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Rethinking Sexual Initiation: Pathways to Identity Formation among Gay and Bisexual Mexican Male Youth

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Abstract

The topic of same-sex sexual initiation has generally remained understudied in the literature on sexual identity formation among sexual minority youth. This article analyzed the narratives of same-sex sexual initiation provided by 76 gay and bisexual Mexican immigrant men who participated in interviews for the *Trayectos* Study, an ethnographic study of sexuality and HIV risk. These participants were raised in a variety of locations throughout Mexico, where they also realized their same-sex attraction and initiated their sexual lives with men. We argue that Mexican male same-sex sexuality is characterized by three distinct patterns of sexual initiation-- one heavily-based on gender roles, one based on homosociality, and one based on object choice-- which inform the men's interpretations regarding sexual roles, partner preferences, and sexual behaviors. We analyzed the social factors and forms of cultural/sexual socialization that lead sexual minority youth specifically to each of these three patterns of sexual initiation. Our findings confirm the importance of studying same-sex sexual initiation as a topic in its own right, particularly as a tool to gain a greater understanding of the diversity of same-sex sexual experiences and sexual identities within and among ethnic/cultural groups.

Keywords

Homosexuality; sexual initiation; Latinos; Hispanics; Mexico; youth

INTRODUCTION

Sexual initiation is not a topic that figures prominently in the English-language academic literature about sexual minority youth. The focus has been instead on the broader topic of sexual identity formation, which subsumes discussion of youths' first experiences of same-sex sexual interaction into models of the so-called coming out process (Savin-Williams, 2005). In this article, we seek to demonstrate that studying male-male sexual initiation as a topic in its own right can be a productive endeavor. We base our analysis on data collected with men who self-identified as gay or bisexual and who were raised in Mexico, which allows us to demonstrate how distinct paths of sexual initiation and sexual identity formation among sexual minority youth may depend on the specific social and cultural contexts in which these youth grew up and became sexually socialized.

We pursue three specific goals. First, based on analysis of our empirical data, we emphasize the importance of identifying diverse patterns of lived experience in relation to sexual initiation within specific ethnic subgroups of sexual minority youth. Second, we question

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stereotypes about the manner in which male-male sexual initiations and interactions are organized in Mexico. Following the findings of early anthropological studies (Carrier, 1972, 1995; Taylor, 1978, 1986), the U.S. literature has tended to assume that only a heavily-gendered model of male homosexuality--the so-called *pasivo/activo* model--is available for Mexican men. Consistent with other recent research conducted in Mexico (Carrillo, 1999, 2002; Gallego Montes, 2007; Laguarda, 2005; List Reyes, 2005; Núñez Noriega, 1999; Teutle López, 2007), our findings question such an assumption. Third, we seek to illustrate the usefulness of studying sexual initiation among sexual minority youth as more than a stage in their process of sexual identity formation. Through detailed description of three distinct patterns of sexual initiation, we demonstrate the variety of interpretations of male-male sexuality that prevail in Mexico, which also point toward distinct forms of sexual socialization that are shaped, in part, by differences in social class and geography (urban vs. rural).

Male-Male Sexual Initiation and the Models of Sexual Identity Formation

Beginning in the 1970s, scholars developed several models of sexual identity formation among sexual minority youth. Those models have tended to assume that sexual minority youth go through a fairly standard sequence of developmental stages in the process of acquiring a sexual identity. Typically, the literature has depicted this progression as beginning with awareness of same-sex attraction and culminating with the youth accepting their identity as a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person; disclosing this identity to others; and participating in the activities of organized gay/lesbian/bisexual (GLB) communities (Cass, 1979, 1984; D'Augelli, 2002; Eliason, 1996; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Troiden, 1989).

Somewhere in between the beginning and the end of the identity formation process, and often as a second stage that follows the acquisition of awareness of same-sex sexual attraction, sexual minority youth have been assumed to experience for the first time same-sex sexual contact (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). (Some models do not take sexual activity into account, including the influential model developed by Cass [1979, 1984]). However, not everyone has agreed that this sequence of events is standard, noting that the assumed order in which the stages occur does not hold true for many sexual minority youth (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Furthermore, same-sex sexual activity (including both voluntary and coercive sexual encounters with other youth or adults) may provide youth the first inkling or recognition of their same-sex sexual attraction, and thus in some cases it may precede any previous full awareness of such attraction (Plummer, 1981).

Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) reported that four well-known studies conducted in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s (D'Augelli, 1998; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996) found similar average ages at which sexual minority youth gained awareness of their same-sex sexual attraction (9.6 to 10.8 years of age for males, and 10.1 to 11.1 years of age for females). The average age range for same-sex sexual initiation was slightly broader (13.1 to 14.9 for males and 14 to 15.9 for females). Savin-Williams and Diamond argued that the differences across these studies may reflect, in part, the demographics of each sample and how same-sex sex was defined in each study (whether in terms of intercourse only or more broadly including other practices such as fondling, kissing, or oral sex). But in all four studies, on average, sexual minority youth developed an awareness of same-sex sexual attraction before experiencing same-sex sexual activity for the first time.

Generally, the literature has reported that first same-sex sexual experiences usually occur during adolescence, most frequently in the early stages of the youths' sexual development. However, very little detail has been provided about how those first sexual encounters take

place, what behaviors are typically enacted (who does what to whom, sexually speaking), who are the youths' sexual partners, the nature of their relationships to them, what contexts or situations make the encounters possible, and what these encounters have meant for the individuals involved (exceptions are Savin-Williams [1998], Savin-Williams and Diamond [2000], and Bolding [2007]).

Such absence of detail is puzzling, particularly because the youth themselves may see these encounters as enormously significant, and also because these experiences of sexual initiation appear to be quite varied. Savin-Williams (1998) noted, "of all developmental milestones assessed, none varied as widely among the interviewed gay/bisexual youth as did the age of first same-sex experience" (p. 68), which in this study ranged from 5 to 25. He also detected considerable diversity in terms of the age of the sexual partners (5 to 45), the nature of the relationships (from best friends to complete strangers), how they met, who initiated the interaction, whether it was a one-time encounter or one that led to repeated sexual interactions, and the venues where the interaction occurred (ranging from "a public restroom or an adult theater" to "in one's bedroom with parents downstairs" [p. 68]). Sexual initiation also had a wide variety of meanings for the youth in this study, who interpreted their first same-sex sexual interactions as:

"fantastic," "erotic," "the best"; other times it was "horrible," "seedy," "devastating." Born of lust or disinterest, carefully orchestrated or a chance encounter, life-altering or forgettable, the first sexual act was perceived as diversely as having no effect on the youth's sexual orientation, as causing him to be gay, as reaffirming his heterosexuality, as constituting his sex education, as helping him disclose his homosexuality to others, and as confirming that which he already knew—his gayness or bisexuality. (p. 68)

Sexual Initiation, Diversity, and Difference

Such data not only indicate the importance of studying sexual initiation as a topic in its own right, but also raise questions about the factors that may influence variations of interpretation related to same-sex sexual initiation. Are the experiences different for those who grow up in large urban areas with visible lesbian and gay communities as opposed to those who grow up in smaller places? What roles do various forms of difference--related to class position, race/ethnicity, generation, and even cultural understandings of same-sex desire--play in how same-sex sexual initiation is experienced and interpreted? And how does social difference influence the practices that youth engage in, or the roles that they adopt, during these first same-sex sexual encounters? To date, however, due to a conspicuous lack of detailed investigation of sexual initiation in most studies of sexual minority youth, the U.S. literature generally has not revealed discernible patterns that would help explain variations among specific youth subgroups, especially in relation to cultural difference, ethnicity, and race.

