

Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition

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HOW do male homosexuals who choose homosexuality as a way of life recall having acquired their gay identities? This question provided the impetus for the descriptive study presented here. Rather than concerning itself with the etiology of homosexuality, this report—a synthesis of and elaboration on recent investigations of homosexual and/or gay identity¹—concerns itself with documenting the ways in which a man learns that he is homosexual, how he realizes or decides that he is gay, and how he integrates this affectional and sexual preference into his identity or self-conception.

In the pages that follow, an ideal-typical model of gay identity acquisition is presented. Data obtained from interviews conducted on a sample of male homosexuals provide empirical support for the model. The model is by no means definitive; rather, it is intended to provide a meaningful framework within which to describe and better understand just how it is that many men who adopt homosexuality as a way of life begin to engage in homosexual behavior, decide to designate their sexual attractions as homosexual, define themselves as homosexual in the sense of an identity, start associating with other homosexuals, and enter into homophile love (as well as sexual) relationships.

According to Warren's (1972) informants, the concept of gay identity contains the components of same-sex sexual activity, same-sex sexual attraction, self-identifica-

tion as homosexual, involvement in the homosexual subculture, and same-sex romantic attachments. Here, these identities are viewed as being acquired in four stages: sensitization, dissociation and signification, coming out, and commitment.

METHOD

As a means of ascertaining the ways in which gay men come to realize and decide they are gay, I undertook an interview study of a sample of male homosexuals. The sample was collected by means of the "snowball" technique: contacting men known to me, interviewing them, and then asking each to supply the names of other men willing to be interviewed. Using this technique, 150 men were interviewed, 50 in each of three areas: New York City, Suffolk County (a suburban to semirural area about 50 miles from New York), and Minneapolis, Minnesota. All of the respondents were white. All were between the ages of 20 and 40; slightly more than half ($N = 77$) were in

¹ See Altman, 1971; Dank, 1971; Hammersmith and Weinberg, 1973; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1977; Warren, 1972, 1974; T. S. Weinberg, 1977.

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their 20s, and the remainder ($N = 73$) were in their 30s (or exactly 40 years old). Over a third (36%) had no college education; a third (34%) had attended college; and roughly a third (30%) had at least some graduate school experience. Since many studies of homosexual populations have concentrated on men who frequent gay bars, I sought to incorporate non-gay-bar-goers into the sample. Roughly half ($N = 78$) were bar-goers, and half ($N = 72$) were not. A bar-goer was defined as someone who went to a gay bar for sexual and/or social purposes more than once per month during the previous year.

THE MODEL

Stage 1: Sensitization²

As the name *sensitization* implies, it is during this stage that men gain experiences which *later* serve as sources for interpreting their feelings as homosexual. The stage is divided into an early (prior to age 13) and a late (age 13-17) phase, and its hallmark is a sense of apartness from more conventional peers.

Most informants reported that during the early part of the stage they were only dimly aware, if aware at all, of the nature of their sexual orientation. Altman (1971) suggests that prior to adolescence many boys gain certain types of experiences that may later serve as sources for interpreting their sexual feelings as homosexual. Plummer (1975) singles out for special attention events located in social, genital, and emotional spheres as predisposing young men to later self-identification of themselves as homosexual. Unfortunately, Plummer does not specify exactly when those experiences are gained.

Data will be presented which indicate that experiences in these areas produced a sense of difference during childhood (prior to age 13) that crystallized into a distinct sense of *sexual* dissimilarity during high school, usually before informants reached age 17. It is not so much childhood experi-

ences themselves, then, but the *meanings* which later came to be attributed to them that are important in the acquisition of gay identities. These results also indicate that a majority of the sample recalled engaging in their first homosexual contacts to orgasm during the latter part of this stage.

Of the interviewees, 72% experienced a sense of apartness during preadolescence. The following comments convey the content of this stage:

A STUDENT: I never felt as if I fit in. I don't know why for sure. I felt different. I thought it was because I was more sensitive.

A COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR: I felt different due to my interest in school, ineptness at sports, and the like.

