
Composing Self on Narrative Landscapes of Sexual Difference: A Story of Wisdom and Resilience La composition du Moi sur arrière-plans narratifs de dif- férence sexuelle : récit de sagesse et de résilience

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ABSTRACT

This study draws upon recent narrative inquiry research that explored the resilience experiences of 6 young same-sex-attracted men and women (4 men, 2 women; age range = 21–27). This article elucidates the story of one participant, Joseph, a 25-year-old Canadian man. As we conducted the research, Joseph's story stood out for us as having something important to say about resilience and same-sex attraction. Using a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, the researchers and participants encountered Joseph's story of resilience as a situated wisdom that arises in experience that is social, temporal, and situated. This perspective of resilience calls upon mental health professionals to enter into the client's story and to live and practice within it.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude s'appuie sur la recherche récente d'enquête narrative ayant exploré les expériences de résilience de 6 jeunes hommes et femmes homosexuels (4 hommes, 2 femmes âgés de 21 à 27 ans). L'article met en lumière le récit d'un participant, Joseph, un Canadien de sexe masculin âgé de 25 ans. Au cours de la recherche, le récit de Joseph s'est démarqué comme comportant un enseignement important au sujet de la résilience et de l'homosexualité. En utilisant un espace d'enquête narrative tridimensionnel, les chercheurs et les participants ont perçu le récit de résilience de Joseph comme une sagesse contextualisée qui survient dans le cadre d'une expérience qui est sociale, temporelle, et mise en contexte. Cette perspective de résilience incite les professionnels de la santé mentale à pénétrer dans le récit du client et à vivre et pratiquer à l'intérieur de celui-ci.

I sat there. I just sat there, with cuts on my wrists and tears streaming down my face. I could look up and make eye contact with him, and I didn't have any tissues. I could taste my own snot in my mouth. I didn't know what to do and my family doctor didn't know what to say. So far, nobody understands me. I'm not suicidal, but I just want to attack myself, you know? I want to get at that part of me that I can't make go away. I don't want this, I don't want the trouble it is bringing me, and I don't want my friends and family to have to go through it either.

So spoke Ethan, a client of Andrew, the first author, some 14 years ago.¹ Ethan (a pseudonym) was recounting a painful "coming out." As he spoke about his ex-

perience of telling two friends, he told a vivid story of tense anticipation followed by a confronting realization of non-acceptance. Ethan's story resonates in many ways with countless young same-sex-attracted men, who find that their emerging sexual orientation places them at odds with their friends, their loved ones, and their communities. Ethan's voice echoes forward to address us here and now, and the literature and anecdotes from practice tell us that these are also today's struggles for young gay men in Canada.

In this article, we draw upon the story of another young same-sex-attracted man (Joseph, also a pseudonym) that was told as part of a larger research project, which sought to inquire about the resilience experiences of young same-sex-attracted university students. While our larger study addressed the experiences of both men and women, this article focuses on the experiences of men. We took enrolment in either an undergraduate or graduate program as being a measure of success in having negotiated some of the personal and social challenges associated with emerging sexual difference. Using narrative inquiry, we explored the experiences of a group of young men and women in order to learn about how they had negotiated the transition from adolescence to adulthood as they also came to understand themselves as people of sexual difference. When we refer to the participants in our study we use the term *same-sex attracted*. We do this because we recruited participants using this term for two reasons: first, because the experience of even transient same-sex attraction can confer risk for negative mental health outcomes (Skegg, Nada-Raja, Dickson, Paul, & Williams, 2003); second, we did not wish to exclude young people who wanted to participate but who did not identify with a static identity category such as "gay" or "lesbian." Despite our preference for the term same-sex attracted, our review of the literature and subsequent discussion refers to the identity categories of gay and lesbian because other authors as well as the participants in our study used them.

As a result of our narrative approach, a different perspective on resilience is presented in this article. Instead of conceptualizing resilience as a trait, a characteristic, or an ability to access available resources or supports, we offer a narrative view of resilience *as* experience in context. That is to say, resilience is intrinsically woven into the experience and story of the person as it is lived and told in places that have topographical and social features. Understanding resilience in this way not only offers important insights into the marginal and mainstream experiences of people of sexual difference, it also suggests shifts in the ways that therapists and counsellors practice with same-sex-attracted clients.

The literature reports a number of increased problems for young gay men as they negotiate the internal and external experiences of sexual difference. Many of these young people experience negative life events, from being exposed to other people's negative attitudes about their sexual orientation, to actual physical assault (Herdt & van de Meer, 2003; Herek, 1984; Kuehnle & Sullivan, 2001; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). Explicit and subtle homophobia as well as pressures to conform to gendered norms from peers and others result in increased levels of psychological and psychosocial distress (Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008)

that can influence their feelings of worth, hope, or hopelessness. As a result of these negative feelings, some young gay men commit suicide (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 2001; Johnson, Faulkner, Jones, & Welsh, 2007). Although the statistics vary, and while acknowledging the difficulty of establishing causative associations between sexual orientation and suicide after death, suicide attempt and completion rates are markedly higher in gay men than in their straight counterparts (Cochran & Mays, 2008).