In recent times, there has been a particular concern about how race and ethnicity may influence sexual minority youths' developmental paths (Agrognik, O'Donnell, San Doval, Duran, & Vargo, 2004; Eliason, 1996; Parks, Hughes, & Matthews, 2004; Rosario et al., 2001; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Some studies have reported differences among U.S. racial/ethnic groups, but they have also tended to attribute those differences to the largely untested perception that, compared to white youth, ethnic minority youth encounter more barriers because they are exposed to more negative attitudes about homosexuality in their communities of origin (Parks et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 1998). (Some point also to racism within primarily white gay/lesbian urban communities as another potential barrier [Rosario et al., 2004]). Few studies, however, have actually analyzed the

association between racial/ethnic-specific attitudes about homosexuality and sexual identity formation (Parks et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2004; Savin-Williams, 2005), and some have found instead that nonwhite ethnic groups are no more antigay than whites and may be even less so (Bonilla & Porter, 1990; Herek & González-Rivera, 2006). Thus, the perceived association between race/ethnicity and sexual identity formation, driven by the unexamined assumption that whites are more liberal and accepting of homosexuality than racial/ethnic minority groups, is speculative at best (Agrognik et al., 2004).

In order to adopt an openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity--the argument goes--racial/ethnic minority youth must first leave behind pervasive and deeply internalized negative cultural norms and values about homosexuality that they learned in their communities of origin. Although such an argument may be correct, the same need for distance is often prevalent among their white counterparts (Parks et al., 2004). In the literature, however, the path of sexual identity formation is assumed to be more treacherous for racial/ethnic-minority youth than for white youth, even when little empirical evidence has been collected that would lend validity to such a claim. As we will see, by focusing on the alternatives available to Mexican male sexual minority youth, our findings also question such an assumption.

METHOD

Participants

Data for this article were collected as part of the *Trayectos* Study, a large ethnographic research project that used qualitative methods to analyze the social and sexual contexts of HIV risk among self-identified gay and bisexual Mexican male immigrants in San Diego, California. The specific analysis presented here was based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with 76 participants who: (1) were age 18 or older, (2) were born and/or raised in Mexico,¹ (3) experienced same-sex sexual initiation in Mexico, (4) had migrated to the U.S. within the past 10 years, and (5) self-identified as gay/homosexual or bisexual and had had sex with men in the previous 6 months.

Most of the men in the sample (N = 68) self-identified as gay or homosexual as adults (as indicated by Carrillo 2002, the two labels of identity are often used interchangeably in Mexico), but a few (N = 5) thought of themselves as bisexual, and three simultaneously self-identified as transgender. The study did not recruit heterosexually-identified men who have sex with men, whose identities and lived experiences are considerably different from those of the self-identified gay and bisexual men in this sample. However, our participants often referred to sexual encounters involving those men.

Procedure

A team of four ethnographers, including the authors, conducted the interviews. These interviews consisted of an in-depth exploration of each participant's family background, sexual history, migration history, incorporation into San Diego's gay life, history of substance use (if any), preferred sexual practices and types of partners, history of HIV testing and current HIV status, perceptions of HIV risk, current life and social networks, and current and past sexual or romantic relationships, among other topics. The data for this article were elicited as participants talked about their sexual history, typically in response to the question "when did you start having sex?" At the end of the interview, participants

¹We included five participants of Mexican origin who were born in the U.S. but brought to Mexico by their parents or caretakers at an early age. These five remained in Mexico during childhood and returned to the U.S. as young adults.

completed a short exit survey that we used to collect basic demographic and behavioral information.

All interviews were digitally audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed using a detailed qualitative interpretive method. The core research team read and summarized all interview transcripts, discussed them as individual cases, and then created a comprehensive codebook. This codebook was developed and refined in sequential iterations in the early stages of the analysis. The bulk of the coding was then conducted by seven graduate students under the supervision of the ethnographic team. Throughout the coding process, we assessed and achieved a high level of inter-coder reliability (81% on average, calculated based on the number of times that all coders assigned the same codes to a selection of random pages of interview material previously coded by the researchers) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All codes were entered into a searchable database using the qualitative software program QSR N6.0. The results presented here resulted from searches of codes related to sexual initiation. After identifying patterns within the coded text on this topic, we selected passages to illustrate the most relevant themes (as well as to represent variations in lived experience according to the various themes detected), and we recontextualized those passages in order to consider them within each broader individual case.

RESULTS

Three Distinct Patterns of Male-Male Sexual Initiation

All 76 of the participants in this analysis had been initiated into male-male sex by the time of their adolescence or early adulthood. We identified three primary patterns of male-male sexual initiation, which we have labeled as gender-role sexual initiation, homosocial sexual initiation, and object-choice sexual initiation. The emergence of clear patterns of reported lived experience and of interpretation among the men in our sample point to commonalities among them, but also to forms of difference that were linked to the various specific contexts and situations in which they were socialized and initiated into same-sex sex. Such patterns suggest diversity in homosexual experience in Mexico that was connected to geographical location, social class position, and generation, among other factors.

Although these three patterns were fairly distinct, we do not see them as mutually exclusive (Carrillo, 2002; Núñez Noriega, 2007). In fact, we also found that, in many cases, the experiences of sexual initiation among the men in our study involved a combination of two of these three patterns, where a youth simultaneously engaged in different types of sexual interaction with different partners during the very early stages of his sexual life. In the sections that follow, we discuss each of the three patterns.

Gender Role Sexual Initiation—Sexual initiations that involved the performance of sharply differentiated gender roles (“male” or “female,” according to the participants’ own interpretations) constituted an important pattern in our study. Participants whose male-male sexual initiations conformed to this pattern commonly began their sexual life performing so-called receptive (as opposed to insertive) gender roles, either by being anally penetrated by a sex partner or giving oral sex to a sex partner. This role is also labeled *pasivo* (Carrier, 1995; Carrillo, 2002). When their initiation took place during childhood or early adolescence, participants described their sex partners as boys or adult men who performed the insertive role during anal sex, and who rarely kissed them, performed oral sex on them, or touched their genitals. These adult sexual partners included relatives, mostly male cousins or uncles. As we will see, sometimes the sex in these early stages was forced or non-consensual.

