The desires that were denied: (Re-) construction of sexual identity in middle adulthood

Thomas B. Swan[1] and Suzie Benack[2]

1 Siena College
2 Union College

ABSTRACT

Many men who entered adulthood in the 1970's through 2000 experienced sexual desire for other men in their adolescence, but did not integrate this experience into their identities. After forming heterosexual identities and entering heterosexual marriages, some experience a re-emergence of same-sex desire in midlife. We examine posts to three online groups for such men in "mixed-orientation marriages" to describe the ways in which the inadequacies of available cultural scripts for sexual orientation impede their ability to re-integrate their same-sex desire into their adult identities. We also suggest that the men who can make use of advanced forms of adult cognition are better equipped to transcend the limitations of cultural scripts and form a more coherent and inclusive adult identity.

KEYWORDS: gay married, mixed orientation marriage, midlife, adult identity, dialectical thinking

TRADITIONAL MODELS OF IDENTITY formation assume that in adolescence, ideally, a relatively coherent and cohesive identity can be created. This provides a stable platform for adult development, bringing important aspects of the self into a relatively harmonious relationship and connecting the individual to her social context in a meaningful and continuous way (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994; Westen, 1985). This developmental task most often cannot be achieved with both complete scope and complete coherence. However, it is unlikely that adolescent identity will both include all potentially relevant aspects of the self *and* to create an identity that is unified and which harmoniously relates all the parts. It is necessary, then, that some aspects of the self that cannot be easily integrated with others be "sacrificed" (consciously or unconsciously) in order to form a more coherent identity. This compromise is necessary to make initial young adult life choices possible, but it also means that those choices will be, to some extent, ambivalent and conflicted.

Some of the forces that create challenges in integrating aspects of the self into a coherent identity include

» intrapsychic conflicts—aspects of the self which are incompatible, e.g. a desire for grand achievement vs. a desire to avoid risk of failure;

» interpersonal conflicts—identity-salient others who will be hurt, disapproving or angry if the adolescent acts on certain motives;

» social forces which make motives difficult to enact or impose costs for acting on them—limitations due to one's economic resources or social status, social taboos sanctioning particular behaviors in general or for members of certain social groups (e.g., if a person has aspirations which are economically unreachable or deemed "inappropriate" for someone of their social status);

» cognitive structures which limit the ability to integrate seemingly discrepant features of a self-system—e.g., a mode of understanding in which it "doesn't make sense" to be both a "good" daughter and angry at one's mother.

For many people, adolescent formulation of identity and early adult life choices form a more or less adequate basis for later adult identity and life, with gradual adaptation and elaboration in response to new life circumstances and personal growth. In some cases, however, the motives which were sacrificed/excluded from identity re-emerge later in life with a suddenness and intensity that creates a sense of crisis. Recognizing re-emerging parts of the self can create intrapsychic conflicts (*What I'm feeling conflicts with who I am*), conflicts in one's life structure (*I made choices/got where I am based on not feeling this; these feelings don't fit in my current*

life), and conflicts with one's relational commitments (*I created bonds and made promises based on not feeling this*).

Several "expectable events" in the course of adult life can alter the balance of psychic forces present in adolescence in ways that contribute to re-emergence of previously "sacrificed" motives. Below is a list of examples.

» Changes in the internal hierarchy of motives—Motives which were dominant in adolescence and early adulthood become less pressing, in part because their goals have been achieved.

» Changes in the interpersonal context of choice—Important relationships that led force to sacrificing a motive become less relevant as the relationships are redefined; in particular, relationships to parents can become less salient forces as one becomes more independent and parents age and/or die.

» Changes in social norms—Especially in post-modern cultures with rapid rates of social change, the social forces that shaped identity formation in adolescence may change dramatically during adulthood. Motives whose expression was prohibited become socially acceptable, and a wider range of actions become possible without the social costs they would have incurred at an earlier point in one's life.

» Changes in cognitive structure—The development of more complex cognitive structures in adulthood can render the "unthinkable" (in adolescence") something that now "makes sense," and thus becomes possible.

» Recognition of potential finality of the sacrifice as mortality becomes more salient—As an adult increasingly experiences his lifespan as finite, and his remaining time as limited, it can feel more urgent to recover what has been "missing" in his earlier life.

