Old Coyotes:
Life Histories of Aging Gay Men in Rural Canada

by

Barry Trentham

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Adult Education and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Current understandings of aging and the life course are largely based on taken-for-granted
hetero-normative assumptions. Gay men lack aging road maps that are unique to their life course
experiences and which consider the changing contextual and social conditions that shape their
participation choices in family and community roles. This is particularly so for gay men aging in
rural environments as most studies of aging gay men focus on the urban experience. This study
adds to understandings of aging and the life course by examining the lives of three gay men
aging in rural environments. I use a life history approach to shed light on how sexual identity
development and marginalization within rural environments intersect with shifting social
contexts to shape the aging process in terms of engagement in social role opportunities, namely,
community and family participation. As a life course researcher, I pay particular attention to the
tensions between individual agency and structural constraints and how they are revealed through
the life histories. Epistemological and methodological assumptions based on social
constructivism, critical and queer theory inform the study while my own lived experiences as a
gay man and an occupational therapist practitioner and educator ground the study.
Cross-cutting themes identified in the life narratives reveal connections between sexual identity development and the coming out processes with patterns of social relationships and the gay aging process. These themes are then discussed in terms of their relevance to broader aging and life course constructs including generativity, social capital and gay aging; agency and structure in identity development; and expanded notions of family and social support for gay men. Findings from this study have implications for current explanations of ageing and life course processes; challenge limiting stereotypes of older gay men; inform health and social service professionals who work with older gay people; and provide examples of alternative queer life pathways for gay people of all ages.
Acknowledgments

I am very grateful! My gratitude extends to the many extraordinary people in my life who have supported me throughout this doctoral journey. First and foremost, I am deeply appreciative to the three men who shared their life stories with me. They welcomed me into their lives, their memories and into their communities. They trusted me with their stories and their secrets with the hope of making a difference to how gay people of all ages are understood and valued.

I was blessed with a remarkably supportive and committed doctoral committee who believed in me while challenging me to think deeper and broader. I am so thankful for my supervisor, Dr. Ardra Cole, who I know spent many hours carefully reviewing drafts of my work. Ardra encouraged me to think of research in another way, to avoid the temptation for easy roadmaps and to, “write for meaning.” She rekindled in me a joy in writing creatively that I have not experienced in many years. By asking me “what is so important to you, that you will spend four years of reading, researching and writing,” she also pushed me to clarify and recommit to my values and my purpose in doing research.

I am warmly appreciative for the presence of Dr. Judy Friedland in my professional and academic life. Judy has been my academic coach and mentor for many years and was instrumental in leading me to the decision to pursue doctoral studies. Seeing something in me that I had not yet discovered, Judy invited me to serve as lecturer with the Department of Occupational Therapy in 1998. My decision to accept this offer changed my life in a profound way. With frequent and annual prompts to “consider a PhD”, she eventually convinced me that a PhD would be worth it, that I could do it and that it would help me to, as she stated: “focus your research agenda.” Judy’s passion for, and scholarly work in, the history of occupational therapy inspired in me an interest in research that values the importance of learning from the past.

I feel very fortunate to have benefited from the guidance of Dr. Stephen Katz. As a critical gerontologist, Stephen pushed me to extend my theoretical analysis, to read more broadly and to question my assumptions about the aging process and what it means to be old. I am particularly appreciative for the frequent emails that Stephen sent with suggestions for fresh-off-the-press literature on feminist, queer and humanities’ approaches to critical gerontology. I very much enjoyed the several informal conversations over coffee with Stephen, in admiration of the
extent of his knowledge of the gerontology literature. Stephen’s genuine interest in my research and its possibilities was a key source of motivation to keep me moving forward.

I am grateful to those in the academic occupational therapy community who have expressed a keen interest in the focus and methodological approach of my research work including Dr. Elizabeth Townsend, Chair of the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at Dalhousie University and Dr. Lori Letts, Chair of the Department of Occupational Therapy at McMaster University; and my colleagues at the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto, in particular, Dr. Lynn Cockburn, Dr. Bonnie Kirsh, Dr. Alex Mihilaidis, Professor Jill Stier and Professor Jane Davis, Dr. Helene Polatajko, and Department Chair, Dr. Susan Rappolt, as well as all those colleagues who I know covered for me on those occasions where my doctoral studies took over from departmental tasks. Thank-you also to Justin Chee, graduate student with the Graduate Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, for his expert and accommodating assistance with the formatting of this document.

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For Cassie, the cat in my life for 18 years, who was clearly nearing the end of her life as she watched me tapping away on my lap top. With little energy left but to monitor my progress, she seldom left my side. When deciding it was time for a break, she would walk over the lap top keys, bringing all work to a halt. Sadly, she could not wait until the end, but managed to be by my side until the first draft was finished. I think she was satisfied.

And of course, where would I be without the ongoing, unquestioning, loving and patient support of my partner of 24 years, Lambert Boenders, who never doubted my ability to one day finish this thesis and who has come to enjoy, as much as I do, the important job of unclening!

Finally, I am also very appreciative of the financial support of the Social Sciences Research Council of Canada in the form of a two-year doctoral scholarship that made this work possible.
Dedication

To the memory of my dear mother, a teacher of unfailing dedication,

Teresa Trentham (October 21, 1928 - December 3, 2009)

To my father Robert Trentham, who never stops caring and,

To all the members of my family, both of choice and of origin.
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Prologue

At the start of my doctoral studies, in a qualitative methodology course, Ardra Cole asked us what was it that we cared so much about that we were willing to spend the next several years researching it. With little thought, I responded that it was my desire to create spaces for older adults to participate in communities of their choice. This is a professional pursuit, but it is also a personal interest as the two are very much interconnected. As an occupational therapy educator I am eager to impress upon future therapists the importance of meaningful occupational participation in the lives of the people we serve. I also want to instill in them a critical perspective in choosing from the various road maps that guide us as therapists to enable the occupations of those people who, due to disability, age, or social situation, have been blocked. I am optimistic that these life histories will inform occupational scientists and therapists about how the experiences of sexual minorities speak to mainstream questions about the impact of social, historical and other contextual forces on occupational choices. I also hope that this body of research will have relevance for those working in other related fields of aging in research, policy and service domains.

In addition to their potential meaning to health care researchers, practitioners and educators, I hope that the life histories that emerge from this study will have relevance for gay people of all ages; those dealing with challenges at the end of their life and those thinking more about their own aging as they enter the mid-life aging transition period. I also hope that younger gay people can benefit from their elders’ stories about navigating life’s various challenges while being offered an alternative roadmap to the limited models currently available.

These are stories of lives lived well and, as such, offer needed role models. The social relevance of such work is best expressed in the stated purpose of life story telling according to
several First Nations writers (Deloria, 2006; Graveline, 1998; Whitehead, 2006) and that is, a desire that my research process and findings are powerful in their capacity to teach life lessons, in context, to reveal the interconnections amongst people and their worlds and to heal individuals through the transformative effect of illuminating how power structures constrain or enable life choices.
Chapter 1
Introduction and Autobiographical Sources of the Inquiry

Photo 1. RE-ENTERING THE BADLANDS
October 2005

“We used to hunt them down with Bobby. We’d get up early in the morning and follow them. They were smart buggers. Once, we got one, we didn’t kill it, but caused some damage.”

50 Year Old Male
1.1 Introduction: Coyotes Not Wanted on the Prairie?

As a boy from “town”, visits to my uncle’s farm were filled with a diversity of animal life, smells, intimidating farm equipment and the raw, rough, fearsome and tobacco-chewing ways of my older male cousins and uncle. The changing seasons and the life cycle of farm animals and plants structured the numerous farmer activities. I watched from a safe distance as the men pulled slippery calves and lambs from birthing farm animals, sheered the sheep, castrated and branded the yearling cattle. They cursed the weather and the eastern Liberals as they ploughed, seeded and harvested wheat, barley, flax and oats. My uncle, aunt, cousins and grandmother lived in three separate houses that sat on a butte overlooking the rolling prairie to the west. Apart from the farm animals, prairie wildlife was abundant. I spent hours at the nearby slough collecting tadpoles and waiting anxiously for them to transform into frogs, as I was assured they would. It was not uncommon to spot a snowshoe hare, hawk or deer. In summer the air was filled with the melodious, complex song of meadowlarks and the high-pitched call of Richardson Ground Squirrels as they stood as straight as soldiers above their gopher holes. Badger dens found while wandering on the cowpie-dotted pasture, though intriguing, always raised fear as I had been told often how aggressive they could be. Visits to the farm were filled with earthy smells, hot tempers and the ebb and flow of the natural world. And then there were the coyotes.

I was perhaps five or six and was visiting the farm. It was winter, though the cold wind was not enough to keep me inside and away from the magic of the farmyard. I knew that inside the pig’s barn, I would find warmth if needed. Dusk was drawing in when I heard the droning sound of a ski-doo coming up the long laneway from the west. My cousin, Ken was steering the noisy machine at full speed. Behind Ken, tied to a long rope, was a bundle of white fur that
bounced along the frozen lane. My other cousins ran to the top of the wide farmyard driveway to meet him. They shouted with frenzied excitement as they approached the ski-doo with my older cousin Ted yelling angrily at Ken. In closer view, the bundle of white fur looked to be some kind of large dog. It was still breathing with its eyes wide open.

The next minute Ted ran up to the dog with a baseball bat. Amidst more yelling and with directed rage he began to bash the head of the animal. Blood spurted everywhere. I felt weak at the sound of the bat hitting the furry helpless animal’s head and my stomach tightened. The animal quickly lay lifeless. I was stunned and confused. I wanted to scream, to run, or to have my dad do something. But I could not move. I was dumbstruck.

In my innocence, I had no idea what the reason was for this brutality. I had never witnessed anything so cruel and violent in all my short life. My dad did not join in on the frenzy and in my memory, disapproving, drew me away from the bloody scene. I appealed to him to make sense of the scene. I learned that this animal was a coyote—a threat to the farm and its inhabitants. It did not belong. The explanation did not ease my discomfort. I still felt sick for the coyote.