As indicated in Table I, over half ($n = 46$) of the 76 participants in our analysis began their sexual life practicing gender-role sexualities with partners who took an insertive role during

sex. Half of these 46 men exclusively engaged in gender-role sexual encounters in the early stages of their sexual life. The other half also participated in sexual encounters with other partners who were willing to reciprocate in terms of gender roles (i.e., in situations that were much less gendered in terms of sexual positioning), within what we call homosocial or object - choice sex (which we describe below).

It is important to note that the participants in this pattern typically did not identify as gay at the time of their sexual initiation with men and during the early years of their sexual life. In fact, many felt estranged and isolated due to their sexual attraction to men. Several indicated that others labeled them as *maricones*, *jotos*, or *putos*, derogatory terms that suggest that they were perceived by others as effeminate and as belonging to a socially-stigmatized group. Some also perceived that being labeled in this manner gave local men in their neighborhoods or towns the “green light” to solicit receptive sex from them or even to force them sexually.

An important additional emic term that emerged from our qualitative analysis, and which has been noted in other research in Mexico (Carrier, 1995; Carrillo, 2002; Prieur, 1998), was the term *mayate* (believed to be associated to the indigenous name for a dung beetle), which these men often used to refer to their sexual partners (see Prieur [1998]). (We understand that other Latino populations use the word *mayate* to refer to African Americans in a derogatory way; this is not the use here.) The following passage by Emilio,² a 24-year-old man born circa 1980 in a small town near Puerto Vallarta in the state of Jalisco, illustrated the use of this term:

Mayates are supposedly *straight* [in English in the original] guys...who like to have sex with homosexuals. They don't really like to suck [perform oral sex]...they like only to get sucked. And when you finish sucking them off, they *bend you over* [in English in the original] and they want to stick it in.

Emilio's use of the phrase “they bend you over” was significant; it represented a perception that heterosexually-identified Mexican men who seek to have sex with youth or men whom they perceive as effeminate establish strict rules of sexual interaction. Such strict rules seemed to be used to convey that these men were merely seeking sexual pleasure and that the sexual encounter involved no romantic feelings or sexual attraction toward their partners.

Emilio, who had his first sexual experience at age 12 with a young *mayate* from a nearby town, explained:

My first [sexual encounter] was when I gave a *blow job* [in English in the original] to a guy from outside my town. [He came] to the town's fiestas, which take place on April 25. I clearly remember. We left the party and it was my first experience. He took me to his pickup truck and he made me suck him off. I sucked him off and the guy came, that was all....[He was a] very attractive guy. He was around 18 years old.

Emilio reported that this sexual partner told him that he was very attracted to him, and also wanted to kiss him all the time, which to some degree contradicted Emilio's own sense of what *mayates* were willing to do sexually. Indeed, other participants in our study also reported that their heterosexually-identified, masculine partners sometimes asked to be anally penetrated. For instance, Ezequiel, a 33-year-old (born 1970) who, like Emilio, was from a small town in the same region, talked about having *mayate* sexual partners who in the moment of sex would ask to give him oral sex or the *beso negro* (“the black kiss,” a reference to anilingus, commonly referred to as “rimming”), and also asked to be anally

²All participants' names are pseudonyms. Unless otherwise indicated, passages were translated from Spanish.

penetrated, which greatly surprised him. Also surprising to him was the discovery that having these masculine partners perform what he saw as his own role greatly aroused him.

Nonetheless, a sense of the strict lines that defined male and female roles within these sexual encounters had considerable staying power. Another participant, Gerardo, a 32-year-old man born in 1971 in Aguascalientes, explained in great detail some of the definitional boundaries of *mayate* practices and meanings:

They don't touch you. As I say, for them it is "stand there and here it goes." Or they say "give me oral sex." That's it. But they don't touch you, you can't kiss them, you only touch their penis. That is Mexican men's mentality. That's why there is a phrase that may sound funny to you: "In times of war any hole is a trench" (*En tiempos de guerra cualquier hoyo es trinchera*). Do you get it? There is another: "*Hoyo aunque sea de pollo*" (Any hole is good, even if it's a chicken's). Those are Mexican phrases. These men are married, have families and all. But they have this mentality. I don't know; they don't care. If they want sex, they just tell you, "You like it, right?" It's that easy.

Gerardo's male-male sexual initiation, at age 14, involved mutual masturbation with a cousin who was five years older and who had taught him how to masturbate. In spite of the age difference, the encounter did not seem to involve heavily gendered male/female roles. Soon after, however, Gerardo was pursued by a co-worker while cleaning a bathroom of an office building (he was working as a janitor while also attending junior high school). This man claimed that he had heard that Gerardo liked to have sex with men, and requested anal sex:

We were cleaning the bathrooms and he said to me "What's up?" [*¿Qué onda?*]. I said "What's up with what?" And he showed me [his penis, and said] "I was told that you like it," which didn't surprise me because everything is known in the neighborhood....And he said "If you want, we can do it." "We do what?" I said. "I will give it to you." And I said "No, why not the other way?" He says: "No, because I am the man." [And I responded] "And what am I?" He said, "You can take it." I said, "I won't." So we tried to do it, but we couldn't. In the end, he convinced me, but it was too painful.

Later in life, Gerardo joined the army, where he continued to be pursued for sex by heterosexually-identified men.

Ezequiel, whom we mentioned before, distinguished between *hombres* (men) and *jotos* and referred to *mayates* as "men who like *jotos*." In his case, his male-male sexual initiation took place at age 7 with a 13-year-old boy in the context of childhood games (the boy asked him if he wanted to play "making love"). As a teenager, however, he began to interact sexually with other boys his age whom he called "*mayatillos*," with the diminutive term indicating that they were masculine boys. By then, he had developed a reputation as *joto* and had embraced an effeminate style. Yet, he also played soccer and other sports. His interest in soccer puzzled the other boys, who would tell him "How can you be *joto* and like soccer?" Playing soccer not only helped him maintain a reputation as a regular boy--as "one of the guys"--but also facilitated sex with other teenage boys. Ezequiel said:

My favorite thing was to go to the beach to play soccer with my friends. The last one who stayed...with that one [I had sex]. That was the plan that we all had. We would go to the beach. We would be around 15. We would finish the game and everyone would say "Let's go." And I would say "Not me, I will stay for a while." And I would swim along the shore, about half a kilometer, and I would come back

to see who was the last one to stay. When I came back, one would still be there, waiting, and with him I stayed [and had sex]. That was the business.