Any of these forces can lead to a crisis of identity in adulthood (a "midlife crisis"), in which the re-emergence of previously denied desires lead to re-opening fundamental identity questions and a re-evaluation of the life plan. Confronting questions of identity as an adult in contemporary American culture can be frightening and demoralizing, for several reasons. The dominant lifespan narrative in American culture includes and supports identity crisis in adolescence, but expects adults to "have it together" enough to make stable commitments to work and relationships. Being unable as an adult to say what one wants or to tell others what they can count on, then, can be experienced as a personal failure or a sign of immaturity. Moreover, American culture does not provide adults with the social supports given to adolescents in identity crises. A period of moratorium in which to experiment with temporary roles, values, and relationships, (Erikson, 1968), social approval for rejecting others' expectations and values in order to achieve personal authenticity (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1994), and tolerance of temporary self-centeredness, self-absorption, and irresponsibility. People renegotiating identity in adulthood must resolve identity issues while embedded in adult relationships of economic and social interdependence and responsibility. Their spouses, children, family, friends, and colleagues share the costs of the process and have a stake in its outcome. The demands of

adult life limit the time and degrees of freedom available for exploration and experimentation. They also pose moral issues. While contemporary Western cultures encourage freedom, tentativeness about commitment, and self-focus in adolescents, adults who exhibit these traits are often criticized as being selfish, immature, irresponsible, or even pathological.

In this paper, we examine a particular group of midlife adults who experience the re-emergence of previously denied motives. That is men who experienced erotic attraction to other men in adolescence, but did not form "gay identities." These men entered heterosexual marriages, but found themselves, in middle adulthood, once again feeling intense same-sex desire, to the degree that it propels them to reconsider their sexual identity and their life structure. These men are often called "gay/bi-married men." For reasons which will become clear later in the paper, we want to avoid characterizing their sexual desires in this way, so will refer to them as SSA spouses—spouses with a same-sex attraction. In addition to giving a general description of the adult identity crisis precipitated by the re-emergence of same-sex desire, we will focus on the ways in which the inadequacy of dominant social scripts about sexuality to describe these men's experience creates a specific crisis of meaning-making. We will also illustrate how, in the absence of adequate social narratives, more highly developed cognitive structures can enable individuals to construct relatively adequate personal narratives.

» METHODS

Our analysis is based on a reading of messages posted by gay/bisexual men in self-described "mixed-orientation marriages" (MOMs) to three internet support groups between 2005 and 2010. These groups were a) HOW (Husbands Out to Wives) a group for men whose wives know of their same-sex desires; b) HUGS (Hope-Understanding-Growth-Support), a yahoo-based group for both members of mixed-orientation couples; and c) Closed Loop, a yahoo-based group for men in heterosexual marriages who seek exclusive sexual relationships with other men. Our method is participant-observation; we originally gained access to these posts not as researchers, but as members of the (private) listservs. Because it would be impossible to obtain informed consent from individuals to use posts as research data, we limit our analysis to a) a count of simple "factual" information to evaluate whether the men who wrote these posts present a profile similar to the participants in past studies of mixed-orientation marriages, and b) a qualitative description of our observations as participants in the group conversations on the lists over a five-year period. For the same reason, we do not quote passages from the posts.

We selected posts by men because the number of posts by gay/bisexual women in our sample was too small to make generalizations. Since participants in these groups might write frequently over several years, on multiple groups, using different names and email addresses, we used the individual message rather than the person as our unit of analysis. We eliminated posts that were merely indicating agreement with previous poses (e.g., "Right on!"), as well as those that did not address the topic of mixed-orientation marriage (e.g., making logistical arrangements for a meeting, recommending a book). This yielded 659 posts.

» RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The crisis of the SSA spouse in a heterosexual marriage

Most research on men who find themselves in "mixed orientation marriages" in adulthood reports that they usually entered the relationship desiring and expecting to be satisfied with a traditional, monogamous heterosexual marriage. They typically had some homosexual experiences in adolescence or early adulthood, but believed that their same-sex desires were "a phase." They expected to be able to put them aside with marriage, just as two straight people entering marriage might expect to put aside their extramarital heterosexual attractions (Edser & Shea, 2002; Matteson, 1985; Ross, 1979). This pattern was true for all but a few of the men in our sample; only eight posts reported having sex with men during the first year of the marriage.