A MINISTER: I felt intimidated by my peers ... I envied their athletic skills.

A WAITER: I was fascinated by the male body and decided that I wanted to be a dancer. My friends often teased me about it but it didn't upset me all that much because I was good at other sports, too. On a certain level, however, I felt that my fascination with the male body was somehow wrong, but I couldn't tell you why I felt this way.

The comments of all informants are summarized in Table 1. As the table indicates, the most frequently recalled sources of a childhood sense of difference were: alienation, reasons unknown (22%); feelings of gender inadequacy (19%); and warmth and excitement in the presence of other males (15%). The references to alienation and gender inadequacy show that childhood *social* experiences played a greater role in sensitizing a person for subsequent self-definition as homosexual than did preadolescent experiences gained in the spheres of *genitality* (same-sex relations) and *emotionality* (warmth and excitement).

However, this is not to say that feelings of alienation, gender inadequacy, or warmth and excitement either cause or are indicative of homosexuality. Nor is the claim being made that homosexuality causes the emergence of such feelings. Moreover, the assertion is *not* made that a childhood sense of difference is experienced

² The terms *sensitization* and *signification* are borrowed from Plummer (1975).

Table 1

IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU FEEL DIFFERENT DURING YOUR CHILDHOOD YEARS?*

	Responses	
	%	No.
A general sense of alienation; no specific reason	22	30
A sense of gender inadequacy	19	27
Experiences warmth and excitement in presence of other males	15	21
Did not share many interests in common with male age-mates	14	20
Effeminacy	9	13
Awareness of and fascination with male body	6	8
A medical or physical disability	6	8
Was a self-designated homosexual	4	6
Experienced guilt over sexual activity with other males	2	3
Other	2	3
	99	139**

* As used here, "childhood" refers to the time prior to the 13th birthday.

** Responses were obtained from the 108 informants who experienced a sense of difference during childhood. In this and the following tables, the number of responses exceeds the number of informants because of multiple responses.

only by persons who later become homosexual, or that differences need necessarily exist between the overt behavior of young males who later acquire gay identities and those who do not. It is quite possible that during their childhood many males who later develop *heterosexual* commitments also feel estranged, for various reasons, from other males.

What is suggested here is that homosexual and heterosexual males may differ in terms of the *meanings* they later come to attribute to a childhood sense of apartness. The same childhood feelings which the adolescent heterosexual may come to redefine as the initial signs of, for instance, artistic sensitivity may be reinterpreted by the teen-aged male who later becomes homosexual as the first stirrings of homosexual interest. Childhood experiences gained in social, emotional, and genital realms, then, came to be *invested* with homosexual meanings when informants were adolescents. Thus, the reinterpretation of past events as indicating a homosexual potential appears to be a necessary condition for the eventual adoption of a gay identity.

In the later phase of the sensitization stage, during their high school years, usually prior to their 17th birthday, almost all—99%—of the males experienced a sense

of *sexual* difference. Informants recollected that a global sense of apartness during childhood crystallized into a subjectively experienced sense of sexual difference during middle adolescence. Reasons offered by informants for this solidification are listed in Table 2. Unlike the childhood sense of difference that mainly grew out of *social* experiences, the grounds for feelings of sexual difference during adolescence stemmed primarily from the spheres of *emotionality* and *genitality*: less opposite-sex interest than other males (40%), undue interest—as defined by informants—in other young men (14%), sexual activity with other males (11%), and gender inadequacy (11%) were the most frequently cited. These responses are significant considering that nearly two-thirds, or 98 of the 150 interviewees, engaged in their first homosexual activity to orgasm during this stage, at a mean age of 14.9. This indicates that an important aspect of the process of becoming homosexual involves learning to recognize and define one's feelings as homosexual.

Stage 2: Dissociation and Signification

The hallmark of this stage—*dissociation*—consists of the partitioning in consciousness of sexual feelings and/or activity

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from sexual identity. Rather than diminishing a growing awareness of "possible" homosexual tendencies, dissociation has the ironic effect of *signifying* these feelings. That is, the very act of dissociation serves to *re-present* to those who practice it that which they are attempting to dissociate—namely, the implications which their same-sex sexual interest or activity may hold regarding the fundamental character of their sexual orientations.

