities, additional components of minority stress arise from concealing a stigmatized identity that is not immediately visible to others. Moreover, because sexual minorities in most cases do not share a sexual identity with parents or other members of the family of origin, they are less able than other minority groups to access and model familial coping skills and support. Secrecy and isolation can become distinct, chronic stressors for sexual minorities, especially during childhood and adolescence when access to a gay community or alternative support
networks is lacking. Managing concealment and disclosure comprises its own complex form of chronic stress for invisible minorities like gay men. Pachankis (2007) argues that this taxing process reduces cognitive resources available for other endeavors, which may lead to special challenges for gay youth faced with a variety of developmental tasks. For example, Morrow (1997) showed that partly because of a preoccupation with managing a stigmatized identity, gay youth have fewer resources to devote to career planning and lag behind their heterosexual peers in this domain.

Morrow’s study raises larger questions about the potential impact of minority stress on gay youths’ ability to anticipate their own futures. Could stigma, actual and anticipated discrimination, internalized homonegativity, and the stressors associated with secrecy and disclosure have specific implications for gay youths’ sense of the future? And could a disrupted sense of the future partially mediate the relationship between minority stress and the depression, anxiety, and suicidality which occur at higher rates among gay youth compared to heterosexual youth?

There is some evidence for these potential linkages. King and Smith (2004) asked 107 gay men and lesbians to write descriptions of their future as a gay person. They found that those individuals who were able to write more vivid and elaborate descriptions, and who rated their descriptions as more personally salient, experienced greater subjective well-being, while those who could not describe a vivid and salient future as a gay person experienced lower subjective well-being. Before the implications for variability in future orientation among gay men can be meaningfully examined, however, the characteristics of gay men’s future thinking must be explored further. What characteristics and patterns
may distinguish the narratives of the future which gay men create? How do gay men perceive and feel about their own future thinking? What influences do they identify as shaping their views? And what do they see as the consequences of their ways of thinking about the future?

Existing Research on Future-thinking

Our understanding of how children and young people envision their adult lives is skeletal. Our understanding of how this experience may differ across various minority groups—including gay youth—is basically unchartered. The ability to envision a range of potential near and distant futures may be a uniquely human capacity, but one that is difficult to operationalize and study. Broadly speaking, future-thinking is born of a complex intersection of social, cultural, and psychological variables, and implicates our most basic, existential sense of self-in-the-world. Children’s ideas about their own futures appear to vary according to era, culture, technology, spirituality, perceived opportunities in a given society, and other aspects of the sociohistorical milieu (McInerney, 2004). Even thinking about and planning for “the future” may be differently valued and practiced across cultures; for example, collectivist cultures may place less emphasis on an individual’s articulation of a personal future compared to the future of the society as a whole, while contemporary Western cultures may tend to focus on future preparedness and an individual achievement arc.

Research on future-thinking suggests that it is developed through various interpersonal processes, beginning in infancy. Very early, primitive experiences of drive
and need yield to more complex cycles of satiation and anticipation with the development of object permanence. As the caretaker is understood to exist even when absent, the child begins to experience anticipation of drive gratification with his or her return, thus instilling a basic temporal perspective. Hudson (2006) argues that future time concepts are elaborated through mother-child conversation, with maternal time references and temporal terminology predicting children’s use and understanding of the same. By middle or high school, coincident with the development of Piaget’s formal operations stage, most individuals have a fairly well-developed sense of their future existence, though its specific content may be vague (McInerney, 2004).

Arnett’s (2000) theory of “emerging adulthood” highlights the role of future-thinking in adolescence and young adulthood. (Arnett considers emerging adulthood to encompass ages 18-30, with a focus on 18-25.) Arnett claims that “emerging adulthood” is a historically recent phase of human development, a stage between adolescence and adulthood that has widened over the past few decades due to longer education trajectories and changing social expectations that have led young adults to delay the acquisition of full adult responsibilities and commitments. Arnett characterizes emerging adulthood as a period of experimentation and exploration, a period of relative freedom, but also one of anxiety as the individual contemplates all of the possibilities before him or her.

Arnett identifies three primary domains of exploration: Love, Work, and Worldview. Arnett’s contention that emerging adulthood is distinct from adolescence rests in part on his argument that future-thinking within these domains takes on a qualitatively different and larger role in emerging adulthood. Arnett posits that
individuals in both periods are highly concerned with exploring identities, but that emerging adults project their explorations further ahead and take them more seriously. For example, with regard to explorations of love and relationships, Arnett writes: “In adolescence, explorations of love tend to be tentative and transient; the implicit question is, Who would I enjoy being with, here and now? In contrast, explorations in love in emerging adulthood tend to involve a deeper level of intimacy, and the implicit question is more identity focused: Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” (p. 473).

Arnett acknowledges that the process of exploration—or the very existence of a distinct phase of emerging adulthood—may vary with culture, class, and other demographic markers. For those youth who may be expected to fulfill adult obligations (such as contributing to the family’s finances), or for those in locations where opportunities to “try on” various roles are limited, emerging adulthood may contract. How might growing up as a sexual minority impact the experience of emerging adulthood? What questions do gay men in this developmental phase ask? The emerging adulthood framework enables exploration of these questions without resorting to the overly simplistic notion of “delayed adolescence” that is often attributed to gay men in their twenties.

The “possible selves” literature offers another framework with which to conceptualize the ways individuals begin to fill in the content of their future imaginings. Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced this concept of “possible selves.” More than mere hopes or fears of future outcomes, possible selves occur within the context of a self-
concept, as imagined experiences of what it would be like to live, as one self, in various future possibilities. In this way, the current self and possible selves engage in a reciprocal process of meaning-making. Possible selves are incentives or guides to behavior, “personalized carriers of motivation,” as opposed to abstract strivings or lists of life tasks (Erikson, 2007). Erikson emphasizes the intersubjective quality of possible selves, arguing that they always exist in a social context, and are dependent on social reflection for meaning. Erikson writes: “I will go as far as to suggest that it is through these cultural expectations that it is possible for us to rely on our future, imagined events to such a degree. If we could not count on others being able to share our understanding and acting in accordance with shared norms, the function of possible selves would be very different” (p. 355).

Thus, in the vein of Kohut (1977) and Self Psychology, the development of both the self and possible selves are interpersonal processes, dependent on identification, reflection and validation at various levels of the interpersonal world. These levels include the family, the immediate social world, and the culture or society-at-large. I will argue that at each of these levels, being gay may impact the processes of identification, reflection, and validation, and thus influence the ways in which gay men are able to construct current and future self-concepts. More specifically, I propose that these interpersonal processes may be disrupted for gay men (as they may be for other stigmatized minorities as well), leading to constricted or troubled visions of the future.
Young gay men’s development of the self and possible selves

The developments of the self and possible selves are coincident. In other words, who I may become figures centrally in how I see myself now. Possible selves are particularly important to the self-concepts of adolescents and young adults, for whom the process of becoming is perhaps more central than for any other age group (Knox, Funk, Elliott, & Bush, 1998). As youth attempt to define the self, they consider various hypothetical selves, and evaluate how desirable, probable, and socially viable each possible self is. Thus, examining the research on the impact of growing up gay on the self may provide insight into the impact on gay youths’ conceptions of future, possible selves.

The effects of growing up gay on the development of the self are myriad and complex. These effects on the self may be positive, negative, enriching, damaging, traumatic, meaningful—or all of the above. Similarly, “growing up gay” signifies no one, standard experience. Differences in the family environment, society, and culture interact with individual variables, such as gender and age, to constitute the experience of “being gay” for any one individual at any one specific time. Thus, we may expect different courses of development for someone coming out at a relatively young age in a relatively tolerant environment, than for someone who remains closeted in a particularly homophobic culture. Nevertheless, for most individuals undergoing homosexual development in a primarily heterosexual culture, we may predict certain impacts on the self-concept.
Cornett (1993) outlines a general application of Self Psychology to the development of gay men, focusing on the disruption of selfobject functions. Gay youth are denied experiences of attention and acceptance both because they are closeted (and no other can reflect or validate what is hidden from view), and because their tentative or unconscious expressions of their sexuality may often be met with verbal or nonverbal communications of rejection, distancing, devaluation, and contempt. Such responses from parents—whether they are consciously intended or not—are particularly traumatic to the child, who learns that his sexuality is “bad” and that he must change or hide it. Thus, it is not only the absence of mirroring and validation, but the presence of rejection and devaluation that is incorporated into the gay youth’s self-concept. This is the basis for “internalized homophobia” and shame.

Denying or splitting off sexuality as a part of the self and focusing on external qualities and appearance may be a common adaptive response to the underlying experience of shame. Canarelli et al. (1999) discuss these dynamics in relation to the emphasis on physical appearance and sex in popular gay culture:

A performance of self defends against a shameful conviction that what is experienced as the private self is not good enough and will be rejected. Living with the strain of performing a self in order to distract one’s own attention as well as the attention of others away from what is always liable to leak out—as it did when the high-pitched laughter or girly walk betrayed one’s difference—is a situation fraught with anxiety and shame. While appearing to function adequately,
one’s attention is trained exclusively to the outside, to the surface. This leaves the individual with a new dilemma: he feels dead inside. (p. 65)

This sense of deadness or emptiness captures Kohut’s (1977) description of narcissistic depression, a profound disturbance in the experience of self.

Theory on chronic stress or “complex trauma” provides another, related lens through which to analyze the effects of growing up gay on the self. Complex trauma refers to repeated, ongoing traumatic experiences (such as child sexual abuse) which may lead to a syndrome distinct from PTSD as described in the DSM-IV-TR (PTSD developed from studying reactions to more discrete, adult-onset trauma such as rape or combat). In the sense that gay youth may be living with the day-to-day stress of being a stigmatized minority, their experience can be viewed as a type of complex trauma (Carter, 2007). Davies (1996) draws attention to the element of secrecy in child sexual abuse as the factor which may account for some of the particular post-traumatic reactions in these victims. The lack of a witness—of any person or interpersonal forum in which to at least acknowledge the events which have occurred—leaves the event “undigested.” A sense of self is based on integrating experiences into a relational matrix. Thus if the traumatic experience (the event, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with it) cannot be recognized or processed interpersonally, it also cannot be integrated into the self. This is the basis for dissociation, whereby the victim’s “private hell” is made all the more unbearable by what Davies calls a “maddening sense of unreality.” The individual’s daily, social “reality” is split off from internal experience, and the individual faces the confounding, “crazy-making” challenge of inhabiting both
sides of the split. The individual is, to varying degrees of consciousness, disturbed and haunted by the dissociated material, which reveals itself in intrusive thoughts and images, while he or she simultaneously attempts to avoid the material though emotional aversion and numbing. Interpersonal intimacy—with its demands for a synthesis of the social and personal, the external and the internal—threatens the individual’s complex management of the split. Moreover, intimacy could force the traumatized individual to confront more directly the painful emotions held back by dissociative defenses.

Dissociation, a fractured sense of self, interpersonal deficits—these are some of the central phenomena of the complex post-traumatic reactions of child sexual abuse victims, and they are phenomena which characterize the lives of many gay youth and the adults they become. As one of Drescher’s (1998) gay male patient’s reported: “It was a strange sensation, this being divided and still functioning. My pattern of lying, of hiding the things I knew to be the truth, was beginning to become an integral part of me.” Like the victims of sexual abuse described by Davies, gay youth may make subconscious attempts to make sense of their unspeakable trauma and pain by blaming the self. Such efforts may also serve to preserve the “goodness” of the aggressor. In the case of the sexual abuse victim, the aggressor is usually the perpetrator of the abuse, while in the case of gay youth the aggressor may be the culture or society as opposed to any one individual. Like other adolescents, gay youth may be highly invested in gaining attention, acceptance, status and achievement in the social system. Denigrating the self may, on an unconscious level, be preferable to denigrating the system which has heretofore defined what is good and valuable. When rejecting the system is not an option (because of the
reality of dependence on the system or because of the all-or-nothing thinking which may characterize adolescent cognition), rejecting the “bad” part of the self—which is incompatible with that system—may feel like the only choice. As the work of Davies illuminates, the individual may dissociate both from his or her traumatic experiences and the sense of “badness” engendered by those experiences. The individual turns away from internal pain, focusing instead on maintaining an exterior acceptable to one’s social surround.

Thus we may discern a confluence of ideas regarding gay youths’ development of self, whether viewed from the theoretical perspective of self psychology or complex trauma. In each view, assaults to the self from various levels of the interpersonal milieu result in feelings of shame, badness, isolation, and rejection. Compensatory measures, utilized to preserve self-esteem and protect the self from further insult, include hiding the authentic self from others (retreating to the “closet”) and even from one’s own awareness through dissociation or a focus on externality.

The current self-concept, and its particular configuration of perceived abilities and limitations, affects the possible selves which are imagined and viewed as probable (Erikson, 2007). As homophobia and the adaptive/defensive processes of dissociation and secrecy fragment and imbue the current self with shame, the ability to project that self into future possibilities may be impaired. The emptiness, fragmentation and negativity which characterize the current self-concept may come to color possible selves as well.
While they did not speak to futurity per se, Moe, Dupuy, and Laux (2008) did demonstrate a link between gay identity development and hope and optimism in a study of mostly female, college-educated LGBQ individuals. Individuals with “higher” levels of gay identity development were characterized by greater self-acceptance and integration of their sexual identity into their social world. Such individuals demonstrated greater hope, which the authors defined as a greater ability “to craft self-affirming personal narratives that connect them to future achievement and overall life satisfaction” (p. 17). In contrast, individuals with lower levels of identity development—characterized by shame, anxiety, and division between inner and social identities—expressed less hope. This study also demonstrated that greater hope for the future was related to greater current life satisfaction, further supporting the notion of a reciprocal relationship among an individual’s current and possible selves. The current study will build on Moe, Dupuy, and Laux’s work by closely examining and describing personal narratives for the future, as opposed to taking a quantitative measure of hope.

In short, the studies above suggest that, among gay youth, variance in the development of the self, moderated by exposure to minority stress, may also predict differences in their ability to anticipate a viable future.

**Future Scripts**

In addition to disruptions in the processes or selfobject functions of identification, reflection, and validation in the family and immediate social world, gay men may be denied these functions in the society or culture at large. As Cornett (1993) writes, “No
other group faces as many assaults on its collective self-esteem as do gay men…. There are no institutions in this culture that celebrate male homosexual masculinity…. The natural cumulative result of the massive devaluation and rejection most gay men experience throughout their development is shame and self-alienation” (p. 53). I argue that one “institution” from which gay men are denied is the collection of normative “future scripts” promulgated in the culture.

Individuals appear to use popular, cultural “scripts” of the life course in order to structure or launch their own future imaginings. Of course, the “normative” future prescribed by 21st century American culture is vague and shifting. As the MacArthur Foundation’s Research Network on Transition to Adulthood’s (Shanahan, Porfeli, & Mortimer, 2004) large scale studies of youth demonstrate, the passage into adulthood is increasingly complex and protracted. Whereas even a generation or two ago a linear and rapid path through the five traditional “milestones” (completing education, leaving home, marrying, achieving financial independence from family of origin through work or marriage, and having a child) was not an unreasonable expectation, today’s youth often travel a more circuitous path. In 1960, 70% of women and 65% of men had achieved all five milestones by age 30. In 2000, about half of women and a third of men had achieved all five by age 30. However, contrary to the Network’s researchers’ expectations, they found that markers such as marriage and having a child still figure heavily into youths’ understanding of achieving adulthood. This finding varied for men and women (with women reporting more socially-oriented hopes and fears for the future while men
reported more career-oriented hope and fears), but the overall findings suggest that the five milestones continue to play a major role in youths’ thinking about their futures.

While gay youth may not be excluded from some of these markers, the path is implicitly premised on heterosexuality and procreation. Goltz (2008) describes the dilemma gay youth face: “Weddings, marriage, children, grandchildren, and perhaps great-grandchildren suggest a model to work from, a social foundation that is perpetuated in film, television, religious institutions, and political debate. What does it mean to exist in a space outside of these blueprints and images, to be denied access to the dominant scripts?” Halverson (2005) echoes these questions in her case study of a performance-based intervention to help GLBTQ youth explore possible future selves. She argues that while adolescence is generally depicted as an expansive time when youth are able to “try on” a variety of identities and imagine their extension into the future, gay youth may experience a restricting of options, and few “legitimate possibilities for future selves open to them.”

Exclusion from scripts or normative paths may be implicit, or as explicit as anti-GLBT legislation. In a 2009 study, Levitt et al. interviewed 13 GLBT individuals living in one of the 26 states which have passed constitutional amendments in recent years that restrict marriage to one man and one woman. A grounded theory analysis of the interviews yielded a core category (central finding): “GLBT people need to balance the dual dangers of engagement with GLBT advocacy and self-protection through withdrawal.” Could this dangerous balancing act include a withdrawal from the future? Though the researchers found that the legislation was deemed most relevant by older,
partnered individuals, they noted that for young participants “the potential for future harm was always at the back of their minds.” As one participant explained, “… If we decided to have a child, I mean, there’s that whole problem there. My partner wouldn’t have rights over the child unless he’s, you know, legally allowed to adopt him. I mean there’s so much more crap.” If potential future paths, as literally outlined by legislation, are not completely blocked for GLBT youth, at least there’s a lot more “crap” in the way.

Research on the effects of the legalization of gay marriage in certain states on existing same-sex couples suggests that legalization imparts feelings of legitimacy and acceptance. In addition to providing external validation, legalization may change the internal experience of a relationship as well. For example, LGBT individuals have reported that their own relationships felt more “real” following legal recognition (Lanutti, 2007). It is unclear how such legislation may shape the imagined possibilities of non-committed individuals. In a state like Massachusetts, does marriage more readily figure as a marker or anchor of future imaginings for gay youth?

It is not only exclusion from dominant scripts, but exposure to negative future scripts which impact gay youth. Writing from the perspective of communications and cultural studies, Goltz (2008) argues that the dominant, heteronormative culture promulgates negative representations of a gay future in order to preserve the status quo of heterosexual hegemony: “Gay male aging is constructed to reify the correctness of heteronormativity through enacting a tragic ritual of gay male sacrifice and punishment.” Whether one agrees that heterosexuality is reified by a tragic gay future, Goltz does expose popular culture’s largely negative portrayals of gay adulthood. In his analysis of
film and television over the past century, he identifies a recurrent script of the gay future as one characterized by isolation and despair. After a brief flare of youthful hedonism, gay characters are often killed or commit suicide. Should they live to thirty, they are doomed to miserable wandering and yearning for the joys of heterosexual life. They invariably end up alone and deformed by their suffering. *Brokeback Mountain* (2007), for example, illustrates both tragic outcomes. After a passionate yet frustrated romance, one man is killed (apparently for lack of discretion regarding his homosexuality), while the other is fated to isolation and yearning for what is lost. Of course, this movie depicted a particular, rural culture in the mid-Twentieth century, but Goltz argues that its themes were nonetheless quite familiar to contemporary audiences.