Past studies report that for most men, this construction "works" for many years. Frequently, it is only after many years of marriage that same-sex desires reach a level of intensity and significance that leads the heterosexually married gay/bisexual husband to re-examine this life-plan (Edser & Shea, 2002; Ross, 1979). Meanwhile, they have developed adult life patterns of intimacy and generativity in terms of the dominant cultural script for heterosexual marriage, including their marriage, children, relations to extended family and friends. Our sample supports this finding: in 83% of posts describing the period before the "crisis of coming out," there was a period of several years in which same-sex desire was not problematic. Nothing in our sample suggested that these men had any lesser commitment to and satisfaction with their "heterosexual lives" than other heterosexually married midlife adults.

At some point, however, same-sex desire re-emerged as a conscious concern and became motivating enough to cause significant conflict/unhappiness. Participants in the online groups identified several changes that seemed to facilitate this "return of the repressed." The most common attribution was to broader social changes regarding homosexuality (mentioned 72 times)—greater social acceptance, the visibility of gay people in media and social life, and, especially, the rise of internet sites which made it possible for individuals to access gay pornography, chat rooms, discussion groups, and social networks to facilitate arranging sexual encounters, all without leaving their homes. Other factors often mentioned included a lessening intensity of sex and romance in the marriage (55 posts), and a lessening preoccupation with the goals that had been central in early adulthood. These goals included children, career building, establishing a home (14 posts). Several men mentioned their own illness or the death or illness of parents as increasing their sense of mortality and intensifying the urgency of the need to deal with their unrealized desires (23 posts).

Recognizing their same-sex desires and disclosing them to their spouses (intentionally or accidentally, by getting "caught" in extramarital sexual activity), these men face the difficulties of coming out as homosexual in a homophobic culture and the marital crisis of infidelity (real or desired). They also face the identity crisis of having aspects of the self that feel vital to one's authenticity and wholeness. However, these men are in conflict with a structure of meaning and commitment that has defined one's earlier adulthood. Concretely, these men (and their wives) must decide whether to remain married. Buxton (1994) estimates that about 2/3 divorce relatively quickly, while a third decide to try to maintain the marriage. Of these, about half are still together five years later. Whether they ultimately remain married or divorce, however, these men face the challenge of reformulating an identity (and a life) that in some way addresses the meanings of both their heterosexual life and their homosexual desires.

As reported in another analysis of messages on MOM groups (Klein and Schwartz, 2001), most of the posts in our sample dealt with what might be called "practical" conflicts. These conflicts included how to renegotiate major relationships in the light of one's same-sex desires, coming out to friends and family, whether to maintain or end the marriage, the ethics of consensual and/or hidden extramarital sex dominated a good deal of discussion. In addition to these concrete difficulties, however, we observed that for many men the re-emergence of same-sex desire posed an unsolvable cognitive problem that created a crisis of meaning-making. The central predicament for many SSA spouses seemed to hinge on the ways in which their feelings, motives, and experiences were not adequately described by dominant cultural scripts about sexual orientation. In the attempt to renegotiate an identity that could make sense of both the "straight" and the "gay" parts of their lives, these men asked questions to which our dominant cultural understandings of desire, love, and marriage provide no answers or, alternately, multiple contradictory answers. In the absence of a sensible answer to the question "Who am I, sexually?" it was impossible to find purchase on the pressing questions regarding life decisions. Below, we examine the dominant cultural narratives regarding sexuality and how they fail men in mixed orientation marriages.

The "orientation script": an essentialist view of sexual desire

The narrative about sexual desire held most widely, both by psychologists and by the general public, is essentialism, the belief that people do not merely have differing sexual preferences and behaviors, but that they have different underlying *orientations*. For an argument that this is a historically recent view of sexual diversity, see Halperin, 1990, and Foucault, 1990; for an argument that sexual orientation is a socially constructed category, not reflective of a natural category, see Stein, 1999. The core assumptions of the essentialist view are:

1. People have a sexual orientation, an inner nature that leads them to desire either men or women (or in more sophisticated versions of the script, sometimes both). In other words, people come in one of two sexual kinds: gay or straight.

