



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



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### ABSTRACT

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

### 1.1. Background

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

### 1.2. Turning points

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

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

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

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

### 1.3. Turning points, gender, and sexual orientation

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

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

or dependent,” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 130). Gay men also viewed employment as representing “what it means to be a man,” (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983, p. 129). Prior studies of gay male employment patterns illustrate that in the 1970s–1990s, gay men were concentrated in management-administrative, university research and artistic-creative jobs, and those categorized as “nurturant,” which are positions that aim to provide service in face-to-face settings (Hewitt, 1995). Some argue that the concentration of gay men into these fields is related to their employment preferences, while others point to gender stereotypes, discrimination, and the desire to work in gay friendly environments as shaping the trends (Hewitt, 1995). As lesbian and gay rights have expanded over the past several decades, the possibilities for family and work are also shifting to accommodate a greater range of family structures and gender norms (Weeks et al., 2001).

Individuals’ ages and social circumstances at the time of various political and cultural events also affect their experiences and perceptions; for example, Rosenfeld (2003) organized her lesbian and gay elder participants into “identity cohorts,” that reflected the stage and social context in which they identified as “homosexual” in order to address differences in experiences by time. While the social contexts of the participants’ lives differed according to birth year, geographical location, and other characteristics, the dominant discourse regarding homosexuality during the 50s and 60s was one of deviance and sickness. There were negative legal and political consequences of having a homosexual identity that led many, including study participants, to live a “split existence” in their public vs. private lives (Hammack & Cohler, 2011; Westrate & McLean, 2010). Following the Stonewall Riots in 1969, and during the 70s and early 80s, a narrative of pride and liberation emerged symbolizing the modern Gay Rights Movement; simultaneously, and over future decades, discrimination and oppression of gay and lesbian populations continued through structural and individual actions.

The present study is grounded in the prior research, particularly in the intersection of gender and life course theories as they relate to turning points for lesbian and gay midlife and older adults. During in-depth interviews, lesbians and gay male participants were asked about experiences they identified as turning points in their lives, in order to better understand meaning making through the life course. It is important to analyze turning points for contemporary cohorts of lesbian and gay adults age 50 and older in order to understand how coming of age and living in social and historical contexts that have sometimes rendered them invisible, and other times, made them the subject of stigma, have shaped the narratives of their lives.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows: Given the differences in gender norms and structural limitations that they experienced throughout their lives: (1) How are the turning points that lesbians and gay male participants identify similar to or different from those identified in the general literature? (2) Do lesbian women identify different turning points than gay men?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The interview data that guide this exploratory research were collected in 2011–12 in the greater Los Angeles area. Trained researchers interviewed 35 individuals (N=35), which comprised a subset of the Caring and Aging with Pride study, a component of the National Health, Aging and Sexuality Study. Only the data for those who self-identified as lesbian or gay are being included in this study because there was only one bisexual and one transgender interviewee (n=33).

Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, the research project was conducted through collaboration with 11 community-based agencies across the U.S. serving LGBT older adults to better understand the risk and protective factors impacting the health, aging and well-being of these older adults and their caregivers (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). The two criteria for inclusion in the study was an LGBT identity and an age of 50 years or older. For the original National Health, Aging, and Sexuality Study, the research team distributed mail surveys to people on the mailing lists and/or client databases from partner agencies. Only individuals who had completed and returned the original survey, lived in the greater Los Angeles area, and had indicated that they would be willing to participate in future research were randomly selected to receive an invitation letter to participate in face-to-face interviews. The letter reminded participants that they indicated a willingness to participate in future research and asked those interested to contact the local Los Angeles-based research office. Individuals who contacted the project were screened for participation by phone via a short set of demographic questions and subsequently interviews were scheduled. All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at the authors’ universities.

### 2.2. Procedures

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 33 lesbian and gay male midlife and older adults at a time and location of their choice. The researchers conducted interviews in private homes and in an office at a local LGBT center that serves midlife and older adults. A few interviews were conducted in public locations such as shopping centers and cafes; in these cases, the researcher and interviewee sat in the location that provided the greatest level of privacy with the least foot traffic. Prior to beginning the interview, the participant reviewed and signed an informed consent form. At the end of the interview participants were each paid \$25 as a token of appreciation for their time and participation in the study.

The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant. Interviewers were experienced in working with these populations and trained in methods and techniques for effective interviewing of midlife and older LGBT adults.