Goltz sees more recent representations of gay adulthood, such as the character Will of *Will and Grace*, as an idealization of ultimately unrealizable heteronormative future scripts. He argues that these scripts may make provisional space for certain gay groups—particularly the affluent, white, and monogamous—while continuing to suggest that gays may at best hope for a watered-down approximation of the future of their heterosexual peers. Of course, one could argue that the media’s provision of future scripts for any number of groups is stereotyped and limited, but gay youth may have fewer “real-life” examples of adulthood to counter these media images. As a result of these restrictive scripts, gay men may overvalue youth, deny the future (failing to imagine or plan for the future), and even anticipate an early death (a death possibly, though not necessarily, related to the specter of AIDS).
Goltz explicates the route from exposure to negative future scripts to an overvaluation of youth in gay culture:

The narrative of the gay male approaching the future with fear and a sense of dread works to define the concept of ‘future’ as a site of punishment that ought to be avoided and rejected rather than privileged and embraced…. This sense of loss and dread of aging is further perpetuated by the absence of older gay representation within the culture and a lack of visible role models… the youth-centered nature of the gay male community, cultural myths of misery, and lack of counter-representations of ‘older’ gay men has a negative impact on both ‘older’ and ‘younger’ gay males, assisting the perpetuation of negative aging myths, the equation of aging with loss, and the fear of the future. (p. 75)

Though youth may hear of successful gay adults in the media, they likely have little if any access to gay adults in their immediate social worlds. The future becomes threatening, in that it portends suffering for the gay adult, or increasingly demands adherence to social conventions and roles that the gay youth feels to be incompatible with his or her inner secret. Perceiving a foreclosed or tragic future and limited possibilities, gay youth may become hopeless. An avoidance of thinking about or a denial of the future—known as the phenomenon of “foreshortened future” in the PTSD literature—may defend against these feelings. Certain risk-taking behaviors, such as drug abuse and unprotected sex, may be driven by this denial of a viable future. The disproportionately high rates of suicide among gay youth may also be linked to this hopelessness regarding the future (Morrison & L’Heureux, 2001).
In his Queer Futures Project, an exploratory companion study to his initial media analysis, Goltz (2008) utilized an interactive, focus group methodology to help seven queer participants articulate and develop a sense of the future. He found that the four male participants’ views of the future were characterized by “gloom and doom,” with repeated references to the “cultural myth of the alienated, older, bitter, gay man”: “This myth dominated the gay men’s understanding of what the future held for them and was linked to a lessoned interest in longevity, internalized ageism, and a more sarcastic bitterness in regard to their future” (25). One participant noted that, in “gay years,” 30 means “you’re on your way out.” In contrast, female participants invoked traditional structures—partnership and procreativity—to construct a positive sense of the future.

Goltz’s attempts to explore alternative paths to a meaningful future with the participants were frustrated. While serving as a role-model to queer youth or becoming active in social justice or the community were considered, Goltz found that these sources of meaning failed to replace heteronormative models. Access to heteronormative structures—marriage and family—continued to define future possibilities; while the female participants imagined inclusion in these structures and a positive future, male participants imagined exclusion from these structures, and a miserable, lonely future (or no future at all). While coupling and procreation need not necessarily be seen as “heteronormative,” Goltz’s work suggests that they are seen this way by some queer youth, who measure the value of their own future in terms of inclusion or exclusion from these structures. However, the very small number of participants and unconventional methodology limits the generalizability of these findings.
In her dissertation, Elizabeth Doerrbecker (2007) interviewed fifteen adult gay men and four therapists who work with gay men about their sense of gay male identity and future after coming out. She argues that when men who are attracted to men accept a gay identity, they also lose a heterosexual identity and a sense of the future associated with that heterosexual identity. Doerrbecker identifies a correlation between suicidality and the inability to imagine a positive future as a gay man. Her subjects did not necessarily anticipate a negative future as a gay man, but simply had no sense of what that future could be. There were no ready replacements for the heterosexual future script they had recently given up. Many of the men also reported that certain characteristics of gay culture made it difficult to imagine a positive future. For example, they identified popular notions within the gay community that it is difficult to date and develop a serious, committed relationship, something they desired as part of the future. Thus, while they may have some notion of the possibility of a future as a gay man, they felt that the future they wanted was improbable.

Given exclusion from heteronormative scripts and negative or nonexistent scripts for a gay future, what do gay youth use to develop a sense of their future? Do they anticipate a negative future, or lack any sense of future possibilities? Recall Erikson (2007) writing on the notion that possible selves must fit cultural expectations in order to be viable: “I will go as far as to suggest that it is through these cultural expectations that it is possible for us to rely on our future, imagined events to such a degree. If we could not count on others being able to share our understanding and acting in accordance with shared norms, the function of possible selves would be very different” (p. 355). Unable to
count on others in this way, how do gay men develop possible selves—and, if they do, how do these possible selves function? Does involvement in the gay community facilitate imagining a future, and/or does the gay community promulgate its own restrictive notions of gay futurity (possibly reflecting homonegative stereotypes)? Finally, have recent sociocultural developments, such as the legalization of gay marriage in some states and countries, provided new cultural markers onto which gay youth can anchor a sense of the future?

**Limitations in the Current Body of Research**

“Futurity” or “future-thinking” are slippery topics that are implicit in a number of research and theoretical channels, but are rarely explicitly defined and studied with reference to general populations, let alone to specific minority groups. This may reflect the inherent elusiveness of the “future” as an object of study. Within clinical psychology, the influence of our clients’ pasts and how they think about them obviously commands great attention; while there is also an obvious interest in clients’ goals, we may be less versed in discussing and exploring the process of formulating a future. Where future-thinking does appear as a discrete concept, its meaning may be taken for granted. For example, I could find no studies on the phenomenology or differential identification of “foreshortened future,” despite its being one of the criteria for PTSD.

Thus while the work reviewed above offers promising insight into future-thinking among gay men, this line of investigation is quite new and unexplored. Goltz and others have begun to examine the content of gay men’s thoughts about future, but there is a
dearth of research into the process of thinking about the future and the various influences on this process for gay men. I aim to examine both process and content in this study—content by way of eliciting narratives and descriptions of anticipated futures, and process by way of talking with gay men about how they see their visions of the future being molded and changing over time. It important to note that given the paucity of research in these areas for any population, this study is exploratory and phenomenological, and not based on comparisons to an established concept of “normal” future-thinking. Thus the findings may illuminate general qualities of future-thinking, as well as qualities that may be specific to gay men.
CHAPTER III
METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research method to examine the experience of men who identity as gay, ages 22-30, in the United States. Through interviews and the collection of first-person written narratives, rich data were collected and subsequently analyzed. This chapter will briefly review the use of qualitative methods in the social sciences generally, followed by a detailed description of the interview method, the participants, and the data analysis procedure used in this study. In accordance with the qualitative research traditions discussed below, special attention was paid to the researcher’s role, or “self-as-instrument,” in the processes of both data collection and analysis. Attention to the researcher’s subjectivity as both asset and liability to the study pervaded this work in innumerable ways; select illustrations of this process will be described in this chapter.

Background on Qualitative Methods

Qualitative methods are often used by social science researchers, and appreciated by consumers of social science literature, for the richness and “experience-close”-nature of the results. Yet defining the “qualitative method” as a singular entity is difficult. Qualitative methods are a family of research approaches that are perhaps best described
in contrast to quantitative methods. Padgett (2008) identifies five “common denominators” that set qualitative approaches apart from their quantitative brethren: (1) “Insider rather than outsider perspectives”; (2) “Person-centered rather than variable-centered”; (3) “Holistic rather than particularistic”; (4) “Contextual rather than decontextual”; and (5) “Depth rather than breadth.” Roughly, qualitative methods attempt to understand the complexity of a participant’s experience within his or her lived reality, whereas quantitative methods attempt to understand a variable of experience pulled from lived reality and isolated in controlled settings. Consequently, qualitative studies usually result in narrative descriptions, while quantitative studies result in numerical statistics. However, Padgett (2008) argues that the two methods are fundamentally more similar than different; in both approaches researchers rely on observation, data collection, and a systematic procedure. In other words, qualitative methods are empirical and scientific, and these qualities differentiate them from other non-scientific approaches to understanding human experience, such as philosophy, literature, or critical theory.

When are qualitative methods indicated? At a most basic level, qualitative methods are “exploratory”—they help to increase understanding of topics about which little is known. While quantitative methods elucidate patterns and relationships among variables, qualitative methods can identify the variables at play in the first place. What are the elements of a particular phenomenon? Along what lines do individuals’ experiences of a particular topic diverge and converge? What effect does context have on a particular experience? Qualitative methods begin to answer these questions by eliciting
the individual’s own account of his or her behavior, tapping into elements of the experience that may not be readily observable by an outsider or quantitatively measurable with an “objective” instrument or scale. Furthermore, qualitative methods help researchers to generate questions about a little-known topic for which testing concrete hypotheses may be premature. When a researcher know what he or she is looking for, quantitative methods allow for measurements and comparisons of that variable across individuals or groups. This risks leaving unknown variables in the dark, however. When a researcher is uncertain as to what he or she is looking for, qualitative methods illuminate the darkness, and allow for thorough exploration.

Qualitative methods are also indicated for topics of “emotional depth” and “sensitivity” (Padgett, 2008). The empathy, understanding, and flexibility of the researcher are utilized and valued as methodological tools, and can elicit shades of an emotionally-complex experience that may be lost to the more rigid and uniform approach of a quantitative study. The emotional particulars may emerge gradually, but in the end may be a defining feature of the experience under study; qualitative methods are well-suited to eliciting and preserving such nuanced data. Building on this point, Padgett (2008) observes that qualitative methods capture “lived experience” and “meaning-making” by drawing out the insider’s perspective.

Morse and Richards (2007) add that qualitative methods are conducive to theory-construction, as opposed to theory-testing. Qualitative data procedures often involve discerning “themes,” which can then become the bases for theories.
The strengths of qualitative methods enumerated above fit with the objectives and characteristics of this study. Most importantly, this study aims to understand the depth and nuance of a personal experience that is complex, abstract, and loaded with personal meaning. As this study examines how gay men think about and construct a narrative of their futures, a method which allows the participants to think “out loud” and verbalize their personal narratives would be ideal. Qualitative methods—with their emphasis on context, depth, and the voice of the “insider”—thus emerged as a good fit with the questions this study poses.

Furthermore, the limited research on future-thinking in general, and the dearth of data on future-thinking among gay men, call for an exploratory study that can begin to identify the important elements, themes, and variables at play in this phenomenon. Eventually, as specific variables are identified, quantitative measures could be developed, and the variables compared across groups (for example, comparing the future-thinking of heterosexual versus gay men, or between generations of gay men, or between gay men and non-gay-identified men who have sex with men, etc.). Such comparisons would be premature at this time, however; while certain variables could be hypothesized and measured quantitatively, the risk of missing important variables and contextual factors would be too great.

A qualitative study allows for a fuller exploration of gay men’s experiences of the future, and the generation of rich data. An open-ended approach, though the use of a semi-structured interview, enables participants to inform the researcher about the nuances of their experiences, some of which would not have been anticipated by the researcher—
or even by the participants themselves at the start of the interview. In other words, given future-thinking may be a process that is not entirely conscious, the interview will facilitate the participants’ recognition and articulation of their own thoughts and feelings on the subject in a way that asking them to endorse items on a quantitative scale, for example, would not. In this study, participants were asked to reflect on the experience of the interview, as the interview itself became an instance of the phenomenon (e.g., thinking about the future) under observation. In fact, it was expected that many participants do not typically consciously reflect on their futures in the course of daily life; thus the interview would be a unique opportunity for the participant himself to become aware of and articulate his experience. This made for an exciting and immediate process, the twists and turns of which were difficult to fully anticipate. A qualitative method could both structure this process and allow for spontaneity and surprise for both participant and researcher. In taking measurements of identified variables, a quantitative method would foreclose on the discovery of unanticipated themes.

The emotional depth of the subject also called for the use of a qualitative method. To capture the subtlety of participants’ descriptions, a qualitative data analysis procedure includes close attention to language and the uncovering of themes that may not be explicitly and neatly articulated. For these reasons, a qualitative method was chosen for this study.

The Long Interview Methodology

McCracken’s (1988) “long interview” is the basis for the specific qualitative methodology employed in this study. The components of this method are described in
detail below. In brief, the long interview is a specific method of generating questions about a human experience, asking those questions in a semi-structured single interview, and analyzing the responses. McCracken writes that the long interview method takes “us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he sees the world,” and he emphasizes that this method is particularly sensitive to the social and cultural contexts in which the phenomena being explored is embedded. This method aims to explore the definitions, experiential qualities, and culturally-specific assumptions at play in the individual participant’s mind; in other words, how does the individual organize his ideas about the subject, and what are the assumptions and norms which shape the style of his organization? As I have argued above, the existing research suggests that future-thinking is a product of interpersonal experience—at the levels of family, peers, sub-culture, and culture. But we know very little about an individual’s actual experience of future-thinking and the interpersonal processes that shape it. How is the future defined and organized? What assumptions (imparted and reinforced at each level of interpersonal experience) shape the future possibilities that are imaginable? The long interview is well suited to an exploration of these questions.

In preparing and conducting the long interview, McCracken argues that the researcher must also answer his questions for himself. Becoming conscious of one’s own assumptions and beliefs about a subject enables one to use his own experience as a guide in his search, and, somewhat paradoxically, alerts one to the possibility of selectively looking to confirm one’s own heretofore unconscious assumptions and beliefs. In other words, as in psychotherapy, a thorough self-analysis protects against the possibility of
unconsciously projecting one’s own experience onto the subject and data; at the same time, it is through the researcher’s ability to relate and introspect that he can make any sense of the data in the first place. Regarding this “self-as-instrument” view of research, McCracken writes, “The investigator must use his or her experience and imagination to find (or fashion) a match for the patterns evidenced by the data. The diverse aspects of the self become a bundle of templates to be held up against the data until parallels emerge…. The matching process [helps to] fill in and flesh out what the respondent meant to say.”

As a gay man with a complex relationship to my own future, I knew that I could bring useful first-hand knowledge and cultural familiarity to this subject; at the same time, my personal experience of the subject could limit my ability to see meanings and categories in the data which are at odds with my own view. McCracken’s acknowledgement of both sides of this ultimately useful dilemma made the long interview a particularly appealing methodology.

The long interview is a four-step method of inquiry. Step one is a “review of analytic categories” in the form of a literature review. What are the relevant concepts, categories, and relationships that have been used to analyze the subject? McCracken argues that it is especially important for the researcher to be alert to theories or findings that are surprising to him; the discovery of “counterexpectational” data may uncover the researcher’s implicit expectations. In this case, the comprehensive literature review pointed to some potential themes in the content of future thinking for young gay men and emerging adults in general, but showed a relative lack of data and theory regarding the
process of future-thinking (i.e., how it changes over time, influences on its development, the subjective experience and affective valence of imagining the future, etc.). Thus this study is an opportunity to discover new themes in both the content and process of future-thinking in these men’s lives.

Step two is what McCracken calls a “review of cultural categories,” and entails the researcher’s process of self-examination about the subject with the dual goals of “familiarization” (becoming conscious of one’s experience such that it can become a guide in the research process) and “defamiliarization” (becoming conscious of one’s assumptions in order to obtain a distance from them and an openness to surprise). While it would be impractical to record here my entire process of self-examination during this study, I will make a brief comment here, and incorporate aspects of my own reactions and experience into the discussion section of this paper where they seem relevant to my interpretations of the data. A few broad themes and metaphors I discovered in the course of this study regarding my own experience of the subject: As a closeted gay adolescent I often experienced the future as a minefield stretching before me with innumerable opportunities to be “discovered” and to have the fiction of my daily life shattered. This central preoccupation alternately contracted and stretched my time horizon; I lived with both a sense of imminent disaster that would have no possible life or resolution beyond it, and a sense of dread at “living a lie” forever, making endless compromises between my inner homosexuality and the “heterosexual” futures that were the only ones I saw as available to me. After coming out in college, being “discovered” and “living a lie” were no longer central preoccupations, and the future began to hold other possibilities: Finding
a partner or being alone, succeeding or failing professionally, “getting over” the angst and fractured sense of self left over from years of being closeted or feeling constrained by them forever. These possibilities seemed to exist as binaries—perfection or disaster—and thinking about the future was emotionally colored with doubt, anxiety, and a yearning for safety, as opposed to an excitement or sense of freedom. Now, in my early thirties, those binaries have begun to soften, with desire and choice starting to matter as much as “should” and safety in my thoughts about the future. Through this self-examination I am more aware of the central organizing roles of fear of discovery and “living a lie” in my future thinking as an adolescent, and was more alert in this research to the possibility that other versions of being closeted (or not) could have a diversity of implications on future-thinking. More generally, I recognized how central being gay has been to my future narrative. That recognition, and an assumption that this must be true for other gay men, drove my desire to do this study; at the same time, I was listening for the possibility that being gay may not be identified as a central determinant in thinking about the future for other gay men. Does my own focus on the impact of being gay on my life and future-thinking obscure my view of other influences? What influences do other gay men identify? Raising these observations and questions through self-examination complemented the literature review as I devised the interview questions and later listened to my respondents.

The third step of the long interview comprises writing and conducting the interview. McCracken argues that the interview should aim to “allow respondents to tell their own story in their own terms,” through the use of open-ended questions (what
McCracken calls “grand tour” questions) designed to “spring” respondents without
directing them in overly-specific ways. However, the interviewer must maintain some
sense of direction, lest the interview stray too far afield. The interviewer must balance
exploration and the possibility of far-ranging yet relevant connections in the participant’s
narrative with attention to time and a specific focus. The interviewer uses what
McCracken calls “floating prompts,” including both nonverbal (e.g., nodding) and verbal
prompts, to both encourage and contain the participant as he responds to the grand tour
questions. The interviewer also uses the participants’ own language to ask follow-up
questions, thus avoiding introducing new language that could be leading.

Based on the literature review and an examination of the “cultural categories”
evident in my reflections on my own experiences related to the subject, three major areas
of inquiry emerged. The grand tour questions and potential “floating prompts” were
developed from these areas.

1) How do young gay men describe their futures?

- What experiences/events stand out as landmarks of the future?
- Are there certain types of goals or fears emphasized by gay men?
- How far into the future do their imaginings extend?
- What is the emotional valence—positive or negative—of their descriptions?
- What commonalities in language do gay men use to describe the future?
- How vivid are their descriptions?
- How difficult do gay men find it to describe their futures?
2) What major influences—especially interpersonal influences—do gay men identify as shaping their visions of the future?

- How do gay men describe the origins of their future narrative?
- How do gay men describe the roles of their parents and family in creating their future narratives?
- How do gay men perceive representations of heterosexual and homosexual futures in the media, and how do they connect these representations to their own future thinking?
- Who do gay men identify as role models as they think about their futures?
- What do gay men perceive to be normative future scripts for gay men, and what types of futures do they see as supported by the gay community and culture?

3) How do gay men relate their experiences as a stigmatized minority to the ways in which they think about the future?

- How do gay men connect experiences of “being in the closet” to future-thinking?
- How do they connect experiences of “coming out” to future-thinking?
- How do gay men see political, legal and social developments regarding gay rights as affecting their views of the future?
• How do gay men imagine that their visions of the future would be different if they were not gay, or if they grew up in an environment that was not homonegative?

Participants

Selection Criteria.

This study was restricted to males who identify as gay, ages 22-30. While extrapolation to the experience of other members of the queer community (including lesbian women and bisexual men) may yield important insights, the experience of these groups may be distinct in important ways, warranting separate examinations.

Recruitment.

Individuals were recruited via a networking/snowball sampling. Friends, colleagues, and personal and professional contacts will be asked to identify potential participants and ask their permission to be contacted about the study. Participants were contacted by email and provided information about the study. Some participants were also asked to pass information about the study to their contacts, and additional participants were recruited in this way.

Demographics.

Ten subjects were enrolled in the study. All of the subjects identify as “gay.” Information has been de-identified to protect the privacy of the participants.

Patrick is a 23-year-old Caucasian male who works as a freelance journalist in a large urban area. He has a Bachelor’s Degree from a small liberal arts college. He grew
up in a small town in the West. He is currently in a non-exclusive relationship of a few months. He is “out” in all areas of his life.

Vykas is a 28-year-old first-generation Indian-American employed in marketing, living in a suburban area. He has a Bachelor’s Degree from a large public university. He grew up in the suburbs of a mid-sized Midwestern city. He is currently single. He is “out” to friends and colleagues, and to his parents and siblings, but not to members of his extended family.

Graham is a 27-year-old Caucasian graduate student in Social Work. He continues to live in a small town where he grew up. He is currently in a committed relationship of two years. He is “out” in all areas of his life.

Leo is a 22-year-old African-American male working in Sales for a small company. He grew up in a small town, where he continues to live. He has a Bachelor’s Degree from a large public university. He is currently single. He is “out” to friends and his parents, but not to colleagues or other family members.