The suspicion that one "might" be homosexual is used to mark the outset of the stage, a point suggested in Plummer's thesis on "becoming" homosexual. The mean age at which participants in this study started questioning their heterosexuality—that is, could no longer take their "straightness" as given—was 17.1. Of the 150 informants, 148 remembered having passed through a period in their lives when they thought they "might" be homosexual but could not tell for sure.

The following comments are fairly representative of the forms dissociation assumed for these men:

A HOTEL DESK CLERK: I went into service at 17, mainly to get away from home. That's where I finished high school. Anyway, when I was in service I started to realize that I felt a sexual attraction for other men, that I was as strongly attracted to men as I was to women. I was

engaged to be married at the time, so I passed the attraction off as being due to the circumstances—the loneliness and the lack of female companionship. I rationalized my feelings as indicating feelings of deep friendship. But I couldn't seem to stop thinking about it. The possibility that I might be gay terrified me.

A WAITER: Before I was publicly labeled a faggot, I realized that I wasn't very interested in women. I had had enough experiences with girls to realize that while I was aroused by them, I was also aroused by males and wanted to have sex with them. However, I thought this was something I'd outgrow in time, something that would straighten itself out as I matured.

AN AUTO MECHANIC: I had a sexual experience with a neighbor. We got drunk together and we ended up masturbating each other. I felt guilty and ashamed. I knew that the activity was homosexual, but I refused to label myself as gay. I rationalized it away as sexual experimentation and curiosity. Even so, I still worried about it. I didn't like to think that I could enjoy homosexual activity, which suggested homosexual inclinations. I decided that I'd try not to think about my attraction toward men, that if I didn't think about it, it might go away.

Dissociation or the separation of identity from activity and/or feelings is reflected in the examples presented above, where there is a seeming need to explain ("something I'd outgrow"), excuse ("due to . . . loneliness and the lack of female companionship"), or

Table 2

IN WHAT WAYS DID YOU FEEL DIFFERENT DURING YOUR HIGH SCHOOL YEARS?*

	Responses	
	%	No.
Less interested than peers in members of the opposite sex	40	71
Felt "unduly" interested in persons of the same sex	14	25
As a consequence of sexual activity with other males	11	19
A sense of gender inadequacy	11	20
Opposite-sex sexual relations were somewhat unsatisfying; something seemed to be missing	9	16
Was a self-designated homosexual	4	7
Alienation	3	6
Homosexual activity was more satisfying than heterosexual activity	2	4
Other	5	9
	99	177**

* As used here, "high school years" refers to events which occurred between a person's 13th birthday and graduation from high school.

** Responses were obtained from the 149 informants who felt a sense of difference during their adolescence.

Table 3

WHAT LED YOU TO QUESTION THE NATURE OF YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

	<i>Responses</i>	
	%	No.
Becoming sexually aroused by another male or beginning to view other males in sexual terms	24	40
A physically enjoyable homosexual experience or homosexual fantasies	23	39
The desire to repeat a homosexual experience	18	31
Reading or learning about homosexuality	16	28
Heterosexual interests or emotional involvements seemed less strong than those exhibited by male peers	11	19
Developing a "crush" on or an emotional attachment for another male	7	12
Other	1	1
	100	170*

* Responses were obtained from the 148 informants who reported that for a time in their lives they thought that they might be homosexual but couldn't tell for sure.

Table 4

WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU MIGHT BE GAY, WHAT KEPT YOU FROM LABELING YOUR FEELINGS AS SUCH?