The semi-structured interview began with the interviewer building rapport with the participant, asking several sets of open ended questions intended to elicit conversation. The questions addressed a range of topics about the health, aging, support networks, relationships, housing, important life events, experiences of discrimination, and caregiving. The question that provided the most fruitful data for this study was: “What do you consider to be the most significant turning points you have experienced?” When the flow of the interview allowed and participants provided little detail, interviewers asked follow up questions. If participants asked what was meant by “turning points,” interviewers explained that they are experiences that seemed to move an individual from one life path to another. Both positive and negative turning points were included in our results and analyses.

The qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and then coded by examining responses to a series of questions. The data were coded through the process of open coding (LaRossa, 2005), where the material was reviewed repeatedly in order to identify common themes or concepts that emerged from the interviews. The lead researcher carefully examined the interview data and then created codes for the most common themes related to the turning points in their lives and then confirmed with a research assistant, though there were no formal processes of inter-coder reliability conducted.

**3. Results**

The demographic profile of the participants by sex and sexual orientation was 60% gay men and 40% lesbian women. Please see [Table 1](#) for a full demographic breakdown. The age range of the participants was 54–88, with a mean age of 70.06 and a standard deviation of 8.06: 8 participants were aged 50–64; 21 aged 65–79; 4 aged 80+. By race, the participant demographics were 29 white, 2 black, and 2 Latino. Relationship statuses were 16 single, 15 partnered, and 2 other. Only two individuals in the interview study (one man, one woman) had children. The highest level of education was 9 High School Graduate, 10 college degree, and 14 graduate degree. The income levels of the participants were 6 decline to state, 13 less than \$25,000, 5 between \$25,000–\$75,000, and 9 above \$75,001. For a breakdown by participants' gender and sexual orientation see [Table 2](#).

The study participants identified turning points related to relationships and family, occupational achievements, coming out, and death of loved ones as being the most significant in their lives. The most common turning points named by participants were related to relationships and occupational achievements; this was true for both the lesbian and gay male participants. The researchers coded the responses such as “meeting partner,” “divorcing wife,” and relationship breakup under the umbrella of “relationships,” because these experiences led to subsequent transitions, such as openly dating a same-sex partner or going from being in a relationship to being single. Work and education categories were coded together into “occupational” turning points because they were often associated; i.e., graduating from nursing school led to taking nursing exams, which led to working as a nurse. Subtle differences in the ways that gay men and lesbian women experienced these turning points suggest that gender has shaped the manifestations of these turning points according to the social contexts in which they occurred. Additionally, participants' turning points appear to be influenced by the intersection of gender and

**Table 1**  
Sample characteristics.

Variable	N = 33
Age	54–88 (70.06 ± 8.06)
Age 50–64	8
Age 65–79	21
Age 80 and over	4
Gender/sexual orientation	
Male/gay	20
Female/lesbian	13
Race/ethnicity	
White	29
Black	2
Latino	2
Relationship status	
Single	16
Partnered	15
Other (widowed, dating, blank)	2
Highest level of education	
High School Graduate	9
College Graduate	10
Graduate Degree	14
Income	
Decline to state	6
Less than \$25,000	13
\$25,001–\$50,000	4
\$50,001–\$75,000	1
\$75,001 and above	9

**Table 2**  
Demographics by gender and sexual orientation.

Variable	N = 33
Gay Men	n = 20
Age	
50–64	6
65–79	10
80 and over	4
Race	
White	18
Black	1
Latino	1
Relationship Status	
Single	11
Partnered	7
Other (widowed, dating)	2
Highest level of education	
High school graduate	5
College graduate	9
Graduate degree	5
Decline to state	1
Income	
Less than \$25 K	10
\$25,001–\$50,000	2
\$50,001–\$75,000	1
\$75,000 and above	4
Decline to state	3
Employment Status	
Working full time	6
Working part time	3
Retired/Disabled/Not working	11
Lesbian Women	13
Age	
50–64	1
65–79	12
80 and over	0
Race	
White	11
Black	1
Latino	1
Relationship Status	
Single	4
Partnered	8
Other (widowed, dating)	1
Highest level of education	
High school graduate	3
College graduate	1
Graduate degree	9
Decline to state	0
Income	
Less than \$25 K	3
\$25,001–\$50,000	2
\$50,001–\$75,000	0
\$75,000 and above	4
Decline to state	4
Employment Status	
Working full time	4
Working part time	6
Retired/Disabled/Not working	3

sexual orientation. In the section that follows, we highlight the data for each of these themes.