Josh is a 29-year-old Caucasian medical student in residency at a large urban hospital. He grew up in a small town in the Midwest. He is currently in a committed relationship of five years. He is not “out” to all colleagues or extended family.

Damien is a 24-year-old Caucasian part-time student earning his Bachelor’s Degree at a small college. He grew up in a large urban area, and currently lives in a small college town. He is currently single. He is “out” in all areas of his life.
Bradley is a 30-year-old Caucasian male employed in Information Technology. He lives in a mid-sized city in the Northeast. He grew up in a suburban area. He is currently in a relationship of one year. He is not “out” to colleagues and extended family.

Colin is a 25-year-old law student, living in a mid-sized city. He grew up in a small city in the South. He is currently in a relationship of 3 years. He is not “out” to many of his classmates or his extended family.

Matt is a 23-year-old working in a human services agency, living in a large urban area in the Northeast. He recently graduated from a small liberal arts college. He grew up in a suburban area in the Midwest. He is in a relationship of six months. He is “out” in all areas of his life.

Anthony is a 27-year-old medical student living in the suburbs of a large city in the Midwest. He grew up in a small town on the West coast. He is currently single. He is “out” in all areas of his life.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted in a place of the participant’s choosing (interview sites included participants’ homes, offices, and coffee shops). First, the researcher explained the basic structure of the study, and participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix A). The consent form also included a separate section for consent to be audio recorded. All participants agreed to be audio recorded. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point, but all ten completed the full procedure. Participants were then asked to complete a brief
demographics form (see Appendix B); this form included questions about hometown, education, and relationship status. This form took 2-3 minutes to complete.

Next, participants were asked to free-write for up to 20 minutes in response to the prompt: “Describe your whole future life as you think it will most likely unfold.” All participants finished writing within 20 minutes. Participants were then asked to read what they had written aloud to the interviewer. The interview began with questions about participants’ reactions to what they had written (e.g., “What was it like to write that?” and “What are you feeling having just read what you wrote?”). The interview proceeded according to the semi-structured interview (see Appendix C). The open-ended questions covered five broad areas: (1) Experience of thinking about the future; (2) Characteristics of the future vision; (3) Perceived influences on and evolution of vision of future; (4) Role of being gay in development of vision of future; (5) Cultural scripts for potential futures. The order in which these areas were covered varied from participant to participant, as the interviewer followed leads in each participant’s responses. The interview took approximately one hour. No participants reported any distressing reactions to the interview, and many commented that they found the interview interesting and worthwhile.

Each participant was assigned a case number, which was the only identifying information used on transcripts and other materials. Consent forms were kept in a locked file, separate from the other materials. Interviews were transcribed by the principal investigator. All recordings, transcripts of interviews, and other data collected from the participants will be maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet.
for seven years after the completion of the study. After seven years, the principle investigator will destroy all research material.

**Data Analysis**

The content of the written narratives and interview transcripts were analyzed together following the qualitative data analysis procedure outlined by McCracken, described in this section.

McCracken calls the fourth and final stage of the long interview process the “discovery of analytic categories,” or “the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent’s view of the world in general, and the topic in particular” (McCracken, 1988, p. 42). The objective of this study was to determine the concepts, concerns, and assumptions that inform gay men’s vision of the future, which of course also involves their general view of the world in which that future will occur. McCracken writes that during data analysis the researcher must keep in mind the literature review and his or her own experience of the topic, as a guide or lens through which to discern the analytic categories in the data. At the same time, the researcher must be prepared to ignore the literature review and his or her own experience, “to see what none of it anticipates…. to glimpse and systematically reconstruct a view of the world that bears no relation to his or her own view or the one evident in the literature” (McCracken, p. 42).

McCracken outlines a structured yet flexible data analysis procedure similar to that of other “grounded theory” methods. Data analysis moves from the particular to the general: “The investigator begins deeply embedded in the finest details of the interview
transcript and, with each successive stage, moves upward to more general observations” (McCracken, p. 42). A second trajectory of analysis involves moving from the direct “voice” of the participant toward observations and themes increasingly informed by the researcher’s synthesis of the participants’ words with his or her own knowledge, experience, and understanding of the literature.

Grounded theory data analysis involves “coding” the data into discrete units of meaning, observing patterns and frequencies of codes across participants, and condensing and funneling those codes into themes. Themes are broad ideas, assumptions, dialectics, or overriding questions or concerns that characterize the experience of many (though not necessarily all) of the participants. The “results” section of the study lists the identified themes and illustrates them with examples directly from the narratives of the participants.

Three phases of data analysis are included in basic grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990): Open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding entails analyzing the transcript as a whole to extract major themes, as well as examining each line of each transcript to understand the micro-level themes. The data are categorized by similarities and differences. Axial Coding involves identifying the relationships between the categories and subcategories; patterns across the data emerge in this phase. During Selective Coding, categories are further collapsed to form the core categories of the model. Categories are connected through a paradigm model that forms the “grounded theory.”
McCracken elaborates on basic grounded theory data analysis, and poses five stages. The first stage involves identifying individual “utterances” in the transcript and using them as “entryways” to begin understanding underlying assumptions and beliefs. The identification and highlighting of utterances often proceeds from an intuitive “recognition” on the part of the researcher (again using “self-as-instrument”) that the utterance is meaningful and important in itself. In this study, after interviews were transcribed, I used the “Track Changes” function in Microsoft Word to “tag” utterances and note my own associations to what assumption or belief the utterance might point. McCracken cautions that this rich associational process can suggest routes into the “heart of the matter,” but that in the end generalizations can only emerge from the later stages of the data analysis procedure.

After tagging utterances (of which there were often a hundred or more in each interview) and noting associations to them, the second stage involves linking utterances to one another and to the existing literature. At this stage the researcher is exploring the relationships among utterances, and similarities and contradictions among them. Discrete utterances are linked to develop more general “observations” about particular meanings evident in various parts of the data. In the third stage, these observations are examined in the context of the whole interview and in relation to other participants’ interviews, and patterns and themes are identified. In the fourth stage, the various themes identified are organized, collapsed, and culled. Repetitious themes are combined, and redundant ones eliminated. Seemingly contradictory themes do not need to be reconciled, necessarily, but acknowledged, and perhaps reorganized as an underlying dialectic as opposed to separate
themes. In the fifth and final stage, the surviving themes are reviewed and analyzed by the researcher for the information they convey about the whole group and experience under study. At this stage, themes speak not as the direct voice of the participant describing his life, but rather as the researcher’s observations, informed by his or her entire analytic procedure. These observations are prepared as “conclusions” ready for presentation to the academic community.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Results are presented in two forms: First, as case studies of two individual participants, and, second, as themes derived from data gathered from all ten participants. To complement the results presented thematically, the case studies allow the reader to gain a greater sense of the holistic context and complexity, the process and evolution, of future-thinking in an individual’s life. The two individuals were chosen because, while both of their narratives are in many ways representative of the whole sample, they are also distinct from one another, and offer the reader the opportunity to observe the idiographic nature of future-thinking.

The thematic results, which follow the case studies, allow for a detailed inspection of the most common elements of future-thinking described by all of the participants. Five major themes are discussed: (1) Participants’ sense of being “late the game” or “behind the curve” when they imagined their progress in life thus far and projected into the future; (2) At some point in development, considering a “heterosexual” future, which is ultimately rejected; (3) Grappling with a sense of feeling at least partially excluded from certain milestones—such as marriage and having children—on the path into the future, yet also feeling liberated from conventions, free to pursue an “unconventional” path; (4)
Stereotypes of “typical” gay adulthood and life course, sometimes bleak and shame-infused; and (5) Anxiety about “ending up alone.”

Case Studies

Graham.

Graham is a 27-year-old Caucasian graduate student in Social Work. He lives in a small town near to where he grew up in the Northeast. He is currently in a committed relationship of two years. He is “out” in all areas of his life, including to his extended family.

Like many of the men in the study, Graham described a vision of his future that has evolved over time, with a current future vision that is very different from the one he held as a child and adolescent. Graham came out during college, but said that he had known he was gay from early childhood. His first ideas about gay adulthood came from watching an episode of Oprah:

As a child, I think I always knew I was gay. It’s vague and hard to pinpoint at what age, but I definitely remember like young, preschool or kindergarten, kind of knowing that I was gay. I remember watching an Oprah episode, at like eight years old, and she was interviewing gay men. My sister and I were watching, and she said to me, which says a lot about her unconscious, “We have to make sure that doesn’t happen to you.” I mean, God bless Oprah, she was doing her best, but they were coming across like, not like the happiest people. It was more their struggles and loneliness, the things they couldn’t have, like not getting married, stuff like that. I remember watching this episode, and knowing that was me.
And my sister saying we have to do something about this, and thinking, feeling panicked. Like, she’s right, those people look unhappy, and I don’t want to be ostracized from society, you know? But knowing at a very kindergarten-ish age, that is me, so what should I do about this? It’s not that I can change it, but what can I do about it? In those young years I didn’t know what would happen, if I would come out, whether I would marry a woman. There was a lot of uncertainty about that.

Graham’s first exposure to gay adulthood was delivered with a warning: Make sure this does not happen to you. To Graham, the gay adults he saw on the screen were lonely and ostracized. Graham went on to describe the “options” he perceived were available to him at the time:

I think even then, let’s say first grade, I think I knew I had certain options. Like I could keep it a secret forever and marry a woman. I think I knew I could do that… that I could be gay and still choose to marry a woman. I could keep it a secret forever and be alone. I could be like really promiscuous, like the stereotype that was prevalent in the media, like being this sexual deviant. I’m trying to think whether I honestly thought about the possibility of a committed relationship with a man at that age. I don’t know that I did. I think it was like an abyss. I just didn’t know what was going to happen.

The “options” Graham perceived at a young age were to pass as heterosexual, to be solitary, or to play a sexual stereotype. In addition to the Oprah episode, other media portrayals did little to expand Graham’s perception of the options. Recalling the gay characters he did see on television as a child, Graham said, “I think at that age it was mostly just frivolous, one-dimensional characters who weren’t to be taken seriously. Like
you weren’t really human, you were just to be laughed at.” He recalled watching a report on a gay pride parade on the news, and picking up on the message that the participants were jokes. With these portrayals as his examples, Graham said that he saw all of his “options” as lonely, isolating, and “dehumanizing.” As a child considering these options, Graham described feeling overwhelmed and confused. He did not question or attempt to deny his sexuality, but he had no peers to speak with about these options, and he certainly had no role models of gay adult men who had sorted through such options. Furthermore, he described having no idea how he could make these decisions, or where they would lead; thus, rather than perceiving multiple potential futures (as an adult in different circumstances might do given various “options”), Graham began to experience his future as an “abyss.”

One critical experience that began to change this outlook was a family trip to visit his uncle, one of his father’s cousins:

When I was like 11 or 12, we visited my uncle and his partner at their place. So I knew they lived together, and I knew they weren’t roommates, and I don’t think I had the vocabulary for it, but I knew they were a couple. And it really affected my very strongly and positively. And I remember thinking, without really having words for it, that this could be like me. That this could be like my life. And I remember I actually took his name as my confirmation name, which says a lot. I don’t know if I realized it, but I got to see an example of a positive gay couple, and a possibility for me other than loneliness.

Graham’s uncle died of AIDS a few years after this important visit. Graham said that his uncle’s death did not alter the important role he had played in showing him a
possibility of gay adult life and partnership. However, interacting with Graham’s Catholic upbringing, his uncle’s dying of AIDS exacerbated his anxiety about the future of his sexual life:

Catholics generally have a lot of baggage surrounding the issue of sex anyway, and God forbid gay sex. Like sex is a negative thing anyway among Catholics, so to have this positive role model in my uncle, who in some people’s minds screwed up. I’m not saying that’s how I felt, but I definitely think there was that perception in the family, and in society at large, that people allowed that to happen to themselves and it didn’t have to happen, so it was that person’s mistake for getting HIV. And since he was such a role model for me, it felt like a real possibility that that could happen. And I guess sex education in general isn’t that good, and then among catholic people, and then for gay people, it’s even worse. So there was fear surrounding sex, and I was unclear about how to even avoid HIV. No one really talked to me about it. I remember thinking that I would always have to have sex with condoms. That even in a committed relationship for years, I would have to have sex with a condom. So in that way part of my vision for my life was always having protected sex, even in a committed relationship. Yeah, and there was some, I didn’t hear about it as an 11 year old, but there was some discussion in the family about the circumstances in which my uncle contracted HIV. Whether his partner had cheated on him. I have no idea. But yeah, that was part of the picture I had. There’s only so much you could do, but you could always still get HIV, even if you were doing everything you were supposed to.

Thus in many ways Graham took his uncle’s death in stride, retaining him as a role model, and imagining a protection for himself (i.e. protected sex) that did not preclude being gay. At the same time, Graham was left with a sense that there was “only
so much” one could do, and that contracting HIV could lead not only to death, but also shame for having “brought it on oneself.” He suggests that this exacerbated the shame about homosexuality communicated by Catholicism. Eventually, Graham found that leaving the Catholic Church, which he did in college, alleviated some of this “burden” of shame.

In addition to the role model of his uncle, Graham identified a number of other factors that began to open up his vision of his own future during his adolescence, college years, and into the present. These factors included his coming out to his family, leaving an all-boys Catholic high school, going to college and having gay peers for the first time, two of his cousins coming out, and the increasing visibility of positive gay role models in the media (he cited Ellen DeGeneres and Neil Patrick Harris). He said that coming out to his family was critical in consolidating his vision of the future:

Before coming out to my parents, I saw my life, that I would have almost two lives. That I would have my friends who knew all of me, and I would eventually have a boyfriend, and that would be one life, and then when I saw my family I would be a different person. I always thought it would be like, I just wouldn’t talk about it. So I wouldn’t entirely be keeping a secret, because I thought they would eventually figure it out, but things just left unsaid. So I thought I just wouldn’t be a full member of the family. I would just live my life separately and therefore not see my family as much, not go to gatherings, and so that would be the vision for my life. Very private, isolated. I would have my life but it would be totally separate, separate from my family.
Graham said that he did not make the decision to come out to his family, but that his parents questioned him about his sexuality when he was in college. They were supportive when he answered that he was gay. With this his vision of his future was further revised away from the “isolation” that had previously characterized it. Graham had moved from imagining himself alone, to imagining himself with a partner yet separate from the family, to imagining a life in which his relationship and family life could be integrated. While he yearned for this integration, he said that he was anxious about fulfilling it, perhaps keeping in mind the shame and speculation that had surrounded his uncle’s relationship. He did not bring home any of his more casual boyfriends, waiting to take this step until he was sure of his current partner. He said that bringing his partner home with him, and his family’s acceptance of his partner, had further consolidated his vision of the future. This step had also raised the possibility of having children, something Graham had previously deemed impossible. Before coming out, when he imagined a kind of “double life” apart from his family, children did not fit into that fractured picture: “How could you have kids and not talk about it? How could you have kids and not have family support, or an ability to bring them to family gatherings?” His difficulty imagining having children ran even deeper than this family consideration, however. The mere idea of gay men having children was completely foreign. Graham said,

I had met my uncle and his partner, but I certainly didn’t see any gay couples with children. And I definitely didn’t see in the popular media any examples of same-sex parenting. So it just wasn’t. Now I realize that I could have thought, well I could still do that, but at a younger age it just
didn’t enter my consciousness. I never saw gay parents. It just didn’t seem like something people did. It would be like getting an iguana as a pet or something – you just didn’t do that.

Yet just as his uncle had modeled the possibility of partnership many years ago, a role model recently opened up the possibility of parenthood for Graham. In this case, the role model was a college friend who at the time of the interview had been married to her wife for ten years. Graham said,

To see people who are committed to one another, and who kind of like shatter the stereotype of gay people’s inability to do that, and who are happy in their careers. My friend and her wife have a daughter they just adopted. They’re just a really positive couple. And they’re amazing parents. I think in a way they are more role models to me than people in my family. It’s definitely people who have it all. People who haven’t sacrificed their full humanness, and who show that gay people are just people, and you can have all the same things if you want them, not that you have to. Like you can be successful in your career and personal life and you can have children, and you’re not any more limited.

Graham and his partner have discussed having children, and he now imagines that they eventually will. Still, as his future possibilities continue to expand, certain elements remain uncertain. For example, Graham had a difficult time imagining himself in older age. He said that he saw few examples of older gay men, and could only speculate about their lives. His uncle’s death had also left him wondering what happens to gay men as they reach older age, especially if their partner has died:
I certainly didn’t see many elderly gay couples in my life. What do people do after 40? Where are the gay couples then? I wondered, what does gay retirement look like? I remember actually visiting my grandpa who went to Florida in the winters, and it was hard for me to grapple with when he was single after my grandmother died. But he could go to these senior citizen parties, and singles would mingle, and so would couples, and everyone was accepted. And I remember thinking, what do you do if you’re gay and old? And if you’re gay and single, where do you go? I wonder what happens when either my partner or I dies? Where do I go then? Back to the bars?

Graham said that he saw the gay community as offering little to older gay men. He said, “It’s one thing to couple off and have your own gay existence privately, but in terms of community, and like social interaction, I think it is a lot about going to bars, and looking cute, and young, and I don’t know that there’s that much positive support for anything other than that in terms of people coming to together, especially when you’re older.”

In general, Graham saw the evolution of his vision of the future as one toward greater optimism for attaining the things he valued most—professional success, partnership, having children. His future had evolved from isolation and secrecy at the foot of an “abyss,” to a sense of being accepted by others and heading down what could be considered a fairly “conventional” path into adulthood. He identified coming out, especially to his family, as a critical step in this process. Yet, while coming out seemed to open up some possibilities, he also perceived that being out as gay constricted him:
Despite everything I said about coming out and how positive it was, I also remember that before coming out, people would introduce me as ‘this is Graham,’” and that would mean all of who I was, when I was still closeted. It meant introducing someone who was smart, and kind, and all of these things. And then when I came out, it was like I was introduced as, “he’s gay.” As long as I was considered straight, I was recognized for who I was, and once people knew I was gay, when they met me, they decided who I was. When I was straight I could be whoever, but once they were like, he’s gay, they knew who I was, before knowing me. It is much more narrow as an identity. So even in terms of life vision, it does affect people and me in terms of how I see myself, this identity that I felt like I was assigned.

Thus Graham wonders about his future—will he be seen, or even experience himself, as a gay father, a gay husband, a gay man, or as a man, husband, and father, unmodified?

Vykas.

Vykas is a 28-year-old first-generation Indian-American employed in marketing, living in a urban area. He has a Bachelor’s Degree from a large public university. He grew up in the suburbs of a mid-sized Midwestern city. He is currently single. He is “out” to friends and colleagues, and to his parents and siblings, but not to members of his extended family.

Vykas began his written narrative in this way: “I think that, on the whole, I have always assumed that my life, especially in terms of profession, will undertake many
changes and twists over the course of my adulthood.” He went on to write that as a high school and college student, he was always encouraged to “diversify” his interests, to develop broad, analytical abilities and a breadth of knowledge and skills that could be applied to a range of occupations. At 28, however, Vykas said that he is left with a sense of being “duped” by this training, and that he is coming to see that he needs a specialty, a focus, and that he feels ill-equipped to find one. He said that he currently feels quite “foggy” about his professional future, and that a major aspect of his future thinking at this time is to imagine how to funnel his varied interest and skills into an occupation. Vykas explained that high school and college provided a structure for achievement and progress, but in the more ambiguous “real world,” one had to chart one’s own vision of progress and future—and this was proving difficult. He wondered if a smaller city would help him to focus, as so many options abound in his current large metropolitan home that he often feels paralyzed by choice. He expressed a great deal of anxiety about his professional future and his life in general, stating, “It seems hopeless. That there are only so many people who are going to make it through, and do what they want to do. So I do worry about that a lot.”

