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**MSc in Life Course Development**

**Pink and Grey: An Examination of the Life  
Course Stages of Non Heterosexual (Gay) Men**

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## **Abstract**

This research tries to map the life course development of non-heterosexual (gay) men. Four distinct life course transitions became evident during this research. Gay men transcend these four transitions although they are not navigated by their non-gay counterparts. The four stages were the internalisation of homosexuality, same sex intimacies, the externalisation of homosexuality and living a gay life. I investigate the degree to which gay men experience a mid-life crisis and look at intergenerational activity both within the gay and non-gay community. Ageism within gay culture is also analysed. I try to explore how these factors influence the gay male life course. The extent to which older gay men experience what Erikson describes as their generative stage is also examined. Finally the effect of period, historical and cohort impact on the respondent's lives is also investigated.

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## Introduction

The life course of gay men has changed considerably over the last three decades, from illegal to legal, the evolution of the gay liberation movement, the fight of homophobia and heterosexism through to the building a community of out, powerful and proud gay men only to be confronted with the 'plague' of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Not surprisingly this rather chaotic life-course has yet to be mapped. In this research project I will try to examine some of the stages experienced by gay men and try to relate them to some of the stage and transition theories put forward by Erik Erikson, Daniel Levenson and Gail Sheehy. Intuitive knowledge points to similar life-course transitions to that of non-gay men although, until studied in much greater depth this will remain intuition as opposed to fact. These shifts in intimate life which have taken place over the last 30 years have been collectively characterised as a new phase in the history of modernity known as 'reflexive modernity' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991 1994). 'One of the major features of this new period, highlighted by recent sociologists, is the apparent breakdown of traditional assumptions about individual life trajectories. Rather than following what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have called 'standard biography', which include heterosexual courtship, marriage and nuclear family life (with its concomitant assumptions about gender roles, power dynamics and relationship longevity), there has been a move towards a situation where individuals are able to adopt a 'do-it-yourself biography' (Weeks Heapy and Donovan 2001 p.181). In this trajectory individuals are freed from the traditional family life and values and are associated with the process of

individualisation where the person rather than the community or family become the primary focus of contemporary life. The questions that I seek to answer are

- Are there any transitions/stages in the life course of gay men that do not occur in their non-gay counterparts?
- Is a 'mid-life crisis' evident in gay men?
- As gay men mature do they navigate what Erikson describes as the 'generative verses stagnation' stage in their psychosocial development?

## Chapter One - Literature Review 'Gay Ageing'

My search for gay ageing text and research in the mainstream Gerontology books, papers and journals proved somewhat fruitless. *The Handbook of Aging and the Social Sciences* (Binstock 1985) does not include one reference to homosexuals. The same is true of the ten-year study on ageing published in 1998 *Successful Aging* (Rowe and Kahn 1998). Twenty years earlier, Daniel Levinson's *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (1978) set standards in the search for the stage theory of the life course. Homosexuality was mentioned only once with an example of two non-gay men who had homosexual experiences in their youth.

Given the fact that Age Concern suggests that one in every fifteen users of its services is a lesbian or gay man (Age Concern 2001) such negative attitudes to, or invisibility of, homosexuals in texts on Gerontology seems rather disturbing, although it is argued that this 'heterosexual assumption' (Foucault 1979) is 'not entirely a bad thing given the long history of anti-gay bias in the medical and academic communities' (Cruikshank 1991 p. 77).

The early gay life-course development has been examined (Stanley Siegel's *Uncharted lives*, Richard Isay's *Becoming Gay* and Richard Isay's *Being Homosexual*). These studies emphasize the stages leading up to and coming out. Mid-life and ageing is missing from these books, as if a gay man's development stops when he comes 'out'. Whilst I will relate the stages of gay

development with the theories mentioned above. I will try to look further than coming out and try to chart some later, mid-life, stages or developments.

Whilst ignoring the fact that the older population includes gay people many gerontologists seem unaware of the small body of work produced by gay gerontologists. First published in 1982 with a second edition in 1996 Raymond Berger's *Gay and Gray* gives an excellent insight into some of the issues faced throughout the life-course by gay men. It includes both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The book is in three sections with part one concentrating on six qualitative interviews. Berger begins 'the older homosexual is not wanted by either side – by the gerontologist or the homosexual' (p.10). Participants talk about coming out, involvement with family and community, social and sex lives, intergenerational attitudes, discrimination and life review. In the second section the questionnaire study and analysis is included. 112 subjects participate with an age range of 41 – 79. In this quantitative research, questions like 'what are older homosexual men like?', 'what leads to psychological and social adjustment?' and 'the older homosexual man in perspective' are explored. In the third section additional perspectives on gay ageing are included with chapters from other contributors.

Theories are put forward on how a gay male may successfully age with some interesting points such as, older gay men who have had experience in reconstructing the arbitrary definitions of what homosexuality and gender mean, are also more likely to be able to transfer these affirmative processes

to their identities as older people. Crisis competence, flexibility in gender roles and reconstructing the personal meaning of homosexuality and ageing so they are positive, have powerful effects on the individual psychology of older gay men.

The mastery of crisis hypothesis or crisis competence theory (Francher and Henkin 1973, Kelly and Johnson 1978) is examined and is defined as a way of resolving present and potential losses. This ability has been linked to successful ageing as to how well a person can adapt to losses of family, friends and physical health associated with growing older. Doug Kimmel (1978) first described coming out as a potential crisis for gay men that once resolved, may provide a perspective on life crisis and a sense of crisis competence that buffers the person against a later crisis. Although Lee concluded that the best route to a well-adjusted old age for gay men is not to face and master crises, but rather to avoid them (Lee, 1987 p. 56).

Many gay men fulfil less rigid gender roles that also facilitate the transition into mid-life and beyond. Numerous gay men develop the flexibility to play many social roles at home and in public because they live alone or with another man. Whilst in recent research on heterosexual home lives, 'there is an overriding emphasis on unchanging gender roles and inequality' (Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001 p. 99). Most gay men are not afraid or embarrassed by their ability to take care of themselves, whether this means cooking and cleaning (traditionally feminine roles) or home repairs and car maintenance (traditionally masculine roles) in addition, a gay mans sexual

identity is less likely than a non gay mans to be threatened by changing gender roles as he ages. Daniel Levinson (1978) calls this the masculine/feminine polarity in which men must face the co-existence of masculine and feminine parts of the self. Many non-gay men feel emasculated in later years by having to feed and clothe themselves after their spouses have passed away, while gay men learn how to take care of themselves from day one.

Another interesting book is John Alan Lee's *Gay Life and Maturity* (1991). Edited by Lee the book is a vignette of works by respected gay gerontologists. In one chapter (also found in Gay and Grey 1996) Richard Friend offers a theory of successful ageing of older lesbian and gay people. In this theory he proposes a model for identity formation. In this model he categorises gay men into three types:

1. Stereotypic Older Gay people – These individuals conform to the popular negative images as a result of internalising powerful heterosexist ideology. Dawson (1982 p. 5) argues that 'when today's older gays were young they faced an unrivalled hostility towards homosexuality that was far more virulent than it is today. They were labelled sick by doctors, immoral by clergy, unfit by the military and a menace by the policy and legislators. If identified as homosexual, they risked the loss of their job, home, friends and family. The need for secrecy caused an isolation, which imperilled their most intimate relationships. And the greatest damage was done to those gay people who believed what society said about them, and thus

lived in corrosive shame and self loathing'. This group may never associate with openly gay people and therefore, may never have had an opportunity to challenge their own heterosexist belief system. 'Having internalised extremely negative ideas about themselves the men in this group may lead lives of isolation, guilt, anxiety, self hatred and low self esteem' (Friend 1991 p.105).

2. Passing Older Gay Men – The passing (as non-gay) older gay man must become skilled in the performance of heterosexuality. Whilst this requires new practical resources (Bell, cited in Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan 2001 p. 93) this constructed duality can interfere with identity formation. 'They believe the heterosexist sentiments with which they were raised while also acknowledging and marginally accepting their homosexuality. Many manage the conflict that results by marrying heterosexually and distance themselves from anything defined as gay' (Friend 1991 p. 105). This internalisation of the damaging messages about homosexuality prevents this group from sharing their sexual orientation with their marital partner as well as other gay men. 'Given the strength of heterosexist discourse, being secretive and trying to pass is probably more representative of older gay men. Given marginal or conditional self-acceptance, there is a perceived need to live in two marginally exclusive worlds. This may result in a fragmented sense of self and a lack of authenticity in interpersonal relationships. Emotional issues that are common amongst this group include heightened levels of anxiety and self consciousness generated by the possibility of being found out. Conditional acceptance and the absence

of emotional supports during crisis and times of need' (Friend 1991 p.106-107).