*3.1. Relationship turning points*

Beginning and ending relationships with a same-sex partner were the most common turning points identified by participants: relationship-related turning points ranged from meeting a partner, having a commitment ceremony, divorcing a heterosexual spouse, and experiencing a break up. Both men and women identified circumstances related to relationships as turning points. For example, one 61-year old gay man explained, “Meeting Phil was one of the most crucial experiences that shaped my life.” Alice, a 71-year-old lesbian similarly noted: “I think certainly my relationship with [partner] in terms of its stability,” and clarified

that the stability is even more important as she ages. Nancy, who is 68 years old, identified her wedding to Violet as a turning point, saying: “There was so much joy. I don’t think I’d had that until then . . . Everyone was there. It was wonderful, so celebratory. I think that for me was a turning point in realizing that this was my family and I feel really good about belonging.”

There were differences by gender in describing how the relationship was a turning point. Some female participants shared that they did not identify as lesbian when they started their relationship. Letitia, a 72-year-old lesbian, recalled meeting her partner of 37 years: “I fell in love with Miller the minute I saw her. She came into my family’s restaurant and I said oh, I’m going to spend the rest of my life with you. I didn’t know her name; I wasn’t necessarily gay at that point but I just knew that I was going to live with her the rest of my life.” Most male participants more commonly identified as gay prior to meeting a significant other, but some experienced a relationship whose importance evolved over time: “I didn’t realize it at the time but when I met Bob that was something special. He loved me but I didn’t necessarily love him and so he just moved in as a roommate and after six months I said why should I look for anybody else, Bob is just fine . . . We were together twenty years and then . . . he found someone else, became HIV positive, and then our sex life went down the hill from there,” (Harold, gay man, age 82).

Participants also discussed the end of committed relationships as being major turning points in their lives, in ways that were uniquely related to sexual orientation. Interestingly, there was also a gendered component to these accounts, as women were far more likely to address a break up as a turning point than did men. Marcy, a 72-year-old lesbian participant, explained, “When my first partner and I broke up it [had] a tremendous impact on me. I didn’t want to break up . . . I was still working at the [Catholic] hospital. So I couldn’t say why I was upset or what was going on so, it was just a horrible time . . . It was probably more so because I backed away from people, rather than reaching out to people. I think the break up was probably the biggest [turning point].” Here, Marcy could not discuss the pain of her breakup with co-workers because the relationship that had ended was with another woman and she risked being fired if anyone found out that she was a lesbian. A handful of gay men identified break-ups as turning points, but only one was in relation to a same-sex partnership: Warren, a 61-year old gay man, who characterized the most difficult turning point in his life as ending a 13-year relationship when his partner became violent due to steroid use, though he did not clarify whether being the victim of violence or ending the relationship was the more difficult aspect of this change. Three additional gay male participants noted that their divorces from heterosexual marriages were turning points. George, a 70-year old gay man explained that he was married for six years: “I got divorced from my wife. That would certainly be a turning point. I mean I always knew that I was gay from the time I knew what gay was . . . I kept it bottled up inside and thus I got married. Once I got divorced, I was so happy. I could come right out and tell people I was gay. It was such a relief.”

As they discussed break ups as a turning point, some of the lesbian participants, but none of the men, also addressed ongoing relationship with those exes. Bobbie, who is 75-years-old, explained that she was in a relationship with her ex-partner for 20 years, “And then we separated and we’re the best of friends, if we had the level of trust that we have with each other at this point then we would still be together but that was a turning point.”

### 3.2. Occupational turning points

Occupational-related turning points, such as educational accomplishments, professional experiences, and military service were noted by many participants, which is consistent with studies

of turning points identified by their heterosexual counterparts. Those men who discussed their educational processes as turning points typically focused on some notable element of this experience; 88-year old Walter focused on being the first in his very large family to earn a college degree and then own a successful garment business for 26 years with his long-term life partner, Brad.