Writing about his personal life, Vykas began, “I cannot profess to have any great idea as to how my life will progress.” He identified finding a partner as a major goal, but said that he was very doubtful about achieving this. Throughout his written narrative and the interview, Vykas repeatedly described feeling like an outsider—marked as “different” by his race (he is a first-generation Indian-American), his sexuality, and by what he perceived to be his “singular” personality. He described feeling like an outsider within
the gay community too, again marked as different by his race and by what he called his lack of “conventional physical attractiveness.” All of these factors significantly affected his vision of the future, which he generally regarded as quite vague, subject to chance, influenced by others but on which he himself could exert only limited agency. He wrote:

I have often had a particularly difficult time imagining a “normal” life plan for myself, as defined by being in a committed relationship, planning a life with a partner, and then perhaps starting a family or doing what most family units do. Truly, the romantic end of my life eludes me; if I try to envision myself in a committed relationship, taking it as an accepted and reliable thing, I find myself very doubtful that any such thing should come my way. Generally, I have a tendency to think that I operate outside the realm of the “normal” gay man. I often see my role in the gay community as being a source of entertainment as opposed to an actual romantic fulfillment to someone. This is why, when I think of my future, I can see it only in vague counterpoint to the “normal” futures I try to envision others having. I tend to think that my existence will be one of much transition and adaptation to the various life markers of other people as opposed to what I, myself, achieve outright.

Vykas reiterated this theme throughout the interview—that compared to others who may have a plan or outlines or structure for their futures, his own future was highly malleable. He imagined his life taking shape around others’ lives, as opposed to being driven by what he wanted himself. He acknowledged that this attitude was in part motivated by anxiety that his desires for his future were not realistic or attainable, so that he had decided not to hold on to too many hopes or expectations. However, he also said that, on a societal level, there were fewer expectations and conventions to structure his
life as a gay man compared to heterosexual men. He spoke about his heterosexual twin brother as a ready counterpoint to himself:

If my brother wants to be a family man, and have a life in the suburbs, he can have it. All that traditional stuff, he can do it. I’m freer of that in a way because I’m gay, so the idea of settling and having a family and all that seems necessarily a little more removed. The trade off is that as gay men we have to go through this whole hard process of coming out and things, but as a straight man, especially in a more traditional Eastern culture, that’s a burden too. So it’s this odd trade off in a way. It’s much harder for them in terms of meeting specific markers in life. Like I have no doubt my mother is looked down on in a way because most of her friends’ children are all married off, and my mother has two sons and one of them is gay and the other is not married. So as proud of us as my parents are, I think others don’t see it that way. And our futures are so uncertain. But I think my brother is the most likely to have that future. His life is the one out of the two of us that’s following that a priori trajectory that we both thought we would have until recently.

Vykas explained that while his being gay was difficult for his parents to accept and is a stigmatized identity among the larger Indian-American community, being gay also “excused” him from specific cultural and familial expectations and pressures about the way his life should take shape. He was happy to be free of these expectations, but, again, this “freedom” left him in the confusing position of inventing a future for himself. Vykas realized he was gay at a relatively young age (around 10 or 11 years old), and spoke of “knowing that I was different” even earlier. He said that he never really
imagined having a conventional future, or “passing” as heterosexual; rather, his future was a kind of blank. He said,

To be honest, for the greater part of my life, not until the last year or two, as I approach 30, but I’ve always had this thought in my head that I wouldn’t make it to 30. I just couldn’t envision my life past the age of 30, especially as a kid and a teenager. I never envisioned it happening. I think it was an emotional mechanism, because if I really thought about it, it would make me too anxious. Like if I’m really responsible for another 30-40 years of living….It just never. I don’t know if I thought I would die or what. I really had the tendency to push that away. So it’s a relatively new thing to think about. (What did you imagine would happen when you reached 30?) I think it was…just a question mark. I always tell people that I envisioned myself as the fun gay uncle. So when my brothers got older and had families, I would be like the one interloper. So it was something very frivolous, undefined, dictated by the life markers of other people. That other people who have family units and things, I would live in a reactionary sense to what was happening in their lives. And I still tend to imagine things that way.

As Vykas worked to fill in the “blank” of his future life, he imagined other roles for himself. While the “fun gay uncle” could function as a viable role, Vykas experienced this possibility as “frivolous.” Struggling to envision his own life, Vykas began to imagine himself as an “interloper” on the lives of others. Underlying even this possibility, Vykas said that he imagined the life of a gay man to be a life lived alone, a vision he carried throughout most of his childhood and adolescence:

Being gay, it was just always something I viewed as very solitary. Something you deal with alone. And you’re ostracized. You’re alone. So
when I think about my future, or especially as I thought about it as a kid, it’s solitary, so it was a projection of that sense I always had. And as a kid the handful of gay men I at least could identify, like maybe teachers in school, weren’t partnered, or didn’t seem to be. So I got the sense it was a lonely life.

Vykas said that this view has changed as a result of moving to an urban area, coming to know more gay men in relationships, and seeing gay male relationships portrayed in media. Regarding the latter, he said, “I do think things are steering away from showing gay men as whores, hooking up with random people, like that’s not the stereotype of gay men any more. Like, no, there is commitment and love, and I think there is more of an effort to highlight that. As opposed to the past when it was all about promiscuity.” Still, despite the increased visibility of gay relationships, Vykas questioned whether he would ever have such a relationship. This doubt again related to his view of himself as an outsider:

Like an older gay guy I know, who was actually one of my advisors in college, I’ve heard that he is in a long-term partnership. But the thing that comes into my mind with that is, well, he’s very conventionally attractive and has had a great level of success from an early age. So I see people who have fractions of what I’m talking about, but I see them as exceptions to the rule, to which I’m not privy. I do this often….When I think about my gay friends, I can’t really see anyone else who has an experience similar to mine, which is necessarily limiting. So I don’t know to what end I find solace in them, because it seems different. It seems outside. Like others are doing and being, and there’s me being apart from that.
Vykas connected this expectation of being alone, apart, as a factor in other components of his vision for his life. For example, he imagined that without a partner, he would not have the desire or ability to raise children. Vykas noted that as marriage and raising children become more visible options for gay men, these developments did not necessarily translate to his expecting these things for himself:

I do wonder, as things seemingly evolve for the LGBT community in this country, what role I will play. Will I be on the sidelines watching as others appropriate what has until now been a rather heteronormative life experience as legitimate trajectories for their own lives as LGBT people in a changing America? Or if I, more unbelievably, will participate more so in that process myself than I have a knack for envisioning. I envision myself being surrounded by close friends, but I also assume that most of my friends will begin normative lifestyles of their own with life partners, spouses, etc., so I will have to rely a great deal on my own creativity and ability to find entertainment alone.

Thus Vykas imagines being “left behind” by others—both gay and heterosexual—who will go on to pursue “normative lifestyles” that he does not imagine for himself. Yet in addition to the uncertainty his own “outsider” status creates in his vision of the future, Vykas also expressed a confidence and satisfaction in his ability to “survive on his wits,” a positive dimension to his singularity that helped him to imagine carving out a path into his future. Articulating both his anxiety and hopefulness about the future, Vykas said,

Well, I don’t know if this is a fault of mine, but I do have this innate sense that I’ll be fine, because there is something different or dynamic or creative about me that will help me. But sometimes I don’t know if that’s naïve to think. Like clearly someone of my ability, or hard work, won’t
just collapse, like there has to be a way through. Though I start to worry that wow, maybe I won’t get to where I want to be… and that’s a new feeling for me. Because generally I’ve thought, no, if you work hard… but now I’m thinking maybe that’s not enough. It’s trickier that I thought. But in terms of thinking about my future, I think, ok, I’ll be ok, I’ll figure it out.

Themes

In this section, themes derived from an analysis of the data from all ten participants are presented. The themes are illustrated with quotes from the participants’ written narratives and interviews.

Late to the Game.

Sixty percent of participants expressed a sense of feeling delayed or “behind the curve” when they considered their progress toward the future they imagined for themselves, or compared to other’s lives. This sense applied to various domains of life, from work to romantic relationships to identity formation. For some, this sense of being “behind” colored the process of thinking about the future with anxiety. As Colin stated,

I guess the thing I have the most urgency and worry and guilt about is the professional life and financial future. I feel like I really need to be in that very soon, and I’ve taken such a long time kind of bumbling along the road, figuring things out. It’s been really nice and great, but now I’m like, ugh, I really need to figure out my career. And I’m really feeling late to the game…. I feel like my peers—especially my peers I did undergrad with—are much further along professionally and family-wise.
While Colin identified his college peers as the benchmark against which he measures his own sense of being behind, others identified heterosexuals generally as the benchmark. Going a step further, Vykas spoke about his sense of being behind even in comparison to other gay men:

It seems that most gay men I know have had relatively similar experiences of identifying their sexuality, coming out, beginning their sexual lives most often in college and then honing those experiences to have more fulfilling adult lives in terms of romance and sex. I have always found myself operating outside of that construct, and in a way, I think generally that once one is behind that curve, it is quite hard to catch up, as it were. Others have already cleared certain bars in their lives and want to build from there, and the idea of regressing to accommodate someone else’s comparatively undeveloped life experience seems counterproductive and counterintuitive.

In the quote above, Vykas expresses a certain hopelessness at the prospect of “catching up.” He imagines that his being behind alienates him from others, who would not want to “regress” to “accommodate” him into their more “developed” lives. Thus, whether measured against peers generally, heterosexuals, or even other gay men, participants shared a sense of being behind, leading to anxiety and a sense of difference from others.

While some participants did not explicitly connect this sense of being “late to the game” with being gay, other participants did make these links. One common link cited by participants involved feeling that as children or teenagers they were unable to engage in certain developmental experiences (particularly involving sex and relationships) because
they were closeted and subject to heterosexual norms and expectations. Some participants described investing time in exploring heterosexual relationships, whether out of an effort to be or at least to “pass” as heterosexual, or because of curiosity or confusion regarding their sexual desires. Whatever the motivation for engaging in heterosexual relationships, participants described then feeling behind with regard to how to develop and sustain same-sex relationships when they chose or finally had opportunities to do so. As Colin said,

I dated a girl for most of high school. I think I knew I was gay, but I was also attracted to her at the time and it was just a lot easier to pursue that than to try to get involved with other guys. But then in college when I came out, trying to date men was like starting over. I felt like a 14 year old. I mean, a really horny 14-year-old who had more freedom to get sex, I guess, but in terms of actually dating or making a relationship, I felt clueless. I don’t know, maybe that wasn’t about me, or says more about gay dating culture or something, but I definitely felt like my straight friends were pairing off seriously and I was just fooling around.

Other participants suggested that sexual activity is accelerated among gay men because, in the course of development, gay men may have more opportunities to have sex with men than to practice more involved, intimate or romantic relationships with men. Thus participants described a sense of sexual development that outpaced romantic development. As Bradley said,

When I was a kid in the time when people were starting to date, and me not being able to do that, my orientation became more sexualized because that was the opportunity that was more viable, compared to romance. I
saw people around me who had possibilities open to them that didn’t seem open to me, and even my early experiences with men were sexualized. I remember there was this guy I was sleeping with in high school off and on, and I tried to—it wasn’t like even making it romantic—just acknowledging that I was actually attracted to his body as opposed to making it about, ‘oh, we can’t get girls,’ which was the premise. And that turned him off. He was like, what is it with you? And that was very hurtful. It was sort of a moment, a crystallizing moment that, wow, even in this setting where I’m sleeping with this guy, I’m fucked, I can’t be honest. And I think that actually being affectionate and warm or whatever, that was seemingly out of the question too, and I think I was really starved for that.

Bradley went on to describe how he ultimately felt lacking and behind his peers with regard to developing relationships, a problem with which he said he continues to grapple today:

I often wonder what it would have been like if I had found my stride at some point and didn’t have the burden of being gay. I think that I have a wish that I would have been able to have had the dating experiences that straight kids had at like 13. I feel like I’m behind the curve with that, experientially and developmentally. *(What gets developed at that age that you think you missed?)* Well the way I imagine it… First of all there’s all the pitfalls of dating. You get to figure out what is it like to be with someone, what does that mean, what does it consist of, how do I feel about, what kind of person is for me, what is this whole ritual, this attraction and mating thing, how do you do it?
Josh echoed this sense of being “behind the curve” with regard to relationships:

Sex was always totally disconnected from relationships for me, because the idea of actually having a boyfriend, when I was a teenager, was just totally out of the question. So I just had a lot of sexual fantasies about men with absolutely no expectation that it would ever happen as part of a relationship. Like, if sex happened at all, it would have to be secret and illicit. And that’s what my first sexual experiences were like, secretive. So, now, trying to figure out how to integrate sex with a real relationship, still feels like something that eludes me. Maybe not a lot of people know how to do that, but it feels like my straight friends have that more figured out.

In addition to delays in relationship skills or development, participants also suggested that the formation of a consistent sense of self can be delayed for gay men. As Damien said,

There are definitely some delays in finding who you are for gays. Like especially for people who don’t realize they’re gay, or won’t accept it. That can be really, really hard. They may not be the adult they want to be. They could be Jim McGreevy and marry a woman, and living a lie. I guess you’re still an adult. Not a happy adult. And then if you decide to start all over you’re like way behind everyone else.

Multiple participants referred to a sense of being psychologically wounded or preoccupied by experiences of being closeted or encountering homophobia, in a way that impaired, and may continue to impair, moving forward. As Josh stated,

All that time I spent thinking about, and feeling scared about being gay and what it would mean to come out of the closet and all that, and just the energy of maintaining that secret, felt like it sapped my energy for
planning for my life or even thinking about what I wanted. I still feel like that sometimes, even though I’m not closeted now at all. That I’m still worried about what others think about me, or still recovering from being closeted for all those years, that I haven’t done the work my peers have in terms of pursuing other goals and planning for their futures. Sometimes I feel like I don’t even know what I like to do, or what kind of people I would like to be with. So I end up feeling kind of lost, like others have moved ahead to more productive things and I’m still stewing in my angst back here by myself. It’s like, what’s wrong with me?

Echoing this sense of isolation, Vykas said,

Then when you get older and you see some people who went through what you went through as a child, and are dating and stuff, that it’s not solitary, but maybe you still hide behind that idea because it protects you from having to get out there and live it, and then you find yourself behind the curve. Because you saw it as solitary, as limiting, or you saw it as no one else could identify with you, so you didn’t take advantage of finding solace in people around you, and all sharing the experience together, and moving through it together.

Thus Vykas suggests that, for him, seeing himself as alone and separate persists beyond a point where these assumptions are challenged. He attributes this persistence to a need for protection, a way of justifying avoidance and not “getting out there.” Vykas views himself as having failed to take advantage of opportunities to “move through it together,” and ending up behind the curve. For Josh, Vykas, and other men in the study, perceptions of being “delayed” by issues related to sexuality are colored with a sense of personal failure and implicit shame. While participants could attribute these perceived delays to homophobia and external circumstances, they seemed often to be left with a
question of, “What’s wrong with me?” As illustrated in many of the statements above, a sense of starting behind the curve can color considerations of the future with anxiety and potentially hopelessness. Of course, not all of the men expressed this sense of being late to the game; a minority of participants described feeling on track with their heterosexual and homosexual peers. Moreover, some participants rejected the notion of keeping up with the curve, and cited the inevitability and the value of different trajectories for different people. One participant suggested a distinct “gay timeline,” on which various life events—particularly related to “settling down” into a relationship—occur later; this participant did not view this as inherently problematic or undesirable, but noted that from the “heterosexual” perspective gay men may appear to be immature or behind where they “should be” in life.

**Considering the options: Straight futures, Gay futures.**

Eighty percent (80%) of the men described considering a heterosexual identity and life course at some point in their development. They described a range of events leading to the rejection of this possibility, including the discovery of gay role models, meeting gay peers, dating men, traveling, and leaving the family home to go away to college. Participants also described different emotional reactions to “giving up” a “straight” future, from relief to sadness.

Like others, Anthony said that before realizing he was gay he shared the “default” vision of the future with his peers, a vision of heterosexual life. He said,
I remember doing this exercise in grade school where we had to predict what our lives would be like, like by the time we went off to college. And I remember thinking I would go to an Ivy League college, because I idolized my friend’s dad who went there. And he was a doctor, and I thought I wanted to be a doctor. And I thought I wanted to have lots of kids, probably because that same friend also had like 6 brothers and sisters, and I always thought it was boring that I had only one brother. And I imagined having a wife and lots of kids in that scenario. I also imagined having a big house on the top of the hill in my town where all the doctors lived and having a family in Eugene. Now it seems so provincial. I think it was kind of naïve. Maybe that’s all you can imagine growing up in Eugene, but it becomes impossible to imagine that life being satisfying after having lived and traveled all over the world. But I think the idea of going back and having some connection to that still is appealing.

For Anthony, traveling as well as finding gay role models led to his ultimately rejecting this vision of the future, but he recalled it with a certain nostalgia. He wondered if he might someday find a way to live part-time in his hometown, and hoped that his parents would always live there so that he could maintain a connection to the place—and the life he once imagined living there.

Damien said that after realizing he was gay at a young age, he considered a “heterosexual” future of being with women:

So yeah once I figured out I was gay I thought I’d be alone, and unhappy, if things continued and if I didn’t change. But then I thought maybe I could be into girls, and I had close female friends, so there was that idea going on too. I could imagine the possibilities. Like would it be a sexless relationship? Would I be able to do that? Where would things stop? Would
I like that? Besides kindergarten play-time doctor games, I hadn’t had any sexual contact with women, but I’d had sexual contact with other boys early on, so I didn’t know what was in the realm of possibility.

Damien went on to say that he rejected the possibility of this heterosexual future in high school, at one point considering the possibility of “celibacy,” and finally starting to imagine a life as an openly gay man. He said that meeting and eventually dating other gay men in college fueled this transition.

Leo described dating women in his teens and believing he would pursue a heterosexual life:

I was dating the girl for a while in high school. I was 15, going on 16. And I dated her for 10 months, and we fooled around but never had sex. Then she went away on vacation and came back, and I was like, ugh, I just decided I’m gay. Of course I had known for a long time. That was really rough for me. I mean during that whole time I did consider all the time what it would be like to live that life, a straight life. I mean, having a house and kids and marriage. But there was always this feeling that my heart wasn’t in it fully, and I didn’t know why, because I was trying so hard to not know why. And then once I finally did know why, it clicked, and from then on I didn’t really think about the conventional way.

Describing his reaction at the time to rejecting a “heterosexual” future, Leo said, “It was rough. It’s always rough starting out in one way and realizing nothing is going to be easy, because the other world, not everyone is going to agree with your way of living. Not everyone is going to have your mindset about it. Like people say it’s a choice. Right, because I choose to live with everyone being up against me.” For Leo, abandoning the
“heterosexual future” he had considered meant facing a more difficult life as a gay man in which “nothing is going to be easy.” The choice was between hiding his sexuality and living in a way that his “heart” was not in, or coming out and living with others “up against” him.

Recall how Graham (as described in the case study) also imagined limited and somewhat bleak options:

I think even then, let’s say first grade, I think I knew I had certain options. Like I could keep it a secret forever and marry a woman. I think I knew I could do that… that I could be gay and still choose to marry a woman. I could keep it a secret forever and be alone. I could be like really promiscuous, like the stereotype that was prevalent in the media, like being this sexual deviant. I’m trying to think whether I honestly thought about the possibility of a committed relationship with a man at that age. I don’t know that I did. I think it was like an abyss. I just didn’t know what was going to happen.

For Graham, the only “gay” futures imaginable where isolation and secrecy, or becoming a “sexual deviant.” Graham said that perceiving these options contributed to his staying closeted as a teenager, and made it difficult to imagine any satisfying future at all.

Not only imagining repressing or keeping his homosexual desire a secret, Josh said that as a teenager he wished that he could actually become heterosexual and desire women. He connected this with an almost desperate desire for a “heterosexual” life, and an inability to imagine any alternatives:
I sometimes prayed that I would become straight, like actually prayed. And I was always wishing to become normal, to not be gay, which was this really bad and scary thing in my mind. I would imagine marrying a woman and having kids and stuff, but it would leave me with this sick feeling—like I could do it, but it would never be right, or true. And that I would always feel so alone with my secret. But then on the other hand, that straight life was the only life I could imagine. It felt like, without that, there wasn’t any life at all. So I just lived in this suspended state of anxiety for years there, when I was a teenager.