2. A person's sexual orientation is present at birth, probably rooted in biology, and does not change across his or her lifetime, even if his or her sexual behavior or his experienced desire does change.

3. All forms of sexual desire and romantic love reflect a person's sexual orientation (and thus will be directed at a single gender).

There are two major variants of the orientation script in modern American popular culture. The "heteronormative" version of the orientation script assigns positive value and health to a heterosex-

ual orientation and sees homosexual orientation as sinful and/or pathological. The "gay affirmative/identity" version of the script argues that the two orientations are equally normal/healthy. This identity-affirmative version sometimes adds one more assumption to the orientation script, namely,

4. People should adopt a private and public identity that reflects their sexual orientation. They should act on it by having sexual and romantic relations with the gender they are attracted to.
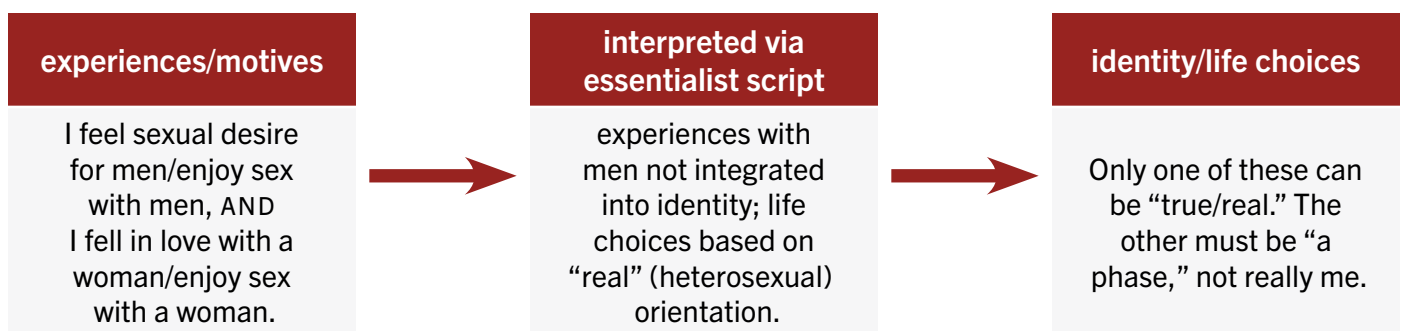
The orientation script assumes, then, that sexual preferences are not like, say, tastes in food or political beliefs. A person can in general find spaghetti his or her most preferred dish, but enjoy the variety of an occasional lobster dinner, or be liberal in one's youth and become more conservative with age, without contradiction—not so with regards to love, sex, and marriage. The script takes one's sexual orientation to be a fundamental fact of one's being, a core aspect of identity. It defines who a person is and how he is socially situated. It also assumes that "the whole package"—lust toward strangers, sexual pleasure in relationships, romantic love, commitment and family—will all be directed at a particular gender, providing a basis for a coherent sexual/affectional life that is either gay or straight.

How the "orientation script" problematizes the SSA spouse's identity

The essentialist script was the dominant cultural construction of sexual identity when the men in our sample were adolescents and young adults (roughly, 1970–2000). Moreover, the dominant version of the script was binary (gay vs. straight are the only categories) and heteronormative (heterosexuality is more valued). Almost all of the men reported experiencing desire for other men in their adolescence, most had homosexual encounters, and a few had romantic relationships with men prior to marriage. When they fell in love with a woman, and in that context enjoyed heterosexual sex, the essentialist script offered them a choice. Their sexual identities and adult lives could be based around one or the other of their desires. Most were relieved to be able to escape the stigmatized category "gay" and to be able to lead a "normal" heterosexual life. Their development of sexual identity is represented below.