Even though some young gay men may not be suicidal, many experience higher levels of psychological distress than heterosexual men and women (King et al., 2003), and these young men require sensitive and effective responses from the health professionals from whom they seek help. While Andrew's patient, Ethan, sought care during his crisis, he found little comfort in it. Although there is evidence to suggest young gay men today are psychologically healthier than in the past (Savin-Williams, 2005), anecdotally young gay men tell us that they still often avoid seeking care that will either "out" them or confront uncomfortable issues about their sexual orientation.

This brief account of the struggles of young same-sex-attracted men calls us to engage with their experiences. As we venture onto the landscape of sexual difference, be it as mental health professionals or as vested protagonists, we cannot escape awareness of a landscape that is diverse, rapidly changing, and often troubling. Sexual difference features on a landscape of people, socialization, and places: some supportive, and some alienating and hostile. In these places, young same-sex-attracted men are attempting to make meaning of their experiences, to find a place to fit, and to meet the challenges brought about by their sexual difference.

RESILIENCE AND WELL-BEING IN SAME-SEX-ATTRACTED YOUNG MEN

The concept of resilience arose from an interest in the attributes of "invulnerable" children who seemed to thrive despite considerable adversity (Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007). Resilience is a dynamic process in which people demonstrate adaptation in the presence of adversity (Schoon, 2006), whether it comprises small or everyday stressors (Rutter, 1985, 1987, 1993; Shapiro, 1995) or large-scale traumas or disasters (Alvarez & Hunt, 2005; Bonanno, 2004). Rather than an attribute, resilience can be thought of as something that occurs in interactions between individuals and their environment (Garmezy, 1991). Resilience, then, is about knowing what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, in order to survive or even flourish. Given that there are few scripts that offer gay men specific guidance on how to live well, the experiences of gay men who cope well with challenges and adversities are of interest.

Factors that are known to increase resilience in individuals include family support and togetherness (McMahon, 2007; Webb, 2002), collective self-efficacy (Blum, McNeely, & Nonnemaker, 2002), spiritual faith (Beautrais, 2003), a sense of belonging (Monasterio, 2002), and pride in one's culture (Hall, 2007). For some same-sex-attracted young people, family can be unsupportive and even a

threat to their safety or well-being, and shame rather than pride in one's culture is experienced as a result of early (and sometimes sustained) exposure to homophobia and negative social portrayals of homosexuality.

Also implicated in being resilient are good problem-solving skills, the development and maintenance of self-esteem (Blum et al., 2002; Cloitre, Martin, & Linares, 2005), being able to effectively seek help, the utilization of healthy ways to cope with stress (Blum, 1998), and being able to find meaning in traumatic experience (Antonovsky, 1979). While problem solving is, at least in part, a learnable skill, it is also dependent on access to resources that can address the problem. Furthermore, effective help seeking is also dependent on helpful others being recognizable and available. Problem solving and help seeking can be difficult for many gay men who might find resources or services do not meet their needs (Isacco, Yallum, & Chromik, 2011) or who have encountered significant homophobia or prejudice. Resilience is known to be helpful in managing the sorts of daily stress that might arise from occupying a marginal status (Ong, Bergeman, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006), but understanding how young gay men experience themselves as resilient is limited.

Caught within the complexities of growing up same-sex attracted, it is likely that resilience and vulnerability go hand in hand for young people as they negotiate their sexual difference. The dynamic nature of this process means that multiple transactions and interactions contribute to the development and strengthening (or conversely, the prohibition) of resilience. Resilience, then, can be thought about as an achievement of experience and learning (Hauser, Allen, & Golden, 2006). This experience is, however, constantly changing and being modified by socialization and context. The diversity of contexts within which resilience can feature means that different experiences offer new insights into what could be thought of as resilience for gay men.

Internalized homophobia is one consequence of growing up in an unsupportive or even hostile environment. It is broadly defined as the application of a society's homophobic attitudes toward the self (Meyer, 1995), resulting in negative self-appraisal and unease with homosexuality (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010). Internalized homophobia can persist, even in contexts where there is broad acceptance of sexual difference (Russell & Bohan, 2006), and the internalization of societal homophobic attitudes and messages can have damaging and far-reaching consequences for psychological and physical well-being (Moss, 2003), intimate relationship development (Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead, & Viggiano, 2011; Frost & Meyer, 2009), and risk-taking behaviour (DeLonga et al., 2011).