Ezequiel's remarks also points to the exchange of sex for money or gifts that some Mexicans reported in relation to sex between so-called *jotos* and *mayates*. He explained that, in his town, it was customary for the *jotos* to buy gifts for their masculine sexual partners, including clothing and shoes, which the *mayates* sometimes openly requested with the excuse of having a party to attend.

Although some study participants defined their sexual relationships with *mayates* as strictly based on monetary transactions, Ezequiel's experiences represented a broader understanding in Mexico of the term *mayate*. In this prevalent view, *mayates* were perceived to be heterosexually-identified masculine men, who have girlfriends or are married to women, and who also have consensual sex with *jotos*, whom they meet in public places or local bars.

Sometimes strong and lasting emotional bonds were established between a *mayate* and a *joto*. Moreover, we found that these emotional bonds sometimes were sustained by the *mayate*'s expectation of receiving gifts and favors from his *joto* partner. One example was offered by Octavio, a 27-year-old Mexican man born in 1977 in Mexico City. In talking about his attraction at an early age to other boys, Octavio described falling in love with a young man in the context of a relationship that could be characterized as involving sexual abuse (although Octavio did not interpret it as such):

When I was around 8 years old, 9 years old, a young man [*un muchacho*] started talking to me, started seducing me, we could say, until I had my first relationship with him. He was around 18 years old, 17. And I was in primary school, perhaps around 8 or 9 years old. But I was really attracted to this person. I loved him... maybe I still do, although I haven't seen him in many years. It's been about 12 years since I last saw this person. But the time I spent with this person was very nice....When I had my first relationship with him I don't feel it was rape or something that made me a deviant. I feel I was a deviant from the beginning, I mean, I was homosexual from birth....I always loved him. I was very attracted to him. Although I had sex with other people while I was with him.

Nonetheless, some sexual initiations that involved gender-role sexualities were characterized by severe abuse and power asymmetries between the study participant and his "male-role" sex partner. Although such power asymmetries typically seemed based on age difference, in some cases an adolescent's effeminacy simply triggered abuse by other youth. In the following example, Prado, a 31-year-old Mexican man born in 1972 in a small city in Sonora, presented an interesting case in which he was harassed by other boys in school because of his effeminate mannerisms, but he sought and obtained protection from an older masculine boy in exchange for oral sex. In describing how he responded to being called names by other boys, he said:

I would turn a blind eye. The other boy, who hung out with me, would defend me however he could. Then there was a guy who was two grades above mine. He approached me one day and told me he knew I was *joto*. He said, "If you want to touch me there [the penis] and do some things to meI will prevent them from hitting you." And I said yes, and they [the boys who teased him] stopped somewhat.

About one fourth ($n = 11$) of the 46 participants with gender-role sexual initiations in our study reported coercive, abusive, or forced early sex with older youth or men. Often the sexual partner would spread the word among his brothers and friends that this effeminate

youth was sexually available. Such was the case of Plutarco, a 29-year-old Mexican man born in 1975 in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca, who narrates his traumatic childhood sexual life:

At age 4, I started being abused by a neighbor who was around 12. At first it was him, and then it was also his brothers, and then his friends, and it was a chain. And he forced me to do it. This person would threaten me: [He said] if I didn't have sex with him he would hurt me or my family. I was so small and I was fearful of talking. I never told my parents or my siblings what was happening.

In some cases, the abusive men were the participant's own relatives, most typically his cousins or uncles, but occasionally his older brothers. For instance, Hilario, a 38-year-old Mexican man born in 1965 in Guanajuato, said that he was sexually abused by one of his uncles:

I don't remember how it all started. But I remember that I slept in the same bed with him, and sometimes he wanted...he kissed me and made me give him oral sex. I don't remember if he penetrated me at that age. But later, when I was around 10 years old, I remember there was penetration...I was ashamed of telling anyone what was happening. I could not tell or trust anyone. I had no one...

Finally, the sexual initiation of three participants in our study who, in addition to self-identifying as gay or homosexual, also referred to themselves as transgender or transsexual, also conformed to these gender-role sexualities. In contrast to others in this heavily gendered pattern of sexual initiation, these three participants reported feeling very feminine or not masculine since early in their lives. Moreover, they also expressed an exclusive sexual and emotional attraction to heterosexually-identified men. Their experiences are illustrated by that of Ulises, a 43-year-old born in 1959 in a small town in the state of Veracruz. Ulises described her first sexual relation as "something quite romantic." (Ulises simultaneously referred to herself with feminine pronouns and with her original male name; for that reason, we have given her a male pseudonym.) She added:

I wanted to have a boyfriend...I had sexual relations with him when I was in the first year of high school. I was late. I am surprised many people say [they were sexually initiated] at age 8 or 10. But I was a virgin until age 17....He went to a party, we liked each other....When I went to parties I dressed as a woman.

Later in the interview, Ulises clarified:

I am transgender but, you know, I like *hombres derechos* (straight men), as one says in Mexico. Here they say *straight* [in English in the original]. I only have sex with straight men. I was never attracted to homosexual types, to declared homosexuals....I like masculinity. The man I am with now is straight. Well he is bisexual as a result of being with me, but I don't consider him [bisexual]. He doesn't like men, he only likes women.

Homosocial Sexual Initiation—Homosocial sexual initiations were quite different from those that involved strong gender-role differentiation. Similarly to Gagnon and Simon (1973), we use the term homosociality to convey contexts of sexual initiation where sexual identities have not coalesced (and, in our case, where strict gender roles did not centrally guide the sexual interaction). Savin-Williams (2005) used the term "sex play" to convey a similar idea. Mexican youth whose male-male sexual initiations conformed to the homosocial pattern experienced early male-male sex in contexts that were much more reciprocal. Often these youth engaged in sexual games involving mutual masturbation and exploration in social interactions with other adolescents within male-bonding groups. In contrast to the men who reported gender-role sexual initiations, these participants thought of themselves and their partners as masculine, and assessments of masculinity and femininity

did not play a considerable role in determining who did what sexually during the sexual encounters. As a result, these youth and their sexual partners showed much more freedom to touch and kiss each other, and sometimes even to mutually give and receive oral sex or to penetrate and be penetrated during anal sex. Furthermore, at the time of sexual initiation they did not think of themselves or their sexual partners as different from other “regular” (meaning masculine) boys or men, which makes this pattern distinct from the object-choice pattern that we describe in the section that follows.

Half ($n = 38$) of the 76 participants considered in this analysis initiated their sexual life exchanging homosocial sex with other boys in their age group. Of those, a third ($n = 13$) exclusively practiced homosocial sex; the rest practiced homosocial sex with some partners, but also had early sexual encounters that involved gender roles ($n = 22$) or, alternatively, that could be called object-choice based or “gay sex” with gay-identified partners ($n = 3$). However, participants whose sexual initiations involved homosocial sexual interactions generally had not yet assumed a gay, homosexual, or bisexual identity during these early stages of their sexual lives. Furthermore, these participants reported that several of the sexual partners with whom they engaged in homosocial sexual explorations eventually became heterosexual adult men. In short, homosocial sexual initiations generally involved sexual interactions between masculine adolescent male friends who engaged in mutual sexual exploration.