In general, lesbian participants noted educational and work achievements with greater detail than men and were more likely to mention graduating at the top of their class, receiving scholarships, and being told by teachers about their intelligence and high abilities. Yet, the social contexts in which they lived limited their professional options. One participant, Violet, aged 73, addressed how being a lesbian shaped her professional trajectory:

I would not have gotten scholarships, jobs in Catholic hospitals if I would have been open [about being a lesbian]. So I was smart about it. It meant I had to hide half my life, which was rotten. I also realized that I had to be as strong as I could. Just looking around the strongest I could be was [through] education, so, I hid who I was to get the education. I wanted to go to medical school. I applied for a couple medical schools. I was 26. The schools asked me if I planned on getting pregnant. I told them “no.” But they refused me based on my age [and sex]. And legally they could do it in those days. So I could not get any money from anybody to go to medical school. That was a big disappointment, because I was a childbearing woman. I thought if I told them I was a lesbian that they would have blackballed me even more.

Here, Violet illustrates how sex discrimination, which was legal at the time, limited her ability to pursue being a physician. Violet did not want to have children and disclosing a lesbian identity could have supported that claim to the educational institutions, yet telling others that she was a lesbian would also likely have led to rejection from medical school. She eventually earned a Ph.D. and was still a practicing clinical psychologist at the time of the interview.

About one third of the gay men described long or short-lived careers in creative professions, such as fashion, design, and television or theatrical productions, though only one was still working in these fields at the time of the interview. Donald, who is a 54-year old gay man, noted a major turning point was giving up on his acting career. He described how his acting career was influenced by being gay: “I’m not any Mr. Macho leading actor. I’ve always been a little quirky, come across gay. That does affect my acting.” Vincent, a 78-year old gay man characterized his experience with being employed as a high school art teacher: “Art teacher’s always queer, even back then, except they didn’t say it in that way. There was a different attitude towards gay people in the 50s.” Vincent also discussed how he felt discriminated against in employment settings: “I once had this lady I was interviewing who said these look like drag queens of my sketches, which, you know, I took as a very derogatory comment because I’ve never tried to pretend I was straight and most people who work around gay people, and the garment industry is full of them, usually know right away. So, that’s usually why they hire a woman, because I’ve even had jobs when they told me ‘we would prefer to hire a woman.’”

### 3.3. Military service

Of the total sample, two men and one woman in the study discussed military service as turning points in their lives. Some, like Bruce, a 60-year old gay man who was drafted, said being favorably discharged from the Army was a turning point, but did not elaborate further. Larry, who is 82-years old and gay, described Pearl Harbor, his parents’ imprisonment by the Japanese, his

service during World War II and his return from the war as turning points, but did not discuss whether or not he was drafted. Bobbie, a 75-year old lesbian noted, “going into the service was an experience,” and identified it as one of the three most significant turning points in her life because she was able to leave her parents’ home. These accounts are all the more significant because there were prohibitions on gay male and lesbian people serving in the military during the time when they were enlisted.

### 3.4. Coming out

Many participants identified the process of coming out as gay or lesbian a turning point in their lives. More gay men than lesbians identified coming out as a turning point. Charlie, a 70-year-old gay man noted that coming out was the most significant turning point he experienced. Others reflected on coming out in relation to their families. Milo, a 76-year old gay man, explained that when he was a young adult, he moved to Europe and avoided coming out to family members for twelve years. Nancy, a 68-year-old lesbian noted that coming out to her sister was one of her turning points, “She knew already, but her being so accepting was a biggie for me.”

The process and timing of coming out varied for the individuals in the study. As discussed previously, some of the participants, like George, came out after they had been in heterosexual marriages, even though they had known they were gay or lesbian for a long time. Gwen, a 69-year-old lesbian addressed how she came to understand her sexual identity: “I guess [a turning point] would be the first affair that I had with a woman. That would be a big one. And then that realization, oh yes I really am gay because before that it was like am I gay? Am I not gay? Am I gay? Am I not? Yes, no, yea and on and on.” Another lesbian participant, Myrna, who is age 75, noted: I think a big [turning point] is the decision to come out. I came out kind of late in life, I was looking at turning forty . . . I had lived with a woman for seven years, but she was my “roommate.” . . . And [after we split up] I didn’t go back into the closet. I was never out.”