	<i>Responses</i>	
	%	No.
Viewed feelings as indicating a phase	54	89
Inaccurate knowledge regarding homosexuality led to belief that little was shared in common with homosexuals as a group	22	36
Did not reciprocate sexually (e.g., was passive partner in fellatio) or viewed homosexual activity as an expedient means of sexual release	7	12
No history of homosexual experience or a history of heterosexual experience	8	13
Viewed feelings as indicating tendencies	3	5
Viewed feelings as indicating bisexuality	2	4
Other	3	5
	99	164*

* Responses were obtained from the 148 informants who did not label these feelings as gay even though they suspected they "might" be homosexual.

justify ("sexual experimentation and curiosity") the implications which one's acts or feelings have regarding the nature and direction of one's sexual identity.

Table 3 summarizes the circumstances that led informants to question the nature of their sexual feelings. Sexual doubts were prompted by experiences subjects defined as more explicitly homosexual than those which had earlier led them to believe they were merely sexually different. Events most frequently reported as having provided grounds for suspecting homosexual interests were: becoming sexually aroused by

another male (24%) and physically enjoyable homosexual experiences or fantasies (23%). Although the homosexual component in these feelings and behavior was recognized during this stage, no degree of permanence was attributed to it. Put somewhat differently, even though informants questioned their sexual feelings, they neither effortlessly nor immediately defined them as decidedly homosexual. Most males attributed a temporary status to the sensations, as a glance at Table 4 will show. Sexual attractions were not labeled as definitely homosexual because they were in-

Table 5
WHAT DOES THE TERM "COMING OUT" MEAN?*

	Responses	
	%	No.
To admit to oneself a homosexual preference, or decide that one is, essentially, homosexual	31	77
To admit to oneself a homosexual preference <i>and</i> to begin to practice homosexual activity	27	41
To start actively seeking out other males as sexual partners	9	13
First homosexual experience as a young adult (i.e., after middle teens)	8	12
A homosexual experience that triggers self-designation as homosexual	1	2
Other	3	5
	99	150

* Informants were asked to define what the term "coming out" meant to them—that is, how they would use the term.

terpreted as a phase of development that would eventually pass (54%), or because interviewees believed they shared little or nothing in common with homosexuals as a group (22%). In short, the idea that one might possibly be homosexual was ego-dystonic for these men at this point in their lives.

Stage 3: Coming Out

The events included within the stage of *coming out* occur relatively close together. Thus, for heuristic purposes, the decision to label one's sexual feelings as definitely homosexual is used to mark the outset of this stage. Self-definition as homosexual, initial involvement in the homosexual subculture, and redefinition of homosexuality as a positive and viable lifestyle alternative are viewed as making up the content of this stage. While the commencement of homosexual activity on a regular basis (one or more times per week) is associated with the stage (the mean age was 21.0), a majority of the sample (68%) experienced homosexual contacts to orgasm one or more times prior to labeling themselves as homosexual. For this reason, changes in the conception of one's identity and of one's view of homosexuality and homosexuals—rather than homosexual behavior—are seen as crucial to this stage.

Some disagreement exists among both social scientists and members of the gay

community as to what is meant by the term "coming out."³ The ways in which participants in this study defined "coming out" are presented in Table 5. Some disagreement existed among interviewees about the meaning of coming out, with 51% maintaining that coming out refers to the act of defining oneself to oneself as homosexual. This definition is used here.⁴

³ Gagnon and Simon refer to coming out as "that point in time when there is self-recognition by the individual of his identity as a homosexual and the first major exploration of the homosexual community" (1967, p. 131). Hooker's homosexual subjects attributed a somewhat different meaning to the term; they saw it as a "debut . . . of a person who believes himself to be homosexual but who has struggled against it. [Coming out occurs] when he identifies himself publicly for the first time as a homosexual in the presence of other homosexuals by his appearance in a [gay] bar" (1965, p. 99). Still another meaning of the term is offered by the homosexual respondents who took part in Dank's study of coming out in the gay world; his informants tended to use the term to mean only "identifying oneself [to oneself] as being homosexual" (1971, p. 181). Last, Plummer notes that the term can mean something else altogether when used by members of the Gay Liberation Movement, for whom "it means 'going public'—letting oneself be seen in the 'straight' world as homosexual" (1975, p. 147).