Josh said going to college in a distant state opened up possibilities for a future as a gay man; he attributed this to meeting other gay men, and seeing that gay relationships were possible. However, he said that he still wonders about the “heterosexual” future he had once considered:

I know it wouldn’t have worked, to marry a woman and stuff, but there’s still a part of me that’s sad that I won’t ever have that. I think I can have basically the same things as a gay person, but there is something sad about knowing I’ll never have that traditional life. That there was this whole other future I might have had. I don’t wish for that now and I’m glad not to be so tortured about it, but there is some sadness there.

**Conventional Milestones: Set free, or excluded from?**

All of the participants described certain conventions or milestones they saw as central to a vision of the future. These included deciding on a career, achieving financial stability, living independently from the family of origin, and forming a long-term relationship (though that relationship may not necessarily be monogamous or lifelong). Participants identified other conventions that they perceived to structure the future
visions of heterosexuals, but with which they as gay men had a more complicated relationship. These conventions included marriage, having children, developing a masculine identity, and participating in religion. Participants described a range of attitudes toward these conventions—aspiring to expecting to achieve them, feeling blocked from attaining them, or feeling happily liberated from them. And when one’s access to these conventions or structures feels partially or completely blocked, what is the impact on one’s view of the future? Vykas encapsulated this dilemma in his comment:

We are free from certain responsibilities as gay men, like automatically having to support a family, have children, attract a woman to marry. We’re not beholden to the same things, and does that help or hinder us? It’s freed me up. I don’t feel the heavy weight of that, in maybe the ways my straight brother does. But at the same time it doesn’t give you the kick in the rear end to sort these things out. You’re given a pass, so you don’t have to engage with it. So it’s a win-lose situation. It’s like when people joke about marriage—like, yeah, let gays get married so they can be just as miserable as everyone else. So there’s good and bad there. It’s not all just frolicking through the forest and being happy.

Others described this dialectic between conventionality and unconventionality, conformity and non-conformity, as a central concern in their lives, so much so that they felt it was almost a part of their personality. As Anthony said, “I realized I like the idea of reconciling very different things in my life. Trying to find ways to reconcile different interests.” For some participants, the poles of the dialectic were symbolized or promoted by family members, friends, or other figures. For example, Colin said, “I’ve always had this conflict between being eccentric or different and not following every day laws versus
a more traditional nature. And I see that as a conflict between my mother and father. My mother being pretty eccentric, and my father as very traditional. So being gay definitely makes it more complicated, to be so unconventional, especially in my father’s eyes. It’s something I feel very torn about.” Some of the men felt that negotiating conformity and non-conformity led them to be especially sensitive and thoughtful people. Josh said, “It’s hard growing up gay, but I wouldn’t wish otherwise because I feel like it gives you a unique perspective, and that’s a strength. You think about things and notice things and can understand people in a way that those who have never questioned themselves really can’t do.”

Like other participants, Leo described often experiencing his family as the promoters of convention, against which he had to struggle to formulate his own vision of his life:

It gets hammered into you what the conventional life should be. The husband and wife, two kids, picket fence, that kind of life. And I hadn’t experienced anything else other than that, so it was hard to realize that I wanted something different. And then once I went to school and realized there are so many different types of living out there, I pretty much changed my whole view, like who I was, and it was great to get away and experience that. But me and my dad totally see things differently because he never left our town. So he’s still in that conventional…. Like he totally supports me, like he’s not mad I’m gay, but in other aspects of conventional life we just don’t click. He doesn’t get the kind of life I want to have. Like what types of roles in a relationship you should play. And he’s very stubborn in his ways, like he doesn’t cook and doesn’t want to learn. And I’m like, that’s such the conventional way, and he doesn’t care.
And it was just annoying because he’s complaining about my mom not cooking every night. Sometimes my family, they gang up on me. When it comes to beliefs, they try to shove theirs down my throat.

Many of the men spoke of the difficulty of striking a balance between wanting to conform or please others, and planning a life according to their own desires. Josh said,

You’re in this weird position as a gay man. You’re used to being really conscious of what others want, and maybe trying to pass as that, but also realizing that’s not really you. So when I look ahead to my future, I feel like I’m still doing that—I’m trying to anticipate what others want, like my parents. Like to have a monogamous partner, children probably, that would make them happy. And I think I want that too, but then I’m not sure, because I’m used to kind of shoving my desires under the rug.

The following sections illustrate some of these themes with regard to specific conventions or institutions—marriage and having children, participating in religion, and the norms of masculinity.

_Marriage & Children._

All of the participants described feeling that marriage and having children did not figure as automatically in their views of the future as they did for heterosexuals. The absence of marriage and children as “givens” made constructing a vision of the future somewhat more difficult or complicated. As Colin stated,

If you are married then it’s very easy to say what you want or imagine for the future. As long as you’re reasonably happy in your marriage, then that’s one whole part of your narrative and your family that’s kind of
checked off. And when you think about your own future you can think about hopes and expectations for your spouse, and for your kids. That’s something that’s settled, so you don’t have to worry about it anymore. So I think that not having that same kind of finality in that aspect just makes other aspects equally hard to pin down. I am currently in a male-male relationship, and in our state marriage isn’t really an option, and I don’t even know if we would go with that option. So, yeah, I just don’t have that finality. I think normally people’s spouses are quite a part of their life decisions, even career decisions. Whereas me, two people on different paths, but because we don’t have the kind of everyday status like married people, it’s just not… it’s just different.

Thus Colin suggests that marriage and having children offers a “narrative” for the future that is not as readily available to gay men. Furthermore, he suggests that one’s own vision of the future is built through imagining the future of close relations, and making decisions together. While such relations are not exclusive to marriage, the “finality” that marriage and child-rearing confers may make a married spouse and children particularly stable anchors for future-thinking. Several of the men noted that having children would be possible, but more difficult for them than for heterosexuals or lesbians. In addition to legal complications and the question of how to obtain a child, the men cited the lack of role models and limited social support for gay male parents as factors that would make having children “a struggle.” Participants also noted concerns—such as finances, time commitment, and being “tied down”—that would apply to any one considering having a child.
Bradley described feeling that the conventional timeline for marriage and children can be a driving force for heterosexuals, a pressure (and an opportunity) that is not as automatically available for gay men:

You feel different when your straight friends are getting married and stuff, and not being in that same boat, not having the same social expectations, not having the societal support for it, not going through the whole kids thing in the same way. Starting even in her twenties, my sister felt like she had to get married, create a family and make babies, which I don’t have the time pressure for that. As a woman in her late twenties, she’s like, I gotta make this happen. I actually think that made me feel more alienated from her and other straight people than I did in college, because of those differences that start emerging.

Several of the men noted that while developing a long-term relationship was a major component of their view of the future, the possibility of legal marriage lent a different quality to their future-thinking. Specifically, participants imagined that marriage would confer a public “legitimacy” and recognition that would contribute to a sense of achieving adulthood in society. Graham, who is in a long-term committed relationship in a state where gay marriage is not legal, said that he and his partner were considering a non-legal marriage ceremony. He said that he would call his partner “husband,” whether or not it were legally recognized. However, he acknowledged that a legal marriage would be meaningful. He commented,

Gay marriage is definitely meaningful. It definitely shaped what I wanted and what I thought was possible. I guess if I thought it was an impossibility, if there were no legal options at all, I guess what I have now
would be as much as I could have. So the possibility of marriage adds a new chapter to my own view of what’s possible for me. Obviously the legal rights we would have are important. Though I think much more important, and less talked about… You know, you hear people talking about the legal rights, and that everyone has the right to love, and to stand up in front of the family and make that commitment, and for it not to be a second-rate commitment, and it should equally be a till-death-do-us-part thing… but I think another aspect that doesn’t get as much attention because it’s hard to verbalize or pinpoint, is the huge validation that’s attached to a real marriage, as opposed to “I’m living with my boyfriend.” I think that cannot be overestimated. Even I think I underestimate it. It sends a message to everyone that it’s completely ok to hold my boyfriend, my husband’s hand in public, and it’s completely not ok for anyone to say anything negative about these couples. It just sends a message that people don’t even think about. It would make me feel a lot better to say, we’re married, especially if it were legally married. I just think the message of validation is just like… you don’t want to admit that you need validation from anyone but yourself, but it’s just the truth. To be recognized as like equally human to everyone else, you can’t duplicate that through any other way.

Other participants echoed the desire for validation and recognition—making a relationship “real”—but rejected the need for legal marriage. For example, Matt said, “I couldn’t care less about the political gay marriage stuff, but I think it is important to me to have some sort of ceremony or some way of recognizing if I partner with someone that it’s for real. And I think my outlook on that is affected by my being gay and not subscribing to the marriage hegemony.” In explaining his views on “marriage hegemony,” Matt described the value he places on creating a view of the future that does
not rely on marriage and having children as the markers of adulthood. In fact, he feels disappointed when he sees other gay people adhering to these conventions:

I know there are certainly plenty of gay folk who have kids, but if I’m going to be honest, I don’t consider that to be part of gay adult development. For myself, and in general. I still think, when I hear about gay folks having kids, there’s a part of me that thinks that’s good, but if it’s people I know, there’s that part of me that feels disappointment that you’re growing up and you’re accepting this more settled down lifestyle. I think it’s pretty nice that now we as a culture can sort of be adults and not have that mean having a family and living in the suburbs, that sort of thing.

In a similar vein, Anthony argued that the idea of a life-long committed relationship, whether legally sanctioned or not, may be a heterosexual model that need not only be the only option for gay men:

And maybe just something about the idea that gay partnerships are so conventional that they would be exactly like heterosexual domestic partnerships, where it’s expected you’ll move into a retirement community together and travel together after you retire. That seems like a heterosexual concept and I’m not sure it means that’s what gay partnerships should look like. And maybe in 50 years I’ll look back and think it was so narrowminded that I thought gay men were not capable of monogamy or, you know, that they couldn’t with their gay partners to assisted living facilities together. That my lack of imagination is culturally-contrived. But I also don’t want to just imagine gay life courses from this heterosexual lens, that it will be exactly the same but with two men or two women. I’m not sure it will be just the same, maybe they’re both changing.
Vykas said that posing partnership as the only model of satisfying adulthood was too narrow. He said, “On the straight end too, the idea that someone single couldn’t possibly be fulfilled. And that’s reductionist, they’re might be people who really like being single.” Colin said that he could imagine alternative forms of adulthood, ones that did not rely on marriage and/or children for legitimacy, or on any relationship, for that matter:

There’s definitely lots of people, like my Aunt, who never get married. We don’t really know maybe what’s going on between the sheets, but they don’t have any visible partner, and they live the life of the mind, or whatever it is, their thing.

However, Colin added that in thinking about his own future, a “life of the mind” seemed to offer only a vague path into the future, compared to the concrete milestones of marriage and having children.

**Religion.**

Forty percent of the men identified religion as an institution that had the potential to structure one’s vision of the future, though these men varied widely in the degree to which they felt they had—or could—use religion in this way. Bradley described growing up in a chaotic household, and regarding his parents as “negative role models” for what his life could become. He felt that he lacked a “compass” for his life, a feeling exacerbated by his being gay and lacking gay adult role models. He questioned whether he could have found “direction” in the church, as his sister had done:
My sister, who is straight, escaped the nastiness and bitterness and lack of safety in the house, by starting to go to a church. I think she enjoyed the norms of civility there that didn’t exist in our house. And probably she enjoyed the sense of a moral compass that didn’t really exist in our house. Unfortunately it turned into… I don’t know why she couldn’t have been just like a moderate protestant. She turned into a bible thumper. But I don’t know, I guess at this point I’d rather be me than her, because I think I can have some of the things I want without having had to go sign away the usage of my brain like she did. But I think in the short term it helped her create a family and make babies. It got her out of there. And I went through some really bad mental health stuff that she avoided. I think that she, by having the church and a husband and a relatively stable family, avoided getting that close to death. Fortunately things have worked out for me and I’m still here and ok, but I certainly couldn’t have gone to any church and tried to get accepted there. It was not even an option as a gay person. I mean that would have been ridiculous to go to the church.

Bradley suggests that his sister was able to envision and create a path into the future through the norms and values of the church. She also developed an identity (a “bible thumper”)—an identity that Bradley did not want for himself, but that offered his sister a path out of the family. Bradley went on to explain that his own “mental health stuff” related to feeling hopeless and critical of himself. With no community outside the family to turn to for acceptance as a gay man, he had difficulty imagining a path forward. Other men echoed this dilemma: Experiencing the family as invalidating, but, because of being gay, lacking other communities or institutions for validation.
Josh, who was raised Catholic, described feeling like a “fraud” when he did participate in the church. He described how the Catholic Church’s sacraments serve as markers along the path of a “good Catholic,” from birth to death. He said,

You can do the whole plan, from baptism to confirmation to marriage to then having kids and getting them baptized, all the way to confession or last rites when you’re dying. So there was this whole Catholic future ahead of me, and I was acting like I was on the road, getting confirmed at 14, going to church with my family every week. But it was all fake, because I knew I was gay and that wasn’t ok with the church. But at 14 and around that age I thought maybe I would just keep going and live as straight, get married and have kids. I didn’t care so much about being religious, but it was just the most obvious place where this whole traditional life path was set out and talked about and you could see it with all the families at mass and everything. Obviously they didn’t have any alternatives for gay Catholics, like other ways to have a life in the church. Maybe being a priest… I’m just kidding. But there wasn’t any other way anywhere, not just in the church.

Josh said that he had felt guilty during his adolescence for participating in the church while keeping his sexuality a secret. After high school he stopped practicing Catholicism, and said that he now regards religion with some disdain. Graham, who also was raised as Catholic, described a similar experience of participating in the church while knowing that his sexuality was not compatible with its teachings. However, he found that his vision of the future was shaped by Catholicism, that he imagined a “gay version” of at least some aspects of the life Catholicism prescribed. He said,
I think on some level, even when I realized I was gay, I still thought, oh, I’ll be basically married, just to a man. I was raised in a Catholic family. So I only ever saw committed relationships. I never saw divorce, or any single adults for any reason. You weren’t supposed to get divorced. Like I only saw married adults everywhere, so that was a default. I never saw anything else.

In Anthony’s case, religion actually did offer an alternative to more conventional heterosexual and homosexual life-paths. Anthony seriously considered becoming a priest or monk, and had role models of gay priests and nuns. Anthony said he was drawn to the religious life path because it offered community and purpose in a way that a secular future could not. While he did not see religious life as incompatible with a homosexual identity, he saw that it would have implications for his sexual life. For example, one could in a sense avoid the question of sexuality, which would be more difficult to do as a secular person, gay or straight. This possibility had its appeal at one point in his development, when he was uncertain about his own sexual desires. On the other hand, even as a priest who was openly gay among his fellow priests, he would not be able to pursue a relationship and “public” gay life. These, among other considerations unrelated to sexuality, eventually led him to pursue a secular life. Describing this decision, Anthony said,

I could have been an openly gay Jesuit priest. As a monk I think it would have been different. I would say most of the monastic communities have been more conservative, and I think you do sort of renounce your sexuality in order to live in a monastery. I do think at an earlier point, part of what was attractive about religious life was that you could avoid
coming out or the whole question of your sexuality. But I think even then it became clear that that process was really important and formative and you can’t avoid that self-realization and what it means to go through that. I think monks still have sexuality, but I don’t think they have a public life. So being an openly gay person in secular life doesn’t have an equivalent in community life where you’re in a lot of ways not living in an autonomous way, you’re living as part of a community. I still find something about that life very compelling.

Regarding the Catholic Church’s denouncement of homosexuality, Anthony said that, in reality, the Catholic Church lives with contradictions:

I find it to be characteristic of Catholicism. At its best I think it holds onto two different things that are hard to reconcile and acknowledges that both are mysterious and sacred in some way, and the connection between the two is maybe not obvious.

**Masculinity.**

Just as participants discussed the influence of marriage and religion on their life plan, they also identified “masculinity” as an institution that had the potential to shape who they saw themselves becoming. This concept tapped into fundamental ideas and anxieties about what it means to become an “adult man.” In contrast to concerns about attaining concrete “milestones” (such as having children), concerns about masculinity cut to the core of participants’ “future self.” Whatever objective milestones they attained, who were they now, and who would they be in the future? All of the men reported a sense that by being gay, they were not conforming to the norms of masculinity. Especially as children and young adults, they struggled with the question of how to imagine themselves
as adult men, knowing they violated the masculinity that defined men as men. Anthony described feeling that there was no future as a man outside the norms of masculinity; this rendered “gay adult male” a non-viable future, a “theoretical” possibility that could not hold water. As he commented,

I think in high school honestly the idea of homosexuality was almost theoretical. I don’t think I knew for a fact that people really identified as homosexual in significant numbers anywhere in this world. I had very rigid notions of what was masculine or not masculine. And I knew that wrestling on the wrestling team and not wearing too much hair product and not wearing penny loafers were all part of the definition of masculinity. Being gay was definitely not. I think part of that comes from my father. Though he also raised me with the idea that men can be vulnerable and men can cry and can have emotional lives. So, but I think I had a sense that there was one way to measure men, and it by this heterosexual ruler. And that homosexuality was only kind of a deficit on that ruler somehow. It wasn’t a lifestyle or an identity.

Rather than experiencing homosexuality as a freedom from conventional masculinity, non-conformity was experienced as a void, a “deficit.” As such, homosexuality did not offer a path forward, a workable lifestyle or identity. This led Anthony to consider alternative paths that were consistent with masculine norms—specifically a heterosexual future, or a religious life that would, in a way, excuse him from some of the demands of heteronormative masculinity without explicitly violating its norms.
For some participants, violating masculine norms also impacted future-thinking indirectly, by increasing stress and diverting energy from other developmental tasks. As Josh said,

I wasn’t like very feminine, but in high school some guys picked up on something that made them recognize I was gay, or at least not manly enough for their standards. And it opened me up to a lot of harassment. It was rough for a while there. And I kind of just got into survival mode, trying to keep a low profile, get through days without any problems. So while some of my friends were talking about relationships and all the stuff they wanted in their lives, I was kind of hunkered down. I was living day-to-day, I didn’t feel like I had the luxury of imagining a future that would be any different.

Josh also spoke of the energy he invested in trying to “pass” and appear masculine, which he said detracted from his exploring who he really was: “I spent so much time trying to act ‘normal,’ that I feel like I feel behind in terms of just becoming my self. I still have a hard time knowing who I want to be as I go forward. I don’t feel like I need to conform as much, but I’m not sure how else to figure out who I am.”

Patrick thought that he had an easier time imagining his future as a gay man because he had always been “masculine”: “You know, I’m pretty masculine. I don’t dress outrageously or have a lisp. I enjoy masculine things like sports. It probably hasn’t been as difficult for me as if I hadn’t conformed to some of those stereotypes.”

At the same time, some of the men felt that being gay liberated them from masculine norms, allowing them to imagine a more fulfilling identity. Being unconventional comes to have its own value. As Damien said, “Being a macho guy seems
really boring and limiting. I was glad to get to be different, creative, to imagine having this kind of artistic life, which I don’t think straight guys get to indulge in as much.” For others, being gay and masculine began to seem less and less incompatible as they left high school and encountered broader definitions of masculinity. Anthony described coming to admire the AIDS patients for whom he volunteered during college, in part because they seemed both strong and “beautiful”; they did not conform to stereotypical masculinity, yet were clearly “brave” men. Describing this reconciliation of conformity and non-conformity, “scandalous and not scandalous,” Anthony said,

These were men who I really admired, who seemed brave to be at that the ends of their lives and facing death, but at that same time they’re queens, who were operatic and loved Broadway musicals. Some dressed in drag. I think the idea that they could become both beautiful and men became contagious for me. It was like, yeah that is me, I can identify with that. The idea of being this beautiful contradiction. There’s something about it that’s scandalous and not scandalous. This combination of characteristics and redefinition of gender roles that is appealing and interesting, the different combinations that can occur. Yeah, the identity to me was something that then was really attractive. I didn’t want to not be gay. On the flip side the idea of being heterosexual became boring or less appealing, not as exciting and imaginative.