This memory resurfaced as I drove down a long prairie gravel road after completing an interview with Luke, one of the research participants, a 74 year-old gay farmer. I was thinking about Luke’s response to the coyote I had just seen in his yard. As I was about to leave the farm, I spotted the coyote with his tail between his legs in typical coyote fashion about 10 metres from me. Calling Luke’s attention to it, he told me that this must have been the coyote that had eaten his entire crop of carrots that were just about to be harvested. He seemed amused rather than angry. “Coyotes eat carrots?” I questioned. There was apparently much I did not know about coyotes.
The coyote appeared occasionally in my prairie memories as I drove the country roads of south-central Alberta or anecdotally in the stories of the research participants, and in conversations with family and friends who live in the prairie towns along my route. At the same time as my research progressed, newspaper articles on the coyote “threat” appeared in both Toronto and Calgary daily newspapers. Perhaps the coyote has something to say, a story to be shared. Like the research participants, the coyote has adapted to an unfriendly and, at times, hostile environment. The stories I hear about them are often contradictory and full of misinformation. To some, coyotes are a threat; to others they are admired and respected. I had not thought much about coyotes for a long time. But as if to make their presence known, they were suddenly everywhere. And so this inquiry into the lives of older gay men living in rural Alberta paralleled a more casual investigation into the ways of the coyote and how they have responded, reacted or adapted to the human threat to their territory and way of life. Media clips and casual comments made by friends, family and the participants of this study in response to a simple question, “What do you know about coyotes?” mirror popular (mis)perceptions and attitudes towards coyotes and reveal the social context within which coyotes must adapt. These, mostly anonymous, quotations are included throughout the paper as points of departure and reflection.

This thesis is organized within eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides some contextual background to the history and culture of Alberta particularly with respect to social attitudes towards homosexuality. I follow this with recollections of formative experiences in my own life that have led to my interest in this course of research. My research purpose, rationale and questions are also included in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical lenses that guide and inform my research process, analysis and interpretation. Chapter 3 provides a detailed description of the life history research methodology and introduces the reader to the three
participants. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 represent the co-constructed life narratives of John, Jake and Luke and offer a first level of analysis in the life history methodology. With the exception of John, the names and any identifying information of the participants have been adjusted to maintain participant anonymity. Chapter 7 takes the analysis one step further by identifying cross-cutting themes which are then contextually interrogated to reveal how the life histories speak to the influence of broader contextual shapers on the life course. These themes loosely reflect life course periods or stages. Finally, Chapter 8 revisits the research literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) aging and the life course in terms of how the themes discussed in Chapter 7 illustrate and expand on key life course constructs, namely generativity, social capital and gay aging; agency, structure and identity development; and finally a reconsideration of the concept of linked lives vis-à-vis the unique social relationship patterns of older gay men. Critical reflections on the contributions of queer theory and problems associated with the changing concept and experience of the rural are also discussed before concluding the thesis by revisiting my initial hopes and expectations for this work.

1.2 Rural Alberta Historical Context

Canada welcomed Alberta, along with its rich farmland and natural resources, into Confederation in 1905. This is a wealthy province with a unique right-of-centre political history and popularly perceived as one of the most socially conservative of Canadian provinces. I pull on Howard Palmer’s comprehensive book, Alberta: A New History (1990), to shed light on how its political and social history shape current policies and response to its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) inhabitants. Though three out of five Albertans currently live in one of the two major cities (i.e., Calgary or Edmonton), the province has strong rural roots. Prior to World War II, Palmer reports that 70 percent of Albertans lived in rural areas and that the politics of the
province are still largely based on its small town and rural agricultural values. Critics feel that this has much to do with an electoral boundary system where a rural vote can be worth up to three times that of an urban vote and where electoral revisions continue to reinforce this inequity, an inequity that favour conservative interests (Johnsrude, 2010). Right wing, conservative political parties have dominated in the provincial legislature since the latter part of the 1930s and have catered to the agricultural and resource economic sectors. The three participants in this study have lived mainly under the influence of two political parties, the Social Credit Party and the Conservative Party, both of which continue to be resistant to gay-positive legislative changes (Filax, 2004).

Alberta is known as the most American of Canadian provinces with the agricultural and mineral resource sectors providing a link with similar sectors in the American mid-west and southern states. Large numbers of American settlers came to Alberta starting in 1870 and dominated the growing ranching industry. They brought with them the American spirit of individualism, independence and Protestant evangelism. Other mainstream Protestant religious influences from British immigrants and Ontario migrants also shaped the everyday life of Albertans and dominated the politics of the Province. The Catholic minority was of the lower social economic class and included the majority of native peoples, as well as French-Canadian and Slavic farmers. They were less involved in political domains until the 1940s (Palmer, 1990). In fact, Palmer points out that mainline Protestant churches saw the large scale immigration to Alberta from non-Protestant countries as a threat to the Canadianization of the West where Canadianization meant Protestantism.

The participants in this study, born between 1930 and 1936 grew up in an environment that was influenced by the politics of the Social Credit Party, initially led by the populist leader,
affectionately known as Bible Bill Abrehardt. Aberhardt was an Evangelical Christian preacher and was very effective at mobilizing large numbers of the population in a political and economic grassroots educational movement flavoured with a heavy dose of conservative religious views. Bible Bill along with other fundamentalist preachers used radio broadcasts to promote their message and was highly successful in a manner unique to Alberta. According to Filax (2004), the conservative parties in Alberta continue to be highly influenced by conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist religious values, Christian denominations known to be vehemently opposed to gay-positive human rights legislation (Reimer, 2008).

The Depression of the 1930s hit Alberta very hard with its impact magnified by a widespread drought that hit the prairie provinces in the early 1930s. Immigration and growth in the province slowed to a trickle during the 1930s. For the participants, as young children, they would have known little else. Growing up in the 1940s, their lives would have steadily improved during the War years. Times just got better; as they grew, so did the economy. The politics of the 1930s, however, left a legacy that would have a continued impact on the lives of the participants for sometime to come.

Large-scale unemployment during the 1930s led to a highly discriminatory environment. Visible minorities were not seen as deserving of unemployment and welfare benefits. For example, Palmer reports that Chinese immigrants, most of whom had been in Canada since the early 1900s, were eligible to receive less than half the weekly benefits of non-Chinese. The reactionary policies of the government led to widespread discontent, particularly amongst those from non-British backgrounds including the Hungarians (the background of one of the research participants) and other eastern Europeans. The Communist Party made up mostly of Eastern European coal miners and farmers became a real threat to the governing party, the United
Farmers Association (UFA). Though increasingly vocal, the political left was fragmented between the Communists, the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) and radical members of the UFA. It was the Social Credit Party, under the shared leadership of Bill Aberhart and Ernest Manning that united the left and proposed a vision of social credit that transgressed traditional left-right distinctions and united groups from across ethnic and religious lines. The Social Credit Party saw the concentration of economic power in a few hands (i.e., wealthy Eastern Bankers) as the real threat to capitalism and provided the populace with a common foe. The Social Credit Party, which came into power in 1935, was originally more radical from a policy perspective but became increasingly more right wing over time. It remained in power until 1961, at which point, the Progressive Conservative Party took over and remains in power to this day.

1.3 Queer Alberta History: A Brief Overview

Much has been written about the Gay Liberation movement in the United States, specifically the demarcation of the Stonewall Riots in 1969 in New York City (discussed later in this text) as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement in North America. The Stonewall riots are referred to often in the LGBT literature; however, there is relatively less discussion in the LGBT and aging literature on the unique Canadian markers of LGBT human rights achievements. This section focuses on changes to Canadian LGBT human rights changes as contextual markers for the participants in this study with a focus on how these changes have been adopted in Alberta.

Alberta, with its conservative political legacy, has been much slower to adopt gay positive legislative changes (Filax, 2004) that had their beginnings several decades ago. Canadian same-sex history time lines often start with the conviction of Everett George Klippert
of the North West Territories in 1965. While being tried for arson, he admitted to having sex with men. Because of this admission, and because it was determined that he was unlikely to stop having sex with men, he was convicted as a dangerous offender and imprisoned indefinitely. He was eventually released in 1971 (Kinsman, 1987). Prior to Klippert’s case, with the exception of occasional news releases reporting the arrests of men for same-sex sexual offences and with the gay community largely underground, little was written about gay and lesbian issues (Phair & Wells, 2006). The next significant date in Canadian LGBT history was May 14, 1969, when Pierre Elliott Trudeau was successful in decriminalizing homosexuality under the Criminal Law Amendment Act raising much debate and reaction across Canada. Prior to 1969 and since 1892, buggery was considered a Crime Against Morality. The law applied to men only as women were viewed as largely asexual beings (Warner, 2002). Starting in 1890, gay men were also charged with gross indecency, which until 1953 was used primarily to prosecute gay men (Warner).

Beginning in 1948, gay men could also be convicted as criminal sexual psychopaths. In 1961 this descriptor was re-defined as dangerous sexual offenders, if those found guilty of gross indecency or buggery (i.e., same sex acts) were believed to be probable re-offenders. Under this law, gay men could be held indefinitely as was the case with Everett Klippert described above.

With the adoption of the Canadian Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (the Charter) in 1982, the courts became more active in the politics of Canadian society (Smith, 2005) and in the development of social policy. It paved the way for charter challenges based on sexual orientation. Though charter claims based on sexual orientation were initially not included in the Charter, the case of Egan and Nesbitt versus Canada in 1995 resulted in de facto inclusion of sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination in the Charter under Section 15. This later led to amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act in 1996. Many provinces had already included
sexual orientation in their provincial human rights charters; for example, Ontario included protection against discrimination against gay and lesbians in 1986 (Smith, 2005; Warner, 2002).