Given that threats continue to affect the social and psychological well-being of young people of sexual difference, it is important to further examine how resilience might assist us to understand more fully how young people of sexual difference experience their worlds, learn ways to manage internal and external stressors, and thrive in the face of adversity. As gay men, we have experienced our own share of threats to well-being and are aware that support is not always at hand. As clinicians (past and present) we have tried to step into the experiences of our

patients, and as scholars we are moved to creatively and accountably explore and surface the ongoing troubles associated with sexual difference. To this end, in the remainder of this article we present the story of Joseph, a participant in a study of the resilience experiences of same-sex-attracted young people. Joseph's story offers a different way for therapists and counsellors to think about resilience and how we may therapeutically engage clients' experiences.

NARRATIVE INQUIRY METHODOLOGY: EXPERIENCE AND STORY

Human beings are practiced storytellers. We tell stories to each other and we talk about the stories that we tell (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Ontologically, narrative inquirers consider story as the means by which human beings are present in the world: we live stories as well as tell them (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). People live as well as tell personal, social, and institutional stories that influence how self is composed in relation to our place, socialization, and the time in which the story is being lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Put more concisely, knowing is "locally, socially, and temporally situated" (Stauffer & Barrett, 2009, p. 22).

Within this frame, narrative inquirers view experience as the phenomenon of interest, or that which we study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) conceptualized a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space within which experience as phenomenon, as well as research practice itself, could be understood. Attention to the transactions that occur at the interface of self and social world, place, and time offer a narrative frame that permits the richness of experience to emerge and be explored. Narrative inquiry thus wakes us up to the intricacies of experience (Clandinin, 2009) and "make[s] visible the complexities of what we are trying to understand" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 325). As narrative inquiry "fleshes out" experience by attending to stories lived and told, it also allows multiple voices and meanings about phenomena to emerge (Stauffer & Barrett, 2009).

Although complexity can confound, it also creates possibilities: for identity, for psychotherapeutic practice, and for social change. Narrative inquiry as a practice of listening deeply permits different and alternative stories to shift our thinking about apparently familiar experiences and concepts (Estefan, 2008). At first glance, such an endeavour seems enticing: a new vision of an old, perhaps intractable, clinical "problem" with which we can work. Supporting Clandinin's (2007) assertion that stories reveal complexity, Bruner (2002) also cautions us to acknowledge that stories might be thought of as more helpful in finding problems, rather than solving them. So, as we listen deeply we hear more: more complexity, more richness, and more trouble. As we listen to diverse experiences, so we become more experienced about the experiences of "others."

As we acknowledged Bruner's (2002) caution about surfacing greater complexities and, in our case, social and individual problems, we set out to conduct a study that involved working with same-sex-attracted young people to hear their experiences in context, to show the richness inherent in a life lived on sometimes

mundane, but often dramatic and risky landscapes. The purpose of the research was to explore our participants' experiences, to find out what worked for this group of young men and women, how they got by in the face of different adversity, and to find a means to show that experience in ways that are useful for therapists and clinicians.

The Research Field and Its Features

Six young people between the ages of 21 and 27 participated in the research. Following approval from our local ethics board, the study was advertised through posters at the authors' university. The posters informed potential participants that the researchers were seeking to interview same-sex-attracted young men and women to explore their experiences of being same-sex attracted. All potential participants who inquired about the study were informed that the research would explore their experiences of managing and coping with some of the difficulties of same-sex attraction. No incentives were offered to participate in the study. Participants self-selected, based on criteria of being at least a second-year student, and not currently receiving any care or intervention for mental health problems. All participants met with the principal investigator to discuss the requirements for participation, and consent was gained from each participant. Four participants were men and 2 were women. Of the men, all identified as being gay, 1 woman identified as bisexual, and the other felt she could not place herself into a static identity category. For this study, self-identification as same-sex attracted was more important than identification as gay, bisexual, or transgender, since the literature suggests that even transient same-sex attraction confers risk for negative mental health outcomes (Skegg et al., 2003).

Each participant was individually interviewed and asked about experiences they felt were important in understanding their sexual difference. From this initial question, an open-ended, conversational style (Glover, 2003; Grace, Cavanagh, Ennis-Williams, & Wells, 2006) emerged. The openness of this first question meant that subsequent questions were different for each participant, and focused on their experience. The telling of stories was encouraged by the use of prompts such as "Can you tell me about a time when ..." as well as other questions that elicited information about people, places, and the "where and when" of particular events in the participants' experience (Clews & Newman, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 1993; Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000). Interviews lasted for an average of 90 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and were then compared to the audio recording for consistency. Each participant was given the opportunity to review their individual transcript and make any amendments or deletions they felt necessary.