The gay “world” and life course.

Just as participants described complex attitudes toward certain conventions of “heterosexual futures,” they also described contending with certain conventions or
stereotypes of the “gay life course” and, especially as adolescents, the “gay world” they imagined encountering as adults.

Participants outlined various images of the “gay life course,” images they said they derived from their own experiences, gay men they know, media portrayals of gay men, and gay culture. While many of the participants acknowledged that their image of the life course was a stereotype, they also said that they struggled to formulate a more nuanced vision, in large part because they did not know many gay men at various ages and points in the life course different from their own. Participants also emphasized that they thought there was no one life course for gay men, and that cultural background and location (for example, urban versus rural) were significant variables. Participants also noted that their vision of the life course may be generation-specific, and that gay teenagers today might describe a different vision—for example, one that may more likely include marriage.

*Childhood and adolescence.*

Participants identified a first critical event in the gay life course of realizing one is attracted to other males. There was a fair degree of variability as to when this occurs, with some men reporting they first realized they were attracted to other boys as early as six or seven, and others reporting this occurring in adolescence. Vykas described knowing he was “different” from other boys as long as he could remember, but that he was not aware of what constituted the “difference” until he began to develop sexual feelings later in childhood. Josh suggested that a sense of difference initially involved
gender as opposed to sexuality per se: “I just didn’t feel comfortable with other boys, the stuff they did, the way they acted with each other. I liked being around girls more, and I had an idea pretty quickly that that was weird.” All of the participants described a period of secrecy, of feeling alone and confused with their burgeoning awareness of their sexuality. Bradley described this period as a struggle: “A lot of pain as a kid. There wasn’t as much coming out in high school as there is now, it was just too hostile. Yeah, a lot of pain and alienation, and sometimes overt hostility.” This period extended until the men came out, generally in high school, college, or shortly thereafter.

**Coming out, the twenties.**

Coming out was depicted as an exciting but anxious process that could extend over a long period; indeed, some of the men described coming out as an on-going, lifelong process—for example, to new colleagues and acquaintances. Coinciding with and extending beyond coming out, young adulthood was depicted as a time of exploration and increasing contact with other gay men. As Bradley said:

> Your college years, your twenties, it’s really kind of an exploration, an explosion. I guess there’s a lot of fickleness and sleeping around in that period, and figuring out what you want. I think there’s probably a lifelong gradual development of identity, a lot of healing of identity. There’s an initial explosion of, like, wow, I’m so gay, in your face or whatever, and then there’s like, where you end up, there’s got to be a lot more nuance than that.

While many of the men (who were in their twenties) characterized the twenties as a period of exploration, discovery, and fun for gay men, they also tended to view
themselves as different from the “typical” young gay man—as more mature, more interested in serious relationships (though not necessarily ready for a committed partnership), etc. Thus their depiction of gay men in their twenties was often characterized by a certain disdain or frustration. As Leo said,

I feel like a lot of gay guys in their twenties don’t want to settle down, want to have random sex and get lots of STDs. Then in their thirties most will want to settle down, but some still want to party. But then by forty almost everyone has decided they want something serious. But a lot of people my age like to play games, with dating or relationships, and I’m over that, I don’t want to play games or whatever. But I also realize I’m not ready to settle down, and I don’t know what I want in that aspect.

**Middle age.**

As the participants looked ahead to the next phases of their lives (being in their thirties, and middle age), the image of gay life in those periods was often negative. Colin attributed his image to gay culture:

I feel like there’s a lot of gay culture where you just kind of like, in your thirties, forties, and beyond, maybe you have a little relationship here and there, but by and large, you’re just going out and having sex with different people, and maybe you’ll have a couple dogs, and you’ll be in your apartment in Miami and New York or whatever, and it’s fabulous. (Fabulous?) I’m being sarcastic. I guess I don’t really see that as being perfect. I guess it feels like a bit of a dead end. Like, I’d rather have some kind of relationship, long-term, a home I share with somebody, and other people know the other person. I guess that’s more what I want.
Colin sets himself apart from the “standard” life course, contrasting his desire for a relationship and home with the shallow, “fabulous” lifestyle he sees as promulgated by gay culture. Damien said that part of his image of gay middle age came from movies, and that the highly stylized depictions gave him little to identity with or aspire to:

You know that movie Trick? There’s a guy who is nice to the main character, and he manages a bar. He’s kind of middle-age. He’s like really queeny, and he actually does have a lover, but…. You know, the East Village type of thing, with leather chaps, and boas. I had seen that, and knew that was gay. That that was a gay option. But the range of gay possibilities I was exposed to was very limited. I had contact on AOL with a few gay men on AOL, but they were single, and it was sex-oriented, so it didn’t really alter my perceptions.

In a way, participants’ depiction of gay middle age was not so different from their depiction of gay men in their twenties, only that the pursuit of casual sex in middle age was associated with loneliness as opposed to fun and exploration. In their depiction, moving into adulthood often meant encountering an unappealing “gay world.” Again, however, they often located themselves outside of this world, as a critical observer or marginal participant. Leo, who lives in a small town, referred to the “gay world” of the city; however, this image figured largely in his image of gay adulthood, as he had no alternative image of suburban or small town gay life. He expressed ambivalence about his plan to move to a large city, attracted by the possibility of a “gay world,” but dissatisfied with many of its attributes. He said,

I think my view comes from different TV shows, movies, and some of my experiences. I used to watch Queer as Folk. A lot of that depicts what goes
on in the gay world with lots of drugs. I’m talking about city gay life, not suburban gay life. City gay life with lots of drugs, and bareback sex that spreads lots of HIV. So, I guess that’s where it comes from, through my experiences with going to the city, and with watching TV and stuff, a mixture. Like going to gay bars and clubs and stuff, and the people I meet are just scummy.

Regarding HIV/AIDS, Leo said that it did loom as one of the dangers of participating in the “gay world,” though he expressed a fairly measured attitude toward the possibility:

I think it’s always been a fear. It’s been more of a fear lately. It’s amazing how many people that you talk to you didn’t even know, are like, yeah, I was diagnosed, and it’s like, wow, I’m glad we didn’t have fun or whatever. It’s scary. And it’s just spreading and it’s a shame because most of the people are doing it to themselves. They just don’t care. A lot of people just don’t care anymore and that’s just sad, because they don’t realize that yes, they are starting to find ways to have people live with it, but it changes everything. But I think that mindset scares me, how people view HIV lately, that it’s not a big deal. It still is a big deal. And I honestly wouldn’t know what to do if I was ever diagnosed. I just, I would find a way to deal with it, but it would just change everything. You never know. It’s just one of those things where you have to keep getting checked and taking every precaution.

Bradley echoed that his vision of gay adulthood involved “hopefully not getting AIDS.” He commented that he felt AIDS was less of a concern for his generation than it was for older generations of gay men, but that the specter of AIDS continued to color the picture of gay middle age and older age:
I feel like there’s still a cloud of that hanging over, the possibility of that happening, the vulnerability. Not only being socially vulnerable, but biologically. I have a friend who has AIDS, which I say because it got to that point, though it’s better now in terms of blood counts or whatever. I don’t know, in a kind of way he just accepted that, that this just happens. And there’s a lot to be said for that, but there’s the part of me that’s like, that would be so unacceptable, not an ok course of events or future. Why would a gay man my age take it on the chin that he has AIDS?

Matt expressed little concern about HIV/AIDS, reporting that he has dated HIV-positive men in the past, taking precautions to avoid infection. He said:

I don’t see that hopefully as part of my life. I guess it’s possible I would be with a partner who was HIV positive, and that’s something I would work with. And I’ve had sexual partners in the past who are HIV positive, and there’s always a little anxiety around that, but I don’t think about it too much.

Thus while casual sex and the specter of HIV/AIDS did characterize participant’s images of gay adulthood and middle age, there was also a consensus that during this period many gay men begin to desire more stability, including long-term partnerships. However, as illustrated in the section “Ending up alone,” there was a great deal of variability in the degree to which the men saw this happening for themselves and others.

Old age and death.

Echoing other participants, Patrick said, “Old age is probably the scariest time for gay men. Like if you haven’t found a partner, what do you do?” Colin said, “Your body
starts giving out and they don’t have anybody to take care of them. The dog can only do so much (*laughing*). You die alone in your apartment or in a hospital room.”

An image of older gay men as sad and alone was ubiquitous across the interviews, so much so that this image is discussed separately in the next section. Almost all of the participants said that beyond this stereotyped image, they had very little idea of what old age was like for gay men. They attributed this to general ageism applied to older people regardless of sexuality, knowing very few older gay men, a lack of media portrayals of older gay men, and the emphasis on youth in gay culture. Damien said,

Well we are a fairly ageist society to begin with. I suppose we’re more focused on singles and couples. Well, even making more movies about it. We have all these coming-of-age movies, like 18-21. We don’t have any of-age movies. That would help. So fairly little is communicated by gay culture about the rest of the lifespan, besides that there is a life span, so don’t kill yourself.

Anthony’s vision of gay older age was of a life characterized by “eccentricity”:

Either because of HIV or because it seems like gay men don’t seem to stay together forever, life involves at some point being an older, once-partnered gay person, now single, living an eccentric lifestyle in the city by themselves. Maybe overly involved in their work or gay causes. (*Overly involved?*) For lack of other family. It somehow becomes very important for the gay community, for that to be like their grandchild.

Several men echoed this notion of an older gay man as an exception, an eccentric, carving out a highly particular existence, usually in the city. For Anthony, this vision
included involvement in a close gay community, in which the older man could be a kind of grandfather.

Other men, noting the emphasis on youth within gay culture, wondered whether older gay men could meaningfully participate in a gay community that seemed to be centered on bars. Recall Graham discussing the difficulty he had imagining gay men living the type of retired life his heterosexual grandfather enjoyed:

I certainly didn’t see many elderly gay couples in my life. I wondered, what does gay retirement look like? I remember actually visiting my grandpa who went to Florida in the winters, and it was hard for me to grapple with when he was single after my grandmother died. But he could go to these senior citizen parties, and singles would mingle, and so would couples, and everyone was accepted. And I remember thinking, what do you do if you’re gay and old? And if you’re gay and single, where do you go? I wonder what happens when either my partner or I dies? Where do I go then? Back to the bars?

Thus in the absence of other visions of “gay old age,” many participants somewhat reluctantly endorsed an image of being “old and alone.” The next section examines this image in more detail.

**Ending up alone.**

Ninety percent (90%) of the participants expressed some expectation or fear of “ending up alone,” and this was the most common anxiety expressed as participants discussed their futures. The men cited a number of factors that contributed to this anxiety, including a lack of role models (not knowing gay men in long-term partnerships),
knowing older gay men who are single, perceptions or stereotypes of gay relationships as short-lived or unsustainable, the lack of traditional family structures (marriage and having children), failure of parents’ relationships, their own history of failed relationships, and past or current experiences of being lonely and solitary. Eighty percent (80%) of men described an image of older gay men as “sad and alone,” and at times seemed somewhat mystified about the origins of this image. As Vykas said, “I mean I guess I do know a couple sad, older gay men, so sometimes I see that, and think like that’s my future. But it’s deeper than just knowing a couple examples. Like still single, 40-something and older gay men, with the occasional sexual dalliance. So I do know that that’s something. That’s a thing. But I’m not sure where it comes from.” Also questioning the origins of his belief that gay men will end up alone, Graham said, “I think it’s all kind of unconscious. I mean, as a kid realizing I was gay, not only did I have this secret that I couldn’t tell anyone, which was isolating…. It’s not like I thought I was the only gay person on the planet, but I didn’t know how I would ever meet anyone gay. So yeah, underlying that, without realizing it, I foresaw loneliness. Maybe for my whole life. And that sticks with me even though I don’t rationally think it.” Other participants had a variety of ideas about how they had developed an image of the solitary gay male adult. Citing a number of potential contributing factors, Bradley stated,

I have some of that fear of being the single old gay man with no family. I feel like it’s an image I’ve seen in movies and stuff. Just a certain loneliness. There is some image of the old gay man, alone. I don’t know how different that would be from straight people who don’t have that sustaining relationship, but I feel like the dynamics are different among
gays and the dynamics are different without kids. I suppose there’s the image of the old gay man dying of AIDS, which I certainly hope isn’t going to be what happens to me, but I think it’s kind of a cultural image that’s there among gays and well, I haven’t talked to anyone about it. Also this sense of gays not being able to keep relationships alive. I don’t know to what degree that may really be false. But it’s something I feel like I have data against that notion, but, I don’t know, there’s a loneliness component. I mean both of my parents are alone, but they have grandchildren. I mean, being alone is a very vivid experience so far in my life, feeling very alone, so going to my grave that way is a scary thought.

Vykas also described feeling alone at many times in his life, and imagining that this feeling will extend into his future:

I just never imagined myself with someone, and it’s still really hard to do. I don’t know why. It was just an amorphous thing. And I assume that’s something a lot of gay kids go through. Because the hard part about growing up gay is feeling very singular. You think you’re the only one. And to some degree I think I’ll always feel that way.

Damien echoed these sentiments, suggesting that on a fundamental level being gay can be equated with being alone, especially during childhood or adolescence:

As a kid I didn’t think I’d end up with someone. I thought being gay meant being alone. And that was like an ongoing fear and source of unhappiness when I wasn’t out, and even when I first came out. And even now that’s probably the area of least confidence. I hear some of my friends or acquaintances echo ideas from my past, like, fuck, can relationships even last? And especially if you try the monogamy thing… how can that even work? And I’ve heard that a lot. And I also see that contradicted in
some ways by the long term couplings that I see just as capable of surviving as heterosexual couplings.

For Damien, coming to know older gay men in long-term relationships began to erode his conviction that gay men end up alone, though he continues to struggle with that anxiety. Matt suggested that his own fears of ending up alone were related to his experiences working with older gay men in a social services agency:

There’s always sort of that fear, am I going to really be by myself? I’m thinking back to when I moved to NY three years ago, and I had a few friends here but I was really on my own, I lived in my own place, and I really didn’t see a lot of people. I was working with old gay folks and you know it was very affecting to have heard about how some of them lived in such solitude. You know, a couple of guys I worked with lived in the same apartment for decades, and their partners have died or long since been dead, and they kind of just try to make the best out of a very lonely existence.

Many of the men connected the expectation of ending up alone with beliefs or stereotypes about gay male relationships—i.e. that they are not sustainable, that gay men cannot commit to monogamy, etc. While the men questioned whether they believed these stereotypes, they nonetheless felt that their visions of the future were shaped by them. Some of the men felt these stereotypes reflected their own relationships (for example, their own doubts about their ability or desire to be in a monogamous relationship), or failed relationships that they had witnessed among others. Anthony said,

There is this rumor that gay relationships don’t last (laughing). Just the way I hear gay men older than me talking about relationships, even people
who are partnered, that they will get to the point where they decide there is no more chemistry. The relationship had a lifespan, and that wasn’t forever. And also this suggestion that gays are not capable of being completely monogamous. I’d like to argue with that, but I’ve never really been in a monogamous relationship, so how can I argue with someone who says it doesn’t actually exist?

Leo suggested that his own lack of experience with stable relationships made it difficult to imagine one in the future:

I mean I eventually want to settle down. It’s just one of those things where I haven’t experienced any stable relationships, so I’m still kind of naïve and don’t really know how to, how these things work. So I’m kind of thinking maybe it will just fall into place like everything else.

I don’t really have many gay friends. And the ones I have are in the worst relationships. And, I mean, my straight friends, their relationships aren’t so great either. And I always seem to get into relationships with people that it’s almost like I can’t be with them for a certain reason. So I guess that’s another reason I don’t know what to expect from the future.

Like Leo, other participants shared the idea that the absence of role models—both gay and straight—in sustained relationships contributed to anxiety about ending up alone. As Bradley said, “I think for a long time I didn’t think that stable relationships were possible because I didn’t see them, or that if they were seeming stable then something was really screwed up in them that I just wasn’t seeing. That was my parents’ myth, to make the relationship tolerable or able to survive when in reality it was horrible.”
While almost all of the men identified some expectation that they would end up alone, not all of the men regarded this possibility negatively. Anthony stated,

I often imagine getting older as a very introspective, solitary journey. Something that I’ll do alone. I think it’s a bittersweet sentiment. Not horribly devastating. Something kind of sad about it, but I think maybe it’s not something I should really judge, or it would be premature to judge it. I romanticize something about ending life on your own in a brave way, and I think I’m ok with imagining that kind of an ending. And, I think it has to do with my anxieties about the body getting older, and loss of beauty and youth, and I think those are things I can imagine facing myself in a bright way, but it’s hard to imagine giving up those things in somebody else, watching somebody else lose them.

In a variation on this theme, others suggested that ending up in an unhappy relationship, getting “stuck,” was as much an anxiety as ending up alone. Damien summarized this view:

My biggest concern about the future is finding a partner. But now I think I’m more accepting that if I’m not with someone, that’s ok, I can still be happy. And that it’s probably better to not be with someone, and to be on your own, than to be with someone who is not good for you. I think I’m more accepting of that than I ever was. And now that I’m getting older it’s becoming more prominent, and I’m much more attentive to the way I handle relationships, and not staying in them when things are clearly not working, or deluding myself, not trusting my intuition. I’m not sure I know how to find the right person, but I feel like I won’t get stuck in a trap. But that would is the biggest anxiety about the future for me, not finding someone, or ending up in something that’s wrong for me.
Several participants cited their parents as “negative role models,” as examples of “getting stuck” in dysfunctional relationships. They described feeling motivated to avoid a similar fate, preferring to end up alone. Others challenged the notion that one’s choice was between a monogamous, long-term partnership and being alone. Could there be a future outside of either of these paradigms? Patrick said, “Since being in New York I’ve met couples who are not monogamous, who are in some kind of more open relationship. So I’ve seen a wide variety of relationships and how they function or don’t function. And that’s been really interesting to me, as I kind of view my own future.”
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter reviews the results of this study and highlights particular findings in relation to each other and to the existing literature. The degree to which the results answer the study’s original questions is discussed. Drawing from the results of this study, a stage model of gay men’s future-thinking is proposed.

Limitations of this study are identified; as it is an exploratory study with a small sample size, the ability to generalize to a larger population of gay men is limited. Finally, direction for future research as well as implications for clinical practice will be discussed.

Key findings

Synthesizing the case studies and specific themes discussed in the previous chapter, central findings emerge:

- Future-thinking is not a static attribute; rather, a vision of the future evolves over time. All of the men described revising their image of the future over the course of childhood, adolescence, and into the twenties (their present age). They also described their current image of the future as malleable and uncertain, and many anticipated that they would further revise their image of the future as they aged.
• One point in the evolution of future image that was consistent throughout most of the interviews was a transition from imagining a “heterosexual future” to rejecting that image and replacing it with a “gay future.”

• Most of the men identified points at which their vision of the future was vague to the point of their future seeming “impossible,” “theoretical,” a “blank,” “black,” or an “abyss.” They connected these images to anxiety about being gay, lack of role models, and negative stereotypes of gay adulthood.

• Future-thinking is a relational process; the men described developing their vision of the future through interactions with others. Broadly defined, such “interactions” included encountering the conventions or future milestones (such as marriage) that are modeled and promoted at all levels of the interpersonal milieu (family, media, culture, etc.). Transition points in the evolution of their future images were always interpersonal in nature—for example, encountering gay role models. Concerns with social conventions and “falling behind” others reflect the important roles of interpersonal comparison and identification that shape future-thinking.

• The men identified specific ways in which being gay shaped their future-thinking. These include: Obstructing or at least complicating their use of conventional, “heterosexual” future milestones (such as marriage and having children); exposure to negative images of gay adulthood and older age, particularly regarding “ending up alone”; finding satisfaction or pride in negotiating an “unconventional” future; and feeling preoccupied with managing a stigmatized
identity (including managing being closeted and coming out) to the degree that they felt they neglected imagining a longer-term future or were “behind” with regard to knowing what they want in the future. This last finding is consistent with Pachankis (2007), who argued that managing minority stress reduces cognitive resources available for other endeavors.