3. The final group is what Friend calls – Affirmative Gay Men – These manage 'heterosexism by reconstructing what it means to be gay into something positive. These men may engage in a purposeful attempt to challenge and alter the prevailing and oppressive socio-sexual ideologies and hence their identity reflects this process. In order to manage the conflicts that being gay in a heterosexist environment generate, people in this group may reconstruct the meaning of homosexuality into something positive for themselves. It is argued that the ways in which affirmative older gay men reconstruct the meaning of homosexuality also results in growing old successfully' (Friend 1991 p.107-108). By examining more closely the ways, which they shape their lives, and the effects that these new ideologies have on events associated with growing old, a theory of successful ageing is offered.

Research on the stereotypic older gay and passing group is rather thin due to the difficulty in engaging these groups in research. None of these subjects were included in my research project.

Other authors suggest that the results of managing what it means to be lesbian and gay in a heterosexist world, many lesbians and gay adults develop skills for managing their lives which facilitate their adjustment to the ageing process. (Francher and Henkin, 1973; Friend, 1980; Kimmel, 1977).

Further contributors offer evidence from Australia in the continuing debate of accelerated ageing and male homosexuality (Bennett and Thompson 1991 p. 65) 'In this study the issue of accelerated ageing is addressed by accounting for the duality of the gay man's lifestyle as he interacts in both the homosexual community and the larger society where heterosexuality is the presumed norm. The onset of middle and old age as self-perceived by gay men and as perceived by other gay men in the homosexual subculture is contrasted. The results indicate that existing contradictions and debates about gay men and accelerated ageing are largely a function of their referent worlds'. An example of this can be seen in the recent television drama 'Queer as Folk' where many of the characters expressed considerable worry about reaching 30 years old where they thought that gay life finished.

Additional chapters include Lee's own study of gay age-stratified love with his interview with the late Christopher Isherwood's , 30 years junior partner Don Bachardy. Lee argues that 'to his knowledge, even those who analyse gay male dyads (e.g., McWhirter and Mattison, 1984) and the strains caused by 'stage discrepancy' (Mattison and McWhirter, 1986) pay little, if any, attention to the dynamics introduced by age stratification' (Lee 1991 p. 57). Life course development theories are not covered in this book.

A more recent addition to the gay ageing library is Harold Kooden and Charles Flowers, *Golden Men, The Power of Gay Midlife*. Published in 2000 this book draws on some of the theories and logic from the previous

mentioned publications. The author's construct the four ages of gay men, firstly chronological which they call clock age, secondly biological age which they refer to as body age, thirdly the heart age which refers to the level of maturity according to his experiences and present state of mind and finally the gay age which measures how long a man has been practicing and preparing for the adult expression of his sexual orientation. The book is in four parts with the first part concentrating on the body. Body image and sexuality are explored as is wellness, physical health, Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The impact of these is examined and the effect that they have had on wiping out many men who could have been mentors and role models for the next cohort of young gay men. Part two deliberates on the mind and examines work and play a paradigm of purpose and pleasure, finding strength in relationships with family and friends, and self esteem. Part three observes the soul with a look at personal value systems, self control, taking charge and life planning with a look at mortality and spirituality. In the concluding part they consider what they call the last lesson, letting go. The authors argue that ageing is a 'state of body mind and soul and the changes that we face as we grow older are behavioral, mental and emotional' (Kooden and Flowers 2000 p. 21). Each of the chapters describes a developmental task that represent a component of successful ageing. They recognise that gay men are vulnerable to early social forces but make assumptions that 'a gay man is the central agent in developing his identity, and he continues his self-creation over the course of his lifetime' (Kooden and Flowers 2000 p. 21). Exercises are included in each chapter helping the reader alter their perception and attitude with the intention

of encouraging successful ageing. For example they get the reader to describe the different groups of people around whom they felt like an outsider. They acknowledge that appraisal of your history for feelings of exclusion can be both difficult and painful but argue that identifying the feelings of isolation are fundamental to creating new feelings of connectedness and belonging. Some interesting points are raised including the additional effect of AIDS on gay men's sense of ageing. 'No matter how young they are, many gay men are experiencing the world as their grandparents did – with many of their friends dying and their own health an issue' ((Kooden and Flowers 2000 p.11). The tension of experiencing pre-modernity in a post modern life course (Anderson 1985) impacts strongly on not only self-esteem but also self worth. The book also examines other factors that affect the gay life course including intergenerational attitudes, identity and death.

Whilst interesting theories are put forward in the above gay gerontology literature the life course perspective is missing from the books reviewed. Although as we shall see later in the research many gay men do navigate many of the same transitions as their non-gay counterparts although the life course development has yet to be mapped.

## Chapter Two - Literature review 'Psychosocial life-stages'

In this review I would like to examine some of the psychosocial life-stage theories and models put forward by some of the life-course authors. I will try to use some of these models and theories in my search to plot the life course development of gay men.

My first examination is the work of Gail Sheehy. Her book *Understanding Men's Passages, Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives* (1997B) maps out the life-course of American men. It divides the life into decades which she calls the Turbulent 30's, Flourishing 40's, fearless 50's Influential 60's etc. The publishers review argues that 'This is the book every man should read and every woman will', I would argue that this is because the book is written by a woman for women about men.

A total of one hundred men from the 7,880 men and women used when researching one of her earlier books *New Passages* (1997) were interviewed. 'Gay men were often present in the groups and much of their experiences resonated with that of the majority of heterosexuals, particularly if they were partnered. But I do not feel adequate to carry out the task of decoding the mind-boggling changes that have occurred in the gay male life cycle in recent years. The process of understanding and accepting one's sexual orientation and the decision to live with it, requires the courage to live outside many of

the conventional markers of adulthood' (Sheehy p. XV1). She concludes that mapping the gay life course is a subject worthy of its own book.

The research of psychologist Erik Erikson is adapted to her map of the life course. Sheehy makes the case that it is men who are in mid-life who have the best chance to become masters of their own fate. This book is a guide for men (or the women in their lives) as they confront the major issues of each passage for example:

- What keeps a man young?
- Strategies for dealing with the male menopause
- How to successfully defeat depression
- How to survive a job change or company downsizing
- How to navigate a successful marriage

Some valuable points are raised although Erik Erikson in his 1950 book *Childhood and Society* (revised in 1963) argues that the life course can be divided into several stages of psychosocial development. His model for progress is described in Table One.

Erikson saw development as a process in which a person must resolve successive dilemmas. In this model he describes stages of life, each of which involves a crisis for the individual. In Erikson's view, a crisis is not necessarily a disastrous event. Although it has the potential to overwhelm the individual, it may also be seen as a challenge and provide the opportunity for growth.

Successful resolution of life crises enables us to become healthier, better developed, integrated and mature human beings.

Table One

**Erikson's stages of psychosocial development** (Sugerman 1986)

Age	Stage	Crisis	Potential new Virtue	Societal manifestation
0-1	Infancy	Basic trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	Religion and faith
1-6	Early childhood	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Will	Law and order
6-10	Play age	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	Economics
10-14	School age	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence	Technology
14-20	Adolescence	Identity vs. Role confusion	Fidelity	Ideology
20-35	Young adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	Ethics
35-65	Maturity	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	Education, art and science
65 +	Old age	Ego integrity vs. Despair and Disgust	Wisdom	All major cultural institutions

'Erikson's model is of a changing individual in a changing society and as new demands and changes are placed on the person the ego must adapt. The development does not occur randomly but in accordance with the epigenetic principle. Although the crises are presented as a series of polar opposites they in fact represent dimensions rather than alternatives' (Sugarman 1986 p. 84). The following is a brief outline of the eight stages.

**Stage One                      Basic trust verses Mistrust**

In this early stage an infant must learn to trust, or not. The quality of the baby's attachment to its caretaker is important in its development. It is during this time that the beginnings of trust in oneself are learned.

## **Stage Two            Autonomy verses Shame and Doubt**

The goal of this stage is to attain self-control without the loss of self-esteem.

An infant who is made to see himself as inadequate feels ashamed or doubtful. To develop a good sense of autonomy a child must be protected whilst given choice and must experience a sensible equilibrium between freedom and control.