Over the course of the following 5 months, the researchers and participants met as a group to explore the features of resilience (as we understood it at the time) in their current experiences. The groups began with questions that had arisen for us (the researchers) as we worked with participants' individual transcripts. Rather than ask questions about individual experiences, we asked

questions about the threads such as discrimination, coping, and relationships that were woven through the transcripts. As we expected, the participants told us stories of more than just resilience, and their stories spanned the gamut of their life experiences. The people and places of their pasts profoundly influenced their current experiences and they drew on their autobiography to highlight for us how they had become capable, adaptable, and resilient people. Participants spoke about their experience and understanding of what it meant to be resilient. As these experiences became central to our conversations, we found unique and shared stories of resilience. At times, participants identified where they felt resilient, at other times resilience, coping, and wisdom were located in the re-telling and re-storying of self that occurred in the group itself. We met in this way four times, each time composing resilience in more complex ways, unable to be separated from broader experience. The group dynamic was supportive, gently probing, and imbued with a genuine curiosity about each other's experiences. Each meeting was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, and also checked against the audio recording for consistency. The transformation of data into meaningful research text is an iterative, relational, and creative process. As we worked with the research data, interim research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) were negotiated and reviewed with participants. The interim research texts were the stories that participants had told, which we had compiled from their transcripts and our own conversations as researchers, about what participants' stories were telling us. The sharing that occurred in our later meetings helped us to clarify some of the ways that we, as same-sex-attracted men and women, were composing ourselves on diverse landscapes.

This process of conversation is important because, as narrative researchers, we are called upon to consider the notion that we are "in the parade we presume to study" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 86). As a result, we walk into our participants' stories as they are being lived. We never enter at a beginning point, and, similarly, we leave our participants in the midst of their experiences, living, telling, and re-telling their stories. Their experiences and stories intersect with our own. They modify our understanding of who and how we are in the world, and narrative research evokes this experience and process for the reader.

As such, the story that we tell is partial, never final, and certainly not definitive. Despite the incompleteness of any story, the story itself holds the power to captivate and to provide something for us to gather around (Gordon, McKibbin, Vasudevan, & Vinz, 2007). The purpose of narrative inquiry is not to offer objective representations of people's stories, but rather to find ways to develop relationships between people and their environments, the people, systems, and institutions that they contain (Dewey, 1981). As we, the researchers, attended to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, one particular story that was told by one participant struck us as surprising, powerful, and illuminating. This story was one of many that emerged over the course of the research through interview and group work with Joseph, but we choose to tell it here to illustrate the complexities of resilience that feature in his experience.

JOSEPH'S STORY

"I spend quite a bit of time thinking about how I want to describe myself. I guess I would say that I am gay, but then there are lots of terms for it. Recently, in a book, I was reading about how the term was sodomite. I often think that, Oh maybe I'm just a sodomite (laughingly), and all these other terms just obstruct the experience of it, you know? When I meet people, I use gay to describe myself because it just works. When I get to know people I will expand more on what that means for me, but for an introduction gay does just fine.

"By the time I was 16 I knew I was gay. I moved away from home so that I could explore my sexuality. The biggest hurdle was kissing a man. It just didn't feel normal for some reason. Once I got over the weirdness of it and the discomfort, then it felt normal, but it took time for me to break down the mysteries of homosexuality and become comfortable with it. When I was younger, I thought that maybe I was bisexual. I think like for many young guys it was a kind of compromise that wasn't as bad as being gay. But I reached a stage where I just thought I am gay and I should learn to fucking deal with it. At that point I remember letting out a deep breath ... I had made my decision. But then I remember sucking it all back in again, because I hadn't told anyone else.

"I came out to my sister first. I told her I was bisexual and then about three weeks later told her that I was fully gay. She told my dad, my mom, and my other sister. Not behind my back or anything, but just because it was so hard for me to. I was worried what my dad would think, that he would just see me as someone who gets off by being penetrated by hordes of men. My family was fine, though; they are fairly liberal and accepting. But the trouble was, I just saw myself as a sexual being. Within the gay community I only saw myself as a body and identified myself purely with this sexuality and my physicality. It was helpful in the sense that over time I developed a sexual personality and learned what I like and don't like. I remember acting a bit feminine in the beginning, just to get entry into that world, but now there has to be more than that. Now, I need it to be an emotional thing as well. I can't be satisfied any more with the idea that to be gay and successful you need good abs and a big cock. That thinking creates a schism for me and I had to create some sort of normalcy in my life.