When the press to recognize and act on homoerotic desire became more intense, in later adulthood, most of these men continued to try to make sense of their feelings in terms of the orientation script—despite the fact that their experience contradicted it. Their sexual desire and romantic love were **not** consistently directed toward one gender, nor did they usually feel similar kinds of love and desire toward men and women. It is evidence of the power of social scripts that SSA spouses rarely concluded that the orientation script must be wrong. Instead, they struggled, often desperately, to find a way to make sense of their feelings in terms of the dominant cultural narrative, asking them, "*What am I? Am I straight? Then why do I desire sex with men so intensely? Am I gay? Then why do I love and desire my wife? Am I bisexual (if that even exists)? Then why are my sexual fantasies only about men?*" It is not surprising, then, that "labels" (for sexual orientation) are a topic of regular and heated discussion on internet groups for men in MOMs (Klein & Schwartz, 2001).

The SSA spouse's understanding of his feelings for his wife and for men, his evaluation of his past choices and the current meaning of his marriage and his desire for a homoerotic life all are shaped by whether he sees himself as "really gay" or "really straight," or perhaps "really bi." The choice of a label delimits what options are available to him and defines their meaning and value. Many men attempt to make sense of their homoerotic experiences in terms of the gay-identity script and draw upon the positive narratives of the gay community to give shape to, legitimize and support recognition and acceptance of same-sex desire. From this point of view, the SSA spouse has a right and perhaps a moral imperative to act on the same-sex desires, to be "true to himself" and live "authentically." Taking this perspective, the SSA spouse may feel that his wife has an obligation to support his expression of gay desire, that to do otherwise would be selfish and uncaring on her part. However, these narratives delegitimize and problematize his marriage and his love and desire for his spouse, seeing them as "mistakes," made, perhaps, out of "internalized homophobia." Conversely, the heteronormative script delegitimizes and problematizes his same-sex desire. What both scripts agree on is that the two do not or should not coexist—not in one person or in one life.

experiences/motives	interpreted via essentialist script	identity/life choices
I feel sexual desire for men/enjoy sex with men, AND I fell in love with a woman/enjoy sex with a woman.	experiences with men not integrated into identity; life choices based on "real" (heterosexual) orientation.	Only one of these can be "true/real." The other must be "a phase," not really me.

Figure 1. t The development of sexual identity in men in our sample

Table 1. implications of sexual scripts for SSA spouse's identity and life

	identity	life choices
hetero-normative	Continue efforts to exclude/repress same-sex desires in the face of contradictory experience or accept same-sex desire and reconstruct previous identity as "false." Replay of adolescent identity crisis in the sexual sphere.	Heterosexually-based life choices (marriage, family) often continued, but experienced as "false" or "a sham." Can lead to despair, sense of a wasted life.
gay identity	Same-sex desires accepted and integrated into (revised, gay) identity; this requires excluding/repressing opposite-sex desires, often reconstructing them as "false."	Heterosexually-based life choices (marriage, family) now seen as "a mistake." Either discontinued and a new "gay" life begun, or revised to not conflict with new gay identity.
queer	Seeming contradiction between same-sex and opposite-sex desires transcended by relating them in a meta-construction of sexual identity. Both seen as elements of a larger system of sexual tastes and preferences. Stability of identity is located at the level of the system, particular desires are not seen as indicators of the whole.	Heterosexually-based life choices (marriage, family) seen as part of a larger process of acting on sexual identity across one's life. Modification of life choices is based on both same-sex and opposite-sex desires, as well as other sexual, romantic, moral, and practical considerations.

Some SSA men in MOMs find that the sexual orientation script provides an adequate description of their experience and a basis for their identity; they are able to redefine themselves as "gay" or to reaffirm their identity as "straight." Both of these paths, alternate ways of fitting into a socially normal script, offer a coherent meaning system and an affirming community. If, for example, a man has experienced relatively little romantic love and desire for his wife, in contrast to the intensity of his love and desire for men, he may decide that he was really gay all along. He may decide that he deceived himself to a degree about his love and desire for his wife because of his fear of living a public gay life. Viewed in this light, there will be a moral imperative for him to live authentically, as his "real self." The gay community will offer support for this choice, provide opportunities for new relationships and a form of life that will give meaning to his same-sex desires. "Coming out," to himself and to others, as "gay" may enable a joyful re-appropriation of the repressed parts of the self and a more inclusive and coherent basis for adult identity and life.