Alberta, however, along with several other provinces lagged behind with gay-positive legislative changes. Delwind Vriend, a lab instructor at King’s College in Edmonton and referred to by the participants in this study was fired based on the fact that he was gay (Phair & Wells, 2006). He took his case to the Supreme Court of Canada and in 1998, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Vriend versus Alberta that Alberta must include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground for discrimination in its human rights legislation (Smith, 2005). This also meant that the few remaining provinces that had not yet changed their human rights legislation had to adjust their human rights legislation accordingly (Phair & Wells, 2006). The Alberta government pressured by conservative groups, many from the religious evangelical right, resisted and threatened to use the notwithstanding clause of the Charter (Smith, 2005). Similarly, with same-sex marriage which was legally recognized in several Canadian provinces as early as 2003 and incorporated into federal legislation under Bill C-38, the Civil Marriage Act in 2005, Alberta again threatened to use the notwithstanding act; however, Premier Ralph Klein rescinded, proposing to anti-gay rights groups that it would develop legislation making it possible for marriage officials to refuse to marry same-sex couples should they hold religious objections to the practice. Alberta’s Human Rights Act was eventually amended in 2009 under Bill-44 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2009). Thought by the participants in this study as a way to appease the religious right for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the Human Rights Act, the Alberta government included in this same legislation the option for parents to pull their children from school classes during planned presentations on controversial topics including evolution and sexual orientation.
The actions of the Alberta Conservative government should not be seen, however, as representative of the Alberta populace as a whole, many of whom quickly embraced changes to same-sex rights as indicated in population polls. For example, in 2002, an Ekos/CBC poll revealed that 40% of Albertans supported same-sex marriage, only two percentage points behind Ontario and two percentage points above both Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Quebec was far ahead of the pack in terms of its support for same-sex marriage at 54% (Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, no date).

Besides change to human rights legislation, LGBT activists have also played a significant role in bringing about positive change for queer people in Alberta. Phair (2008) highlights the impact of the 1981 raids on the Pisces Bathhouse in Edmonton and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 80s that mobilized the gay community of Alberta. As with the bathhouse raids in Toronto earlier that year, the LGBT reaction to the Pisces Bathhouse raids of 1981 revealed to the Alberta public that there was an active gay community willing to fight for their rights (Phair, 2008). They were no longer content to remain hidden underground. The LGBT community response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic served to solidify and mobilize the gay community against the mounting moralistic backlash of the religious right that saw AIDS as God’s punishment on the ungodly (Phair & Wells, 2006). It was during this period of tremendous change that the participants of this study were beginning to accept themselves as gay men and to venture out into gay spaces.

Although there have been remarkable gains for LGBT people with respect to gay rights legislative changes and while the majority of Albertans, like other Canadians, generally support gay rights (Reimer, 2008; Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance, no date), obstacles still remain; a point made by the three participants of this study. This hit home as I was about to start my research in Alberta.
When starting my research in Alberta, I visited the Red Deer Museum’s Archives upon hearing of an unreleased, unpublished oral history study of 16 lesbian, gay and transgendered Albertans living in central Alberta. The study, Lesbian and Gay Life in Alberta (1998) was commissioned by the Red Deer Museum. Gloria Millar, an independent researcher was contracted to do the study. Apart from the findings of this study that highlighted themes of isolation; the need for constant vigilance and the importance of self-affirming connections in the lives of LGBT people, it was the reported response of government officials and the reaction of the public to the study, “a mini-moral panic that erupted and continued for months” (Filax, 2004, p. 108) that most surprised me. Stockwell Day\(^1\), then a Progressive Conservative member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta representing the electoral riding of Red Deer North attempted to force the Red Deer Museum to return the provincial lottery grant. The Edmonton Journal ran the headline, *Treasurer Wants Gay Study Grant Money Returned* (Canadian Press, August 16, 1997, p. A1), even though the funding decisions were designed to be non-partisan and at an arms length from government. In the same Edmonton Journal article Day stated that "We all make mistakes and they [the museum] made a mistake in pursuing a project which purports to reflect the sexual choices of one per cent of the population." The reaction to the study seemed to me to be quite out of proportion with the scale of the research project. The participants of the study were extremely concerned about any loss of confidentiality and asked that only

\(^1\) Stockwell Day served as a Progressive Conservative member of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta for the riding of Red Deer North from 1986 to 2000. He was a Cabinet member and held several important portfolios including, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Social Services and became Treasurer in 1997. In 2000 he was elected as leader of the right-wing Canadian Alliance Party. In 2002 he lost the leadership of the Alliance to Stephen Harper. In 2003, the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party merged to become the Conservative Party of Canada under the leadership of Stephen Harper, whose federal party came to power in 2006. Since then, Day has held several cabinet positions and is currently the Minister of International Trade and the President of the Treasury Board. Day, a devout fundamentalist Christian is known for his many controversial views including a rejection of Evolution and homosexuality (Wikipedia, retrieved July 26, 2010 at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockwell_Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockwell_Day))
“bona fide researchers [sic]” (personal communication) have access to it and only when given permission by the archivist. Copies of the study could not be taken. In a telephone conversation with the study’s author, I was informed that the participants were hopeful that the study would be made public providing their identities remain anonymous; however, staff in the Museum’s archives insisted that the participants did not wish the study to be published fearing disclosure of their identities. Hearing of the public reaction to this LGBT oral history project and the reported fears of the participants, all from an area close to where my study took place, I realized that my study would take place in a geo-political context where LGBT life histories were not politically benign and could present a very real risk to my participants. This is the world that I was stepping back into.

1.4 Linking Foundational Concepts with Autobiographical Sources of the Inquiry

Several prominent gerontologists have called for a greater examination of more diverse life narratives in order to better explain the life course and ageing process (Edmondson, 2005; Elder, Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2002; Hagestad & Dannefer, 2001; Kenyon & Randall, 2001; Nelson, 2003; Webster, 2001). This call is added incentive for my study; however, it is not only the academic literature that inspires me to better understand the aging process of older gay men. It is my lived experience that has led me to this inquiry. Following, a series of autobiographical memories gives background to the personal incentives behind this research and offers to the reader, a sense of what I, as an engaged, deeply connected, and active participant-researcher bring to this inquiry into the life histories of gay men aging in rural Canadian environments.
1.4.1 Touchstones to the Life Course Perspective

To pay the bills during my undergraduate years I worked as a personal care attendant in my hometown’s only nursing home. I recall the day I walked into the dining room to discover that its walls had been covered with black and white photographs of the residents in their younger years. This exhibit had a profound impact on me. These residents, who I first came to know in their old age and who I supported in their everyday tasks, had a history; a life story! I realized then how I had come to know them only in their present as frail and disabled persons. I had little appreciation for their history and for their stories. The photos, many portraying the grey, grainy images of people with stern and dour looks typical of photos taken around the turn of the last century, revealed the youthful and socially connected former selves of the men and women that I cared for. It became clear to me that people are not fully who they are in the present, but are also inhabited by other selves who surface now and again, reconnect and are eager to be heard and recognized. As was expected by their installation, the photos provided much stimulus for conversation and elicited sometimes animated, sometimes reticent storytelling from the residents. I was a keen listener and they had many stories to tell. Being from the same small town, many of the residents knew my family and their histories. They made connections between their stories and mine.

That this event should seem so remarkable to me now, some 30 years later, speaks to me as I examine the life course of gay men aging in rural environments. The photos added to my sense of who these people were and suggested some life course clues as to how they had come to be old people living in a Drumheller nursing home. To know someone, is to know his or her story. The life stories of the three men in this study, as narrated by them and co-constructed with my input, highlight their active role as agents in navigating through life course transitions. But life stories were told within current contextual constraints and were shaped by many changing
social factors over time, the presence of which can remain invisible, if a life is examined out-of-context. So to come to know someone’s life history, is to come to know something about how commonly experienced historical and cultural realities influence their life transitions and occupational choices throughout the aging process. As such life history explorations are key to better understandings of the complexities of the life course.

Although life course studies attempt to reveal the interplay between individual agency within social structures, constraints and opportunities, the study of how older people story their lives is also about meaning-making. And so, behind my quest to better understand life course processes and the aging well process is my desire for a meaningful life in the face of eventual non-existence that aging presents. I believe that this also is a root source of my inquiry. When I think of growing older or when I am with people who are near the end of their life, I must face my own existential questions. Old people die, I will die, we all will die. I am drawn to these existential questions and as a result, I am drawn to the challenge that the very existence of old people offers. Later life has been described as a time of intense meaning-making (Chapman, 2005; Gubrium, 2001; Randall & Kenyon, 2004; Randall & McKim, 2008), and a source of wisdom (Coleman, 1999, 2005; Edmondson, 2005; Tornstam, 2005) that I believe society needs to re-connect with and tap into. I believe mine is really a spiritual inquiry as it speaks to connectedness, meaning-making and human aspirations amidst the adversities of oppression, physical decline and an ever growing realization of our shared journey towards death. This aspect of my study, though a motivating force, is not the primary aim of this study, but is nevertheless at play in the background.
1.4.2 Life Storytelling as Community Participation within Diverse Environments

Growing up I was surrounded by survival stories of the prairie pioneers who broke the land at the turn of the last century and struggled through the Dirty Thirties of the Depression. Themes included hard work and sacrifice, pragmatism, shared experiences of poverty, as well as the necessity for community cooperation and interdependence. Story lines also included reference to religious divisions between Protestants and Catholics. I inherited a combination of what were often contradictory cultural and religious messages from the Catholic fire and passion of my mother and the responsible, duty-focused ethic of my Protestant father. We often heard the story of how my paternal Grandmother cried for days at hearing that her youngest son was to marry a “domineering catholic!” My mother was warned by my Grandmother, “Do not expect to bring all your Catholic children to my house.” Though the inter-religious relationships improved over time, I was always aware of subtle undertones of distrust between the two sides of my family. There were things we talked about, and things we somehow knew we should not when with various members of the extended family. These were my first lessons about intercultural distrust and discrimination and the contextual constraints imposed on storytelling. I now interpret these contextual constraints on life story telling with an appreciation of the importance of social cohesion, trust and community engagement as aspects of social capital (Lynch & Kaplan, 1997). With concerns raised about the threat to social capital given the growing challenges of maintaining social cohesion within a culturally diverse society, such constraints need to be better understood.

The awareness of how my rural, religious and prairie upbringing shaped my outlook on life was not fully appreciated until I moved to Montreal and later Toronto. I was then exposed to a much greater diversity of cultural world views that made my own come into better view. I
welcomed the perspectives of others as they often contrasted with mine and added to my appreciation of differing aspects of what is seen as truth, as good, as the right way to live as revealed through their storied experiences. Exposure to diverse life narratives opened up new vistas. Being immersed in other cultures was liberating as it linked my own sense of marginalization as a gay man, with those of others whose life stories diverged from mainstream storylines. My interest in cultural diversity carries on into my inquiry into the aging process. How do the cultural stories that we live within consciously or unconsciously shape our understanding of aging? More specifically how do religious, professional, family and community cultures shape how aging gay men tell their stories, particularly in reference to their relationship with the communities in which they live?