"It has always been a bit difficult for me to fit into categories. I've just finished working three years in construction. It is like coming out of the closet again, because for a while there I had to go back in. I guess in my life I've gone through various periods of transformations but in the construction world, you can't be gay, you are straight, and that was definitely a weird experience because everything changes. For example, how you interact with other males, how you interact in social groups. It was like relearning how to dress, how to walk, talk, sit, you know? I was conscious of how I looked, my movements, what I said and I always sat in a closed posture. One big factor was how you talk about women. You have to overemphasize sex with women so you can fit in. I had to watch them and myself because any sort of effeminacy wasn't tolerated. They were quite misogynistic too and hated women in their own way.

“I came to construction through more of a spiritual than sexual crisis. I had been in university, had the dreadlocks, and was just floating through it. It didn’t feel right, and so I left to go backpacking and I worked in odd jobs here and there, but I was transient and not wanting to stay around anywhere too long. I started to look at myself and thought that I didn’t want to be this giant identity anymore; I didn’t want to think anymore. I just wanted to do a seven-to-five job and make a salary and be normal, and there’s nothing more normal than construction. It helped me to drop all these layers and return to myself in a more controlled manner.

“Working in construction I was able to act a different version of me. I was able to be one of the guys, and I did it so well that they promoted me and that was quite an achievement. So to get through that and come out of it with my head held high and them not wanting me to leave, made me feel good. Being there helped a lot with my sexuality. It helped me feel more confident as a man as opposed to thinking that because I was gay I wouldn’t really be a man. It also helped me to challenge some of the anti-straight male sentiment that I had picked up from socializing in the gay community. Working in construction I realized I was a strong, independent, critical thinking, intellectual man because that was projected onto me and in turn I projected it out. I fulfilled that role there, and I have taken that into my sexuality and I feel more comfortable now. It has been over a year now since I worked on the site and I couldn’t wait to get away from it and back into study, or something. I didn’t want to do it forever, and this year since has been a kind of process of reclaiming.

“The problem I had always had with homosexuality was the kind of dumbed-down materialist gay culture that we live in—*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and club scene—and I need to think about my sexuality more intellectually. I spend a lot of time thinking this stuff through! My boyfriend, for example, he’s pretty effeminate. We sometimes laugh that he’s two steps away from having a vagina! Not that I am the most masculine person in the world, but I am more masculine than he is. Because I see him as basically having a vagina, I wonder then how he sees me. It’s all about trying to understand my own sexuality. I look back in history and see the same sorts of struggles then as there are now. Historically they may have been class issues or broader social problems, but it’s the same thing now. There are young kids who are learning what it means to be gay, and just because we have those feelings doesn’t mean we have to be wearing pink in a club dancing to Cher.”

DISCUSSION: JOSEPH’S STORIED LANDSCAPE

Just as a story helps to give insight into experience, the telling of a story also enables us to compose and rewrite who we are (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006). Story is also useful in that it offers a means to convey experience that is marginal in ways that confront, challenge, and resist dominant or authoritative explanations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry as a way of researching with same-sex-attracted men and women is thus a useful approach that carries with it the potential to enable a shift in thinking or practice with a population

whose needs and interests remain marginal within mainstream mental health care provision.

As gay researchers, researching young same-sex-attracted men and women, we found that this story contained both expected and unexpected features for us. Listening to stories of discomfort with gay stereotypes, and working out where one fits in the space between stereotype, experience, and body practice is part of our familiar research landscape. Joseph voices this tension as a concern with what is normal in terms of appropriate gendered expression. It would be easy to read Joseph's statement about normalcy as discomfort with his identity and performance as gay. At the very least, it could be read as a judgement. It is through this notion of normalcy, though, that we open a portal into how he seeks to attain balance between the excesses of his early emergence into gay culture and his desire to know himself more fully. He went on to say: "It's a constant process of normalization, right? I'm always trying to put the sexuality thing in spaces of normality. Even when I've had sex that isn't that great, at least it now feels normal."

Recent research into the experiences of distress in same-sex-attracted young people suggests that one form of resilience is the development of the belief that there is a normalness or naturalness to same-sex orientation (Scourfield et al., 2008). Amidst the conflicting perspectives that young people are exposed to, the development of this belief is by no means certain. Joseph's arrival at the naturalness of his homosexuality was part of a process that he storied, where he required the experience of different places and people to enable him to place himself. Joseph's experience started to stand out to us as being a story that spoke strongly to how resilience is located in place, and that resilience might be thought about as a form of wisdom that can be accessed in different places.

Wisdom is commonly understood as the ability or result of an ability to think and act using knowledge, experience, understanding, common sense, and insight (Collins English Dictionary, 2012). Wisdom is also linked etymologically with the love of knowledge. Knowledge is something that is sought, and thus knowledge is implicated in a process of acquisition and integration. Joseph's story of the construction place is one in which his search for knowledge of self, of who he is and how he can be in the world, finds expression. Joseph's story is his experience, the understandings he pursues and reaches, and the insights he gains. Joseph's story reveals wisdom in the construction place, and the wisdom with which he connects is a pathway to resilience for him.