## **Stage Three           Initiative verses Guilt**

According to Erikson, the crisis/opportunity of this stage involves the conflict of initiative vs. guilt. He argues that children at this stage incorporate criticism and punishment into their self-image. The child begins to internalise reprimands from authoritative figures. The child's own internal sense of guilt becomes important in guiding behaviour.

## **Stage Four            Industry verses Inferiority**

At this stage in development the child becomes involved in learning to use the physical and intellectual tools of his or her society. For children who now trust, are autonomous and able to take initiative may now become industrious, taking responsibility for schoolwork or other related pastimes.

## **Stage Five            Identity verses Role confusion**

In this fifth stage the adolescent reaches genital maturity. The search for sexual and occupational identity is predominant. Successful resolution of this crisis leads to a sense of ego identity 'a conviction that one is learning

effective steps towards a tangible future, that one is developing a defined personality within a social reality which one understands' (Erikson, 1980 p. 95).

### **Stage Six                    Intimacy verses Isolation**

Erikson moves us now as adults into intimacy vs. isolation and proposes that the major task for the young adult is to develop their capacity to be intimate. Love is the likely new strength to be developed at this stage. 'Body and ego must now be masters of the organ modes and of the nuclear conflicts, in order to be able to face the fear of ego loss in situations which call for self abandon: in orgasms and sexual unions, in close friendships and in physical combat, in experiences of inspiration by teachers and of intuition from the recesses of the self. The avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss, may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption' (Erikson 1950 p.129).

### **Stage Seven                Generativity verses Stagnation**

Adults gain a positive identity by expanding ego interests and mentoring/guiding one's children, or, lacking that, some object of a 'parental kind of responsibility' (Erikson 1950 p. 231). Failing this, the adult may feel a need of 'pseudo intimacy, punctuated by moments of mutual repulsion...often with a pervading sense of individual stagnation and interpersonal impoverishment' (Erikson 1950 p. 231)

## **Stage Eight            Ego integrity verses Despair and Disgust**

In Erikson's last stage he describes a person who has transcended the 'triumphs and disappointments adherent to being' (Erikson 1950 p. 232). 'Erikson points to several indicators of ego integrity...acceptance of one's life for what it has been and a freedom from the freedom of excessive regret that it had not been different. It also involves an acceptance that one's life is one's own responsibility' (Sugarman 1986 p. 92). The lack of accumulative ego integration leads to despair.

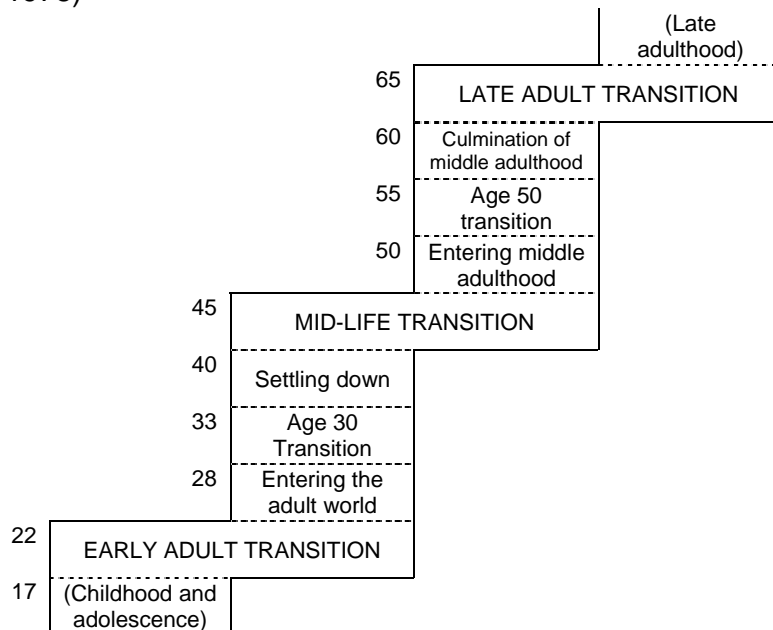
Although subject to some critical scrutiny, updates and revisions it is possibly the most universally accepted and definitive life-course stage model still used today. It could be argued that the exclusion of homosexuality from this study could be put down to its placement in historical time i.e. 1950, the same could also be argued of the next stage theory model that I will examine. It pre-dates the legalisation of homosexuality, Gay Liberation and Stonewall.

Daniel Levinson and colleagues at Yale University conducted an in-depth study of forty men trying to find out what it means to be an adult. The men came from four different occupational groups (business executives, university biologists, industrial workers and novelists). The data was collected in 1969 by biographical interviews. The age range of the participants was 35 – 45 years old. Each of them were interviewed between five and ten times over a three month period and the interviews lasted for between one and two hours.

The result of this research was a comprehensive theory of adult development which was published in 1978, *Seasons of a Man's Life* Levinson *et al.* The concept of this book is 'the underlying pattern or design of a person's life at a given time' (p.41). The life structure is examined from three angles: a person's socio-cultural world; an individual's participation in the world and the transaction between the world and self and the ways in which a person draws upon or discounts his self in everyday life. The physical and social environment shapes an individual's life structure.

When studying these men's life he found there were alternating stable and transition periods. These periods were not defined in terms of concrete behaviors such as Erikson's alternatives or in terms of events, such as Sheehy's (1997B p. 163) 'empty nest syndrome' but rather in terms of the development of a new life structure. In the stable periods of six or seven years work family choices were enriched, developed and unquestioned. In the transition period, reappraisal of work and family led to new life structures in the next stable period.

Figure 1: Development periods in early and middle adulthood. (Levinson *et al* 1978)



He organises stages of adulthood according to the various age-related milestones that are experienced by most adults. These ages provide only a rough guideline as adult experiences differ from person to person. Levinson identified five stages, which he called eras, these are as follows;

1. Pre-adulthood (birth to age 22)
2. Early adulthood (age 17 to 45)
3. Middle adulthood (age 40 to 64)
4. Late adulthood (age 60 to 85)
5. Late, late adulthood (age 80 and over)

In our early adulthood or early adult transition (EAT), the major milestones are defining ourselves as adults (ages 17-22 years) and making initial yet mature choices in values, friendship, love, occupation and life-style (ages 22-28

years). The next transition is to a more stable commitment in love and occupation (ages 28-33 years), and finally establishing oneself in society (ages 33-40 years). 'A distinction is made between the earlier and the later parts of this settling down phase. The latter is dubbed the time of '*becoming one's own man*' (BOOM). It marks a period of special emphasis on the struggle to be more fully one's own person that is found in many ages' (Sugarman 1986 p 106, 107).

The next stage, middle adulthood (ages 40-45) signals a major life review often accompanied by adjustments in priorities and aspirations before age 50 years sometimes called a mid-life transition (MLT). Between the ages 50 – 60 there is a further questioning and modification to address desires that have gone unexpressed.

The transition into late adulthood (ages 60-80 years) is marked by reflection on past achievements and regrets, and making peace with oneself, others and enjoyment of the rest of life.

In the final stage late, late adulthood a major concern is a decline in health and finally death.

Levinson et al identified developmental tasks that characterised each period. The first of these was building and modifying a life structure. The tasks of early adulthood are; forming a dream and giving it a place in the life structure; forming mentoring relationships; forming an occupation; forming love

relationships, a marriage and a family. A fifth task of forming mutual friendships was also identified. The final set of developmental tasks relates to individuation. It is seen as addressing, through the confrontation and reintegration of four polarities concerned with: young/old; destruction/creation; masculine/feminine; and attachment/separateness.

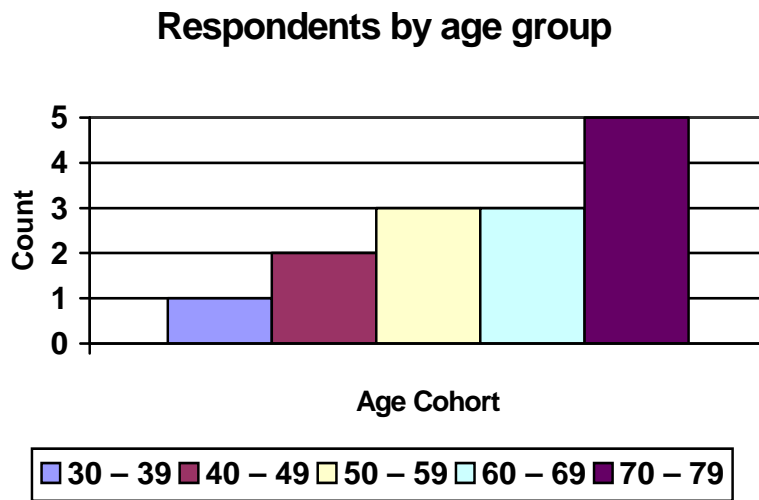
Whilst these classic works map of the heterosexual life-course the reference points that non-heterosexuals use in mapping their development may be quite different. In this research project I will try to identify some of these non-heterosexual points of reference but further research will be needed to plot the lesbian and gay life-course.