⁴ The data contained in Table 5 provide some empirical support for each of the definitions of coming out discussed in footnote 3. Of the men interviewed, 51% essentially agreed with the definition offered by Dank's respondents, and 27% attributed to the term a meaning similar to that formulated by Gagnon and Simon. Further, if one can presume that the decision to start actively seeking out other males as sexual partners involved initial forays into social settings reputedly frequented by homosexuals, it could be said that 9% of the interviewees saw coming out in terms somewhat similar to the definitions offered by Hooker.

Table 6

WHEN YOU LABELED YOUR FEELINGS AS HOMOSEXUAL, WHAT KEPT YOU FROM LABELING YOURSELF AS SUCH?

	Responses	
	%	No.
Viewed feelings as indicating a phase	34	35
Viewed feelings as indicating bisexuality	28	29
Viewed feelings as indicating tendencies	13	14
Inaccurate knowledge regarding homosexuality led to belief that little was shared in common with homosexuals as a group	12	12
No history of homosexual experience or a history of heterosexual experience	7	7
Did not reciprocate sexually (e.g., was passive partner in fellatio) or viewed homosexual activity as an expedient means of sexual release	5	5
Other	2	2
	101	104*

* Responses were obtained from the 93 informants who did not label themselves as homosexual at the same time they labeled their sexual feelings as homosexual.

The decision to label sexual feelings as definitely homosexual is used to mark the transition to this stage; the mean age at which this occurred was 19.7. However, approximately two-thirds of the interviewees ($N=93$) *did not* designate themselves as homosexual—that is, arrive at homosexual self-definitions—at the time they designated their feelings as such. The reasons for labeling sexual feelings but not sexual identities as homosexual are listed in Table 6. The most frequently cited reasons for not labeling sexual identities as homosexual were: Homosexual attractions were seen as a phase (34%), as indicating bisexuality (28%), or as a manifestation of homosexual tendencies or inclinations (13%). Thus, these data indicate that many respondents recalled having experienced at least some degree of confusion regarding the nature of their sexual identities in the twilight of their teens. It will be shown that this uncertainty was for the most part eliminated once these men were able to gain accurate knowledge regarding homosexuals and homosexuality.

The mean age at which homosexual self-designation occurred was 21.3. The following comment illustrates the types of circumstances that encouraged self-definition as homosexual:

A WAITER: I met a straight guy when I was in college. He also was studying dance. As our

friendship developed, I realized that I was falling in love with him and that I had never cared for anyone as deeply as I cared for him. I think he suspected the way I felt for him but I'm not sure. One night we were out drinking with a bunch of guys at a college bar. We both got rather high and when we returned to the dorm I went with him to his room. It was the beginning of a very beautiful night. I walked over to him, put my arms around him, and kissed him. He reciprocated. We eventually mutually masturbated each other. He is now married and has a family. This incident led a fateful resignation on my part that I was irrevocably gay. Due to the beauty of the experience, however, I was able to rid myself of any doubts I had regarding my being a homosexual as negating the possibility of being a good person.

The circumstances in which informants arrived at homosexual self-definitions are summarized in Table 7. Meeting other gay men was the most common circumstance leading to homosexual self-definition. Males who "tested" themselves differed from males who concluded they were homosexual after a meaningful homophile experience. The former decided to determine their sexual preferences after undergoing an intense psychological struggle, often of protracted duration, during which they attempted to suppress their homosexual feelings. Over time, however, these men decided that any form of sexual identity—

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heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual—would be preferable to the sexual ambiguity and confusion they were experiencing. Accordingly, they put themselves to the test—that is, they actively sought out homosexual experiences in order to determine whether or not their inclinations were in fact homosexual. The sense of urgency or need to decide once and for all who and what they were sexually was for the most part absent in the life histories of those men who decided they were homosexual as a consequence of a chance homosexual encounter which they found fulfilling. When these men—as young adults—had the opportunity to engage in homosexual activity, they simply did so, decided they liked it, and consequently defined themselves as homosexual.