Resilience and Wisdom Sit in Places

The notion that place is significant in affording insights into resilience is one to which we are drawn as narrative inquirers and mental health practitioners. Our conceptions and understanding of the role place plays in composing self arise from the structure of place, as well as the cultural expectations that are linked to particular places (Basso, 1996). That is to say, it is not just about the material structure and conditions of the place, but what we expect (according

to custom and convention) to find there. Joseph expected to find the simplicity of regular, honest work in the construction site. Although he found this, he also encountered more than the job-role of performing construction work in this place. In Joseph's story, the construction place was a guide to action and knowing that contained some rules and suggestions for behaviour and conduct. The site also contained boundaries and parameters for being and doing (Hammers, 2009), which gave rise to options for Joseph to craft himself in a new way as a gay man.

The construction site is a key character in Joseph's story, precisely because of the options for identity that it created. Much of Joseph's struggle centred on his identity as a gendered individual, and social constructions of masculinity were important to him. In our social worlds, spaces are coded as male or female, heterosexual or homosexual (Hammers, 2009, p. 309). That is to say, place encourages particular gendered norms and expressions, without directly prescribing behaviour. To be a subject of space, then, is arguably one way in which same-sex-attracted men can be constructed as marginal, since many social places are coded as both masculine and heterosexual. Joseph's story helps us to imagine a different type of subjectivity, in which even the potentially unaffirming place offers up something that can be taken in to craft a different version of self.

The stories that people tell offer insights into the history (the when) and culture (the where, what, and how) in which they are located (Cohler, 1982, 2007; Hammack, 2008). Prior to his time in construction, Joseph had participated in his local gay community. He stories this as a connection primarily of bodies: his own and the bodies of others. It is a part of our culture to view gay men primarily in terms of their physicality. Gay men, like Joseph, experience pressure to conform to certain body ideals (Kane, 2009). Joseph was already storied to give primacy to his and others' bodies and he felt a discomfort with this. His sexual orientation was foregrounded through physical attributes and he found it hard to integrate this aspect of his sexual orientation with the rest of his experiences.

A narrative view of place requires attention to the topography, features, and boundaries of given places (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This practice helps us to displace the body (and individual mental health problems) as the fundamental point of interest, thus allowing a broader and more complex picture of experience to emerge onto the therapy landscape. Joseph's story speaks strongly to the boundaries that were placed around the construction site (heterosexual and masculinized) in comparison to the other (gay) places he occupied. His incorporation of place within his story offers a lens through which we can view his experience and resilience.

In previous research into young gay men and women's experiences of distress, participants spoke of a principal resilience strategy of finding safe places and people (Scourfield et al., 2008). Joseph did not do this. Instead, he went to a place that was not conventionally understood to be safe for someone of sexual difference. Through his engagement with this place and the men it contained, it became safer, and offered him unexpected guidance for composing himself. A construc-

tion site and the places where gay men meet and socialize are geographically and existentially different places. Despite the physical, existential, and performative boundaries around the construction place and the other gay spaces Joseph had occupied, there was a transfusion of wisdom for living that occurred between them. Joseph took the attributes of caution and a watchful approach from a diverse and fluctuating landscape into the smaller, more distilled context of the construction site. There, his caution and watchfulness, appropriate given the tension between his sexual orientation and the context, was transformed into something new—a sense of connection with masculinity that he sought.

Wisdom may indeed sit in places. If we accept this, then resilience—as wisdom’s companion—likely also sits in places. Although it is wise to learn the mores and conventions of a particular place in order to function there, this wisdom about how to be and what to do becomes a form of resilience. For Joseph, who was struggling to situate himself in the world as a gay man, this facet of resilience was found in the place of the construction site.

From this point in his story, Joseph frames his account of learning how to be a good gay man as simply learning how to be a better man. He is talking about the experience of coming to be comfortable with himself. What we can observe in Joseph’s story is the way that his use of the wisdom of the construction place enabled him to re-story himself as an integrated gay man with masculine attributes. This revision of Joseph’s experience was arrived at through the narrative inquiry, and offered Joseph, the other participants, and ourselves (the researchers) the opportunity to reflect on our own positions within our gendered and sexualized landscapes.