Our participants reported two main types of homosocial sexual initiations: one-on-one sexual interactions with another youth and group masturbation. One example of the first pattern was offered by Raimundo, a 36-year-old Mexican man born in 1967 in Navojoa, Sonora, who participated in homosocial exchanges with pre-adolescent friends. Referring to those sexual contacts, he said:

I always had them, with my friends. They must've been neighbors or people from my school...Always with games, playing doctor, this and that. We touched each other. We pulled down our pants and touched each other's buttocks or our parts [genitals]. But there was no penetration. That didn't happen....Later I had a friend [another youth, at age 12] and he started with games, hugging me like this, and if we played hide and seek, he would hide with me to touch me. It was a game he played. Then we started masturbating together; he masturbated me and I masturbated him. That's how I started exploring my sexuality, with him. It was little by little.

In a second example of one-on-one homosocial sexual initiation, Fausto, a 32-year-old man born in 1971 in Obregón, Sonora, described his early consensual, reciprocal sexual interactions with his cousins:

It was at night and...I just remember some details....I gave my cousin oral sex, and he gave it to me. I enjoyed it more when he did it to me than when I did it to him. And I don't remember more sexual contacts until [later when] I had a relationship with my cousin [a different one], more emotional....Some [of these cousins] have married [women]....After the wedding of one of them--the one I was in love with when I was younger--I met his [male] partner...and this partner is 100% homosexual, *activo*, you could say.

In this passage, Fausto alluded to the fact that at least one of his married cousins continued to have homosexual sex as an adult.

The second pattern of homosocial sexual initiation involved group masturbation. Our participants reported a variety of situations in which this practice took place (e.g. when friends masturbated in front of each other with heterosexual pornography [films or

magazines], or when friends challenged each other about who could ejaculate farthest or in the shortest time). In one example, Crispín, a 23-year-old man born in 1980 in Mexico City described the following interaction that took place when he was 13 years old:

There was a vacant lot and everything started with a group of about four friends. They started saying that they were going to masturbate, to see who could finish fastest. One said “I can finish in three minutes!”....There I realized that I liked men because one was older than all of them. He was around 27 years old. Being older, clearly he had a larger thing [penis]....They all started pulling out their penises and masturbating...I was watching and I also tried it but I didn’t exactly do it. They started all doing it as a joke, and playing, but they [definitely] started masturbating, as part of the game. And I was watching to see who would finish fastest. And the oldest one was the one who finished fastest, perhaps because he was older.

In these group practices, youth did not necessarily touch each other. However, our participants reported that sometimes two or more boys would stay behind and then they would indeed touch each other sexually.

What made these homosocial sexual initiations different from the gender-role pattern that we described in the previous section was the absence of a strong sense of male/female roles, as well as the assumption among sexual partners that the encounters should be reciprocal. This means also that there were fewer power differentials between sexual partners. In fact, in these encounters participants’ sexual partners typically were around their own age. Furthermore, all those involved were willing to experiment with different sexual roles, and the encounters usually were consensual, including those that involved sexual encounters with relatives (mainly cousins).

Object Choice Sexual Initiation—The third pattern of sexual initiation that Mexican-raised participants reported in our study involved sexual initiations that took place in the context of Mexican gay male communities, among youth who already had come to believe that what makes a man gay or homosexual is his sexual attraction toward men (or that what makes him bisexual is a sexual attraction to both men and women) regardless of his masculinity or femininity or his preferred sexual roles. Such an understanding reflected the fact that in Mexican gay communities, like in similar communities in other places, many men have adopted interpretations of male homosexuality and bisexuality that emphasize object choice over gender roles (Carrillo, 2002). This means also that in these sexual initiations, participants tended to de-emphasize the relational dynamics that characterize heavily-gendered relationships and sexual interactions such as the ones that we described earlier. We refer to these initiations with the label “object choice” precisely to decouple male-male desire from gender roles. Furthermore, in contrast to the homosocial initiations that we presented above, the sexual encounters in these initiations explicitly linked same-sex sexual desire with understandings of male homosexuality or bisexuality.

Almost a quarter ($N = 18$) of the 76 Mexican-raised participants in our sample initiated their sex life as a result of meeting other men in venues or spaces in Mexico where self-identified gay men socialize or seek sex with other men and where object-choice interpretations of male homosexuality were prevalent. The list of spaces reported included gay bars and dance clubs, but also urban underground gay-identified public sex environments where gay and non-gay identified men may meet, including certain parks and streets. Some men had accessed gay social networks, where they had already begun to interact socially and sexually with self-identified gays, or had discovered gay spaces by themselves or were introduced to them by someone they knew. Among the 18 men in this category, 13 exclusively participated in object-choice initiations. That only 18 participants were sexually initiated in this manner also underscores that most men in our sample ($n = 58$) had already experienced

sex within gender-role or homosocial contexts before they began to participate in sex between men that involved object-choice interpretations and adopted a gay/homosexual or bisexual identity.

The sexual initiations of some of these youth involved sexual encounters with adult gay men. However, in contrast to gender-role sexual initiations, participants who reported being initiated by an adult gay man in sexual encounters based on object choice never followed strict gender roles. These youth interpreted their early sexual encounters as typically consensual and characterized by reciprocity. Both partners engaged in caresses and kissing, for example, and when anal intercourse took place the encounters involved versatility in the enactment of receptive/insertive roles (which suggests fewer prescribed roles based on power differentials created by gender ideologies). None of our study participants in this group was sexually initiated by a relative.

In one example of this type of sexual initiation, Marcelo, a 34-year-old man born in 1970 in Mexico City, first encountered the world of gay male sex in Mexico City's public transportation in the 1980s, when a man glanced at him and touched his leg in the back of a bus. This event, which seemed to provide him a sexual awakening, led him to seek erotic interactions with men in other public transportation venues, including the Mexico City subway. His experience was consistent with the findings by List Reyes (2005), who described the Mexico City subway as a site that working class self-identified gay men have deliberately appropriated for cruising and meeting each other. Marcelo discovered the "*puntos claves de ligue*" (key cruising points) in the subway system, which in turn led him to discover other spaces of underground cruising and sex between men. Marcelo said that at that time there was not, as he put it, "the great liberty" to be openly gay that now exists in Mexican cities. He continued:

...ours was a city of clandestine things. During that time, my favorite place to cruise [men] was the Metro [the subway], with all the risks that that involved. In the Metro, I began to meet people, with whom I of course sometimes had sexual encounters, and others that I only spoke with. In fact, I met my first [gay] friends there, my first group of [gay] friends.