## Chapter Three - Research Methodology

The main body of the research was based on qualitative structured interviews. This methodology was chosen because it was thought that it would be the best method to explore the shifting nuances of gay life course development by providing a brief life history of the subjects. Participants were recruited via my attendance at the Age Concern conference 'Opening Doors' which was the first national conference designed to meet the needs of older lesbians and gay men. I made a request at this conference for research subjects and many of the contributors became involved via this method. This method started a snowball effect but due to limited word space, money and time the total number of participants was 14.

The original questions were piloted with a friend who happened to be gay. These were then refined and revised before ready for use, (full list appendix 1). The age range for the interviewees ranged from 31 to 79 years. A break down of respondents by age group can be found in figure one.

Figure One



14 qualitative consultations were used in this piece of research. The participants were drawn from a variety of backgrounds. Appendix 2 provides a brief biographical note on each of the 14 people. They are listed in order of interview and I have indicated whether the participants were individual or part of a group interview.

I had originally developed the interview questions with the anticipated problem of ‘getting the interviewees to talk’ in mind. However in practice I found that all the participants were very willing and eager to tell their stories. This could have been influenced, in part, by the fact that I had disclosed my own non-heterosexual identity to the respondents. The existence of perceived commonalities between respondents and researchers can have a significant role to play in determining the extent to which trust develops within the interview (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984; Dunne 1997). All the interviews lasted for between 30 minutes and 45 minutes depending on the degree to which participants engaged with the questions. The exception to this was the group interview that lasted for over two hours. This turned into an orderly interview

and the participants took turns at answering the questions. It made the transcription of the tape easier than if subjects had responded spontaneously. The interviews took place in a number of places including a quiet corner of a coffee bar, a respondent's home, my home and a community centre where an older gay group met on a weekly basis. All the interviews were recorded onto tape and later transcribed. This led to an excess of 20,000 words of qualitative interview data.

### Representative sample

The sample cannot be seen to be a representative group of homosexuals and the issue of volunteer bias must be taken into account. Gebhard (1993) points out that random probability samples are problematic when researching homosexuality 'Homosexuals migrate from rural communities where it is hard to conceal their orientation, to anonymity of large cities, so rural samples will be largely devoid of them. In the cities homosexuals congregate in gay communities. These are usually relatively small communities and easily missed in random sampling. Worst yet, the custom of interviewing only one member of a household is disastrous in a gay community, where everyone in the household is apt to be homosexual' (Gebhard 1993 p 64). All participants in this research, with the exception of one, can be described as self-identifying gay men, all were white and many lived in London or the Southeast of England. No interviewees were included from ethnic minority backgrounds. No members of the 'passing or stereotypic group' (Friend 1991) were included.

## Informed consent and anonymity

The research aims and objectives as well as its purpose were explained to all participants. The ethical principle of informing potential research participants before they consented to participate in any aspects of the research that might be damaging or embarrassing was observed. Subjects had an opportunity to skip or pass on awkward or painful questions and were assured that they could stop the interview whenever they wished. Participants were assured of confidentiality. Many of the interviewees were happy to consent to their first name only being used. After further consideration of the issues of confidentiality and arguments against the use of real names it was decided that pseudonyms should be allocated to all participants.

## Reliability and Validity

My research strategy produced a sample in which the responses of middle class, well-educated whites were over represented. Secondly there may be a problem in the accuracy of participant's reports of their behaviour. Memory errors will be inevitable in this kind of retrospective data and it is not possible to check adequately the validity and reliability of the data. The procedure similar to a test-retest check for reliability is known as a take retake interview (Allgeier & Allgeier 1995 p. 55) was not feasible for time and expense reasons. I conducted all interviews so the personality differences among interviewers did not influence the responses of the volunteers and could not be considered as a potential source of bias.

## Generalisability

Although it may be considered likely that other groups of volunteers who might participate in the same research questions would come up with similar answers. The extent to which the findings of the study can be generalised across all gay men must remain questionable.

## **Chapter Four - Research findings**

### **Key Stages of Development**

Drawing from my own experience as a gay man and interview findings from this research four key stages or transitions in the life course development of gay men came to light, these are:

#### **Stage One – internalisation**

An individual admitting to themselves that they are gay or have homosexual tendencies. This is something that I will call the internalisation of homosexuality. In one study researchers found that homosexual boys, on average, discover their attraction to other boys at the age of 12.8 years (Kooden, Morin, Riddle, Rogers, Sang and Strassburger 1979) while another found thirteen years to be the norm (McDonald 1982). In 1979 researcher Richard Troiden of Miami University interviewed 150 gay men about their childhoods. In all 99 percent remember feeling 'sexually different' during this period in their lives. They also recall struggling with the possibility that they might be homosexual by the time they were seventeen years old.

#### **Stage Two - Same sex intimacies**

Troiden (1979) also found that two thirds of his respondents first engaged in sex with other boys to the point of orgasm when they were, on average, 14.9 years old. 'Among the mountain of developmental tasks confronting such a youth is his need to re-examine his self image, particularly his concept of himself as a sexual being. Having been raised to see himself as straight, the

appearance of same-sex desires... .. the presence of homoerotic yearnings may mean that he is not the person that he thought he was' (Vargo 1998 p. 13).

### Stage Three Coming Out

I shall refer to this as the externalisation of homosexuality. Once an individual realises that he is definitely gay, especially if he feels rather good about it, then not disclosing his true self may lead to a feeling of deceitfulness. He comes to realise that his relationships are fraudulent in that they are based on information he knows to be false. When out he no longer needs to pretend or worry about being discovered and accused of dishonesty and as a result he may feel a deep sense of relief.

### Stage Four - Living a gay life

Once a man has gained sufficient sexual and emotional experience and is comfortable with and forthright about his sexuality, he may find himself wishing to settle into a relationship with another man (Coleman 1982). 'He achieves a more complete identity, that of a fully functioning person, his sexuality woven into the larger tapestry of characteristics, traits and predilections that comprise of his being' (Vargo 1998 p. 34).

Because of social pressures put on non-heterosexual men by the dominant heterosexual majority the demands to conform to the overriding 'heterosexual norm' is strong in the early life course. If self-acceptance of ones sexual orientation is not forthcoming it may lay strongly dormant within and can be triggered at any point in the gay male life course.

**Peter** a 52 year old white gay man recalls these key stages:

*“I suppose it actually first dawned on me (that I was gay) when I was at primary school. So I’d be about 9 or 10... .. I’d say I was probably about 15 or 16 (when I first started having same sex, sexual relationships)”*

Q At what age did you come out?

*“Well the process of coming out happened over a long period of time. I mean, I first accepted that I was gay, so the first time that I actually told somebody that I was gay for me was kind of the beginning of the process of coming out and that actually started when I was about 20. and then from 20 to about 24 or 25 the process kind of snowballed and I told more and more people and became more and more comfortable with the identity that I had and the identity that I was forming until eventually I told my whole family (of origin) when I was about 24, and so really that’s when I actually look back and think that I came out.”*

**Peter’s** story is a common one. **Steven**, a white middle class 42 year old gay man had similar life course transitions when asked when he first realised or admitted to himself that he was gay:

*“It has always been there in terms of feeling it. I guess recognising it as being gay probably not until I was 14 or so. I did have (gay) sex before then but it was just something that happened. I didn’t*

*really put a label on it... ...I think that the first person that I came out to was my first long term relationship. So I suppose that I came out to him. But the first person that I really came out to was a friend. I was probably about 22. Because I was in a long relationship it wasn't really an issue, we just were."*

On the other hand **Brian** a 62-year-old white gay man had a completely different life course experience:

*"Oh I realised (that I was gay) when I think that I was in my teens but it was something that I thought about and fought against for very many years. I finally accepted myself when I was in my early forties. I am now sixty-two... ... I can still remember it as though it was an echo, it wasn't me who was saying this it was someone else. But it was a tremendous sense of relief and release..."*