Discovering Masculinity as a Route to Wisdom and Resilience

Issues of gender and gender expression are not unfamiliar in the stories of same-sex-attracted people and their struggles. Although there are relationships between biological sex and gender, the former is a physical attribute while the latter is a social construction. While physical sexual characteristics tend to remain stable, gender is entirely more fluid and unstable. Masculinity or what is properly male behaviour is a prominent organizing plotline in Joseph’s story. Joseph relies on notions of masculinity to frame the various tensions he experiences between being gay and being a man. Connell (1995, 2009) uses the term *masculinities* to reflect the number of possible options of gender expression available for men. Joseph had been searching for a way to express himself as a masculine gay man, and his story speaks to how, through accessing the construction place, he was able to challenge his earlier “othering” of himself as being someone who contravened dominant discourses of masculinity (Goffman, 1973; McCann, Minichello, & Plummer, 2009).

Masculinity is a complex narrative that shapes the ways that men and women develop gendered attributes as well as live stories of gender, sexual identity, and desire (Connell, 1995, 2009). Adding to the complexity of this narrative, Joseph was intrigued by the version of masculinity he witnessed in this place, just as he

was also watchful and wary of it. Because the construction site version of masculinity existed in tension with his identity as a gay man, he felt that he had to perform, but as he performed he also appraised. Being able to comprehend what is present in a place is a form of wisdom that involves interpreting the mysteries of that place and experiencing it beyond its superficial offering (Bateson, 2000). Joseph witnessed misogyny and judgement. He also, however, alludes to the masculinity that he witnessed as being a performance. He said, "You have to overemphasize sex with women." Joseph realized that there were conventions about how the heterosexual men in this place were also constrained in the ways they could speak and act.

It is not difficult to see how failure to exhibit the traditional or hegemonic masculine codes that were operating in the construction place could lead to a sense of failure for Joseph. Perceived lack of masculine attributes or performance can lead young men to feel that they have not met cultural expectations (McAndrew & Warne, 2010). This is something that can be turned against the self, resulting in a kind of splitting that situates the "gay" part as the undesirable aspect, and the side that represents traditional masculine values as that which has worth (McAndrew & Warne, 2010). Although it might be fair to speculate that Joseph's experience results from not having accepted his sexuality, to stay here—interpretively and therapeutically—seems somewhat conventional and uninspired. Joseph's story reveals for us an entirely more dialectical position that challenges temptations to rest easy with a formulaic psychoanalytic interpretation. Rather than separating out two dimensions of his identity, Joseph actively works to compose them as united. In our research work together, he thought carefully about what each place meant to him, and how he saw himself crossing boundaries of place and interaction as he crafted a more sensitized awareness of his own sexual orientation and how it is integrated with other elements of his sense of who he is and who he wants to be in the world.

The stability of the patterns of representation of gay relationships in society and the popular media contribute to the uptake of gendered roles (Holz Ivory, Gibson, & Ivory, 2009). Dominant and pervasive social and institutional narratives of gender and sexuality norms require counter stories as resistance to hegemonies that construct gay men as "other." Joseph's story helps us to see how being a better man was intrinsically linked to a re-storying of himself as a better gay man. Joseph's story is one that evokes for us the strain that masculinity places on men to perform their gender appropriately and the ways that gay men compose themselves as men in a heterosexual society (Pascoe, 2007). There are tensions in Joseph's story because a surface reading of it suggests that he does little more than conform to notions of masculinity, which causes him some concerns about his gay identity. The story of being in construction, arising from a complex history of becoming, is also a form of wisdom that has helped Joseph to develop a story of self-in-time, in which he recognizes himself as being closer to the version of the gay man that he wants to be. Through attention to the narrative, this simultaneously becomes a form of resistance and a form of resilience.

Implications for Therapeutic Practice

As narrative inquirers, we are conscious of the interplay between place, time, and sociality. As mental health practitioners, we are sensitized to the need to engage fully with the experiences of clients. As we lived in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space with Joseph, we stopped thinking about his struggles, resiliencies, and coping. Instead, our attention became directed toward the ways that resilience *was* the whole experience that occurred in place, rather than a discreet part of Joseph's internal experience. Our narrative approach to resilience moves us away from viewing it as an attribute, or as an ability to activate a resource, and instead we are oriented to resilience as a partial and contingent quality of experience itself—deeply situated in and by place. Thinking about resilience in this way leads to shifts in how mental health practitioners might think about resilience experiences as they are lived in context.

This article evokes one voice and as such is a call to reflection on how we might work (or even how we have worked) therapeutically with people of sexual difference. Even in the presence of profound distress that is grounded in confusion about sexual orientation, therapists cannot address every aspect of self-concept that is intersected by issues of gender, sexual orientation, and body practice. If we are able to attend first to clients' experiences as they live and tell them, with greater attention paid to an exploration of the places where troubles and solutions arise, valuable insights may be generated and become something around which client and therapist can gather.