Through those initial gay friends, he learned about other places in the city where underground sex between men took place (including specific steam baths and some movie theaters). Soon after, through involvement in leftist political organizing in his high school, one of his classmates, who Marcelo thinks figured out he was gay, told him about gay political groups in Mexico City. At that point, Marcelo became involved in gay political organizing, started attending gay bars and dance clubs, and his social and work life began to gravitate around gay people. Marcelo described this transition in his life as his entry into the "gay ghetto" in Mexico City.

Similarly, Edwin, a 28 year-old man born in Mexico City circa 1975, had sexual intercourse for the first time with his first gay boyfriend within what he described as a love relationship that lasted 18 months. He was 19 years old, and his boyfriend was about the same age. Previously, around age 11, Edwin had participated in some sexual talk with a pair of brothers who were his neighbors, but he never had any sexual interaction with them (in other words, he did not participate in a homosocial initiation). At that age, he was already aware of his sexual attraction to boys, which he had realized earlier when he had become infatuated with a neighborhood youth. At age 14, he met a young gay man (in his twenties) on a bus returning from Acapulco, and this man introduced him to his gay and lesbian group of friends. Edwin began attending gay bars and gay parties. Around the same time, he disclosed to his parents that he was gay.

When he had sexual intercourse for the first time, Edwin says, “I was aware of what was going to happen. I knew that there would be intercourse, and oral sex--that there would be kissing, everything.” He explains that he had learned about sex from his mother, who was very open, and that his knowledge about sexual interaction always surprised his school teachers. Edwin added, “...when it happened for the first time, he [his boyfriend] made love to me. I was the person that he penetrated.” This first experience of anal sex made him bleed for several days, which worried him. “I talked with one of my sisters, and she told me that he had hurt me [during intercourse], that my rectum was not made for those things. I understood, and I healed.”

In another example, Rogelio, a 36-year-old man who was born in Mexico City in 1969 and who grew up in Tijuana, left his family home at age 12 and moved in with a group of young gay men, who ultimately introduced him to gay life in Tijuana. In his new household, he shared a bed with one of his roommates, who was 18 years old, and he had his first sexual experience with this young man: “I didn’t feel bad. On the contrary, it gave me pleasure. I felt really good. I am *pasivo*. That is, *pasivos* are the persons who are the receptive partner.” In this case, although Rogelio referred to his role as the receptive partner, nothing in his description made reference to ideas about masculinity or femininity. Through his roommates, Rogelio was able to discover an urban gay lifestyle in Tijuana.

Finally, Domingo, a 27-year-old man raised in León, Guanajuato (born 1975 in Los Angeles; grew up in Mexico since age 5), was sexually initiated by a friend of his father when he turned 18 years old. This man told him, “‘you know what...now that you are 18 it is time to talk.’ ‘What about?’ He said, ‘I want to take you out to dinner to celebrate your birthday.’” This man had been quite attentive toward Domingo in previous years:

Between age 12 and 17, he invited me to the [athletic] club, to eat out, to be part of a volleyball team, a basketball team, and to hang out with his group at the club....I noticed he treated me differently than he treated the other guys. But he never disrespected me...he only liked me and he showed me that he had a lot of affection toward me.

It appears that this man was infatuated with Domingo, but he did not make any sexual advances until Domingo reached the age of consent for homosexual relations in Mexico. After that birthday celebration, during which both became somewhat drunk, the man took him to a motel, where he expressed his desire to be in a relationship with him. They had sex that night, and in this first sexual encounter Domingo discovered reciprocal gay sex, including kisses and caresses. However, they did not have anal intercourse.

Their relationship lasted six years. His sexual partner, who was “in the closet,” as Domingo put it, told Domingo that he had known men who, upon entering the gay world, had become very effeminate. He advised him to be careful about maintaining his masculinity and told him he should consider eventually becoming involved with a woman. These suggestions represent strategies meant to help Domingo protect his reputation, even if he decided to acquire a gay identity.

DISCUSSION

Sexual Initiation and the Diversity of Male-Male Sexual Experience in Mexico

The presence of these three patterns demonstrates that, from the time of their male-male sexual initiation, the experiences of same-sex sexual encounters were quite varied among Mexican gay- and bisexually-identified men in our study. Although gender-role sexual initiations were prominent, for a considerable number of participants those were concurrent with homosocial or object-choice initiations. Our findings question the commonly held view

in the U.S. that only a heavily-gendered style of male homosexuality is available to men of Mexican origin, and provide additional evidence that Mexican men's experiences of same-sex sexuality were much more diverse than the U.S. literature has been willing to recognize.

One potential limitation is that our research was conducted with adult men who, while relating their sexual life histories, were asked to talk about their recollections of their same-sex sexual initiation and subsequent same-sex sexual trajectories. Although for some men (particularly the younger ones in the study) the events were recent--in one case, the participant's sexual initiation had occurred merely a year before the interview--for others, the distance in time between the interviews and the events being reported was several years or even decades. We are aware of the critique of studies that rely on adults' recollection of events that took place during adolescence (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1998). This may be an unavoidable limitation of studies of same-sex sexual initiation due to the methodological and human subjects issues that would be raised by any attempt to study longitudinally sexual attraction and sexual initiation in cohorts of children who, based on what the existing literature has found, might need to be as young as four years old at the time of recruitment.³ Thus, we do not claim that the data reported here accurately represent the actual events that surrounded these men's same-sex sexual initiations. Rather, these are their adult recollections of those events, which may be influenced by the men's subsequent life experiences and by reinterpretations of the past that allow events to make sense within each man's understanding of his sexual story and view of his current life. Nonetheless, these data provide a window through which we can observe the meanings that early same-sex sexual encounters have acquired in these men's current lives.

The reliability of our findings is further suggested by their concordance with the existing literature on male homosexualities in Mexico. The men in our study were immigrants, but their experiences of same-sex sexual initiation in Mexico were essentially similar to those of their counterparts who remained in the country, as reported in recent studies of male-male sexual desires conducted in Mexico (Carrillo, 1999, 2002; Gallego Montes, 2007; Laguarda, 2005; List Reyes, 2005; Núñez Noriega, 1999). A study in Guadalajara by Carrillo (2002) found a considerable co-existence of gender-based and object-choice forms of interpretation of same-sex practices in the accounts offered by men and women with various sexual preferences (homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual). Carrillo (2002) concluded that the simultaneous use of various forms of interpretation has led to the presence of a number of hybrid forms of sexual categorization, which he labeled sexual hybridity, and which in our analysis was further confirmed by the co-existence of gendered, homosocial, and object-choice male-male sexual initiations.