These questions have particular relevance in my professional life. I have worked in both culturally homogenous and heterogeneous rehabilitation and seniors’ residential settings and have observed that the shared rituals, stories and values most evident in culturally homogenous settings seemed to add a sense of belonging for residents. In her 2006 Fall Massey Lectures, ethicist Margaret Sommerville reminds us that it is through our stories that we are bonded to one another and through which we gain understandings of how we are to live together. Author Thomas King (2003) tells us that, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” (p. 2). Numerous gerontologists suggest that the ability to make sense of one’s story through its telling is an essential part of the aging well process (Chapman, 2005; Coleman, 1999, 2005; Kenyon, Clark & deVries, 2001). Beyond the meaning-making benefits of life story telling at the individual level, gerontologists have also argued that life storytelling has collective benefits and can impact on the wellness of communities (Coleman, 2005; Edmondson, 2005; Gibson, 2004; Kivnick, Stoffel & Hanlon, 2003; Pohlman, 2003). From my own experience as a gay man, I am very conscious of how, when and with whom I share my story and how comfortable I feel
entering into community or social collaborations. I unconsciously scan each new scene, throw out test probes and monitor responses before engaging to share fragments of my story. This cautious way of being in the world most certainly has much to do with my interest in knowing more about how older gay people, at a time of greater vulnerability and while being at risk for increased isolation, negotiate relationships with family, community and other social contacts. Are their life histories validated, celebrated and offered as means for others to make connections? The life narratives of the men in this study, in response to this question suggest both possibilities and limitations to realizing greater community connections through the sharing of their stories, though all are hopeful that their stories as told and celebrated through this work, will make a difference for the well-being of others.

1.4.3 Communities of Exclusion and Inclusion

The notion of community is a very compelling, problematic and elusive concept. My Master’s research focused on community capacity building within a culturally diverse urban seniors’ apartment complex. Far from the romantic notions of cohesive and supportive geographical settings that are often conveyed both within popular and academic discourse, my research findings discussed in Cockburn and Trentham’s (2002) article on participatory action research, revealed that communities can as likely foster distrust, discrimination, fear, anger, and suspicion, alongside collective efforts to find new ways to work and celebrate together as well as a shared desire for inclusiveness. The older adults in this earlier study came from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Inequitable power structures amongst the various groups quickly became apparent. Like the diverse city of Toronto where I live, this apartment complex was a microcosm of the power dynamics of exclusion and inclusion at play in the broader environment. These dynamics were revealed in the manner in which various groups participated or not in community-building processes. Starting from this earlier exploration of aging, diversity and
community participation, my doctoral research now continues to examine this interplay, though limiting the focus on diversity to the life course experiences of older gay men.

A community framework has always been present in my clinical consulting work, teaching and in my understanding of the occupational therapist’s role in enabling occupation. This is, no doubt, a reflection of my earlier experiences living in a small prairie community and within a cohesive Catholic faith community. Memories of formative years spent in a small prairie town were currents running through my stream of consciousness as I traveled the dusty roads of rural Alberta en route to participant interviews. I pondered the role that communities of shared values and histories play in the life course transitions and trajectories of aging gay people. Reflecting on an earlier trip to my hometown in south-central Alberta helped me to further situate my emotional connection to the notion of community, and to think about questions of diversity, aging and inclusive community participation within a rural environment; a world that seems light years away from the Toronto senior’s apartment complex of my master’s research. The vignette that follows uncovers how my rural ponderings stimulated and inspired the beginnings of this current research endeavor.

An unexpected and extended return home to visit my mother, who now in retrospect was entering the final stages of a terminal illness, and to support my father, overwhelmed with caregiving tasks, gave me some time to revisit old haunts and to think about the historical disconnectedness that I feel every time I return to my rural hometown. As I often do when there, I visited the town’s only Chinese restaurant. Every small prairie town, no matter what size, has a Chinese Café specializing in Chinese and Western Food—a sober reminder of the building of the national railroad, and the racist policies toward Chinese labourers in place during their work on the railroad in the late eighteen-hundreds.

This particular restaurant has existed for at least 50 years. It was one of my teen-age hang-outs, where we would go for combinations of chicken chow-mein, fries with gravy and

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2 In the late 1880s Chinese workers, after completing their work on building the Canadian Pacific Railroad were restricted to manual labour, domestic labour, work in restaurants or laundries (CBC Archives, 1997).
chocolate shakes – real Canadian-Chinese food! Unlike previous visits the elderly man who, for as long as I remember, manned the front cash register, was not there. In his place was an older woman of Asian background. As she made my chocolate-banana shake to go, I began to think about how little I knew of the family who for over 50 years ran this restaurant. They were one of the two Asian families living in the town during my time there in the sixties and seventies. I wondered how much anyone in this town knew about this family or about this elderly woman.

I struck up a conversation with her. As is usual in small towns, we first tried to make connections through each other’s family name. She turned out to be the sister-in-law of the older man who used to stand at the till. I will call her Mrs. Liang. She did not know my family, something unusual in a town this size, which I attributed to her possible isolation. She told me that she had only started working at the restaurant in the last few years as her brother-in-law was no longer well enough. She had not worked outside the home before. She appeared to struggle with her English.

I began to wonder how this woman had managed to live in this town and immediately many questions began to surface. How was she going to age in this town? Does she connect to this community, to any community? Does anyone really know her or her story? She was interested to know that I lived in Toronto and told me that she knew people living in Chinatown. She seemed genuinely interested (though she may also have been amused) as I spoke of my experiences of Chinatown, such as my favourite dim sum places and market shopping activities. In my mind I contrasted the image of this aging woman in this Western Canadian Chinese cafe, on her own, surrounded by small town folks, mostly of European descent, to the groups of older Asian-Canadian women in Toronto. Each morning as I ride my bike to work I pass by small groups of very agile, and very elderly men and women, going through their graceful early morning tai chi ritual to the sound of Chinese music being played on portable tape machines. They appear to have community, connected through at least one shared ritual that takes them out of their homes each day. They appear to support one another, as conveyed by the animated conversations on park benches that I witness as I ride by.

I felt a connection with Mrs. Liang that day, relating it to the homophobia that surrounded me as I grew up in that small town. Since at least my teen years, I remember a sense of dis-ease and vigilance; experiencing the world, I suspect, quite differently from those with whom I studied, worked and played. I had a secret and was ever mindful of keeping in check any clues to my real identity. Like mine, how much of this woman’s story was not shared, celebrated or understood?

I realize that this memory is full of projections. Perhaps Mrs. Liang had a great life, with close friends, morning aerobic classes at the local swimming pool and access to some sort of spiritual traditions. Who knows, with the increase of immigration to this oil rich, labour hungry
area, she may have developed a connection to others who share her experience. Regardless, my encounter with Mrs. Liang that day made me think of what it would be like for me as a gay man to age in a sort of exile, within a community whose members may be threatened by others with a different sexual orientation. Later, my parents reminded me of at least one gay man in his seventies who lives in this small town. He is a farmer. A gay farmer! I wondered, does he feel connected, engaged, and safe in this small prairie town? How is he involved with his family and communities? I was to find out soon, as several years after this conversation with my parents, I reconnected with John, the gay farmer, through this research. Surprisingly, through this study, I was about to discover that life was not so disconnected, unfulfilling and unsafe for gay men who chose to remain and to age in their rural home towns, at least for the three older gay men who I came to know over the course of this study. My black and white assumptions of exclusion and participation for gay men aging in rural areas of Alberta, Canada were to be checked. Yes, homophobia exists; yes, discriminatory structures and attitudes constrain but, like the prairie coyote, older gay men can be remarkably adaptable to hostile environments.

1.4.4 Gay Connections

My lived experience as a gay man who grew up in rural Alberta and is now aging in an urban setting is an additional driver behind my interest in aging and diversity. Developmental aging theorists provide measures from which to evaluate progress through life’s developmental challenges; however, most models, as for example, Erikson’s well-known developmental model (1963), assume a taken-for-granted linear pathway with parenting and grand-parenting as required excursions along the way. This assumed universal route to successful aging leaves many stories unaccounted for.
Aging gay men and women face oppressive attitudes, on at least two fronts, from within
and outside their gay communities. Though the experience of ageism undoubtedly shapes how
individuals from all social spheres tell their stories of aging, my sense is that the experience of
ageism within the gay community is particularly acute with its hyper glamorization of youthful
sexuality. In my experience, aging seems to be highly feared in the gay community. I am struck
with the relative invisibility of gay and lesbian seniors. I know very few older gay men, women
or old gay couples. Prior to this study, I did not read much about older LGBTs in popular queer
media. Though this is changing as the post-Stonewall gay boomers age, there are relatively few
popular films or major books featuring the lives of older gay men or women. What there are,
however, are damaging stereotypes. As Elizabeth Price suggests, “for older gay men and
lesbians, pejorative stereotypes abound” (2008, p. 1342). As example she cites the work of
Wahler and Gabbay (1997) whose review of early literature portrays older gay men as, “living
lives of rejection, shame, loneliness, isolation, poor psychological adjustment and sexual
predation on younger men” (p. 1342). This is the stereotype of the lonely homosexual or the bitter
old queen, images that as a gay man, I am all too familiar with although I have no sense of how
these stereotypes came to be. How did these images become so entrenched in my mind and in the
minds of many of my contemporaries despite several challenges from the LGBT literature as
early as 1980 (see for example, Friend, 1980)? Are they grounded in any reality? If not, where
are the stories of aging LGBTs? Why are they not celebrated? What are the markers of success
for aging gay men and women? What do they have to teach all of us?

An early memory of a conversation between myself, at the age of 19, and an older gay
man in his 70s not only highlights the impact of changing social conditions on the gay life course
but speaks to one of the valuable roles that older gay men can play in the lives of younger
people.
It was 1980 and the beginning of my coming out years. I was a young undergraduate at the University of Alberta. As an informal rite-of-passage shared by all out gay people, coming-out was an intense period of discovery and self-acceptance. At the time, a good Catholic boy, I needed to reconcile my Catholic spirituality with my experience as a gay man. I spoke with an elderly chaplain, an Irish-Catholic priest. Surprisingly, his response was one of compassion and non-judgmental validation. Acknowledging his lack of full understanding of what it means to be gay, he referred me to another older gay man, Collin, an active member of the gay Catholic community. At this point I did not know any other gay people, and was somewhat apprehensive about meeting him. As it turned out, he was very non-threatening; a retired, white haired gentleman with a fascinating story. He answered the many naïve questions that I posed and encouraged me to un-learn the misinformation about gay people that I had internalized. Acting as a guide, he introduced me to other gay men and women, kick-starting my initiation into gay culture. I will never forget his story, as it impressed upon me how much we take for granted and how precarious our security as gay men and women has been and could be again.