### 3.5. Death and loss

The loss of a loved one was another commonly identified turning point. Several participants noted that the loss of a parent or grandparent had a great impact on their life. Another experience that participants noted as a turning point were losses during the height of the AIDS epidemic in 1980s and 1990s. Morris, a 67-year old gay male characterized the period: “And then there was a turning point when AIDS came in and everybody died.” James, another gay man, aged 60, said: “I think [my partner’s] turning [HIV] positive was a big turning point in terms of just dealing with certain realities you know I don’t think most people have to think about until they’re much older.” Here, James’ comment reflects that his partner’s HIV positive status meant that they started thinking about health concerns “off time,” as chronic conditions and discussions of mortality are expected to occur later in life. As some of our participants shared, their circles of friends were largely decimated and most talked of others’ experiences with HIV rather than their own health, as a turning point. Only one lesbian participant noted that friends getting older and dying was a turning point in that it caused her to reflect on her own mortality, but most did not discuss their own health and aging in the context of HIV and AIDS.

## 4. Discussion

The results illustrate key turning points for the midlife and older LG adults in the study. Many of the turning points identified by participants are similar to those noted by prior studies of the

general population related to relationships, family and employment (Clausen, 1995; Cappeliez et al., 2008; Martin et al., 2011). Our findings align with Dannefer and Settersten’s (2010) life course approach, which posits that cumulative experiences over the life course including interactions with social institutions and cultural practices shape the lives of individuals. Shifting social contexts have and continue to be the backdrop upon which LG older adults’ identities are written and experienced. We consider how Dannefer and Settersten’s approach, that social circumstances, opportunities and experiences, as well as social ties shape the processes of aging.

In the remainder of the discussion, we highlight how our findings illustrate the ways that midlife and older LG adults experience the same turning points as heterosexuals, but in nuanced ways. In so doing, we address how sexual orientation shapes the experiences of midlife and older LG adults in ways that are distinct from the prior research findings that addressed turning points in general populations, specifically with respect to coming out and relationships. We then use Calasanti and Slevin’s (2001) gendered lens to further understand how gendered norms in their intersection with sexual orientation have shaped the turning points of midlife and older LG adults in terms of the life events that occurred, the ways they were managed, and the narratives that were created. Gender norms appear to have the greatest influence on occupational turning points. Last, we address how these turning points experiences are likely instructive for other populations who experience marginalization.

### 4.1. Turning points for heterosexual and LG midlife and older adults

Our research findings illustrate that there are similarities and differences in the turning points identified by the midlife and older LG adult participants. Prior research findings show that the most commonly identified turning points, the formation and dissolution of relationships, family occupational choices, and health are also relevant for midlife and older LG adults. In our participants’ identifications of turning points, we see how the social context shaped their lives; despite the oppressive contexts in which they grew up and entered adulthood, many participants experienced personal and professional successes. Prior studies of general populations found that both men and women characterized occupational turning points as a reconsideration of one’s goals and a change of employment (Clausen, 1995). Some findings that were relevant in prior studies, retirement and one’s own health-related transitions, were not identified as turning points by LG interviewees in this study (Cappeliez et al., 2008; Clunis et al., 2005; Martin et al., 2011). None of the participants named retirement as a turning point, for example, despite many of them being retired from work and identifying work-related turning points as the most important in their lives.

One of the most common ways that turning points affect identities and social roles is social ties (Elder 1994), including entering into a formal relationship with another person (Clausen, 1995). In general populations, identities and social roles commonly shift by marriage or formal commitment to a partner, becoming a parent, and losing a spouse through death or divorce. In the present study, the findings illustrate how the socio-historical context in relation to both sexual orientation and gender emerge in the narratives as they relate to personal relationships. The participants identified a long-term same-sex partner as providing stability and bringing meaning to their lives, which is similar to the findings in studies of general older adult populations (Cappeliez et al., 2008), but notably, they were prohibited from legally marrying a same-sex partner until very recently.

#### 4.2. Turning points and sexual orientation

Dominant narratives shape many aspects of retrospective storytelling by reinforcing the proscribed norms of the life course and are evident in these data. Coming out is a process that has become a turning point expected of all lesbian and gay people, for better or worse. Plummer (1994) asserts that there is a dominant narrative structure to modern coming out stories for LG individuals: the narrative is characterized as a journey that begins with childhood (sometimes described as unhappy), followed by the emergence and subsequent resolution of a concern about being LG, and ends with the acceptance of an LG identity and discovery of community. Our participants' descriptions of coming out were consistent with this narrative structure, though given the depth and variation in events identified as turning points, their lives are not simply and one-dimensionally defined by being gay or lesbian. Similar to George's account, some attempted to live the "heteronormative narrative of the life course" by marrying and having families (Hammack & Cohler, 2011) and then later came out as gay, both of which are transitions according to life course principles (Elder, 1994). Others exercised a degree of agency within the constraints of the existing possibilities and chose different paths. Milo moved far away from family members and lived in Europe for 12 years to take the time and space to accept his gay identity. Bobbie entered the military, which in the social context of the time, was one of the acceptable ways for unmarried women to leave their family home to be employed and independent (Clunis et al., 2005). Though many men were drafted in the years prior to the transition to an all volunteer force, joining the military was an option that many lesbians and gay men pursued as a means of building an autonomous adult life outside of heterosexual marriage, though once in the service, they needed to hide their sexual orientation or risk discharge (Berube, 1990).