Similarly, in a study conducted during the early 1990s in Northern Mexico, Núñez Noriega (1999) highlighted the central role that homosociality played in the organization of male-male sex among Mexican men. Núñez Noriega (1999, 2007) offered a critique of the use of Western models of gay identity in characterizing Mexican male homosexualities, but also questioned the notion that only a so-called traditional, heavily-gendered male homosexuality exists in Mexico. He instead emphasized homoeroticism as an overarching concept that attempts to encapsulate all forms of male-male desire present in Mexico.⁴ But diversity of experience nonetheless was evident in his findings as well.

³Similarly to Savin-Williams (1998), we actively sought to facilitate a more accurate recall of early-life events by including extensive probing about what happened during the event, the situation, the persons involved, and the participants' feelings after the event took place. We also took steps to minimize the effects of constructions that occur in the dialogue between participant and interviewer by avoiding leading questions and carefully noting moments in the interview transcripts in which social desirability may have influenced the answers.

⁴On homoeroticism, as a conceptual tool for understanding same-sex male experiences in Latin America, see also the work by Freire Costa (1992, 1995)

List Reyes (2005) mapped out contemporary male gay identities that have been organized in Mexico City, as well as the diversity of options for socialization and self-identification that are now available to gay men in the Mexican capital. Gallego Montes (2007), based on a survey with a convenience sample of 250 men (most of whom self-identified as *gay* or *homosexual*) recruited in Mexico City, found quite varied accounts in terms of these men's sexual biographies and relational histories. And in Teutle López's (2007) ethnographic description of social and sexual encounters between men of different persuasions and social-class positions in two public baths in Puebla, the intersections among different interpretations of same-sex desire (interpretations that are consistent with those found in our analysis) were clearly evident.

Collectively, these studies, along with the present one, have established that Mexicans have access to various ways of interpreting the practices, roles, and identities of men who have same-sex desires and engage in male-male sex, in much the same way as gay and bisexual men in other poor and rich countries. The gender-role forms of male homosexuality that have been represented in the *pasivo/activo* model are certainly part of that landscape, but they are enacted side-by-side with other, less-heavily-gendered interpretations.

In the present study, considerably more men spoke of early male-male sexual encounters that were based on gender-roles or homosocial interactions. One possible explanation for their prominence over object-choice initiations may be developmental. Because these sexual initiations often occurred in these men's early teenage years, they tended to take place before the men had gained access to knowledge about the existence of gay communities. Typically in gender-role and homosocial initiations, their partners were relatives, friends, or youth and young men whom participants met in their neighborhoods. The descriptions of these sexual partners suggest that these were youth or men who likely were not gay-identified. As indicated below, however, the absence of exposure to gay communities during the sexual initiation period may also be connected to a combination of other factors, including the generation to which these men belonged, their location within Mexico, and the types of sexual partners with whom they interacted.

Furthermore, the distinction between gender-role and homosocial encounters, the two more common patterns of sexual initiation, appeared to reflect both the self-identification of the sexual partner and the presence or absence of power differentials. When the partner was not gay-identified and there was a strong power differential (generated by differences in age, degree of masculinity, and/or the type of relationship that the sexual partner had with the participant) there seemed to be a greater potential for a gender-role sexual initiation. But when the initial sexual encounter took place between friends or cousins of roughly the same age and perceived degree of masculinity, who were engaging in mutual sexual exploration, the encounter tended to be homosocial.

Finally, sexual initiations that were based on object choice appeared to occur through contact with sexual partners who were attuned to a gay discourse and already involved in gay communities (which, in some cases, may have reflected their urban origin or middle class position). Given the increasing visibility of gay men in Mexico (Carrillo, 1999, 2002; Gallego Montes, 2007; List Reyes, 2005), as well as growing access to the Internet among sexual minority youth in Mexico, we can anticipate that earlier access to gay communities may be increasing in younger generations, which may also result in an increase of object-choice sexual initiation. This is a topic that requires further study.

The Creation of Varied Pathways

As noted above, a number of factors appeared to influence whether the experiences of sexual initiation were based on gender roles, were homosocial, or were based on object choice,

including the social circles that participants accessed (where it was that male-male sex became possible for them), their age and generation, the social class position and geographic origin (urban/rural) of participants and their sexual partners, the particular interpretations that they and their sexual partners assigned to male-male sexual encounters, the perceived degrees of masculinity and femininity of sexual partners, and the type of social relationships that they had with each other (e.g., whether they were strangers, relatives, friends, or neighbors).

The findings of the study by Gallego Montes (2007)--the only other study that we know that has paid close attention to Mexican gay men's male-male sexual initiation--provided further confirmation of the role of these factors. Men in that study were born between 1950 and 1989. Gallego Montes reported that half (49%) had their first male-male sexual encounter with a friend, neighbor, or acquaintance, while for 15% the first sexual partner was a relative, and for 23% a stranger. Only 8% had their first male-male sexual encounter with a boyfriend or long-term partner. Most met their first male sexual partner within their families, neighborhoods, and schools.

Gallego Montes found also that age differences between sexual partners mattered, with those who were roughly the same age engaging in more reciprocal relationships (in which both partners penetrate or give each other oral sex), while those with age differences of two years or more experiencing more gendered sex roles. Interestingly, those in the same-age group also indicated more frequently that their sexual partners at initiation were friends, neighbors, or acquaintances, while sexual initiation in the age-differentiated group more frequently involved relatives. In the age-differentiated group, when the participant was the older partner, he tended to be the one who penetrated or received oral sex, while the opposite occurred if the participant was the younger partner.

The patterns that we observed in our study, as represented in the cases included in this article, were somewhat similar: older relatives or acquaintances were more present in the narratives offered by participants who experienced gender-role sexual initiations, while same-age friends or cousins appeared more regularly in accounts of homosocial encounters. However, sex with same-age friends or neighbors was more heavily gendered when the sexual encounters took place in working-class settings and in small towns or rural areas, which suggests possible differences between rural and urban sexual cultures alongside differences related to social class position. When participants narrated initiation experiences that involved forced or unwanted sex, the encounters were also more gendered or involved considerable power differentials related to the status of the sexual partner (e.g., a relative or an older youth or man). Gallego Montes (2007) reported a similar finding: more among his participants who reported forced sex also said that the encounter involved a relative or a teacher, which Gallego Montes interpreted as indicative of power differentials related to age differences.

In our study, sexual initiation with a boyfriend appeared only in narratives of object - choice sexual initiation in the context of gay communities. In this regard, Gallego Montes found a cohort effect: In his study, more young men (born between 1971 and 1989) reported sexual initiations with boyfriends (although the percentage was small compared to other types of sexual partners), and also more men in this group experienced sexual initiations involving sexual role reciprocity. Gallego Montes also found that more young men experienced penetration as part of their male-male sexual initiation, compared to those born between 1950 and 1970, who more frequently experienced only mutual masturbation. Gallego Montes attributed the difference to a greater normalization of penetration through AIDS prevention programs. A complementary explanation, offered by our data, is that urban younger men may have greater access to gay communities and to models of interpretation

based on object choice that assume reciprocity. As in Rogelio's case, quoted above, some men accessing gay communities at an early age may wait to have sex with a boyfriend in the context of a romantic relationship. These issues, however, need further investigation.