In his youth, Collin was in the British Army and fought during World War Two. He described a tragic scene at seeing his first lover and comrade killed in battle. Several years later, while back in England though still in the army, he was caught having sex with another man, the son of a wealthy public figure. He was charged with buggery and spent six months in jail. Shortly, thereafter he left England for Canada and eventually was able to connect with a gay community that shared his Catholic spirituality.

I recall being so moved by this story, but was incredulous. Could this really happen? I recall feeling very fortunate after hearing what Collin had experienced. Ironically, it did not occur to me at that time to consider the possibility that same-sex partnerships would, one day, be legally recognized and protected. I was to discover in speaking to my research participants that, like me, immersed within their own cultures, time and place, they had few demands or expectations of what society owed them. Same-sex marriage would never have been dreamed of in 1950, an idea that they are still working through.

This story highlights for me the role that older gay men and women can play in the lives of younger people. It speaks to the incredible hurdles that many gay people have had to overcome. It is no surprise then that many older gay men and women seek the safety of their own gay community, a community, however, that is not always welcoming. What impact does this have on the spaces available for older gay men and women to share their stories and to contribute in a way that is consistent with their abilities and values? It is this appreciation of contextually
and historically situated understanding of aging that I bring to my research while recognizing how my own social location, with its similarities and differences from my participants shapes the research process; a theme that I further explore below.

The experiences of exclusion and belonging were brought home to me after my reading of Barbara Myerhoff’s (1979) ethnography, entitled, *Number Our Days*. Myerhoff’s book provides an in-depth look at a community of old Jewish men and women living in a very poor section of Venice Beach California during the 1970s. Myerhoff comments on her discomfort at transgressing from the usual anthropologist’s examination of the *other* in returning to study her own people and, likely, her own aging. She portrays a community with much derision, debate, discontent, anger, but also a community with the strength that comes with a strong shared sense of meaning. Her reflexive accounts of the life histories of this community of older people highlighted themes of shared struggle against oppression, immigration and exile, storytelling, ritual and remembering and provided a model for my own research.

Like the older Jewish men and women in Myerhoff’s ethnography, who escaped the Russian pogroms and who headed for the promised land of America, perhaps my research is a way of coming to terms with my own self-imposed exile from the communities of my origin; the small town life and the Catholic faith community in which I was raised. My questions also express hope that as I continue to age, I will have a sense of what Lorri Neilsen (1998) described as a common desire amongst feminist researchers, of “belonging to an exciting and purposeful community” (p.266). Where will I feel both safe and connected at a potentially vulnerable time in my life? Where do others feel safe and connected? I was to discover that the men in this study remained tightly connected to their local communities while venturing beyond, at least temporarily, to seek out others like themselves. However, unlike Myerhoff’s participants, these
men struggled with their relationships with their faith-based communities, having to find ways to undo their damage, to “de-program” themselves leaving them without the life transition supports that such communities can provide.

1.4.5 Family Participation and Gay Aging Processes

As we age, families often play a significant role as support networks, while providing opportunities to share skills and resources; for our belonging needs. It is commonplace to contribute to, and receive from, families. Gay people often speak of “families of choice” (Friend, 1996) in response to alienation from biological families. These chosen families offer support and a sense of belonging. Similarly, I have a circle of very close gay and lesbian friends with whom I feel a sense of belonging; however, I am also very connected in a unique way to my nieces and nephews. Without children of my own, I have the opportunity to develop very close relationships with nieces and nephews. They have accompanied my partner and me on vacations, spent time at our house in Toronto and have learned about different ways of being in the world. Though I cannot predict what role we will continue to play in each others’ lives as we age my sense is that it will be different than that of my non-gay brothers and sister. My partner and I have also become very involved in the lives of friends and neighbours and their children. We have taken on roles as homework tutors, advocates, god-parents, babysitters and friends. Though there has been little written about the role of gay men or women in the lives of the children of friends and family members, I suspect that, what I label as gay uncling roles, may not be that unusual. I have several gay friends whose supportive families welcome their involvement in their children’s lives; however, this is not the case for all lesbians and gay people. I also have friends who have less supportive family members who do not seek the involvement of their gay siblings. The value that I place on my uncling role made me wonder how older gay men, aging in more
restrictive periods experience similar roles within their families and how these linked lives influence their experience of the aging process.

I initially assumed that rural environments would be hostile to gay men in a manner that would significantly limit their community involvement opportunities. This did not turn out to be the case. What seemed more revealing of their unique social role; however, was their involvement in the lives of their families as caregivers for parents and as engaged uncles. This led me to re-visit the literature on the concept of *generativity* (Erikson, 1963; Hostetler, 2009; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; McAdams, de St. Aubin & Logan, 1993) and aging and how this is realized in the lives of the men in this study. The lives of the three men are reason to reconsider conventional and often limiting portrayals of the estranged and un-involved older gay man and offer more positive aging role models for younger gay men and women.

1.5 **Research Purpose and Rationale**

These autobiographical fragments when re-positioned in relation to my inquiry process and my identity as a researcher reveal the sources of my research questions. My research is really, as is the case for many researchers (Cole & Knowles, 2001), about me the researcher, and the experiences that I bring to my research questions. The experiences outlined in the previous section serve to provide the reader with a sense of my starting place with respect to questions of life history narratives and meaning making, the salience of context in life course studies, and the impact of exclusion and inclusion within communities and families on social role participation. I place value on the need for greater social inclusion and appreciate the importance of providing a means for a diversity of aging voices to be heard. Critical stories need to be told, not only out of a need for individuals to make meaning out of their lives and to maintain a sense of well-being as promoted by life course/life history researchers, but for the well-being of families, communities
and societies; that is, in policy terms, for the development of social capital, realized through greater social cohesion amidst an increasingly diverse aging population. We need to know how to better live together. The wisdom gained from a diversity of stories told, re-told, reconstructed and polished by years of experience, changing conditions, constraints, opportunities and threats cannot and should not be lost. I feel, now more than ever, that in a world so burdened with material over-consumption, environmental degradation, and frightened by a rapidly aging population, we need a more balanced and sober rethinking of what is really important for living and aging well. I am not suggesting that there is one way to live or age well, but that more diversity in stories of growing old lead to more options for aging creatively. As Dana Rosenfeld (1999, 2009) has so well argued, much can be learned from the stories of aging of older LGBTs who have had to navigate the identity challenges posed by the many changing social discourses on homosexual identity over their life times. In addition to better understanding gay aging, such stories also serve to identify the common threads that knit us together as a human community and that enable us to work together towards a more equitable and just world.

Initially, my research questions focused primarily on how life stories as narrative reconstructions of one’s life course can be a mental health promoting means for identity maintenance, meaning-making and connection to others at a time in life, that is for many associated with transition, transformation, uncertainty, chronic illness and increased vulnerability. This interest relates to life storytelling as a means to greater well-being and reflects my clinical and professional background in therapeutic processes. Although the life stories told by the three men in this study clearly speak to how the process was a meaning making project for them, it is what these life narratives tell us about broader questions of the aging in context, that I am most interested.
The purpose of this study then is to examine the life course of gay men aging in rural environments in Alberta, Canada in terms of what can be learned about life course processes, particularly how sexual identity and marginalization intersect with shifting social contexts to shape the aging process with respect to engagement in community and family role opportunities. Findings are then examined as to how they reflect or challenge established explanations of life course transitions and trajectories as well as the tensions experienced between cultural influences and individual agency throughout the aging experience. As the primary unique marker of gay men in terms of what distinguishes them from others is their sexuality; that is, sexual identity, expression and sexual attraction to those of the same sex, the role of sexuality identity development in the aging process is highlighted.

Three men from two different towns in Alberta gave generously of their time to make this project possible and I am deeply grateful to them. The participants are described fully in Chapter 3, but a short introduction may be helpful here. John is now 76 and identified as a farmer for much of his life. He now lives in Drumheller, a town of about 7,000 people. John did not want to use pseudonyms seeing this as an opportunity to be more open about his story. All details of his life and geographical location are unaltered with the exception of the names of his family members who I have changed to protect their identity. Jake (not his real name) is now 80 years old and has lived in a variety of small towns throughout Alberta. He is a retired businessman and currently lives in the town I will call Westview. Luke (not his real name) is now 74 and has been a farmer all his life. He lives on his own on the original family farm. His farm is located about 15 kilometres from the same town where Jake lives. Luke and Jake are friends and are active organizers of a local group for gay men and women living in Westview. In order to protect the identity of Luke and Jake, I have used pseudonyms for places and people and have altered any identifying details of their lives or places of residence.
Beyond its relevance to theories of aging, the study has important implications for health care providers working with LGBT individuals as well as clients from other diverse backgrounds particularly with respect to therapeutic alliance building. Health care educators will find material in this study to inform awareness training on the health and social care needs of older gay men and others from diverse backgrounds. Those concerned with policy will find relevance to questions of social capital and social cohesion in terms of the unacknowledged and perhaps untapped social resource that older gay men offer.

1.5.1 Research Questions

1. *What do the life narratives of gay men aging in rural environments teach us about the influence of marginalized sexuality identity development on aging and life course processes?*

   As I am particularly interested in how the aging process is further conceptualized through a social and occupational participation lens, secondary research questions include:

   a) How do changing social contexts influence occupational choices and engagement over the life course in terms of community and family participation?

   b) How have changing social contexts influenced participation in social networks over the life course?

   c) How do participants define and experience their social networks over the life course?

   d) How does a participant’s degree of “outness” impact on their social network participation and how has this changed over their life course?

1.5.2 Research Rationale: Understanding the Issues of an Aging and Diverse Population

Largely as a result of the aging of Canada’s baby boomers who were born between 1946 and 1963 and who will be entering their 65-plus years beginning in 2011, our population is aging rapidly. Currently, twelve percent of the Canadian population is over the age of 65 in contrast to
the seven percent of the world’s population that is over the age of 65 (Chappell, Gee, McDonald & Stones, 2003). Further, the 80 years and older cohort is the fastest growing population group in Canada. Referred to as the third age, this population often requires greater health and social care; a fact many feel we are unprepared for (Baltes & Smith, 2003).