This lack of self acceptance felt by **Brian** could be what Erickson describes in stage six of his model of development *intimacy verses isolation* 'the avoidance of such experiences because of a fear of ego loss may lead to a deep sense of isolation and consequent self-absorption (Erickson 1950 p. 129). 'It is a reasonable hypothesis that the years of adolescents may be particularly stressful... ...homosexual teens have an additional task facing them in forming a clear identity' (Bee 1998 p. 314). This could also be a factor in some earlier life course problems experienced by **Brian**:

*"When I was 22 or 23 I attempted suicide, I was aware at the time that I was gay and I didn't want to be and I really didn't see a*

*future in my life as a gay man at that time. I was prevented from actually carrying out the act by my sister... .. I then engaged in therapy for a couple of years... .. Then I underwent a second period of counselling. The situation was that I had partly accepted the fact that I was gay, but still wanted to change things. I wasn't really fully happy about it until about a year later."*

Although the gay life course stages usually happen in the order identified (Vargo 1998) this is not always true and many men do not always transcend all four stages. For example many men have same sex intimacies but do not admit to themselves or to others that they could be homosexual. Miller (1979) describes this group as 'trade fathers', those who engage in sexual encounters with other men but define these behaviours as only 'genital urges'. Many non-gay men go through a homoerotic phase. Because children play almost exclusively with members of their own gender – homosociality – it is not surprising to find that homosexual behaviour is more common during the approximate ages ten to thirteen than later in adolescence (Leiten, Greenwald & Tarran 1989). Homosexual activities are a common element in sexual development in western culture, and such experiences seldom determine one's preference of sexual partners (Bell et al., 1981; Van Wyk & Geist, 1984).

**Simon** a 31-year-old white gay man told me:

*"I had quite a lot of sexual experiences before that time (aged 20) before I realised, and admitted to myself that I was gay, I was in central Australia, so I was probably 23 or 24. It was there that it*

*dawned on me that I probably wouldn't get married and have kids and live happily ever after."*

**Jack**, white working class, aged 74 admitted to having same sex intimacies but did not identify as a gay man and although a member of the older gay men's group had lived his entire gay life in the closet.

*"I must have been about 15 when I first started (having same sex intimacies). As I said before I don't have much to do with the gay side. I was married. I didn't do much of that at that time (homosexuality) but when my wife passed away that is when I got bitten by the gay scene. I do live on my own and I prefer to live on my own. I feel quite satisfied, I prefer my own company."*

The lack of acceptance by society at large is characterised by generalised feelings of marginality and perception of being different from same-sex peers. The validation of those feelings, experiences and life course development was not available in the late 1940's and early 1950's and a fairly clear path from arrested growth in childhood to the dysfunction in adulthood can be seen. 'To gain an *identity* (and not to suffer *role confusion*), to learn *intimacy* (and not *isolation*), and to come to a place of *individuating reflection* requires tremendous help from the young person's support network (Freedman 1999 p. 10). This support was not available to **Alfred** aged 74 years recalls:

*"When one discovers one is gay, which I knew from being a very small child but did not understand it until I was about 16. I worked*

*with someone who was of the same mind and he told me all about it. But in those days of course there was nobody to turn to, you couldn't get any advice, there was no where to go. There was no such thing as counselling or anything like that. So you just sort of floundered and stumbled on as best you could. Even coming up to London in my 20's it was just as bad. I didn't like clubs. It was a very bleak lonely time. I was also very poor. I had a very poorly paid job to start with. Trying to make a life of some sort with virtually no help from anyone else. Until later on I met some people quite by accident who made life much more pleasant and worthwhile. Living through my late teens and early 20's I can only liken it to being an enemy alien in a foreign country, like someone who was a spy in a foreign country. I was always afraid of being caught. It felt rather like that because one was on one's own such a lot. You felt so alone in the middle of all the alien atmosphere and facts of life which other people enjoy and you don't."*

A major achievement argued by many of the respondents was not marrying. Not conforming to the predominant non-gay community's norms. This is what I shall refer to as living a gay life. Whist in today's climate this may seem a relatively easy choice, many of the subjects found this a difficult preference, which is understandable when viewed in the period and historical time this choice was made.

When asked to look back over his life and talk about some of the most important stages or accomplishments that he had achieved 79 year old **Brendan**, who at the age of 28, moved from Belfast to London explained:

*“Well I have never got married.”*

Q Do you see that as an accomplishment?

*“Yes I do. We all swore together (Brian and some young gay men friends in Belfast) that we would not get married (heterosexually).”*

**Paul** a 70-year-old semi-retired journalist added:

*“For our generation this was an achievement to withstand the pressures of society.”*

Acutely aware of the impact of class, demography and education on the development of the life course **Paul** went on to add:

*“A plus thing does come into this you know. The young lad that was brought up in Dagenham and who went to work on a factory bench, it wasn't easy for him to even have a furtive grope even on the way home. It was a lot easier for someone brought up in an arty tarty family in Hampstead who was destine to go on to Oxford or Cambridge. Life was very much easier.”*

## Intergenerational Activity

One difference between gay and non gay men which was identified in the course of this research was that gay families of choice, in general, tend to be around the same age as ourselves. This is not reflected in the non-gay world as many men have children and grandchildren and the children and grandchildren of their friends to interact with. So I would conclude from my findings that gay men have less social intergenerational activity than their non-gay counterparts. This can be attributed to two things, the lack of many gay men to have contact with children, their own or other peoples. The second is ageism within the gay community.

Gay men do not get to meet other parents, grandparents and children. Many non-gay people socialise through their children's leverage. Whilst this may be changing with the impact of changes in the adoption laws and the impact of donor babies (and this deserves further research), I think that it will be sometime before this type of intergenerational activity is more widespread in the gay community. (Levinson 1978 p. 27) argues that 'relationships between generational levels are important in all societies. Whilst acknowledging the difference between generations, we can also learn to increase the interaction between them'.

**Tim** aged 66 gave his views on this:

*"I think that probably I prefer (to mix with people of) my own age or up to 15 years younger."*

When asked about aspects of his life that he found to be least satisfying **Brian** aged 62 said:

*“The fact that I have never been a father. I probably poured all of that sort of energy into things like mentoring, helping to develop younger people... .. The fact that I have not been a biological father, and could not have been a biological father, not because I am gay because I know a great many gay men who are fathers, but for me it was just not possible.”*

**Alan** aged 59 retired from Brighton described the hurt felt at not being able to be part of this heterosexual dominance:

*“The least satisfying aspect (of my life) to me was not being able to share my family as my sister shared hers. My sister got married and had children and lived a lovely family life. I didn’t and that is a profoundly horrible thing! It was awful for people my age and older because it was just not talked about at all. No one spoke about anything.”*

**Dave** aged 52 offered:

*“I socialise with people of my own age. Possibly from work that is the way it works.”*

## Ageism

Many of the respondents thought that ageism throughout all aspect of the gay community was not only rife but was still being perpetuated. It was thought by

all respondents that this ageism was much stronger within the gay than the non-gay community.

**John** aged 73 gave his view on this ageism within the gay community:

*“You must bare in mind that for us that are over 60 we see a different world from the younger homosexual because there is no doubt in my mind for the older homosexual to mix either in a pub or a club is on very difficult ground. Generally speaking he isn’t wanted. There could be exceptions to that and I am sure that there are against this rule but for me it has been reinforced quite a lot. It does tend to make for a very lonely life because your ability to find new friends is very limited so it does tend to isolate you.”*

**Alan** a 59-year-old gay man from Scotland who now lives in Brighton and is now retired also shared this view:

*“Oh! If only we could socialise with young people what a lovely world it would be. But getting older is something that you cannot know until you get older. I mean that may sound crazy but it is obviously true. Young people I can take in small doses for the very simple reason that they have never been my age but I have been their age. They are lovely to look at and delightful to hold. But the answer is no I do not socialise with younger people.”*

A view shared by 74 year old **Alfred**:

*“I think that young gay people can be very inconsiderate and rather cruel and rather more self-centred than older people with the things they say and their attitudes towards older people. So if you don’t look for their company that is something that you can be spared. Which I am rather glad that I do not. So the answer is no I prefer people my age or older.”*

**Robert** aged 49 reiterates this observation:

*“As I have got older I have become less comfortable with young gay men because I think that there is an attitude towards ageing that is instilled into gay men that make them averse. Whether that is a reality or not I feel it consciously as I get older that I have less to communicate with them and more to defend and protect and so I feel less comfortable with them because they can be quite cruel. Coming to this older gay men’s group has been wonderful sharing experiences I find that this place and these people so relaxing (Older gay men’s group).”*

**Paul** aged 70 years offered an illuminating view on this ageism:

*“I think that we (older gay men) represent the unacceptable side of their shaving mirrors. We are what they will become tomorrow and they know it.”*

## Mid-Life Crisis/Transition.

In his description of a mid-life crisis/transition (Levinson 1978 p. 26) suggests 'that a man at mid-life is suffering some loss of his youthful vitality and, often, some insult to his narcissistic pride. Although he is not literally close to death or undergoing severe bodily decline, he typically experiences these changes as a fundamental threat'. Jaques has identified the 'middle crisis' as a normal developmental period starting in the late thirties and continuing for several years. He suggests that the experience of one's mortality is at the core of the mid-life crisis. (Bee 1998 p. 408) suggests that the only subgroup of adults who seem to be quite likely to experience a mid-life crisis are well educated middle class white men. Tamir (1982) also confirmed these findings. With my research subjects falling ideally into this group did any of the gay men interviewed experience a mid-life crisis? Most did describe having some sort of mid-life crisis and described their feelings vividly.