Some of the findings for these participants reflect innovations to the life course that are not necessarily exclusive to LG populations, but are reflective of people who lack access to the normative transitions that mark adult life. In prior studies of heterosexual adults, nearly all of the participants married and became parents (Martin et al., 2011); in this study, only a few people had married and divorced heterosexual partners and only two of the 33 interviewees indicated that they had children. These results are notable when compared to a prior study of lesbian and gay older adults, where 50% of lesbians and 35% of gay men had been previously married to other-sex spouse and 29% had children (Beeler et al., 1999), though those findings were from a limited sample. The small proportion of parents in this study may be related to the geographical location in which the data were collected; urban studies of adults often report fewer children than those in other regions. Only one set of lesbian partners in the study indicated that they had a formal wedding or commitment ceremony to a same-sex partner, a trend that may change as marriage equality spreads across the U.S. The legal limitations to marrying and parenting with a same-sex partner imposed barriers for formal entry into family life for midlife and older LG adults, which affected the overall courses of their life trajectories. Now, in later life, only a few of the participants have children who can provide potential assistance as they age.

#### 4.3. Gendered turning points

The findings in our study were gendered; lesbians more commonly than gay men discussed the significance of education and work as turning points. Consistent with prior research, the cumulative accomplishments of passing a licensing exam and graduating at the top of one's class facilitated shifts in social roles and identities (Cappeliez et al., 2008), increased self esteem

(Jones & Nystrom, 2002), and propelled these individuals into the new identities of therapist or graduate. One explanation for lesbians' tendency to focus on professional accomplishments is that it defied conventional gender norms: the social context dictated that all men, but not all women, were expected to have occupations and middle-class women were to marry and have children (Clausen, 1995; Clunis et al., 2005). Lesbians who did not follow the heteronormative narrative of the life course created identities and social roles related to educational and occupational achievements to define their adult lives and in so doing, created new narratives of possibility. That lesbian women identified occupational turning points as most significant is reminiscent of single British (presumed heterosexual) women during and after World War I, who invested their identities in their professional lives; the lack of marriageable men left them with few alternatives (Nicholson, 2008). Lesbians' focus on professional attainment also reflects the reality that work necessarily provided independence, economic resources and financial security (Clunis et al., 2005; Jones & Nystrom, 2002) that could not be otherwise assured.

Over the course of their adult years, many of the participants created alternatives to gendered norms when faced with obstacles that restricted their entry into normative social roles. Most of the participants in the study were socialized and entered adulthood prior to the Women's Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when gender and sexual identity norms were regulated strictly, both formally and informally. This social context shaped their lives in various ways. Some of the gay male participants entered creative professions, such as costume/clothing designers and actors, which defied conventional gender norms of masculinity. Overall, the men in the study typically focused less on their professional accomplishments than did the lesbian participants, perhaps because in the context of hegemonic masculinity, these creative professions were less valued (Calsanti, 2004). Some lesbian participants identified becoming a "dancer" or "teacher" as significant turning points; interestingly these jobs are traditionally gendered as feminine and thus consistent with hegemonic forms of gender, but their eschewing of the motherhood or wife roles for career goals was not. Common identities that connoted a transition to adulthood, such as "wife" or "mother" were not as accessible for lesbians outside of heterosexual relationships, thus they may have focused on these professional identities instead. Lesbians' focus on professional achievements broke the prevailing gender norms by embracing a dimension of their life that provided independence and confidence (Nystrom & Jones, 2012) and thus helped them adapt to a society that otherwise excluded them.