Very little is known about the life course patterns of older gay men and women, an estimated three to eight percent of the population (Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman & Landers, 2003; MetLife Maturity Institute Survey, 2010), particularly those from racialized and minority communities, though there is some indication that the aging process of gay men and women may be unique and offers a rich resource for better understanding aging in general (Hammack & Cohler, 2008; Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Rosenfeld, 1999, 2009, 2009b). For example, there is evidence to suggest (Berger, 1996; Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Kimmel, Rose & Luke, 2006) that aging gay men are particularly at risk for mental and physical health in part due to the large percentage of uncoupled singles, the impact of homophobia and the fact that most are not parents or guardians. Very few studies have examined the lives of LGBTs living in rural areas. Kennedy (2007) in his PhD dissertation on sexual identity development of rural men who have sex with men (MSM) makes reference to several studies on the lived experience of rural LGBTs. (See for example, Adam, 2000; Boulden, 2001; Cody & Welch, 1997; D’Augellie, Preston, Kassab & Cain, 2002; Kramer, 1995; Oswald & Culton, 2003; Roberts, 1992). Fellows’ (1998) groundbreaking book, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* provides contextually rich descriptive narratives of men spanning several generations with the oldest participant born in 1909. Though similar in many ways, his narratives are situated within an American context. The collected stories of Riordon in his book, *Out Our Way: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Country* (1996) provide some valuable information on the Canadian rural context, but offer little theoretical analysis of these experiences. From my reading, there is no examination of how the
rural experience of LGBTs shapes the aging process nor are any of the above listed studies framed within life course principles or theories on aging.

From a practice perspective, the mostly urban-based research suggests that older gay men and women may be reluctant to share their stories, that is, to come out as gay or lesbians at a time of increased vulnerability such as in situations requiring health or residential care (Herdt & de Vries, 2004). This may also have implications for how they participate in their social worlds. According to those in the growing field of narrative gerontology, life storytelling in the aging process can be an important way to maintain identity and social relationships during a time of changing conditions and resources (Cappeliez, O’Rourke, & Chaudhury, 2005; Gubrium, 2001; Kenyon, Clark & de Vries, 2001; Randall & Kenyon, 2004; Randall & McKim, 2008). Therefore, research is needed to examine how heterosexist environments limit or shape how older gay men share their life stories and how this in turn influences how they choose to participate in family and community. Importantly, social participation patterns are known to be an important influence on mental and physical well-being across the life span (Chappel, Gee, McDonald & Stones, 2003; Morita, Takano, Nakamura, Kizuki & Seino, 2010; Theurer & Wister, 2010; Thomas, 2010).

Though much of the literature on the mental and physical well-being of older gay men and lesbians is contradictory, recent research has begun to explore how the social networks of older LGBT shape their aging process. Researchers have discussed the unique nature of the gay community and gay support networks, the impact of ageism within and outside the community, the potential health risks associated with the relatively high percentage of single older gay men and lesbians, and the influence of changing social acceptance of homosexuality over the life span.

Not surprisingly much of the lesbian and gay literature reviewed focuses on the health and social care needs of the lesbian and gay community to the exclusion of the potential contributions of the gay community. Though some of the health related literature also includes examination of community and family involvement, it is most often concerned about contributions to the gay community and views engagement in the broader environment as problematic for many older sexual minorities (Brotman, Ryan & Cormier, 2003; Haber, 2009; Hostetler, 2009). Given the early stage of lesbian and gay studies and a long history of heterosexism this emphasis makes sense. To me, however, it indicates that it may be time to expand understandings of the various roles of older gay men and lesbians in environments not limited to the gay community, particularly as there is some suggestion that older gay men may become less involved in the gay community as they age (Hostetler, 2004). What are they doing, how are they participating and with whom? What meaning do they bring to their everyday activities and social engagement with their families and in the broader community in light of their homosexual identity and experience of heterosexism?

Though the impact of ageism is well documented with respect to aging in general (Horton, Baker & Deakin, 2007; Packer & Chasteen, 2006;), other studies suggest that the gay community with its strong youth focus may present particular barriers to community participation for older gay men and women (Clark, 2010; Hostetler, 2004; Jones & Pugh, 2005). The experience of ageism within the gay community may also limit opportunities to develop and maintain needed support networks for older gay men and women (Hostetler, 2004; Shankle, Maxwell, Katzman & Landers, 2003). Researchers have commented on the need for more empirical studies that
examine, in-depth, the lives of older sexual minorities that can expose the complexities involved in the aging process of gay men or women (Donahue & McDonald, 2005; Rosenfeld, 2009). Aging processes viewed as universal may in fact hold only limited relevance for those not part of the dominant heterosexual culture.

Queer theorists (see for example, Butler, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990), in contrast to those situating themselves in the LGBT studies camp, have been active in voicing opposition to rigid and fixed gender and sexuality categories and constructed sexual identities that limit and constrain individual choices and expression. However in their critical examination of gender and sexuality, and their call for a more fluid understanding of sexual identity, queer theorists have not adequately considered the important insights that can be gained from life course perspectives on aging. Queer culture itself must be put up to scrutiny with respect to its influence over life course choices of older gay men.

In summary, the need for research that examines the life histories of older gay men is needed, not only to improve the health and well-being of aging gay people, but to better understand how the lives of older gay men, like other stigmatized or marginalized groups, contribute to the well-being of their families and communities. This rationale reflects an occupational perspective on aging, or what I refer to as occupational aging (further defined in Chapter 2), where health and well being is understood to be a function of active social engagement. As well, health and well-being understood from this holistic and ecological perspective goes beyond a focus on individuals to consider a broader community and societal conceptualization. It is the social doings of individuals that connect the health of individuals with the health of communities. By situating this study of gay aging within a rural context, the study
distinguishes itself from other aging or LGBT research and in so doing offers new insights that highlight the role of context and community in the life course.

In this chapter, in addition to providing a rationale for this study based on existing LGBT and aging literature, I have highlighted excerpts from my own life history linking them to foundational theoretical concepts with the aim to provide the reader with a better understanding of the intersubjectivities at play in this research. By inviting the reader to engage with, and enter into, aspects of my story they are given what I hope is a transparent view of the experiential world I step from before entering into the world of the participants. I invite the reader to then travel with me into the stories of the research participants but to do so by first sharing with them my road maps and travel baggage. I see this as an important methodological task of a life history researcher, the key principles of which are outlined in detail in Chapter 3. The next chapter outlines the theories that build on and inform my understanding of the various foundational concepts outlined in this chapter. These are theories that speak to questions about aging, the life course, sexual identity and occupational and social role participation over time.
Chapter 2
Theoretical Frameworks

Photo 2. **PRAIRIE HIGHWAY AT SUNRISE**
Fall 2006

“Man encroaches on nature and then they think that they should get rid of nature because it is harming their livelihood. We know that up north in areas where there are bears, you know you have to be careful. I have heard from the farmers that the bears would kill some of their livestock. I don’t know if that was true or not but you know—I don’t care if it is a wolf or a coyote—they won’t hunt something for the sake of killing it. They kill it because they are hungry. They are not like us.”

John, 76 year old Farmer
2.1 Introduction: Guiding Frameworks and Informative Theories

My reading of the participant life stories was influenced by several established theoretical traditions including: an occupational perspective as outlined by Townsend and Polatajko (2007); the life course perspective (Elder, 1994; Elder & Kirkpatrick & Johnson, 2003; Heinz & Marshall, 2003; Settersten, 2003); post-modern gerontological perspectives (Gubrium, 2001), and queer and critical aging theories (Butler, 2004; Chappell, McDonald & Stones, 2003; Cruickshank, 2003; Katz, 2003; Minkler, 1997; Sedgwick, 1990). The work and writings of gerontologists from the humanities have also influenced my analysis and the implications I draw from these life histories, including the ideas of Ruth Ray (2000), Margaret Gullette (1997) and Thomas Cole (1992). So, I brought with me the writings and ideas of many others; I was not starting with a blank slate.

Several theoretical models and conceptual frameworks in particular, however, informed my reading of the participants’ stories and my choice of research methodology. Some frameworks have been part of my professional training as an occupational therapist and enhance understandings of the complexities of human occupation, for example, the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (CMOP-E) (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007); other and numerous theories are concerned with the aging process or sexual identity development (e.g. queer theory); still others, (e.g., social constructivism, life history research described in Chapter 4) inform epistemological and methodological aspects of this work. Though familiar with a variety of the frequently cited theories on aging (e.g. Successful Aging, Activity Theory, Continuity Theory), as a result of the participant interviews, I found that some theories were less helpful in making sense of their stories. For example, both Activity (Havighurst, 1961) and Continuity Theories (Atchley, 1989) have been criticized for limited consideration of an
historical analysis and the changing social structures that shape the aging process. As well, many of the ideas espoused by these theories have been incorporated into the life course perspective with its broad focus on the structure – agency dynamic over the life span. Similarly though queer theory was initially a primary focus of this study, it was used less than expected to interpret participant stories. Queer theory principles did, however, serve as a critical check on a tendency to essentialize gay identity. I was also drawn to other theories not previously fully explored. Aspects of generativity as originally developed by Erikson (1963), though not considered at the outset, were further explored given more recent literature pointing to their importance in the lives of older gay men and the emphasis in participant stories on their roles with family and the broader community (Hammock & Cohler, 2009). In the end, a hybrid approach emerged to make sense of the participants’ life histories in terms of what their lives say about the interplay between aging, sexual identity development, and social role engagement. This study does not serve to examine in depth any particular theoretical perspective but does problematize aspects of these models as elucidated by the participants’ life histories. Below is a brief description of how these theories offered a foundation and starting point from which to explore and make sense of the lives of gay men aging in rural environments.