When asked if he had experienced a mid-life crisis **Brian** a 62 year old white gay man explained:

*"Yes. Up to the age of about 38-39, I dreaded hitting 40, but then I recall that I felt the same at 28-29 about hitting 30 and I sailed over that, and 40 didn't seem to be a major problem, looking back."*

**Steven** a 42 year old educated, middle class gay man explained his recent experience with what he describes as a mid-life crisis:

*“Definitely it was horrendous as well as exhilarating. I would not have not had it. It was triggered by a failing relationship, which I am not over yet and also by lots of things happening in the house where we were living. It was also triggered by my partner doing something that was going to change our lives. This forced me to reassess who and what I was. I was 39 and a half when this happened. It was punctuated by the single issue when I kind of had a mini breakdown I suppose. Not one that lasted more than a couple of days in its chronic stage. I did think that I was going to die when it happened. This was a very sobering thing to have happened. It has enabled me to be able to go back to all kinds of alternative lifestyles that I had before I was in this relationship. Go back more powerfully and more as a practitioner rather than a recipient. This was one of my few mid-life crises’ I would imagine. I fully expect that there may be more (laughs).”*

**Alfred** aged 74 recalled his experience of what his midlife crisis felt like:

*“Well I was a bit apprehensive about it. I wondered what it will be like when you get to 40 or 50. Would it be dreadful, would it be awful? Then I would sort of forget it you know. I did think about it and I was a little worried about it now and then but I wasn’t obsessed with it. I have known several older gay men who were paranoid about their age but it seems to affect younger ones just the same.”*

## The Male Menopause/Andropause

Sheehy (1998) p178 argues that the 'specter of the 'male menopause has become the latest, greatest anxiety of baby boomers faced with middle age – and younger'. Her research reveals what she calls a 'MANopause' for short which is a five to twelve year period during which men go through hormonal fluctuations coupled with accelerated physical and psychological changes' (Sheehy 1998 p. 186). Featherstone and Hepworth (1985) found in their review of the 'male menopause' literature that a significant number of men experience psychological and social difficulties in middle age but these appear to stem from cultural and lifestyle changes rather than from hormonal changes quite different to the findings of Sheehy. Whilst many of the respondents were able to recall their mid-life crisis when the subject of the male menopause/andropause was touched upon a quite different picture emerges.

When asked if he had experienced a male menopause **Brian** a 62-year-old gay man found the notion rather amusing:

*“Laughs.... No. laughs.”*

**Peter** a 52-year-old white gay man explained

*“No I would not say that I have experience a male menopause. I have experienced ageing which does creep up on your body, you do start to have aches and pains where you never had them before but to actually go through a male menopause then no I do not feel that there is such a thing but if there is I haven't reached it yet.”*

**Steven**, a white middle class 42-year-old gay man had also not reached this stage but was aware of its existence;

*“I have not had it myself yet I don’t think but I do know other men who have told me about a variety of physical and emotional symptoms. Talking to female friends this would seem to approximate to the stage when physically and emotionally things are changing. I think that the desire for sex diminishes and sexual prowess. There is a shift in emotions away from what they were doing into some sort of re-evaluation of things emotionally. This is just what I have picked up from people.”*

## Generativity

One research finding that did come to light was just how generative many of the respondents were. Mentoring is part of the developmental process that Erikson has called ‘generativity’. Older people may provide a sense of generativeness or guiding of the next generation (Erikson 1950) ‘Through this process, a man in middle adulthood forms a growing awareness of the continuity of human life and the flow of generations’ (Levinson 1978 p. 254). Many interviewees found this to be as fulfilling as Levinson predicted.

**Paul** a 70 year old, gay, semi-retired journalist talked about his generative work,

*“Well in addition to acting as membership secretary for this group (older gay men’s group) and doing bits for Age Concern I, and*

*indeed Alex work on a thing called Rainbow events. The principal thing that we are working on at the moment is the October fair. This is run by older lesbians and gays although not entirely for older lesbians and gays in central and southern England.”*

**Brian** a 62 year old white, gay man had a similar experience to Paul's:

*“I am on the management committee of London Friend (gay organisation that helps young gay men and lesbians). I run small groups from time to time as part of my job at London Friend, for gay men.”*

**Steven** a white middle class 42 year old can also be seen to be in a generative stage in his life course when he spoke about his mentoring work:

*“I am doing a piece of work at the moment with a group of lesbian and gay tenants for a housing association. That is actually intergenerational work although they are predominantly older there are some very young people there. I am also on the committee of the October fair, which is a community event that runs in Waterloo, and I help on that. It is stalls and raffles with community groups who come along to tell people what they do, so I am involved with that. I am also involved with reminiscence work with older lesbians and gay men. I have also been on the management committees of lesbian and gay groups.”*

**Dave** a 52-year-old chef offered his story:

*“I work for the food chain (Gay food co-op that voluntary distributes food to people with AIDS) usually on a Sunday.”*

## Cohort, Period and Historical Effect

Another research finding that became very evident in the course of this project was the impact that cohort, period and historical effect had on the different generations of gay men interviewed. The damaging affect of living in a period of major hostility towards the homosexual became apparent when the respondents shared their truths. Although all respondents seemed well adjusted to their homosexuality the damaging affect of living through times when being gay was not a legal option, let alone an easy option, surfaced in the interviews. It must also be remembered that it was not until 1974 that the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexuality from the list of official mental disorders. The older respondents held a certain duality of identities and hid their homosexuality from many. This was not true of the younger (early 50's) age group.

‘The decision to conceal the homosexual identity from significant others may be detrimental to psychological well being. Is it possible to achieve an integrated personal identity or have authentic relationships while concealing fundamental aspects of the self? ...In choosing to hide an essential part of the self, individuals are left with a gnawing feeling that they are valued for what others expect them to be rather than for who they really are’ (Blumenfeld and Raymond 1988 p. 90 -91; Minton and McDonald, 1984).

**Alan** aged 59 described the hurt that this duality causes:

*"I wanted to go home and tell my family and sister who I loved and who I wanted to be with but you couldn't do it and that lives with you forever."*

**Alfred** aged 74 argues:

*"It is a double life sort of a Jekyll and Hyde business."*

Whilst **Dave** aged 52 pointed out:

*"But that doesn't apply to all of us don't forget."*

**Alfred** aged 74 and **Alan** 59 added:

*"That's right it's because you are younger. Yes someone who is only 50."*

**Dave** aged 52 said:

*"I had a partnership for 27 years so I call that an achievement of my life and all through that partnership there wasn't one family function on either side that we were not asked along together for, and since he died five years ago I am still with his family even now. In fact in a few weeks time I am going off to a Bar Mitzvah held for his nephew. I haven't got a down side I know that it sounds rather smug."*

**Robert** aged 49 explained:

*“I think it is important for younger gay men to recognise the benefits that we have reaped by the past generations of gay men who have fought for and done so much. Sometimes we loose track of that. I can hold hands or kiss someone goodbye or hello because other people have fought for me to be able to do that.”*

**Paul** aged 70 argued:

*“Oh I think that applies in the wider sense as well. I usually encapsulate it, what I think that you are saying as ‘Gee dad thanks for founding the Kibbutz, where is the disco? That is what the second generation wants. The second generation always forgets what the first generation did that is the price for being a pioneer.”*

**Alfred** aged 74 explained:

*“That is just a fact of life, the passing of time. When you move amongst young gay people they don’t know who changed the laws.”*

**John** aged 73 stated:

*“Youngsters now don’t know what they are talking about.”*

**Tim** aged 66 summed up the feelings of the group:

*“At the end of the day those young people of today will probably be sitting around a table at our age (laughter).”*

Whilst gay and non gay men share many commonalities throughout the life course childhood, puberty, the need to find love and grow as a human being, clinical ageing and finally death. These research findings go some way to separate and map the life course of gay men. It explored some of the key stage developments in the gay life course that are not experienced by heterosexual men. Although these findings add to our intuitive knowledge more research is needed, in this field, to fully map the transitions, stages and developmental process involved in becoming and living as a gay man in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Chapter Five - Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to explore some (but not exhaustive) life course stages that relate to gay men's development and demonstrate how being gay impacts on other stages developments and transitions of the life course. I have tried to map the key stages experienced by gay men and compare with these with the existing theories/models of life course development. The four stages of development that came to light in the course of this research were;

- Internalisation of homosexuality
- Same sex intimacies
- Externalisation of homosexuality
- Living a gay life

I have tried to investigate the degree to which homosexual men experience some sort of 'mid-life crisis'. The evidence that many do, became apparent during the course of this research. By comparing and contrasting some of the classical theories (Jaques 1965, Levinson 1978, Fetherstone and Hepworth 1985) the reader can see how these findings did tend to confirm the findings of Bee (1998) and Tamir (1982).