Also in relation to cohort effects, we must consider that the sexual initiation encounters that men in our study reported generally occurred between 1975 and 1995, and since then there have been important developments within Mexico in relation to homosexuality and gay rights that could alter how these experiences occur among younger Mexican gay men. For the most part, the events discussed here took place before the era of expanded access to the Internet, which in Mexico, as in many other places, is dramatically increasing the ease of access to information about sexuality and homosexuality. Furthermore, during the past decade Mexicans have witnessed the creation of official programs and policies intended to improve the status of sexual minorities, including a federal anti-discrimination law, the implementation by the federal government of a national anti-homophobia campaign, the approval of civil unions in Mexico City and the northern state of Coahuila, the approval of gay marriage in Mexico City, and the implementation of explicit efforts in the mass media to educate Mexicans about the need for accepting sexual diversity (Carrillo, 2007; Castillo, 2009). As List Reyes (2005) noted, there also has been a considerable increase in the visibility of gay men in urban areas. As a result, the availability of object-choice interpretations of male-male desire that differ from the *pasivo/activo* model may be even greater for youth who are coming of age today, and that is a topic that also requires further study.

Implications for the Understanding of Sexual Identity Formation

More generally, our findings contribute to the existing literature on male homosexuality in one fundamental way: They add greater specificity to what is known about the processes involved in the sexual identity formation of sexual minority youth, particularly in ethnic/racial minorities.

The existing literature has expressed increasing doubt about the existence of a universally-applicable model of sexual identity formation (Parks et al., 2004; Rosario et al., 2001; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). It has been questioned whether a single linear model, with specific prescribed stages, can actually explain how sexual identities are formed among all sexual minority youth (Eliason, 1996; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Parks et al., 2004; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Smith, Guthrie, & Oakley, 2005). An important component of this critique of a universal model is the understanding that we need to consider generational differences—the potential effects of the particular historical moment in which any given cohort of sexual minority youth comes of age (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Eliason, 1996; Savin-Williams, 2001, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). The emphasis on history and generational differences has prompted scholars to recognize that, in order to understand how sexual minority youth interpret their same-sex desires and enact them as they initiate their sexual lives, we must pay close attention to the specific contexts—economic, social, cultural, political—and situations in which these youth are embedded (Eliason, 1996).

We agree with this critique, but we also find that it does not go far enough in one sense: As our data suggested, it may not be sufficient to consider the historical period for each generation of sexual minority youth—to pay attention only to the large-scale forces that may affect all in each generation (such as national debates about gay marriage, shifting representations of homosexuality and of gay and lesbian people in the mass media, or the disclosure of same-sex desires by famous individuals). Instead, we need simultaneously to account for differences within a single generational cohort caused by other factors such as the ones that we have noted here: geographical location (and differences between rural and urban settings), regional variations (within individual countries and also between countries),

social class position, education, and cultural difference. In other words, intra-generational variations created by specific contexts and situations must also be considered and we should not assume that all sexual minority youth in one generation are homogenous in terms of their experiences of same-sex sexual initiation or identity formation (Savin-Williams, 2001).

In relation to race/ethnicity, even scholars in the U.S. who are sensitive to the need to understand ethnic differences have tended to talk about African Americans, Asians, or Latinos/as as culturally monolithic groups. Regarding Latino/a sexual minority youth, there has been some progress in recommending that we acknowledge possible cultural differences among Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans (Savin-Williams, 2001). However, those national groups are still too broad. Merely separating Latino populations by national origin will be unlikely to yield any significant data on the multiplicity of patterns of lived experience, such as the ones that emerged in our data, within specific U.S. Latino/a populations. By contrast, our data not only have demonstrated that Mexican men's starting points regarding the acquisition of a gay or bisexual identity were quite varied, but also that, just like men in other ethnic/racial groups, these men can be successful and resourceful in spite of the considerable social barriers that they must confront.

In closing, we note that the men in our gay- and bisexually-identified sample began their sexual lives with varied forms of sexual initiation, yet all of them arrived at some form of adult self-identification as *homosexuales*, *gays*, or *bisexuales*, usually while still living in Mexico. Also, within a few years of their sexual initiation, typically during their late teens or early twenties, most ($n = 60$) had discovered spaces in Mexico where men have sex with men, and three quarters ($n = 45$) among those participants had accessed gay institutionalized spaces, such as gay bars or dance clubs. A majority ($n = 60$) was participating in sexual encounters in Mexico that involved object-choice interpretations, and even more did so after they became incorporated into U.S. gay life ($n = 65$). This convergence of various paths leading to gay or bisexual identities, starting out from very different kinds of male-male sexual initiation, suggests the importance of studying same-sex sexual initiation among sexual minority youth with greater detail than has typically been done.

Moreover, not all men involved in these accounts of male-male sexual initiation appeared to follow this path toward the acquisition of a gay identity. Indeed, also of interest for future research was our participants' frequent reporting that some of their sexual partners in these male-male sexual initiations took paths that led them to very different self-identifications (as "regular," "normal," or "heterosexual" men, who may or may not maintain a sexual attraction toward other men).⁵ How these diverging paths are created remains an open and important question. A better understanding of how various paths converge or diverge requires what we have argued for throughout: transcending the more typical approach that considers sexual initiation of sexual minority youth as only a stage of sexual identity formation, and elaborating beyond merely noting the age of first same-sex sexual interaction or the order in which the stages occur within linear models of sexual identity formation.

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⁵The developmental psychology concepts of "equifinality" and "multifinality" seem relevant here. Cicchetti and Rogosh (1996) define equifinality as "the same end state [that] may be reached from a variety of different initial conditions and through different processes" (p. 597), and multifinality as related to "processes contributing to divergence in outcomes given common origins" (p. 598).

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Table I

Patterns of sexual initiation

	Participants (N = 76)*
Gender-role sexual initiation	46
<i>Exclusively practiced gender-role sex at initiation</i>	23
<i>Also participated in homosocial sex</i>	22
<i>Also participated in object-choice sex</i>	1
Homosocial sexual initiation	38
<i>Exclusively practiced homosocial sex at initiation</i>	13
<i>Also participated in gender-role sex</i>	22
<i>Also participated in object-choice sex</i>	3
Object-choice sexual initiation	18
<i>Exclusively practiced object-choice sex at initiation</i>	14
<i>Also participated in gender-role sex</i>	1
<i>Also participated in homosocial sex</i>	3

Note: The table reveals the overlap between the three patterns of sexual initiation. Summing the numbers in bold yields the total sample of 76.