2.1.1 An Occupational Perspective

Though not so much a theory as a broad frame of reference, my work as an occupational therapist clearly coloured my interactions with the older men in this study. This occupational perspective, though informed by various models (Law, Cooper, Strong, Stewart, Rigby et al., 1996; Townsend and Polatajko, 2007; Wilcock, 2006), at its most basic considers the individual and environmental processes and determinants of occupational engagement and participation in all life domains including, work, family and community. Occupational scientists and therapists view occupation as [not simply referring to career or vocational pursuits but also to] the manner
in which individuals name, structure and engage in using their time in ways that are subjectively meaningful; are socially recognized, although not always validated, within a given cultural framework and which reflect restorative, productive or self-care functions (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Within such a definition, and in keeping with the ideas put forth by narrative gerontologists (discussed below) the process of life storytelling itself can be considered a bridging occupation that can connect individuals within their communities and across cultures and generations (Pohlman, 2003; Carstensen, 1995). Indeed, in some cultures, life storytelling is also a socially sanctioned occupational role particularly ascribed to older adults and appreciated for its value with respect to maintaining community cohesion (Graveline, 1998) and passing on important life lessons (Tafoya, 1989, 1997). Though the primary aim of this study is not to explore the impact of life story telling on health and well-being, or as a community development strategy, the participants in telling their stories found the process to be a very moving and thought provoking experience. It made them think about themselves in ways that they had not in the past and provided them with a sense of making a difference in the lives of other gay people. Two of the participants came to see this story telling as another step in their life long coming out process. I have attempted to honour and validate the meaning that this process has had on the individual participants by completing for them separate life narrative summaries. These will be developed later into more stylized formats as keepsakes for those who wish this.

Additionally, however, and more central to the aims of this study, an occupational perspective played a role in the manner in which I asked questions and organized the narratives and made sense of them. As one who studies occupation, I consider the occupational aspects of aging with a keen interest in the meanings attributed to the changing occupational interests of the participants over time. In the same way that others make distinctions between biographical aging, biological aging, chronological aging (Gubrium, 2001; Kenyon, 2003; Randall, 2001), I
would suggest that there is benefit to examine, what I term, *occupational aging*. Individuals and groups express themselves and their identities through their *doings*, that is, the manner in which they occupationally engage. I argue that as age-related changes to the physical, cognitive, affective and social functioning of individuals is considered as an aspect of aging, so too can peoples’ occupational repertoires and patterns of doings be considered as they change over time and with respect to the aging process. Occupational participation and engagement has been understood to both reveal and conceal aspects of identity (Beagan & Kumas-Tan, 2008). As such, I would also argue that how one assumes an identity of *old* is expressed through the everyday occupations that individuals engage in. Individuals attribute meaning or *story* these everyday doings within an understanding, based on existing meta-narratives, of what it means to be old. As Beagan and Kumas-Tan point out, occupational pursuits may as likely serve to express an individual’s desire to reject, resist or conceal an identity. For example, participation in youthful activities by an old person may serve as a means to resist an aging identity. This aspect of *occupational aging* is similar to Butler’s (2004) queer notions of *performativity*, that is, how people *do old*, which is discussed in detail below; however, unlike performativity theory, the novel concept of *occupational aging* that I introduce here would also consider the changing patterns of peoples’ *doings* based on available opportunities, environmental constraints or changing individual abilities, values or interests.

### 2.1.2 Generativity Reconsidered

The occupational perspective outlined above is further delineated in terms of Erikson’s (1963) concept of generativity. Though Erickson developed this concept in relation to his developmental stage theory and contrasted it with stagnation in his pentultimate stage, I am discussing it here in terms of a cluster of occupational roles that link the individual with the broader community, and with future generations. Generativity concepts were further developed
by McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) and Erikson himself (1997). These ideas are re-examined through the lives of the participants and particularly in light of some important insights raised in the work of Sheung-Tak Cheng (2009) that situates generativity concepts within a broader social model. The life histories of the men in this study are particularly illuminative of generativity-social structure dynamics and raise important implications for other marginalized groups.

2.1.3 Narrative Gerontology: Life Storytelling and Social Participation

Several narrative gerontologists have had a significant influence on my thinking. The works of Brian deVries, Jay Gubrium, Gary Kenyon and Bill Randall were key influences in my decision to return to graduate school. Stephen Katz, who later introduced me to narrative gerontologists from the Humanities such as Ruth Ray, Thomas Cole, and Kathy Woodward differentiates between two different narrative traditions. The first uncritically accepts truth claims made by the storytellers themselves and the second, a more contextually-based and critical narrative perspective, considers how the social context shapes how participant stories are told (personal communication).

Narrative gerontologists speak of life narration and life storytelling both in terms of therapeutic activity (Birren & Cockran, 2001; Webster & McCall, 1999; Wong & Watt, 1991) and a social role (Pohlman, 2003; Tornstam, 2005) that one engages in, and as a way to come to understand aging (Kenyon & Randall, 2001). I am intrigued by the notion that life stories act as a necessary link or connector between individuals and their social participation roles. My lived experience as a gay man suggests that how we name our identity (i.e., tell our story) and what social groups we identify with has an impact on our occupational choices, that is, how we are afforded opportunities to engage in family, community or other social roles. As Kenyon and Randall (2001) propose, we are our stories, though the stories that we are, are a compilation of
the many stories that are handed down to us through culture, history, and religion that are then reconfigured in light of our own personalities, circumstances and sense of agency. This relationship may be particularly illustrative in the lives of gay people who share a common and unifying experience of choosing when, how and with whom to “come-out”; that is, to tell their story.

At the outset of this study, I assumed coming out decisions throughout the life span most decidedly shape who gay people engage with and how they engage with them. The participants’ narratives were to question this assumption. By gaining a better understanding of the historical and contextual influences on how older gay men tell their stories about their participation in social networks over time, this project added a more nuanced understanding of adaptive approaches to coming out and what this has meant for this older cohort of men and their occupational aging process.

Though I remain intrigued by how people story their lives or segments of their lives and how narrative constructions of their life course support attempts to make meaning of a life lived and link them to a broader community and social role, I am most interested in knowing more about the life course of older adults who diverge from taken-for-granted aging storylines. In turn, and in light of current limited gerontological explanations, descriptions and understandings of the aging experience, I believe that these storied accounts can help us better understand how social conditions, attitudes (in particular, attitudes towards sexual diversity) and contexts shape the experience of aging and the life course.

2.1.4 The Life Course Perspective: A Sensitizing Framework

Life course is the primary theoretical framework that guides my thinking. For this reason, a more in-depth description of the life course perspective is provided here. Its underlying
principles are integrated explicitly and implicitly throughout this thesis. Life course researchers in their identification of the limitations of life-stage based research (e.g., cohort effects, historical impacts, omission of the impact of individual biography on experience of old age) have raised the importance of coming to understand the aging process from a long-term, life-time perspective. One approach to studying the life course from a life-time perspective is through life narratives. An understanding of this biographical aspect of aging is useful in coming to understand the complexities and contextual features at play during the various stages of a life.

Settersten (1999) provides an historical and critical account of theoretical developments that have contributed to current understandings of the life course perspective. In highlighting the philosophical differences between the more individually focused life-span development theorists (for example, Baltes, 1997; Erikson, 1963,1980, 1997) to name a few and the broader environmental focus of life course sociologists, he and others identify the key challenge of life course researchers as the need to link individual lives with changing contexts or, in other words, linking biography with history (Elder, 1994; Gubrium, 2001; Gubrium & Holstein, 1995; Kohli, 1986).

Elder (1994) summarizes the life course perspective in five principles. Firstly, the life course perspective views aging as a lifelong process and so, any examination of one stage of a person’s life must be considered in relation to the meanings that are attributed to life events over the life course. Elder refers to these meanings as the biographical context of a life. Secondly, the life course is shaped by, and embedded in, the individual’s experience of the historical times and events that they have lived through. This may also be understood as a cohort effect. Thirdly, the timing of these historical events in the lives of the individuals experiencing them results in the same historical event having a different impact on individuals who experience them at different
times in their lives. How individuals move through socially prescribed normative sequences, for example, education, work, marriage, or retirement will also have an impact on their experience of the life course. Fourthly, the life course perspective understands that individuals do not age on their own. Each person’s experience of the life course is also shaped by the relationships in his life. That is, the actions of others have an influence on the sequencing and meaning of events in one’s life. Elder highlights the social-historical influences in an individual’s life and how these are expressed through a network of relationships including friends, family and work colleagues.

As a life course researcher, throughout this study I have necessarily considered how the lives of the research participants are linked to others in their familial, social, work and intergenerational worlds. By focusing on these interdependencies, I considered how the demands and resources in participants’ social world shape their life choices, transitions and life course trajectories. Finally, Elder views individuals as not mere passive respondents to social circumstances, but as active players in their lives. They make choices about life course options based on their understanding of available opportunities and existing constraints within their social spheres.

Settersten (1999) views the main goal of life course research to, “map changing individual lives” (p. 197). If successful, this map will link a life with the changing environment and will highlight the tensions of individual agency and structural influences. Researchers have called for a greater focus on the role of human agency (Baltes, 1997; Bengston, & Allen, 1993; Gubrium, 2001) and a need to better grasp “individuals’ perception of their environments and how these perceptions shape their actions, reactions and interactions in their environments as it is perceived, constructed and represented in the minds of individuals (Settersten, 1999, p. 197). The process of sexual identity development for the men in this study is particularly illustrative of the life course focus on agency-structure complexities.
In his review of the development of the life course perspective, Settersten (1999) comments on several foundational propositions of the life course which I believe have particular relevance for my study of older gay men. He comments on the importance of determining the extent to which lives are chronologized, institutionalized and standardized. The aging experience may be chronologized to the extent to which age or time of life determines or structures the life course. Individual attributes of the person, support networks, opportunities, and obstacles all influence how people grow, age and develop (Clausen’s, 1986). Not only have opportunities and constraints been a factor in the lives of aging gay men in terms of discrimination, but supports and role models for older cohorts were also lacking. Young gay men had to negotiate and make sense of the gay world and its intricacies largely on their own without the assistance of elders. Regarding questions of timing in the life course, for gay men, the timing of coming out is most relevant here. The relatively late coming out for the participants in this study is discussed in terms of its impact on social engagement, experience of discrimination and later life developmental markers. Institutional forces also shape the aging and developing life course through government policies and institutions (e.g., same-sex marriage legislation). Finally, the extent to which lives are standardized with respect to life course transitions and normative achievements is also of concern, a point of contrast for the lives of many gay men whose life transitions, at least in this study, reveal a highly non-standardized life course. Though Settersten asks how these processes differ according to the social spheres of family, education and work as well as personal attributes such as gender, class, and race, this study introduces sexual orientation into the mix.