**Review of results**

This study began with three over-arching questions: (1) How do young gay men describe their futures?; (2) What major influences do gay men identify as shaping their visions of the future?; and (3) How do gay men relate their experiences as a stigmatized minority to the ways in which they think about the future?

The results of this study speak to all three of these questions through a central theme underlying the several themes identified in the previous chapter: Future-thinking among gay men is characterized by a complex relationship to “conventional” milestones or scripts of the future; these men must negotiate scripts for both a “typical” gay future and a “typical” heterosexual future, determining not only what they want, but what they perceive to be possible. The complexity of this process may often leave them feeling confused, hopeless, or perceiving themselves to be behind their heterosexual peers with regard to their life’s progress and trajectory. At the same time, many of the men perceive a value in being unconventional (challenging both the heterosexual and gay stereotypical “life courses) and forging their own path into the future.
The men in this study, ages 22-30, varied widely in the organization, content, and emotional tone of their written narratives of the future and in the visions of the future they articulated over the course of their interviews. Overall, the men tended to organize their narratives into a few distinct sections: Professional life (most often described first), romantic relationships/partnership, relationship to family of origin, and anticipation of older age. Participants often described the future of their professional life with the most certainty, and older age with the least. The narratives were organized around a number of questions—implicit and explicit—in all of these domains. This is consistent with Arnett’s (2000) description of future-thinking among emerging adults: Emerging adults are imagining and experimenting with possibilities, testing implicit questions in the areas of what Arnett calls “work, love, and worldview.” While work was often discussed first by this study’s participants, love emerged as the site of the greatest concern. Arnett suggests that the implicit question of love for emerging adults is along the lines of, “Given the kind of person I am, what kind of person do I wish to have as a partner through life?” While this question certainly underlay parts of participant’s discussions of their future love/romantic life, other equally-important questions appeared specifically related to being gay. For example, are sustained gay male partnerships even possible? What form will my relationships take: Monogamous or open? Life-long or time-limited? Legally-recognized or not? While there was a great deal of anxiety about “ending up alone,” participants also questioned whether long-term partnership were the only model for fulfilling adulthood. This related to the broader question related to “worldview” that was implicit throughout the interview results: How does one balance striving for conventional
milestones with the value of being unconventional? This question seemed to be so salient for these men because of their long histories of being “unconventional” in a way fundamental to their identities—i.e. being gay. Questions related to conventionality, including to what degree certain conventions were desirable and/or accessible to gay men, seemed to preoccupy many of the men to a point where more specific questions within a potential convention (for example, what kind of person would I like to marry?) became secondary. In Arnett’s model, these secondary questions are the primary questions, presumably because for his general population the relationship to convention is less complicated.

With regard to how gay men’s visions of the future are shaped and developed, participants identified a number of influences—role models, media portrayals of gay men, parents and other family members, religion, their own histories as indicators of what was likely to continue into the future (particularly their romantic successes or lack thereof), and gay culture. Again, however, the most commonly cited influences were the conventional “milestones” and life paths they perceived as typical of gay and heterosexual people, respectively. The “heterosexual” conventions included marriage and having children, religion, and the norms of masculinity; “gay” conventions included a life of casual sex and partying in the “city” (with a possible consequence of HIV/AIDS), failed relationships, becoming an “eccentric” old man, and “ending up alone.”

The men varied greatly in the degree to which they saw these conventions or stereotypes as actually applying to their futures, but all shared in the struggle of negotiating them as they attempted to formulate their own vision. Indeed, many of the
men described experiences of having already “re-negotiated” some of these
customs—for example, recognizing the limits of conventional masculinity and
coming to value their own masculine identity, or rejecting the “casual sex” stage in favor
of more serious relationships. Other stereotypes, particularly those regarding older age,
loomed in the future. While some of the men reported that the stereotype of the lonely old
gay man was beginning to be eroded by exposure to “real life” older gay men, for the
most part this exposure was limited. This is consistent with Goltz (2008), who found that
the stereotype of the “embittered old gay man” was particularly persistent among the gay
youth he studied. Explaining this persistence, Goltz wrote, “The youth-centered nature of
the gay male community, cultural myths of misery, and lack of counter-representations of
‘older’ gay men has a negative impact on both ‘older’ and ‘younger’ gay males, assisting
the perpetuation of negative aging myths, the equation of aging with loss, and the fear of
the future” (p. 75). The men in this study also cited the focus on youth in gay culture (and
in popular culture generally), the trope of the miserable, lonely old gay man, and the lack
of older role models as the reasons for their difficulty imagining older age. At the same
time, some of the men had already begun to “re-negotiate” these conventions and imagine
other future possibilities, such as life-long partnership or finding satisfaction and meaning
in ending life alone.

**Imagining the future: A developmental model**

The themes and case studies produced by this study provide support for a
developmental model of future-thinking among gay men (see Table 1). All of the men in
the study described their vision of the future as an evolving image, one that had changed
significantly over the course of their lives, and one that remained malleable. A certain sequence of stages can be discerned from their reports:

1. *Imagining a heterosexual future.* Before becoming aware of or consciously acknowledging his homosexuality, the “proto-gay” child imagines a heterosexual future. This is the future modeled by his particular family, community, religion, and culture, and as such may vary significantly. However, with rare exceptions, this future is heterosexual, marked by certain key elements such as heterosexual marriage.

2. *Conflict arises between heterosexual future and developing awareness of homosexuality.* As the child comes to recognize his homosexuality, he must reconcile this with his previously-held image of a heterosexual future. One option is to deny his sexuality or plan to keep it a secret, and maintain a vision of a heterosexual future. Some men may decide on this option, and “pass” as heterosexual indefinitely. However, this heterosexual future is now colored with anxiety and doubt: Will such a future be possible? Will it be satisfying? Will others find out who he really is? A second option is to live as a gay man. Here the child or teen draws on his knowledge of gay adulthood. What has he observed in the media? Are there any gay adults in his family or social world? Some children or teens may have positive gay role models, and may be able to make an easier transition to imagining a gay adulthood. In many cases, however, early images of gay adulthood (arrived at through the media or the comments of heterosexual
Table 1
Stage model of future-thinking among gay men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Critical Variables</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Imagining a heterosexual future.</td>
<td>What is the “standard” future modeled by family, community, religion, culture, society? How rigid is this standard? How early does child develop a sense of “difference” from others, even if not initially connected to sexuality?</td>
<td>The child internalizes an image of what constitutes a viable and legitimate future in his social world. He is initially fully identified with this image.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Conflict arises between heterosexual future and developing awareness of homosexuality.</td>
<td>What early role models or images of gay adulthood are available in the home, community, media? Homophobia in social world—will deviation from standard be punished?</td>
<td>Self-alienation/conflict between internalized image of heterosexual future and nascent homosexuality. This may be felt as anxiety and shame. Youth considers options—future “passing” as heterosexual, or imagining a gay future. Some may commit to “passing” indefinitely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rejection of a heterosexual future.</td>
<td>Exposure to gay peers/community. Coming out (how supportive are family and others?).</td>
<td>Range of emotional reactions—anxiety/sadness at loss of heterosexual future; uncertainty at what will replace it. Relief; excitement; hopefulness; confusion. Focus on short-term future; long-term is a question mark, blank. For others, future is foreshortened.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Filling in the blank: Comparisons to “typical” futures.</td>
<td>Peer group’s (heterosexual and gay) progress toward “milestones.” Relationship success or lack thereof. Availability of older gay adults as models (to aspire to or to reject).</td>
<td>Ambivalence/anxiety about milestones (especially marriage and having children). Difficulty reconciling internalized heterosexual future with what appears possible or likely as a gay man. Likely negative perceptions of aging as gay man, fear of “ending up alone.” Experience lack of agency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
family and peers) are non-existent, vague, or negative. At this stage, defining features of the imagined gay future are likely loneliness, isolation, and shame; to some extent, this is a projection of feelings already attached to the child or teen’s developing gay identity. Just as his developing gay identity is not validated as a viable and valued identity, gay adulthood is not promoted as a viable and valued future. At this stage, thinking about the future occurs in broad strokes: Possible or impossible? Living as straight or gay? Isolated (gay) or a part of the world (straight)?

3. *Rejection of a heterosexual future.* Coming out as gay can also be viewed as a rejection of a heterosexual future; in relinquishing any assumed heterosexual identity, the gay man relinquishes a future of “passing” as heterosexual. This decision is motivated by increased interaction with gay men and exposure to a broader range of media, some of which may be gay-affirmative. However, the future that will replace the relinquished heterosexual future remains very vague. Certain “critical incidents,” such as dating other men, or meeting an older gay relative, for example, may open up a sense of possibilities for a gay life, beyond previously-held stereotypes. Central concerns at this stage are coming out, beginning to date, participation in gay culture, etc. The gay community and culture offers a picture of a viable life, at least for the near-term. This picture is likely characterized by casual dating and sex and living in the city. The longer-term future, once defined by the heterosexual image, is now largely blank. A third
“option” at this stage may be to replace the heterosexual future with no future at all—in the face of conflict and anxiety about his identity and the life it will determine, the child or teen’s future becomes “blank,” “black,” an “abyss” (all terms participants used in this study).

4. Filling in the blank: Comparisons to “typical” futures. With coming out and developing a gay identity and life underway, the gay youth may begin to look further ahead into the future. The life image offered by popular gay culture begins to appear limited. What will fill in the blank long-term, now that a heterosexual life plan has been abandoned? Asking these questions may also be spurred by heterosexual peers (including siblings or other family members) starting to marry and have children. While the heterosexual future per se has been rejected, the elements of that model of the future are internalized and continue to figure into the gay man’s imagination. The internalized heterosexual future, while now at odds with the gay man’s identity, may feel like the only valid or “real” future. Some men may feel that marriage and having children are accessible and likely parts of their future, while others may feel reaching these “milestones” will be more difficult or even impossible. Variability in this area may be determined by the availability of role models, legality of same-sex marriage, relationship success or lack thereof, family support, etc. At the same time, gay youth may look more closely at models of gay adulthood and older age, beyond the often celebratory image of the period of coming out. They may find scant images of older age, and
a devaluation of aging, in gay culture and media. Many gay youth may feel caught between a conventional heterosexual future to which they feel they do not have full access, and a conventional gay future that is marginal, bleak and devalued. Gay men may feel unable to imagine life after thirty or forty. This dilemma may be experienced subjectively as anxiety, confusion, alienation, emptiness, fatalism/lack of agency, and a sense of falling behind others. However, the image of gay futures may be rapidly changing, with younger generations increasingly exposed to more optimistic and varied versions.

5. Formulating a long-term vision. As a gay man negotiates the conventions or scripts of both typical gay and heterosexual futures, he also reconciles these images with his knowledge of other gay adults’ life paths, his own experiences and desires, and his own values and beliefs. He gradually develops his own vision of his future, his own combination of various milestones. Some may reject conventional milestones such as marriage and having children as the only viable or fulfilling future, and develop an interest or even pride in imagining “unconventional” futures. Fulfillment is imagined in various domains, including friendship, work, creative expression, etc. For most men, partnership remains a central organizing element of the future, though it may be conceptualized in a variety of ways—for example, as legal marriage or not, as life-long or time-limited, as monogamous or non-monogamous. A certain doubt may remain regarding the viability of long-term partnership, and the likelihood of finding a
suitable partner. While this doubt may be similar to that of single heterosexual people, it may have a unique quality for gay men given stereotypes about gay men being unable to sustain relationships and “ending up alone,” and the particular devaluation of aging in gay culture. Uncertainty remains in the vision of the future, but at this stage of development that uncertainty is characterized more by worry and hope than by fatalism and emptiness.

Commentary on the proposed model

While the model is proposed as a sequence of stages, men may revisit stages at various points in their life, especially in response to significant changes in their life circumstances (for example, the ending of a long-term relationship). Also, some men may remain at one stage indefinitely, and movement through the stages should not necessarily be regarded as “healthy” or “successful.” It is also important to recognize the variables that may affect a man’s movement through stages and his experience within a stage; as was evident in these interviews, the process of developing a future vision is by no means identical for all gay men. Based on the results of this study, these variables include: The expectations for a “typical” future in an individual’s family, social community, religion, and culture; messages about homosexuality received from those same sources; and availability of gay role adult role models (in media or personally).

The process of developing a future vision appears interwoven with the process of gay identity development, and the two processes may likely have reciprocal influence on
each other. Cass (1984) developed one of the first comprehensive models of gay identity acquisition. Summarizing her model, she wrote:

In essence, the process involved in the acquisition of a homosexual identity is one of identity change in which a previously held image of sexual orientation is replaced with a homosexual image. In most cases, the former image is likely to have been heterosexual, since the promotion of an ideal heterosexual image is one of the most prominent features of socialization in industrial societies. Homosexuals commonly report the process to be one of change from a heterosexual to a homosexual identity (p. 145).

This description parallels the proposed model of future thinking, in which gay men replace a vision of a heterosexual future with a gay future. In Cass’ model, gay men move from confusion about their sexual identity, to a stage of comparing their “potential” homosexuality with heterosexuality, through tolerance of their new homosexual identity, to acceptance, pride, and ultimately “synthesis” (in which homosexuality becomes integrated as one facet of overall identity). Moreover, in Cass’ model, seeking interactions with other gay men signals a move toward tolerance and acceptance of sexual identity, and the availability and quality of those interactions (particularly in the “identity tolerance” stage) can play a critical role in furthering identity development. Positive interactions, whether sought or serendipitous, can be the catalyst for movement from tolerance to acceptance and ultimately pride.

The results of this study suggest a similar path for the development of a future vision—from confusion (how to reconcile burgeoning homosexuality with an image of a
heterosexual future) to comparison (comparing a heterosexual future to perceived gay futures) to pride and synthesis (arriving at a combination of “conventionality” and “unconventionality” that feels accessible and potentially fulfilling; taking pride in unconventionality). And, as illustrated in the case studies, interactions with other gay men (whether finding a peer group or encountering a role model) were key in triggering movement through these stages. Thus there are several parallels between the proposed model of future-thinking and Cass’ model of gay identity development.

In fact, Cass points to the connections between identity and future-thinking in her discussion of the transformation from a heterosexual identity to a homosexual one: The individual begins “to realize that all the guidelines for behavior, ideals, and expectations for the future that accompany a heterosexual identity are no longer relevant… and, most important, have not been replaced by others” (Cass, 1979, p. 225). This characterizes the experience of many of the men in this study in the third stage of future image development, in which a heterosexual future is rejected, but a future as a gay man is not sufficiently formulated to take its place. Ritter and Terndrup (2002) write: “Transforming the loss of a heterosexual life image and developing a positive gay or lesbian identity are parallel processes” (p. 92). Later, elaborating on this transformation as part of the second stage of identity development (the “identity confusion” stage), Ritter and Terndrup add: The heterosexual “blueprint for life, along with its dreams and privileges,” must be grieved and eventually abandoned for a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity” (p. 172). Coming to terms with one’s “blueprint for life” is an integral component of identity development.
Other models of gay identity development stress the ongoing process of reconciling inner with outer, personal desires and characteristics with conformity to social roles and expectations. Summarizing their review of models of sexual identity development, Ritter and Terndrup (2002) write, “People achieve their sexual identities in idiosyncratic ways based on how they reconcile their personal scripts and meanings with socially constructed roles and functions. The process of blending essential characteristics of the self with social constructs of the community to form a sexual minority identity is often lifelong and evolving” (p. 89). This blending of social constructs or conventions (of both heterosexual and gay futures) with personal desire and aspirations seems also to characterize future-thinking among gay men.

Given these parallels, the development of a future vision may be a part of identity development, as opposed to a distinct process. Recall the literature on possible selves discussed in the literature review—Erikson (2007) argued for the inextricability of the current self with future selves. The current self is viable only in so much as it can be imagined as viable in the future; at the same time, the imagination of future selves is dependent on the development of a relatively consolidated current self that can be projected into the future. In beginning to elucidate the process of developing a future vision, and in noting the parallels between this process and models of identity development, this study provides further support for the inextricability of the current self/identity and future/possible selves.

Furthermore, just as identity development is an interpersonal process, the results of this study suggest that future-thinking is also developed through interpersonal
processes. While the language of “conventions” and “scripts” was pervasive throughout the results, conventions are not free-standing concrete entities, but rather interpersonal phenomena. Conventions, milestones, and scripts are not only cognitive aides that make the visualization of the future easier; they are also shorthand for social reflection, recognition, acceptance, and validation. Recall Erikson writing on the dependence of possible selves on social recognition for viability: “I will go as far as to suggest that it is through these cultural expectations that it is possible for us to rely on our future, imagined events to such a degree. If we could not count on others being able to share our understanding and acting in accordance with shared norms, the function of possible selves would be very different” (p. 355). Receiving this kind of validation or “shared understanding” is not only an implicit process of matching one’s own aspirations to socially-accepted conventions, but also an explicit process of talking about one’s future with others. Many of the men in this study described never talking about their future with others. As Colin said:

I just keep my plans to myself. I don’t know, there’s an openness other people have talking about their future that I don’t really feel, because everything is not commonplace conversation. It’s not like, Oh, I’m planning this wedding, and we’re going to have taupe tablecloths, you know? It’s just like, Oh I’m going to be going to New York to hang out with my boyfriend on the weekend. It’s just like kookier things I don’t like to talk about too much.
Colin avoids attempting to access interpersonal validation of his life and plans, anticipating that others would have difficulty understanding. This perception is laden with shame, as he dismisses his life and plans as “kooky.”

For the men in this study, then, feeling blocked from a conventional, heterosexual future meant imagining a future that was not socially recognized and valued. They also suggested that looking to gay culture for validation of a gay future was problematic, as popular gay culture also seemed to invalidate aging in gay men, offering shame-laden images of middle and older age. The absence of social recognition often left their future visions feeling “empty,” only “theoretical,” or tainted with shame. Some responded to these feelings with a denial of the future (a foreshortening, perception of a “blank”) or a fatalistic resignation. Emptiness, shame, and self-alienation are, of course, the same consequences of the lack of reflection and validation on the development of the self for gay men, as described by Cornett (1993) and others.

A “lack of validation” understates many of the men’s experiences of oppression as sexual minorities. For many of the participants, being gay (or the possibility of being gay) was met with rejection, hostility, threat, and warning. They received overt and implicit messages that being gay (or becoming a gay adult) was a “bad” outcome. Recall Graham’s first observation as a child of gay men, on an episode of Oprah: As he noted his own stirrings of identification with these men, his sister said, “We have to make sure that doesn’t happen to you.” Echoing other participants, Joshua spoke about the extraordinary effort he invested in concealing his sexuality, motivated by fear of hostile reactions and rejection by his peers and family. Indeed, being gay was experienced as a
vulnerability—an aspect of self that could cost one’s place in the social world, leading to a kind of “social death.” Some of the men also spoke of the role of HIV/AIDS as another manifestation of that vulnerability—a possibility of literal death. Recall Bradley speaking about the “cloud hanging over” his vision of the future, a sense of both the biological and social vulnerabilities inherent in being gay. Thus even for men for whom HIV/AIDS does not consciously loom as a major concern, HIV/AIDS may figure symbolically as another level of the vulnerability and dread associated with the idea of being gay at certain stages of development. Moreover, this vulnerability or threat is viewed as a failing of the self; recall Graham perceiving as a child that his family seemed to fault his uncle for his death from AIDS-related illness. As in other forms of interpersonal trauma, vulnerability/injury is viewed as deficit, and a source of shame. A sense of vulnerability—both biological and social—and associated shame may make it difficult for gay men to project the self into the future with confidence that the self could survive and become fulfilled. This may explain at least a portion of the difficulties participants described having in imagining their futures at various points in their lives. They not only lacked role models and access to conventional “scripts,” but on a fundamental level questioned whether a “gay self” could even survive. At varying levels of consciousness, being gay may be associated with death—social and biological. A foreshortening of the future would then function similarly as in other forms of life-threatening trauma—with a sense of profound vulnerability and lack of control, the future becomes a source of anxiety and dread.