#### 4.4. Turning points shaped by gender and sexual orientation

Another finding that reflects gendered differences amongst the participants is that gay men more frequently identified coming out as gay as being a turning point in their lives than did lesbians. Some of the men who identified coming out as a turning point also disclosed that they did so when they were in their 20s or later, though they noted they had known they were "different" for a long period of time. Coming out represents both a discontinuity in the life course, as well as a shift in social identity (Clausen, 1995) predicated on narratives of self that are embedded in the social and historical context. With the emphasis on social identity shift, we would expect the coming out process to be a significant turning point for both gay men and lesbians. Yet, lesbians more frequently focused on the relationship in which a same sex orientation emerged or the community into which she connected, rather than coming out itself, which perhaps is more reflective of gender roles and norms than those predicated on sexuality.

#### 4.4.1. Social ties

Social ties-related turning points also emerged as influential experiences for the participants in three different ways: through intimate relationships that confirmed a lesbian or gay identity; through the illness or loss of peers as signaling a transition to later life; and through the loss of vast numbers of community members due to HIV and AIDS.

One finding unique to our study is the way that entering into a same-sex relationship or participating in same-sex behavior, long or short term, confirmed and prompted the disclosure of an LG identity. Some participants expressed how starting same-sex relationship confirmed a lesbian or gay identity and spurred the process of coming out in a way that simply is not relevant for heterosexual counterparts. The data show gender differences in how relationships were experienced as turning points. Both men and women in the study identified significant relationships as turning points, yet the women more likely indicated the break-up of an intimate relationship as a turning point. For gay men friendships and partnerships are often formed through initial sexual encounters (Nardi, 1999); when comparing young adults, the first labeling of self-identity as LG is more likely (but not universally) to be emotionally- or relationship-oriented for young women and sexually-oriented for young men (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Weinstock, 2004). Perhaps, lesbians more commonly cite the end, rather than onset, of a relationship as a turning point because it may reflect gender norms in that women are perceived of as being more relationship-oriented than men. Also, when undesired or unexpected the breakups caused great distress for lesbian participants; prior research shows that levels of distress related to the loss of a close relationship are often greatest for people who were highly invested in or more committed to the relationship (Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998). Another possible interpretation of the data is that it reflects a self-narrative anchored in social and historical contexts. The dominant discourse specific to homosexual men during the 50s and 60s was that of sexual promiscuity (Canaday, 2009), which may have led some to construct narratives of self around sexuality, to the neglect of other identities (Kertzner, 2001) such as maintaining long-term relationships. For women in the study, there was silence regarding female same-sex sexuality, like sexuality in general, so perhaps both the gender roles and expectations of the time, outweighed the influence of the dominant discourse relative to sexuality. Also connected to the dominant narratives for LG adults is the endurance of ex-partners and ex-lovers as important social ties. Lesbian participants noted that they stayed friends with long-term exes “if they can stand each other,” which is consistent with prior studies that deem such relationships as an important lesbian community value, in part as a haven from sexism and heterosexism (Weinstock, 2004). Prior research suggests that gay men also maintain close relationships with exes, though to a lesser extent than lesbians (Nardi, 1999).

Another interesting trend from the findings of this study is the way that observing peers go through transitions marks a turning point in the lives of our LG participants, a finding that has not been addressed in prior research about heterosexual adults. While many of the gay men discussed how HIV and AIDS affected relationships and social networks, none of the LG interviewees identified their own health-related issues as turning points. The legacy of AIDS as a community-based epidemic may have overshadowed individual health concerns as turning points in the eyes of the participants. Yet, one lesbian participant indicated that she felt a fundamental shift in her life when her age peers started dying. Perhaps because these cohorts of midlife and older LG adults commonly built chosen family networks from age peers (Weston, 1991), the health transitions of community members marked a turning point in their own lives, as well. This is especially the case for many of the gay

male participants, some of whom identified the HIV and AIDS epidemic a turning point in their lives, even if they did not have HIV disease, because so many of their chosen family members and contemporaries were affected. Belonging to a community and having a strong network of friends is especially important to older LG adults for healthy aging (Nystrom & Jones, 2012); when peers become ill or vulnerable, it may call into question the available network of support.