Alternately, a man may find the strength of his commitments to his heterosexual identity (deriving from, e.g., love for his wife and children, traditional social and religious values) lead him to continue to exclude his homoerotic desires from his core identity. He can affirm the meaning in his choice to marry, his history with his wife and its place in a network of straight relationships (children, extended family, straight friends, perhaps religious communities). From this perspective, the same-sex desires become a quirk, something that he needs to manage, like an addiction, to keep it from destroying his core identity, values, and commitments.

There is some value in resolving the conflict among the competing and incoherent parts of being an SSA spouse by adopting one or the other of these solutions and accepting an identity and social role as either gay or as straight and monogamously married. These solutions allow people to make the pressing choices—act on same-sex desires or not, stay married or divorce—with conviction and get on with life. Most of the men who participate in the groups we studied, however, find both of these alternatives unsatisfactory. For these men, both solutions—to stay married and minimize the significance and disruption of the gay desires, or take on a

gay identity and dis-identify with the marriage—exact a price in wholeness and genuineness. Both require the SSA spouse to disown and devalue some part of his experience, to conform to culturally defined forms of desire and to feel shame about the desires that are not culturally sanctioned. In short, while our culture offers scripts for gay sex/love/marriage/identity, and scripts for straight sex/love/marriage/identity, it offers no coherent and meaningful way to integrate love and commitment to an other-sex spouse with significant same-sex desire. There are not, for example, generally available and adequate descriptions of the sexual orientation of someone who simultaneously experiences love and desire for two differently sexed persons, nor models of lives in which both of these desires are lived out in meaningful, positive ways.

"Queer" conceptions of sexuality and the role of adult cognitive development

If the SSA married man is to develop an identity and a life that integrates his various sexual and romantic motives, he must develop a conception of sexual desire and sexual identity. This desire and identity unseats the assumptions of the orientation script and resolves the contradictions that result from applying it to his experience. We did observe, in a small number of posts, such alternate conceptions of the SSA spouse's sexuality and explorations of the "non-normal" life choices they made conceivable. (These posts were more frequent on the internet groups for people in marriages in which the same-sex desires were known to both partners). We generally characterize these sexual scripts as "queer," in the sense that they do not accept the assumptions of the dominant models of "normal" sexuality (Warner, 2000). Queer conceptions of sexuality do not make presumptions about the aspects of other people that might be sexualized for an individual (e.g., gender, personality, hair color, race, SES), nor about the ways that different sexualized elements might be organized (in narratives about power, nurturance, exposure or hiding, pain, etc.). In addition, from a queer perspective, there is no a priori reason to expect people's organization of sexual motives to remain stable across their lives. In short, from an essentialist perspective the identity question is "What are you?" (meaning "which gender do

Table 2. ways that dialectical thinking supports the creation of a queer conception of sexuality

dialectical schemata	implications for construction of sexual orientation
thesis-antithesis-synthesis movement in thought.	orientation toward finding construction which includes both same- and other-sex desires in identity.
affirmation of the primacy of motion.	changes in sexual desire across lifespan can be included in identity.
avoidance or exposure of objectification, hypostatization, and reification.	recognition that "sexual orientation" is an abstraction, that motives and behavior are the primary reality.
understanding events or situations as moments (of development) of a process.	ability to integrate differences in sexual motives at different points in lifespan into a continuous narrative.
location of an element (or phenomenon) within the whole(s) of which it is a part.	specific desires and behaviors seen as part of larger system that organizes multiple motives.
understanding the resolution of disequilibrium or contradiction in terms of a notion of transformation in developmental direction.	conflicts among sexual motives/disequilibrium of identity (and life structure) can be seen as providing a potential for growth; integration can be valued without devaluing any elements.

you prefer?"). From a queer perspective it is "What is the (current) shape of your desire? What sexual acts and objects attract you, in what ways, and when?" Table 1 summarizes the three models of sexual orientation and their implications for the identities and life-choices of SSA married men.