Independent of the degree to which being gay itself is experienced as traumatic, the results of this study suggest that being gay may affect the response to and ability to
cope with other forms of trauma. For example, recall Bradley speaking about his stressful family environment, and his parents’ neglect of him and his sister. He did not label these experiences “traumatic,” but they could be considered on the spectrum of complex trauma or adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al., 1998). Bradley perceived that his sister was able to access other sources of support and structure—specifically a church—that buffered some of the stress of the home, and helped her to chart a path into the future. Bradley felt that as a gay man he could not join the church, and that there were no other institutions outside the family that he could turn to for support, care, and guidance. As such, he felt that he was more vulnerable to the negative influence of the home, and became depressed. Bradley’s experience suggests that gay men may be more vulnerable to the deleterious effects of complex trauma (including foreshortening of the future) because their access to certain protective factors is complicated by their stigmatized sexuality. Future research which includes more thorough developmental history-taking could explore this possibility.

Of course, almost all of the men described gradually finding validation and developing a sense that gay adulthood was viable. As the case studies in particular illustrated, the critical events in revising a vision of the future were always interpersonal. Recall the evolution of Graham’s vision of the future—transition points included observing gay men on an episode of Oprah, meeting gay peers in college, bringing a boyfriend home to meet his family, etc. Graham’s own shame-laden image of gay adulthood was altered when he met his gay uncle and thought, “This could be me.”
With gay marriage and increasing acceptance of homosexuality, the men also seemed to begin to experience more validation and recognition from society at large. However, this left some of them struggling with the dilemma of receiving validation by imagining futures “just like” those of heterosexuals, while questioning whether a conventional heterosexual future need be the only legitimate path to fulfilling adulthood.

**Limitations of this study**

This study examined data of personal depth and complexity generated from interviews with a small number of gay men. While the results point to themes and issues which may pertain to many gay men, the small sample size limits the degree to which the findings can be extrapolated to the general population of gay men. As there was no control group, no comparisons can be made to other groups in order to claim that the current findings are unique to gay men. For example, other groups, including heterosexual men, could demonstrate a similar anxiety about “ending up alone.” However, continuing with this example, it is important to note that participant’s attributions for this feeling and their own theories of its origin were specifically linked to being gay. Other groups may report a similar anxiety, but would have a very different understanding and experience of it.

The men interviewed in this study were recruited via network sampling, and thus may be subject to a selection bias. This bias was evident in the limited socioeconomic diversity in the sample: All of the men were college-educated and employed or in graduate school. Also, the majority of participants were Caucasian. This was not a
random sample, and thus cannot be considered representative of the general population of gay men. Furthermore, this study was limited to men who openly identify as gay, and the results are not claimed to apply to the larger GLBTQ population, men who have sex with men (MSM), or other groups.

The primary investigator conducted all of the interviews and analysis; thus there is the potential for researcher bias. The primary investigator attempted to manage this risk through a self-reflective approach, as discussed in the methods chapter. However, the potential for bias remains.

Given these limitations, the study did yield a rich description of these men’s lives, beliefs, fears, and hopes. The data collected here, and the model of future-thinking it supports, suggest multiple avenues for future research.

**Future research**

The men interviewed in this study were all between the ages of 22 and 30. Their portrayal of the developmental process of future-thinking was based on recollections of childhood and adolescence; they also could not speak to how future-thinking may change in middle or older age. Thus the stage model proposed is tentative. In order to most fully elucidate the developmental stages of future-thinking, children and men of all different ages would need to be interviewed. Given rapid changes in culture and legal rights for gay men, generational effects must also be studied carefully.

Given the suggestion of the intertwining of the developments of identity and future, research using standardized measures of gay identity development, such as the
Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), could further illuminate links between the two. Do specific elements of gay identity (such as internalized homonegativity) correlate with specific qualities in future-image? The current study suggests several variables that characterize future-thinking—for example, the degree to which a man feels he is “behind the curve” in relation to his heterosexual or gay peers. Future research could develop means to quantify and measure these variables, and correlate them with other aspects of gay life and identity (for example, age at coming out, family acceptance, relationship status, etc.). This study also suggests that experiences of minority stress affect future vision, but specific elements of minority stress were not measured. Minority stress includes exposure to stigma, discrimination and victimization, as well as internalized homonegativity. Scales have been developed to measure these experiences, and variability could be correlated with differences in future vision (Meyer, 1995).

Future research can also explore the implications of variability in future-image. Is an impoverished or negative view of the future correlated with depression or other mental health outcomes? Longitudinal research could examine how determinative a vision of the future is on actual future outcomes. Are visions of the future self-fulfilling prophecies?

**Clinical applications**

This study suggests that a gay male client’s perception of his future should be an area of therapeutic attention for several reasons: There may be a great deal of anxiety associated with the future; difficulty imagining the future may be related to shame,
depression, fatalism, or other dysphoric affects; and imagining the future appears linked to other important aspects of identity and development. Many of the men described finding the interview stimulating and useful, noting that they do not often have opportunities to discuss their future with others. Some of the men reported “keeping quiet” about their future, assuming others would not be able to understand. The therapeutic relationship has the potential to be an important exception to this assumption. Also, given the finding that future-thinking, like identity development, is an interpersonal process, the therapeutic relationship has the potential to facilitate development or revision of a client’s future-image.

Clinicians working with gay men should be aware that “ending up alone” and becoming an isolated, unhappy older man are significant worries for gay men as they imagine the future. The men in this study reported continuing to worry about these possibilities, even as they came to know older gay men in stable relationships. While these concerns are not unique to gay men, they do have a specific quality for gay men, and the men in this study felt that gay culture promoted these negative stereotypes through its focus on youth. These fears may figure into gay male relationships throughout the life course. For example, the end of a relationship for even young gay men may seem to confirm that he will “end up alone,” lending greater anxiety or even shame at the failure of a relationship. In other words, gay men may be especially quick to project themselves into the image of the “bitter, old, gay man,” creating both an urgency with regard to relationships, but also perhaps a resignation or hopelessness. Clinicians may help gay male clients to recognize the influence of this fear, dispel rigid myths, and
facilitate access to role models. Access to role models and a revision of myths about the future could occur through a number of channels, and individual psychotherapy may not be a sufficient or ideal intervention for these purposes. Group therapy with other gay youth, or participation in GLBTQ organizations may open up a sense of possibility for isolated youth. Halverson (2005) pioneered a performance arts program focused specifically on helping GLTBQ youth explore possible selves. The youth in this program acted out characters and created a theatrical performance expressing both their anxieties and hopes for the future. Halverson argued that one important mechanism of change was enabling these youth to express and process their painful histories together, so that they could “move beyond these events toward a positive future.” This idea was reflected in the current study, as the men seemed to project their past experiences of isolation and alienation into the future.

Given gay men’s future-thinking appears to evolve over time, clinicians should be sensitive to the differing needs and concerns of men at different stages in this process. For example, clinicians treating children or adolescents who identify as gay or who are questioning their sexuality should recognize that their client may be struggling to imagine an alternative to the heterosexual future ingrained in them from an early age. They may have a range of emotional reactions to replacing that heterosexual future, including relief, sadness/grief, and anxiety. Ritter and Terndrup (2002) write that helping gay clients to “grieve” the loss of a heterosexual identity (and the “blueprint for life” it affords) is a critical therapeutic intervention.
Gay men at a later stage of development may have resolved concerns about rejecting a heterosexual future, but may continue to struggle to imagine a fulfilling gay future. These clients may need to discuss the negative images and fears they have of aging as a gay man. They may also need to articulate and process their relationship to various conventions, including marriage and having children. The results of this study suggest that many gay men are not simply aspiring to a future “just like” that of their heterosexual peers, but also value being “unconventional” and challenging any one model of fulfilling adulthood. Thus while clinicians may be tempted to encourage gay clients that they can “have all the same things” in their lives as their heterosexual peers (especially in light of movement toward legal equality), this encouragement may dismiss important differences in gay men’s experiences. For a gay man aspiring to marriage, for example, marriage may have specific meanings (e.g., might other gay men be disappointed at his participation in a “heterosexual” convention?) or be regarded as particularly difficult to achieve (given stereotypes that gay men cannot sustain long-term relationships). Also, is marriage necessarily regarded as life-long and monogamous?

In any treatment, the person of the clinician, as observed or imagined by the client, will likely become an object of identification and comparison. In fact, the therapist’s role as a “selfobject” may be the most important element of the treatment for gay men, as many of gay men’s presenting issues may relate to the lack of selfobject experiences (mirroring, validation, idealization, etc.) during development (Cornett, 1995). For gay youth, the clinician may be viewed as a model for the client’s potential future, or as representing a future the youth believes he or she cannot attain or does not want—or
some combination of all of these possibilities. The clinician should be aware and prepared to discuss what “future” the clinician represents for the client, and the emotions (including envy, admiration, disdain, etc.) that may arise around this.

The clinician’s disclosure or non-disclosure of his or her sexual identity will also affect the client’s use of the clinician as a role model. Given the importance of the therapist as selfobject in therapy with gay men, self-disclosure (of sexual identity or other aspects of the therapist’s identity and life) may be indicated. Many gay men have found their attempts at identification with others (the “twinship” selfobject relationship, in the language of Self Psychology) to be rejected. When the client compares his own life and potential future to that of the therapist, it may be therapeutic for the therapist to respond with thoughtful self-disclosure and validation of the client’s perceptions, as opposed to interpretation or refusal to answer questions. Describing Self-Psychology-informed therapy with gay men, Cornett (1993) wrote:

Small acts of therapist self-disclosure, provided they do not overwhelm the therapy, can be powerfully therapeutic for deficits in the twinship sphere, and especially so for gay patients working with gay psychotherapists. (p. 69).

Whatever their sexual identity, clinicians should be aware of their own assumptions, values, and templates for a viable or legitimate future. Some of the men in this study spoke of the difficulty of developing their own desires for the future, given their anxiety about conforming or not conforming to both gay and heterosexual stereotypes of the future. Thus gay male clients may be especially sensitive to any of the
clinician’s explicit or implicit communications about what the future *should* entail. Just as clinicians are encouraged to examine their own histories as they may influence countertransference, so too should clinicians examine their images of the future. Therapy can become a space in which gay men can sort through others’ expectations for their futures, and discover their own desires and hopes.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Imagining the future, envisioning who one will become, is a process at the core of human development, but a process whose specific mechanics remain largely unexamined in the field of psychology. Developmental theory, particularly the relatively new area of “emerging adulthood,” stresses the importance of children, adolescents, and young adults “trying on” various possibilities for their lives. But how do they do this? And do all groups perceive the same possibilities? This study sought to examine this process for one group—gay men in their twenties (emerging adults)—through interviewing them about their current visions of their futures, and their insights into how this vision had evolved over the course of their development.

This study found that as these men looked ahead to their futures, they shared the concerns identified in the general emerging adult literature—i.e. career, relationships, location, etc. At the same time, many of their concerns were uniquely related to their identity as gay men. Several themes emerged, including a complicated relationship to “typical” milestones (marriage, having children, being recognized as a “masculine” adult man), a relationship characterized by aspiration, frustration, expectation of attaining, and, at times, pride in bucking convention.
A major finding of this study was that imagining the future is in fact a process, and one that seems to develop along a certain trajectory for many gay men. Imagining the future (first, typically, a heterosexual future that is later replaced by an image of the future as a gay man) appears to evolve hand-in-hand with sexual identity. Identity and “future” may be inseparable: “Identity is not an abstract, psychological concept, but exists only as the narrative we tell of our own lives…. [Identity if formed by] the interplay between the past, present, and future” (Halverson, 2005, p. 71). In the development of both identity and a future vision, “viability” (a sense that yes, this is possible) is attained through a synthesis of the personal/psychological and the social. This synthesis is often problematic for gay men, who may feel (and have reinforced at various interpersonal levels) that their personal sexuality is incompatible with social norms. Cornett (1995) and others who have studied the development of identity among gay men have observed how this lack of synthesis can fracture a sense of self (leading to shame, self-alienation, etc.). The present study suggests that a lack of synthesis of the personal and social can also fracture a sense of the future, resulting in a vision of the future that is foreshortened, vague, and characterized by shame. The stage model that is proposed is at its core a process of gradually synthesizing the personal with the social, integrating one’s sexual identity with the social norms, conventions, and milestones that structure the future for all of us. Collectively, gay men (and the larger GLBTQ community) may also be gradually reshaping those norms, conventions, and milestones, opening up new future possibilities for everyone.
Therapists can have an important role in facilitating the process of imagining a viable future. First, clinicians should recognize that this process is not necessarily “automatic,” and that many gay youth may be struggling to not only inhabit the present with a stigmatized identity, but also imagine a future. Even after coming out and developing a social life as a gay man, many gay youth may continue to feel confused about or even to dread the future. Psychotherapy is a forum in which clients can articulate and process feelings of dread, vulnerability, and frustration, as well as hope, excitement, and pride. Therapists can help clients to narrate the past, and rewrite the story of the future.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Agreement

Gay Men’s Experience of the Future: An Exploratory Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about it to make an informed decision. If you have any questions, contact the investigator. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores the experience of men who identity as gay as they think about their own personal future. The study wants to understand your experience, thoughts and feelings about your future possibilities. A doctoral student at the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University is conducting this study as a fulfillment of dissertation and doctoral requirements. It is anticipated that 10-15 individuals will participate in this study.

Study Procedures:

You will be asked to write about your future, and respond to questions about certain aspects of your feelings, beliefs, and life circumstances. Participation will take approximately 60-90 minutes.

Interviews will be audio taped to contribute to the authenticity of the study. Interviews will be transcribed and tapes will be destroyed after transcription. Any tape recordings, transcripts of interviews, or other data collected from you will be maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

Data collected from you will be maintained in confidence by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and destroyed at the end of the study.

Risks: The questions you will be asked to answer focus on your thoughts about your own future. It is my hope that responding to these questions will be a positive experience for you. However, thinking about the future may cause discomfort or anxiety for you. If you experience distress related to the study, please discuss this with the researcher, so that he can assist you and help provide you with referrals as necessary.
Benefits: Your experience and knowledge have tremendous value to understanding the issues affecting gay men. In addition, the opportunity to share your experience may be valuable to you.

Confidentiality: All records will be stored in locked files and will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. The data from your responses will be stored on an electronic data file in the researcher’s personal computer in order to keep it confidential. The data will be available only to the research team and no identifying information will be disclosed. Other paper work will be assigned a case number.

Your responses will be grouped with other participants’ responses and analyzed collectively. All common identifying information will be disguised to protect your confidentiality. This will include changing demographic information (i.e. birth order, education level).

Research Standards and Rights of Participants: Your participation in this research is VOLUNTARY. If you decide not to participate, or if you decide later to stop participating, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Also, if you refer other individuals for participation in this study, your name may be used as the referral source only with your permission.

I understand that I may contact the investigator or the investigator’s dissertation chairperson at any time at the addresses, telephone numbers or emails listed below if I have any questions, concerns or comments regarding my participation in this study.

Joseph Cooper (Investigator) Monica Indart, Psy.D. (Chairperson)
Rutgers University Rutgers University
GSAPP GSAPP
152 Frelinghuysen Rd 152 Frelinghuysen Rd
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085 Piscataway, NJ 08854-8085
Email: jcooper212@hotmail.com Email: mjindart@aol.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:
Rutgers University, the State University of New Jersey
Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
I have read and understood the contents of this consent form and have received a copy of it for my files. I consent to participate in this research project.

Participant Signature _____________________________ Date _________________

Investigator Signature _____________________________ Date

***

You have already agreed to participate in a research study entitled Gay Men’s Experience of the Future: An Exploratory Study conducted by Joseph Cooper. We are asking for your permission to allow us to audiotape (make a sound recording) as part of that research study. You do not have to agree to be recorded in order to participate in the main part of the study.

The recording(s) will be used for analysis by Mr. Cooper.

The recording(s) will be distinguished from one another by an identifying case number not your name.

The recording(s) will be stored in a locked file cabinet by identifying number not by name or other information that might disclose your identity. The tapes will be retained until the project is completed and the dissertation has been successfully defended. It is expected that the tape will be destroyed within three years after your interview.

Your signature on this form grants the investigator named above permission to record you as described above during participation in the above-referenced study. The
investigator will not use the recording(s) for any other reason than that/those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

Subject (Print ) ________________________________

Subject Signature ____________________________ Date ______________________

Principal Investigator Signature _____________________ Date ___________________
APPENDIX B

Demographic Information

Today’s Date: _______________

Age: _______________

State where you primarily grew up: _______________

State where you currently live or attend school: _______________

How do you identify yourself racially/ethnically? _______________

Type of community in which you primarily grew up: Rural / Urban / Suburban / Other _______________

Highest level of education completed or currently attending:

___ High School

___ Associate Degree

___ Bachelors Degree

___ Graduate Degree; please specify: _______________

Are you currently in a committed long-term partnership?

If YES: How long have you been in this partnership? _______________
Is your partnership legally-sanctioned by the state?: Married / Civil Union / Other ______________

Are you currently dating someone? yes no

How long have you been in this relationship? ____________
APPENDIX C

Semi-structured interview

Experience of thinking about the future

1. How did you find the experience of writing about your future?
   a. What was most difficult about the task?
   b. In what ways do you feel that the task may have been more or less difficult for you than for others your age?
   c. Thinking back on what you wrote, what surprises/bothers/concerns/excites you?

2. What feelings do you have as you think about your future?

3. When/how frequently do you find yourself thinking about your future?
   a. Triggers/events that make you think about your future?
   b. Describe times/reasons you may have tried to avoid thinking about the future?

Characteristics of future vision

4. What major questions/potential events stand out for you as you think about the future?
   a. At this time, what feels particularly important to you as you think about your future?
   b. What are your biggest worries or fears as you consider your future?
   c. What do you want the most in your future?

5. In what ways do you think your vision of the future or the way you think about the future may differ from others your age?
   a. Same/different from other gay men?
b. … heterosexual men?

c. … heterosexual women?

d. … gay women?

**Perceived influences on/development of future vision**

6. What or who influences your vision of the future?
   a. Parents?
   b. Other family members?
   c. Peers?
   d. Role models?

7. With whom do you talk about your future? Describe those interactions.

8. Has your vision of your future ever differed from others’ expectations for your future? How?

9. How has your vision of your future changed over time?

**Growing up/identifying as gay and the development of future vision**

10. How do you think being gay affects your vision of yourself? Of your future?

11. When did you realize you were attracted to men?
   a. How did that realization affect your vision of yourself and your future at that time?

12. When did you begin coming out as gay?
   a. How did not being out to others affect your vision of yourself and your future?

   b. How did coming out affect your vision of yourself and your future?

13. How would you describe your family and environment growing up with regard to attitudes toward homosexuality? How would you describe your current...
environment? How have those environments affected your ability to think about and plan for your future?

**Cultural scripts**

14. Describe your image of the life course of gay men in general:
   a. Gay men in their teens?
   b. Twenties?
   c. Thirties?
   d. Middle age?
   e. Old age?
   f. Death?

15. From where do you think you developed these images?
   a. Have these images changed over times and in what ways?

16. Describe the extent of your exposure/interaction/relationships with other gay men. How have those relationships affected your view of yourself and your future? Do you know gay men at various ages, and how do they fit or not fit your current or previous ideas about gay adulthood?

17. How do you perceive the culture at large with regard to attitudes toward homosexuality? How do you think that culture has played a role in the development of your view of your future?

18. What messages or images do you perceive the gay culture communicating regarding gay men’s adult lives?

19. What do you perceive as trends or recent activity in political or legal developments regarding gay rights?
   a. Have those trends, publicity, or activities affected how you see your adult life developing?

20. In your mind, what does it mean to achieve “adulthood?” How does one come to be recognized as an “adult” in this culture? How you feel these expectations/definitions affect gay men?