With regard to intergenerational activity of gay men, the findings pointed to gay men having less intergenerational contact than their non-gay counterparts. I would conclude that this is due to the lack of many gay men

being fathers and the overwhelming impact of ageism within the gay community.

Another finding of this piece of research was the discovery that many of the interviewees were in what Erikson describes as their 'generativity' stage. Many seemed happy in this stage and described what fulfilling lives they led.

The final finding was just how hard the effect of cohort, historical and period impacted on the differing generations of the gay men interviewed. Quite drastic variations in self-acceptance and self-disclosure became apparent in the findings.

For me this has been an interesting piece of work but the limitations of it must not be overlooked. If time and money had not been a consideration then many more respondents could have been sought leading to a more balanced picture. I am aware that no members of the rural gay community, ethnic minority, lesbian, transgender or bisexual groups were present in the sample. Perhaps the findings would have differed if these groups had been present?

With hindsight I would have conducted the group interview slightly different and would have dived in with more relevant questions rather than leading up to relevant questions as I did in the single interviews. Much of the three hours of taped interview was superfluous to this research project. I also think that asking 30 questions in the interview was too many. If I were to do the research again I would concentrate on fewer questions that got straight to the point of the aims of the research proposal.

Some of the questions that remain unanswered at this stage are;

- Are older gay men as happy, the same or happier than their non-gay counterparts?
- How does living a gay life impact upon longevity?
- How has period, cohort and historical effect changed the life course of the younger gay men for example in their teens, twenties and thirties?
- What are the life course stages experienced by lesbians and how do these differ not only from gay men's but also their non-lesbian women counterparts?
- Are there other life course stages experienced by gay men and not by their non-gay equivalent?

The above represent just a few questions that have emerged from this study and would warrant further research.

With regards to policy/practical recommendations relevant to this study I do not think that the findings of this study will shape policy due to the small sample size. Although as a pilot, it could be the catalyst for further research mapping the life course of gay men.

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# Appendix 1

Paul Southwell

MSc Life Course Development March 2002

Qualitative interview questions

## **Life satisfaction/stages theory**

Tell me about how you earned a living and were you happy in your occupation?

Do you have or have had any social or civic responsibility?

When did you leave your family of origin?

When did you set up your first household?

## **Gay life stages**

When did you first realise (admit to yourself) that you were gay?

Did you discuss this with anyone else?

At what age did you start to have sexual relationships?

At what age did you come out?

When did you have your first 'long term' relationship?

Would you describe any of your relationships as having a 'mentoring quality'?

## **Family of choice or origin**

How much involvement with your family of birth do you have?

How is your social life?

Do you socialise with gay or non gays?

Do you have any long term, non sexual, mutual friendships with men?

Do you have any long term intimate non sexual relationships with women?

How much of your life have you lived alone?

Would you have preferred to have one partner for life?

## **Intergenerational issues**

Generally, do you socialise with younger or older people?

How do gay men over 50 feel about gay men under 30?

What is your perception of young gay men's feelings about older gay men?

### **Involvement with the gay community**

Are you involved with the gay community?

Are you a member of a congenial social group?

### **Discrimination**

Do you feel that you have been discriminated against because of your homosexuality? (job, housing, health other service)

Do you feel that you have been discriminated against because of your age? (by both gay and non gays)

### **Adapting to ageing**

Looking back over your life what has been the most important accomplishment of your life?

What aspect of your life has been least satisfying to you?

What is the worst thing about growing old?

Are there any other negative aspects of growing older?

What are the best things about growing old?

What are some of the positive aspects to ageing?

In your opinion do you think that gay men over 40 adapt well to growing older?

Have you any advice/tips to help gay men self adjust to growing older?

### **AIDS and the life course**

How has AIDS affected your life-course?

### **Midlife crisis**

Do you feel that you have experienced a mid-life crisis?

### **Male menopause/andropause**

Would you say that you have experienced the male menopause?

## Appendix 2

**01 Simon** is aged 31, white and self-identifying gay man. He is Australian, identifies as middle class and educated to Masters Degree. He is employed as a director of a crime reduction charity. (Individual interview)

**02 Peter** is a 52-year-old, white and identifies as a gay man. He is English and middle class. He works as an educational consultant and is educated to Masters Degree. (Individual interview)

**03 Brian** is 62, white and gay. He is a retired manager of a Further Education college. He lives with his male partner of 19 years. He is educated to degree level moved from the Channel Islands to live in London. (Individual interview)

**04 Steven** is white, middle class and educated to diploma level. He moved from York to live in London and is 42 years old. He works with people with learning difficulties, identifies as a gay man and shares his house with a woman. (Individual interview)

**05 Alan** is white and moved from Scotland to live in London in the early 1960's. He is 59 years old, retired and lives in Brighton in his house which he shares. His identity is gay man. (Group interview)

**06 Alfred** is aged 74, white, middle class and came to live in London in his late 20's he lives in North London. He is now retired but worked all of his working life as a credit controller. He identifies as a gay person. (Group interview)

**07 Brendan** is Irish and moved from Belfast to London at the age of 28 to live in Soho. He is now 79 years old. He worked all his working life as a carpenter. He identifies as working class and a gay man. (Group interview)

**08 Robert** is aged 49 moved to London at the age of 18. He has worked as a chef, actor and is now a Pagan priest. He is white and has been married and had children. He now identifies as a gay man. (Group interview)

**09 John** is white middle class and aged 73. Now retired spent most of his working life in office work. Married three times, has children but now lives a homosexual form of life. (Group interview)

**10 Dave** is aged 52, works as a chef. He is white working class and identifies as a gay man. He lived with a long-term partner (male) for 27 years until his death five years ago. (Group interview)

**11 Tim** is white working class and aged 66. He is now retired but spent all of his working life in retail trade. He identifies as a gay man. (Group interview)

**12 Jack** is aged 74, working class and now retired. He worked in tailoring all his life and was married. After the death of his wife he lives alone. He declined to define himself in terms of sexual identity. (Group interview)

**13 Alvin** is in his early 50's, white and working class. He identifies as a gay man. He joined the group after the introduction and start which consequently led to difficulties engaging in the process. (Group interview)

**14 Paul** is a semi-retired journalist. He is white, upper middle class and educated to degree level. He is 70 years old and used his training to become a teacher in order to leave his family of origin. He identifies as a gay man. (Group interview)

## Appendix 3

### Interview Transcription

Q Tell me about your experiences Coming Out.

My sort of observation would be that in theory it is easier (now) simply because the media is a lot more accommodating to lesbians and gay men. However it still remains an individual thing and I think that it depends on the individual perception of the surroundings that he or she is in and also how people are going to regard him or her.

Q When did you first realise or admit to yourself that you were gay?

Oh I realised when I think that I was in my teens but it was something that I thought about and fought against for very many years. I finally accepted myself when I was in my early forties. I am now sixty two. I can recall the date on which this happened and the incident. The fact that I had a very good straight friend, a colleague, with whom I was working. He had talked about a couple of other gay friends of his. There had been no criticism of any sort. He was giving me a lift home from work one day and we stopped the car and I said that I have something to tell you I said that I would like you to know that I am gay. I can still remember it as though it was an echo, it wasn't me who was saying this it was someone else. But it was a tremendous sense of relief and release because he was quite accepting of it, well completely accepting of it

Q At what age was this?