The findings presented here partially replicate the results obtained in Dank's (1971) study of homosexual identity. He also found the mean age of self-designation as homosexual to be 21. In addition, males who took part in this study tended to arrive at homosexual self-definitions in social contexts quite similar to those reported by Dank's respondents. However, these results differ from Dank's with respect to the role played by love as a generating force to homosexual self-definition. Falling in love rather than initiating a love affair with another male enabled a number of informants

in this study to arrive at homosexual self-definitions.

Initial involvement in the homosexual subculture also occurred during this stage. When asked, "Which came first, beginning to think of yourself as homosexual or associating with other homosexuals?" 52% of the informants stated both occurred at roughly the same time, 41% said homosexual self-definition took place at least six months prior to interactions with other gays, and 7% claimed they had associated with other gays at least six months before self-labeling.

Once again, this finding is quite similar to Dank's results. Of his respondents, 50% defined themselves as homosexual when they began associating with other homosexuals. The mean age at which participants in this research started associating with other gays—that is, started to involve themselves in the homosexual subculture—was 21.8, in comparison with the mean age for self-designation as homosexual, 21.3. Thus, self-definition and initial subcultural involvement took place quite closely together. However, following the interactionist tradition of George H. Mead, Dank and Warren point out that the real significance of subcultural exposure resides in the impact it has on an individual's sense of identity and his attitudes toward homosexuality.

Table 7

WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDED YOUR DECISION TO LABEL YOURSELF AS BEING, ESSENTIALLY, HOMOSEXUAL?

	<i>Responses</i>	
	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>
Knowing or meeting other gays socially	33	65
Deciding to put oneself to the "test" by seeking out homosexual contacts to see if this was what was "really" desired	17	33
A physically or emotionally enjoyable homosexual experience	17	34
Fell in love with another male	16	31
A chance homosexual experience or chance entry into a gay social contact such as a homosexual bar	8	16
Realizing that the label "homosexual" applied to oneself as a consequence of reading about or learning of the existence of homosexuals	6	12
Reciprocated sexually	3	6
Other	2	3
	102	200

The opportunity to gain information about homosexuality that runs contrary to society's stereotypes led the men who took part in this study to see both themselves and homosexuality in a positive light. According to self-reports, 87% changed their attitudes about themselves roughly one year after becoming self-defined homosexuals. Self-conceptions were reportedly altered by 6% at approximately the same time as self-designation. Only 11 males experienced no change at all. Of the men who experienced attitude change, 46% viewed the change as positive, leading to a firmer sense of identity, 20% maintained they achieved higher levels of self-acceptance and happiness, and 11% claimed they felt less guilty or anxious about their sexual-emotional preferences. The change in self-image was related by 44% to exposure to the gay world or making a gay friend(s).

In addition to changes in self-image and identity, time spent in the gay world altered the views these men held toward homosexuality. The meaning of the cognitive category *homosexual* was transformed (Dank). Before arriving at homosexual self-definitions, nearly all—94%—of the respondents recalled having viewed homosexuality as a form of mental illness. When interviewed, only two men looked upon homosexuality as a "sickness." The rest saw it as a variation from the norm. When asked how these changes in attitudes were brought about, the vast majority (88%) claimed their favorable views stemmed from gaining the opportunity to meet homosexuals with interests and attitudes similar to their own—men who, like themselves, appear to be heterosexual. In short, differential association elicited and reinforced a positive sense of identity and served as a barrier to and/or neutralized the highly negative images of homosexuals held by dominant groups in American society.

Stage 4: Commitment

Following Warren, the taking of a lover—that is, the fusion of gay sexuality and emotionality into a meaningful whole—was used to signify the outset of the stage of

commitment. Commitment is indicated when homosexuality is adopted as a way of life—that is, when men express contentment with their life situations, see no reason to change, or believe nothing is to be gained by choosing bisexuality or heterosexuality.