Although this may sound like a Rogerian utopia, our interests are both therapist-centred and client-centred. Stories of identity, such as the one told by Joseph, are one of the ways that we can gain information about the nexus of self and society (Hammack, 2008). This is an important agenda when working with people of sexual difference. Attending to story and experience in this way brings mental health practitioners out of the "half light" in which we sometimes work when addressing issues of sexual difference. That is to say, a narrative view, in which we understand experience as personal, social, and temporal, offers a broader view of the experiences that matter to clients. In addition, viewing experience this way is a means to stay alert to how the "lens" of sexual difference influences how clients interpret experiences.

A final important lesson we can extract from Joseph's story is that thinking narratively about his experience also allows us to tolerate the ambiguity it contains. Joseph says that working construction was a way of reclaiming his identity as a gay man, but this reclaiming is not the same as "going back to the way things were." Joseph's reclamation of his sexual identity is a re-storying of the type of man that he is, and the type of man that he wants to be. The gradual emergence of an open gay culture in western countries like Canada means that, over time, more identity options that "break the mould" will become available (Adam, 2006, p. 23). Despite more options for composing a gay identity, Joseph's story serves as a stark reminder to us that the freedom is accompanied by angst about the legiti-

macy of these identities. In the midst of his concerns about a balanced identity, Joseph found wisdom and momentum in the construction place, and this process of becoming is one to which professionals need to be attuned.

Being able to attend to acts of re-storying means cultivating a narrative sensitivity in practice. This involves the recognition that stories of self are sometimes messy, contradictory, and characterized by inconsistencies. Rather than being characteristic of the dysfunctions that accompany same-sex attraction, Joseph's story teaches us that messiness arises from "working through" challenges to living well. From his story we understand that that which is messy and inconsistent may also be resilient and wise. These are powerful notions for therapists as they open up possibilities for the therapeutic encounter. As we reflect on Joseph's story, we, as clinicians and researchers, see it as a gathering place for ourselves, our clients, and interested others to think about how we might more effectively engage with those who seek treatment. We see this story as another lens through which we can view the experiences of young men who are struggling to feel effective and resilient in their worlds.

Working with clients' stories offers us the chance to normalize experiences that have been challenging, difficult, and even painful. The capacity for story to "make ordinary" helps both clients and therapists to resist a foreclosed reading of experience, in which maladaptation, deviance, and pathology can seize the foreground. Joseph's story emphasizes that in order to achieve this we must remain cognizant that the unexpected parts of a client's story can be the most helpful in therapeutic working. Furthermore, stories of self are always open to amendment. These amendments are interpretive acts that offer further insights into experience; "truths" of experience are contestable and open to revision as we compose our identities on complex social and temporal landscapes.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The purpose of narrative inquiry is to listen deeply and evoke experience. It is important that stories are well told, evocative, and lifelike (Bruner, 1986; Fisher, 2002; Glover, 2003). Narrative inquiry is an exploratory and intimate way of research, and as such the researcher/participant dynamic influences what experiences are brought forth and how they are told. Even though this, combined with a small sample of participants, means narrative inquiry cannot be generalized in an objective sense, it is a way of researching and developing understandings that are generative. Narrative inquiry can develop connections between people and groups, and activate compassion and insights that might lead to action and eventual change. In the context of mental health care, it is important to develop narrative research findings that have relevance for practice (Dodge, Ospina, & Foldy, 2005). This research takes its place as part of the ongoing academic and clinical conversations about resilience and same-sex attraction. The practical value of this research is located in its ability to call us to a deeper reflection on the experiences of gay men, as well as on ideas that might be helpful in individual therapeutic

relationships. We acknowledge that further work that addresses the experiences of women is warranted.

CONCLUSION

Attending to human experience as a story that is lived and told helps therapists to gain a broad appreciation of the temporal, social, and situational dimensions that are germane to the therapeutic relationship we have with clients. To view the client through this narrative lens can be productive and challenging. As we see clients and their experiences differently, we are challenged to step into the client's story as it is lived and told on a diverse social, political, and emotional landscape. We do not stand outside of the client's story; we are a part of it. The ways that same-sex-attracted men and women compose their identities and live experiences of resilience may surprise us, seem strange, and stand outside of conventional explanations of what it means to be resilient. The notion of resilience arising from the wisdom that sits in places opens up possibilities for thinking differently about how same-sex-attracted clients find their way through difficult experiences. The idea that resilience might reside in the experience rather than as a personal attribute refocuses attention to the broader aspects of clients' lives that are sometimes lost to the immediacy of addressing personal distress. The client's narrative landscape is always changing, the story is always in process; for this reason, finding a way to become part of the client's story, albeit briefly, is a worthwhile and wholly appropriate therapeutic endeavour.

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Note

1 This account is taken and adapted from a reflective journal entry made after clinical supervision.

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