It was forty one

Q At what age did you have your first long term relationship?

Oh that would not have been until about three or four years later so therefore about the age of forty five

Q Would you describe any of your relationships as having a mentoring quality?

Laughs! Yes all of them have been. Because I had a severe problem with my father. He was alive until about eight or nine years ago but the relationship was effectively an epistolary one as he lived in Canada and I lived in the UK. I don't think that it would be too strong to say that I divorced him simply because, well he separated from my mother when I was very much younger. The problem was that he just would not accept the fact that I was gay. I wrote to him and sort of tried to ease the ground and make it easier for him to accept this and the response was what have you done to me, what am I going to tell my friends. So I thought, well I can live without that but at the same time over a number of years there have been three significant relationships, all of

which have been older than me. All of who have had a mentoring element in them.

Q Do you have any other involvement with your family of birth?

Yes I have a sister she has finally accepted me if you like. There was a problem for her because she was an evangelical Christian and she had great problems at first about it and then there was a schism in the church that she attended. It was then that she realised that the churches teachings according to her was not of a whole and that there were alternative interpretations because of this schism and that made life a little bit easier for her relationship with me.

Q Do you socialise with gay or non-gay people?

A combination I would think that it is 50/50. I work for a voluntary gay organisation some of my friends are drawn from that. I also have a number of gay friends in the United States. Straight friends are also very important to me. My partner and I have a least two straight couples that we socialise with quite a lot.

Q Are these long-term relationships that you have had with them?

Oh yes a minimum of seven or eight years they are both men and women in the straight cases they are husband and wife.

Q How much of your life have you lived alone?

Oh from the age of thirty one through until forty five.

Q Would you have preferred to have had just one partner in life?

Laughs, you're talking about an ideal here. I do have a partner and he is a support but he is not everything. I need other people for various reasons. To be frank sometimes sexual but also what is important for me is to have friends and a partner with the same intellectual interests as me. As much as I love him my partner does not fulfil all the criteria.

Q Generally do you socialise with younger or older people?

Generally older people.

Q Being a gay man over 50 how do you feel about gay men under 30?

My attitude to them is a word that you used earlier, mentoring. I am more than happy about trying to help develop them in some way but my experience is that they don't usually have the experience or range of experiences that make me want to necessarily associate with them on any other level. They really don't provide a sexual attraction to me.

Q What do you think their (under 30's) perception of older gay men is?

Generally there is a fear. I think that this was exemplified in the television series 'Queer as folk' where most of the characters were terrified about reaching the age of thirty because there would be no life beyond that.

Q Are you involved in any other things in the gay community?

I have been but at the moment not really. I do visit the sauna occasionally but I haven't been to a bar for quite sometime clubs are in my estimation really for a much younger age group.. The reason that I don't go to bars is that I am not really interested in picking men up although I must be honest my partner and I do have an open relationship. There doesn't seem to be much point for me going out to pick up a guy simply because we have quite an unspoken agreement that we would never do that. The second reason I don't drink a great deal but I hate the smoky atmosphere, more frequently the music is too loud, and not music that I enjoy. I have a circle of friends outside the bars

Q Do you feel that you have been discriminated against because of your homosexuality?

No what is of interest is that I have never actually come out to my doctor.

Q Do you feel that you have been discriminated against because of your age?

It depends on what you mean by discrimination. I don't think I have, I actually have had quite the reverse, particularly from younger gay men, sometimes on the sauna scene, you get the 'daddy' figure and I happen to fit the particular stereotype that they might have.

Q Looking back over your life, what are some of the most important stages and transitions that you have gone through?

Okay, 1. I think – when I was 22 or 23 I attempted suicide, I was aware at the time that I was gay and I didn't want to be and I really didn't see a future in my life as a gay man at that time. I was prevented by actually carrying out the act by my sister, one New Year's eve. It was decided that the New Year ahead had nothing in store for me, so I thought – why not? My sister happened to return early from a party she was at, so that empowered me to go along to the local hospital that had a psychiatric wing. I then engaged in therapy for a couple of years and as a result of the therapy I realised that I could do a lot more than I actually did. I was working at the time for an airline company and I was ground staff and I realised that I was quite bright, therefore why not do a degree, I got a couple of 'A' levels by studying in class and started reading for a degree. I started reading a degree when I was 29 and subsequently got it when I was 32. The reason for doing the degree was to be able to gain an administration post within the Airline Company, but discovered in fact that they stopped recruiting people with degrees above the age of 25 - 26. So I went on to do teacher training teaching further education, so I then took up a new career as a teacher in further education. During my time in further education I

met a number of friends including this straight man who was a lot younger than me, almost a sort of paternal figure in some ways, and he was very much helping people to attain whatever was necessary for them to become full human beings either through education or other ways. He was responsible directly for my coming out. Then I underwent a second period of counselling. The situation was that I had partly accepted the fact that I was gay, but still wanted to change things. I wasn't really fully happy about it and about a year later, I had actually by this time had two relationships, one of which lasted about a year, 18 months, and the second lasted about a year, both with men. I've never had a relationship (sexual) with a woman. At the end of the counselling period a couple of other things happened I managed to get senior post in a college or at least a higher post in the college, and I met my current partner and this is 18-19 years ago. At the moment I can't think of any other major points in my life, but from a sexual point of view I can remember the first time that I had any sexual liaison with someone, and I think that is a crucial thing for a lot of gay men because it is admitting to themselves on whatever level that they are interested in men rather than with women.

Q Looking back over your life, what are some of your most important accomplishments?

It was getting a degree. Doing the type of job that I'm doing at the moment, having had a short story published in a magazine – a gay short story. I think that that's about all.

Q So what job do you do at the moment?

I'm a contractor to moderate courses at a college. This will be the last year that I will be doing this.

Q What aspect of your life has been least satisfying to you?

The fact that I have never been a father. I probably poured all of that sort of energy into things like mentoring, helping to develop younger people, not just younger people. The fact that I have not been a biological father, and could not have been a biological father, not because I am gay because I know a great many gay men who are fathers, but for me it was just not possible.

Q What is the worst thing about growing old?

Are there any worse things? Yes, gradually losing some faculties, but fortunately enough I don't seem to be experiencing that. The other thing I think is watching someone you love such as my partner who is five years older than me, in the knowledge that he is going to become old and there is very little you can do about it other than be supportive.

Q So what's the best thing about growing old?

Again, in my personal circumstances, I think the fact that I now have the time and the money and the health to be able to travel more extensively than I would ever have in any period of my life than I have before.

Q In your opinion, do you think that gay men over 40 adapt well to ageing?

On the experience of the ones that I know, yes. We are talking about people over the age of 40, I don't think it would be true of people under the age of 40. One of the problems that there is in gay society generally is that there are not enough gay role models above the age of 40 to indicate to younger gay men that they could have this potential, that things don't have to be as drastic as made out. The problem is that young gay men don't discriminate between older gay men and older straight men. I've always said that when a lot of straight men, they've sired their kids, they've got as far as they are going to get in their jobs from then on its all downhill. I don't necessarily think this is true for gay men.

Q Would you have any tips or advice that you would give to younger gay men to help them self adjust to growing old?

First of all, make sure that you are going to be financially secure. Second, try to keep as healthy as you can. Thirdly, try to associate with people from a whole range of different ages.

Q Do you feel that you have experienced a mid-life crisis?

Yes. Up to the age of about 38-39, I dreaded hitting 40, but then I recall that I felt the same at 28-29 about hitting 30 and I sailed over that, and 40 didn't seem to be a major problem, looking back.

Q Would you say that you have experienced a male menopause?

Laughs.... No...laughs.

Q How has AIDS affected your life course?

I must be one of the very few gay men who have not been touched by this. One of my friends died, but interestingly he died as the result – it was in the very early days of the epidemic, and he received infected blood. It has made me a lot more cautious in my sexual practices; I am a lot more careful.

Q Do you have any social or civic responsibility?

I have social responsibility, yes, in the sense that my partner and I try to be good neighbours. Also I am on the management committee of London Friend. I run small groups from time to time as part of my job at London friend for gay men.

Q When did you leave your family of origin?

It would have been 31, which I know is a late age.

Q Is that when you set up your first household?

It's when I left Jersey in the Channel Islands, which is where I was born and came over to England. Again my circumstances were such that when I was 11 months old I was brought over by my parents because of the German occupation. I never returned until I was 17 and I stayed in my mothers house for 12 years, until I was 29 then came over to the UK and been here really ever since, setting up my own household in one way or another.

End of interview.