The taking of a lover *confirms* gay identity. In terms of the perspective of Warren's informants, an individual whose sexual activity is exclusively homosexual, who has been sexually active with other males for an extended period of time, say 20 or 30 years, but who has never entered a love relationship with another male or interacted with other gays socially, would be viewed as possessing a *homosexual* rather than gay identity. Without a romantic involvement—that is, never having had a lover and social interaction with other gays—the individual is defined as lacking a *gay identity*.⁵

The romantic-sexual act fusion . . . serves as a highly significant benchmark symbol of converted self-identity for many . . . members [of the gay community] who . . . indicate that [the linking] of romantic-sex acts . . . differentiates the "true" homosexual from the one who is simply experimenting. [Warren, 1972, p. 223]

The assertion that love relationships are usually initiated in the post-coming-out period has a basis in fact. Current evidence (Gagnon and Simon, 1973) suggests that large numbers of male homosexuals are more likely to enter into love relations after, rather than at the same time as, they label themselves as homosexual. Gagnon and Simon suggest that once familiar with the sexual side of the gay scene, many homosexual men may begin to personalize their sexual encounters, seeking persons from whom social, emotional, and intellectual as well as sexual gratification can be obtained. The data derived from this research bear out this suggestion. When asked, "At the present time do you want a lover (given your own definition of the term)?" 91%

⁵ The assertion that the fusion of sexuality and emotionality is a necessary condition for identity development is not new (see Erikson, 1956).

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replied yes. Further, 76% of the informants answered yes to the question, "Have you ever had a lover?" and an additional 12% indicated they had been in love with another man and would have gladly entered into a love relationship had the other person been willing. The men who initiated one or more love relationships entered their first love affair at a mean age of 23.9—approximately 2½ years after the mean age of homosexual self-definition.

Contrary to Warren's conception, however, the process of becoming committed to homosexuality as a way of life is seen here as involving more than the taking of a lover. Although a foundation for commitment is laid during the coming-out stage, when men redefine homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle alternative, they can still see heterosexuality or bisexuality as more viable and rewarding. In a similar vein, while many men may come to accept a gay identity, they may still place a higher premium on heterosexual or bisexual identities. That is, men may vary in the extent to which they are satisfied with their identities.

Therefore, one's present identity has implications for the future, since today's identity can provide the foundation for tomorrow's interactions. In fact, the degree of satisfaction an individual expresses about his present identity as a future identity is a measure of his commitment to that identity (Hammersmith and Weinberg, 1973). Thus *commitment* to identity differs from *acceptance*, in that commitment presupposes a reluctance to abandon the identity even if given the opportunity to do so. When asked, "To what extent would you say you are accepting of and comfortable with your homosexuality?" 88% of the sample said they were accepting, 11% replied they were somewhat accepting, and only one person stated he was somewhat unaccepting. No one claimed to be completely unaccepting.

When asked, "At this time would you say you are more, less, or about as happy as you were prior to arriving at a homosexual self-definition?" 91% indicated they were more happy, 8% stated they were about as happy, and only one person said he was less happy. Gaining a sense of identity (47%)

and a clearer sense of what is desired both sexually and emotionally (13%) were the most frequently mentioned reasons for higher levels of happiness. Thus, perceived levels of happiness increased with the crystallization of a sense of identity.

An increased sense of identity, however, does not necessarily guarantee commitment to that identity. Similarly, increased happiness resulting from a firmer sense of identity does not warrant the presupposition that the newly acquired identity is necessarily the most highly valued one for that person. A compromise might well be involved. In certain instances, *any* conception of identity might be viewed as an improvement over no sense of identity, or over feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding an identity. Some males could feel happier after defining themselves as homosexual and yet remain convinced they would be even more contented living as heterosexuals. Therefore, to be judged as committed, the homosexual should value homosexuality at least as much as, and perhaps more than, the bisexual or heterosexual alternatives, and elect to remain homosexual if faced with the opportunity to abandon his homosexuality.

When respondents were asked if they would choose to remain homosexual if given the chance to abandon the homosexual option, 91% stated they would not become heterosexual even if they knew of a proven method to accomplish this change; 10 indicated they would change; and 3 replied they didn't know what they would do.