To create a queer conception of sexual identity, the SSA spouse must reflect on his essentialist beliefs, understand them to be constructions rather than realities, compare them to his experience, and respond to the contradictions that result by formulating more complex constructions that can bring into relation the contradictory elements. We suggest that these kinds of moves in thought reflect capacities described in models of adult cognitive development (e.g., Commons, Richards & Armon, 1984; Basseches, 1984; Kegan, 1994). The methodology of this study does not enable a systematic analysis of the ways in which SSA men used advanced cognitive structures in resolving their identity conflicts. We can comment, however, on several patterns of thought we saw in the posts that illustrate the ways in which greater cognitive complexity supports the creation of a queer conception of sexuality and thus makes possible a more adequate integration of parts of the sexual and relational self.

Dialectical thinking, as described by Basseches (1984), orients thought toward perceiving processes of change, and recognizing and integrating contradictory elements into higher-order structures. Table 2 gives some examples of ways that dialectical moves in thought could support the creation of a queer understanding of sexuality. The dialectical attention to conflicting elements promotes the simultaneous consideration of both aspects of the gay/bi spouse's sexuality and discourages restoring harmony by "suppressing" one or the other. The dialectical tendency to see

change rather than fixity supports viewing one's sexual identity as in flux rather than as static across the lifespan. Higher order dialectical schema (those which integrate understanding of change/process and understanding of structure) provide a framework through which the gay/bi spouse can reflect upon his individual motives and experiences as parts of larger wholes, and bring those wholes into relation in hierarchically more differentiated and integrated structures—in other words, to understand one's "straight" and "gay" experiences as embedded in different cultural scripts, and to integrate those conflicting scripts in a higher-order "queer" perspective.

Similarly, Kegan's "fourth-order thinking" describes cognitive moves that could enable gay/bi spouses to include both their same sex attraction and their love for the wives in their identities and life choices (see Table 3). In third-order thinking, according to Kegan, meanings are validated by external sources—other people or groups. Thus, the individual understands both the meaning of his marriage and the nature and meaning of his same-sex desire in terms of the very cultural scripts and expectations that we have argued create a conflict of "incommensurability." Fourth-order thought, in contrast, opens the possibility of self-created meaning systems which include and relate particular relationships and social scripts, but ultimately locate their validity in the authority of the self. Fourth-order thought allows gay/bi spouses to create definitions of marriage and sexual identity that are not socially affirmed, and to recast traditional scripts so as to reduce dissonance. (Kegan also describes "Fifth-order thinking" consisting of meta-systematic moves in thought; this form of reasoning is probably necessary for the full development of a "queer" conception of sexuality and relationships, but was rarely seen in our sample).

Table 3. *ways that men conceptualized issues related to their MOM's using 3rd and 4th order thinking*

issue	3rd order thinking	4th order thinking
future of marriage	depends on whether it can be put "right" again, whether traditional norms and roles can be successfully reinstated.	view of relationship as process, success is not predictable, depends on evolution. often asserts that the instability of an mom is not fundamentally different from any marriage
understanding of sexual orientation	SSA partners' homoerotic desire is "who they are" and thus contrary to participating in their marriage.	SSA partners' homoerotic desire is "something they have," a relational role among many, and they can choose how to relate it to their role as marriage partner.
the past marriage	was false, not real, a mistake. straight spouse's perception of the relationship was mistaken.	what was perceived was real, but now is understood differently in the larger context created by understanding something which was hidden/distorted.

» SUMMARY

The combination of an extended lifespan and the rapid social change characteristic of post-modern culture is likely to put more mid-life adults in situations where parts of the self that were "left behind" in adolescence can re-emerge with increased intensity. The men discussed in this paper illustrate not only of the difficulties of renegotiating identity in adulthood, but the particular predicament of people whose significant meanings and experiences cannot be held in meaningful relation by current cultural scripts. Those who attempted to resolve their identity and life problems within cultural scripts for sexual orientation were forced to sacrifice, as they had in adolescence, some aspect of their sexual experience to achieve coherence and connect to a supportive community. Others were able to recognize and accept the reality of their experience, including the parts that conflicted with cultural scripts, and to create identities that integrated previously disparate parts of the self and imagine a range of life choices—both "normal" and "un-normal"—that were not based in sacrificing important meanings. Our analysis of the writings of men who took each path suggests that advanced adult cognitive operations may be required to negotiate such "culture-transcending" renegotiations of identity. ■

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