The loss of social ties as people age is another finding that is not unique to LG adults, but has particular relevance with current cohorts of gay men in particular due to the ways that the AIDS epidemic disproportionately affected gay men. In this study, only men identified turning points that were related to HIV and AIDS; these turning points were related to others' HIV statuses and not the participants' own HIV status or health. While the study survey asked questions about health statuses, including HIV, in the interviews, we asked participants about their long term health concerns, but did not ask specific questions about HIV or AIDS. Instead, participants identified as turning points the ways that a partner's HIV status affected their relationship and the ways that the AIDS epidemic during the 1980s and 1990s ravaged their friendship networks and communities. Interestingly in the analysis of the narratives, it is evident that many of the participants viewed their discussions about health as a turning point from the perspective of others and the larger community, perhaps as a result of the AIDS epidemic, which at the time was concentrated in gay male communities.

This study contributes to the growing scholarship on LG aging by analyzing the events that participants identified as having the greatest impact on their lives and assessing these narratives utilizing a life course framework embedded within the social and historical contexts that frame life narratives. In so doing, this research illustrates that some of the turning points identified by older LG adults are similar to those cited by a general older adult population (Cappeliez et al., 2008; Clausen, 1995; Martin et al., 2011), but with nuanced differences related to gender and sexual orientation. Older LG adults, like their non-LG peers, identify turning points as most commonly connected to relationships and occupations, but often discuss how the historical and social context delayed entry into committed same-sex relationships and acceptance of an LG identity. The social and historical context in which the older LG adults came of age, which repressed, criminalized, and stigmatized homosexuality, is imprinted on their life courses in myriad ways. Ultimately, this study expands our understanding about how differential access to normative turning points according to gender and sexual orientation shapes people's life trajectories and later life experiences.

#### 4.5. Limitations

Like all empirical research, this work has limitations. Future studies of midlife and older LG adults would benefit from a broader discussion of how theories of social identities and dominant narrative structures shape people's articulations of turning points. While there is much rich theoretical work to be done, it is beyond the scope of this article.

One limitation of the study is that it relies on self reports about turning points, which can elicit social biases and self-protective responses. Future studies that wish to examine turning points would benefit from using a method like life history interviews or personal narratives in order to inductively cull the experiences from those accounts.

The sampling strategy was useful for recruiting older adults for the interview portion of the study. However, inherent in the strategy of using a self-selected sample is the possibility of sampling bias, such that there may be some common quality of

those willing to volunteer for the study that may differentiate them from individuals who did not participate in the survey and did not indicate a willingness to participate in future research. Because older LG adults are a relatively difficult to locate population, the sampling strategy was effective, but also provided a participant group that was limited in term of sexual orientation and race: only one bisexual and one transgender participant were interviewed and were not included in this study due to the small number. Also, the study drew few participants over age 80, and few participants of color. To have a more comprehensive understanding of LG communities, future research should target these constituencies in order to have better representation across groups. As a qualitative, exploratory study, these research findings are not intended to be representative of the entire LG population.

Additionally, like much of the existing research about older LG adults, the research was conducted in an urban area (see Beeler et al., 1999) on the West Coast (see Clunis et al., 2005), which may provide a particular snapshot of the populations. The findings may not be consistent with the experiences of older LG adults who reside in other areas of the U.S., particularly in more rural locations and smaller cities in the south, which the most recent Census shows is where same-sex couples are more likely to be raising children (Gates, 2013). Future research on less studied areas of the U.S. would provide a much-needed contribution to our knowledge about older LG adults.

## 5. Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding about how older LG adults view their life trajectories by assessing the experiences they identify as turning points given a shifting social context. The study also addresses the similarities and differences between the turning points that lesbian and gay participants identify to those in the general literature. The findings reveal both similarities and differences between older LG adults' experiences, as well as between the study participants and general populations that have been represented in research about turning points. We found that while many of the events are similar, some turning points, like coming out, are unique to LG communities. Additionally, we found that in this study, turning points are gendered, such that lesbians identify different turning points than gay men, though in nuanced ways.

As contemporary cohorts of young and middle aged LG adults navigate the social world, social and historical contexts will shape their experiences, as well; future research that considers how struggles for same-sex marriage, LG parenthood, and equal protections under the law will be needed in order to understand the weight of these battles in defining self narratives and the life course. The turning points identified by older LG adults have implications for understanding the life courses of other older adults who have lived in margins as a result of historical barriers and exclusion from the social life of a society. They also reflect experiences among the increasing number of older adults that have rejected normative roles and transitions, such as marriage and parenthood. The lives of midlife and older LG adults are reflective of a critical, yet too often unarticulated, intersection between socio-historical context and human agency, allowing for shifting narratives from deviance to resilience.

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