The most frequently mentioned reasons for not becoming heterosexual were: contentment and happiness with a homosexual preference (52%); the belief that nothing would be gained by a change of sexual orientation (24%); and a clearly expressed preference for the gay life (14%). These data, then, seem to show that the majority of the males who participated in this research endeavor saw homosexuality as more personally meaningful and rewarding than heterosexuality. One could, therefore, conclude that most of these males are committed homosexuals. In short, given the definition presented here, the vast majority

of these men could be described as having acquired gay identities.

Some disagreement, however, exists as to what constitutes the essential element of gay experience. I take exception to Warren's contention that distinctness, a sense of being different or set apart from more conventional persons, is an inescapable consequence of adopting a gay identity. While distinctness probably is acutely experienced at the time of self-definition as homosexual and for some time after—while the experience of being gay is still novel—the effects of time and experience probably distance gays from their unconventionality, thereby decreasing their feelings of distinctness.

When informants were asked, "In what ways do you think homosexuals are similar to and different from heterosexuals?," they most frequently saw homosexuals as differing from heterosexuals only in sexual behavior and preference (65%). Since the mean age of self-definition as homosexual for the participants in this study was 21.3 and the mean age of these males when interviewed was 30, it is suggested that the effects of time and experience in the gay world provided an opportunity to become distanced from the homosexual role. Such distance might account for the relative lack of overriding feelings of distinctness. Indeed, Martin Weinberg (1970) found indirect evidence for this assertion. He found increasing age to be associated with greater self-acceptance and decreased involvement in the gay community, with corresponding increases in time spent with heterosexuals.

Perhaps the disparity between these results and Warren's can partly be explained by one of the sources upon which she rests her case. She draws heavily upon testimony presented in Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America*. This work, a combination of autobiography, first-person accounts, testimony, and social commentary, was written (under a pseudonym) by a one-time homosexual who "converted" to heterosexuality. Published in 1951, Cory's work was a contribution insofar as it broke the taboo of silence that had so long surrounded the topic of homosexuality. How-

ever, to assume that a 1951 work by a man who decided to relinquish his gay identity can be used in the 1970s to describe the essence of gay identity for men who have no desire to abandon their identities seems, at best, somewhat risky.

CONCLUSIONS

A number of comments are in order on the model of gay identity development outlined and supported in this paper. First, gay identities are not viewed as being acquired in an absolute, fixed, or final sense. One of the main assumptions of this model is that identity is never fully acquired, but is always somewhat incomplete, forever subject to modification.

Nor is the model meant to convey the idea that gay identity development is inevitable for those who experience the first stages. Rather, each stage is viewed as making the acquisition of a gay identity more probable, but not as an inevitable determinant. As some persons progress through these stages, some steps may be merged or glossed over, bypassed, or realized simultaneously. A kind of shifting effect is probably involved, with some males "drifting away" at various points prior to stage four. It is quite possible that as adolescents, young adults, or even as adults, a relatively large number of males consciously "test" the extent to which they may be sexually attracted to other men. As a consequence of such sexual experimentation, a substantial number of males may decide that homosexuality is not for them and choose to leave the scene entirely. It is therefore quite likely that only a tiny portion of American males who practice homosexual behavior ever take on gay identities. Those who do acquire them exhibit the following characteristics: homosexual behavior, homosexual attractions, homosexual self-conceptions, social as well as sexual affiliations with the gay world, and same-sex romantic attachments.

Perhaps the most striking conclusion that can be drawn regarding the process of acquiring a gay identity is its tenuous character. For a majority of the sample, the

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route to gay identity was fraught with ambiguity, confusion, and uncertainty. For only a small minority was the gay identity taken on rapidly.

Regarding the reliability of the model, I wish to end this paper with a comment made by David Matza:

The aim of writing is to create coherence. The risk is that coherence will be imposed on actual disorder and a forgery thus produced. No way of avoiding that risk exists, since to write [or speak] is to take on the task of bringing together or

organizing materials. Thus the only legitimate question about a work is the measure of imposition or the amount of forgery, the only offsetting compensation the possibility of entertainment or illumination. [1969, p. 2]

I hope that this model will be viewed as an attempt to illuminate the process whereby gay identities are acquired.

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