Age structuring considers how societies organize and think about the aging process (Settersten, 1997). Formal age structuring takes place at the level of institutions whereas informal age structuring considers how groups and individuals segment the life course and
determine the timing and sequencing of age appropriate behaviour. The life course of older gay men might not necessarily follow the standard process. This point is of particular importance in better understanding variations on what is considered age appropriate behaviours or roles and, in so doing, uncovers common sense or normal assumptions behind the aging process while elucidating the environmental forces that shape life course trajectories.

Some have argued that the life course is becoming less structured, while others insist that there is support for the idea that state and commercial interests are further structuring the life course (Settersten, 1999). In any case, age structures are not necessarily constraining and may often in fact be considered enabling as they can provide a sense of order and predictability, making life’s many decisions less stressful. With this positive consideration of age structures in mind and without the age-structuring forces of religion, clear cultural scripts and gendered prescriptions for the life course, how do gay men maneuver the life course in a manner that does not cause undo life stress? Assumed to have a greater disconnection from family and religious structures, I questioned how older gay men negotiate this post-modern challenge. The extent to which they are disconnected from these structures, however, is disputed (Shippy, Cantor, & Brennan, 2004; MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2010).

2.1.5 Unique Considerations in the Life Course of Older Gay Men

Life historians must necessarily examine the significant historical cohort events that influence how participants story their lives. In addition to the usual significant cohort events identified frequently in the gerontology literature (e.g. WWI, WWII, The Depression), additional unique cohort events in the lives of LGBTs have included the Stonewall riots, the onset of AIDS/HIV (Donahue & Mc Donald, 2005; Grierson & Smith, 2005; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Herdt & deVries, 2004; Hostetler, 2009; Kimmel, Rose & Luke, 2006; Lovaas, Elia & Yep,
2006), and more recently the realization of AIDS/HIV as a chronic illness (Hostetler, 2009). The American dominance in this body of literature overlooks the important cohort markers for Canadian LGBTs, most importantly changes to legislation that decriminalized homosexuality in 1969, several months before the Stonewall riots, and the 1981 bathhouse raids across Canada (Kinsman, 1987). These Canadian cohort effects are considered in detail as they impacted on the life histories of the study participants.

It would be misleading to conclude that these historical events independently determine the available discursive options available for gays and lesbians. Life historians, in their examination of individual lives, expect complexity knowing that it is also through one’s social and geographical location within families, communities and cultures that the impact of such events is mediated (Settersten, 2003). As the stories of these men illustrate, older men coming of age in rural communities during the middle of the last century had very different levels of exposure to collective discourses and ideas than those living in urban and more cosmopolitan settings.

In my experience, aging has most often been discussed and understood by health care providers within the limited realm of biological aging. Equally important are the psychological and social aspects of aging. The ecological view of the life course perspective as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1995) highlights how changing lives and, by extension, shifting characteristics of generational cohorts are not only shaped by changing environments, but also shape their environment. Individuals and groups shape their environments through the social roles in which they participate. Interestingly, Nydegger (1986) actually refers to the life course as the role course (Nydegger, 1986). Hagestad and Neugarten (1985) also comment on the socially created, socially recognized and shared understanding of age-related role transitions that shape the life
course. This ecological perspective resonates with the occupational perspective on aging outlined above. As later discussed in the life histories in this study, individual actions and processes are not only a function of person and environment factors, but those actions in themselves shape the individual and the social or physical environment. The visibility of gay lives can and does shift possibilities for an aging society.

Overall, the emphasis conveyed in my reading on the life course perspective and related research informed by the life course perspective assumes a taken-for-granted heterosexual life course. For the most part, the life course literature is silent on the impact of sexual orientation and assumes traditional male and female gender roles. Entire books on the life course make no mention of alternative forms of relationships while explicitly focusing on the coupled lives of men and women and how the timing of work, family, marriage and procreation shape the timing of life course trajectories (for example see, Heinz & Marshall, 2003). Missing are discussions on the role of chosen families, alternative intimate relationship formation, the timing of the coming out process, the impact of gender non-conformist occupational interests or childlessness. With respect to sexuality in particular, there is little attention paid to the impact of discrimination on life choices and trajectories or the relationship between sexuality identity development and the aging process. There may be cracks in this tradition, however, if the recent publication of a comprehensive work on sexual identity development using life course principles (Hammack & Cohler, 2009) is any indication. Hammack and Cohler highlight the work of numerous researchers who are beginning to examine some of these missing pieces within a life course framework. This study extends the life course discussion on some of the missing pieces identified above.
Outside of the life course literature, the manner in which gay and lesbian family and friendship circles differ from the mainstream has been well documented (Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Kimmel, Rose & Luke, 2006), and would seem to significantly shape the timing and meaning of life choices, transitions and trajectories. Missing though is a theoretical framework that explains why and how these unique considerations are important to larger questions of aging and sexual orientation. I turned to queer theory as a possible source of enlightenment. I was to discover however, that aging as a focus of study has been largely neglected by queer theorists, although, the ideas put forth in queer theory on the role of sexuality and gender on social functioning and identity do have relevance and do offer, if mainly in the form of a critical lens, some important contributions to research into the life course. Indeed, queer theorists’ insights into the discursive aspects of sexual identity development are particularly useful. I now turn to an introduction to the basic ideas behind queer theory.

2.1.6 Queer Theory and a Critical Perspective

Though I initially struggled with the relevance of queer theory to this study in its highly abstract and anti-subjectivist epistemology, it does offer a frame from which to better understand how the sexual identity development of the study participants within changing, historically situated discursive environments influenced the manner in which they engaged with family and communities. The critical lens offered by queer theorists not only speaks to the role of public and academic discourse in creating others but also considers individual resistance to this discourse. Thus in this research, queer theory helps to articulate the relevance that a study of gay men aging in rural environments has for a broader audience interested in the aging process.

My work history has instilled in me the belief that the world affords inequitable and limited occupational opportunities for older adults, particularly those living with disabilities. The
inaccessible ways that homes, communities and institutions are created can disconnect older adults from participation in meaningful social activities. I view the barriers to greater community participation for older adults to be largely a function of exclusionary environments and policies and less to individual limitations, though undoubtedly a function of the interplay between the two. I started this project motivated by a desire to go beyond the individualistic focus of occupational therapists and to consider how seniors from minority backgrounds, including sexual minorities, must first overcome the limitations of discrimination before they can ever feel safe to participate. Findings from this study, however, have altered my understanding of what it means to overcome the limitations of discrimination. First, however, a bit of background on the development of queer theory and its relationship with LGBT studies and aging.

Queer theory has its various streams which reflect different political and theoretical emphases, but in common with all, is the understanding that queer theory is about resistance. It is about resistance to rigid notions of gender and sexual identity. Queer theory challenges labels such as gay, lesbian, homosexual or heterosexual. Queer theorists view such labels as limiting the dynamic and fluid nature of sexuality (Lovaas, Elia & Yep, 2006). Some theorists argue that queer theory is about challenging all rigid categories and dualisms. To queer a domain, a social sphere or an academic discourse is to challenge taken-for-granted social categories and essentialist thinking (Butler, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theory is skeptical of any model of development that is based on essential and sequential stages (Bacon, 2006), leaving open for critique many of the ideas behind psychologically-informed age theories. And so queer theorists and activists speak of queering religion (Wilcox, 2006), queering the academy (Bacon, 2006) and most importantly perhaps, queering sexuality (Angelides, 2006; Gammon & Isgro, 2006). As such, to queer aging, would be to read the aging literature through the lens of sexuality and gender, but to also challenge dualist assumptions (e.g. good vs. bad, successful vs. unsuccessful
aging, male, vs. female aging) and essentialist understandings of the normative stages and categories that are fundamental to many theories on aging. This study, to a certain extent then, is an attempt at queering aging.

Queer theory grew out of LGBT studies and the activist politics of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. LGBT studies, like other civil rights movements, developed within an identity politics agenda focused on making visible the lives and struggles of lesbian and gay people (Angelides, 2006; Butler, 1994; Fellows, 1998; Kirsch, 2006; Wilcox, 2006). More recent sociological literature has begun to focus on the lives of older LGBTs and continues to share this perspective (Bergling, 2004; Cruz, 2003; Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Kimmel, Rose & Luke, 2006). This study reflects this agenda in its primary objective to make visible the lives of older gay men. Though this aim remains significant, I believe this study of queer lives has broader implications. The aim of LGBT studies and activist efforts continues to be the gaining of equal human rights. LGBT studies, situated largely within the social sciences, draw on what queer theorists refer to as an essentialist notion of sexual identity (Butler, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990). Studies on the coming-out process, the experience of discrimination, epidemiological studies of sexual practices, sociodemographic factors (Lovaas, Elias, & Yep, 2006) and health issues (Donahue & McDonald, 2005; Hostetler, 2004; Rawls, 2004) characterize studies focused on revealing the unique lived experience of gay men and lesbians.

Queer theory challenges many of the cherished views of LGBT researchers starting with the well-known post-structuralist and post-modern thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Foucault (1980) introduces the notion of regulative discourse and identifies how the institutions of religion, law and medicine through their control of the languages of discourse reinforce social control. Sexuality has for whatever reason been the focus of social control
efforts for centuries. Building on these postmodern ideas, the writings of Eve Sedgwick (1990) and Judith Butler’s (1994, 2004) performativity theory stimulated a debate within LGBT studies on essentialist readings of gay and lesbian identity and the function of power and discourse in constructing LGBT identities (Powell & Carey, 2007). My interpretation of Butler’s performativity theory understands identity development to be a result of the power conveyed through dominant discourses and regulative structures that offer limited options for performing social roles or identities often though linguistic means. Gay, lesbian and gendered identities are offered as deviant minority options. These minority options are constructed so as to maintain masculinist and heterosexual interests by normalizing them (Butler, 1993; Powel & Carey, 2007) an idea that is well illustrated in the story of one of the participants, as he did not embrace a gay identity until relatively late in life.

Queer theorists speak of multiple sexualities as opposed to dualistic notions of male, female sexuality or binary understandings of homo- and heterosexuality. They also challenge the idea of an essentialist homosexuality, arguing that normative homosexuality can be as limiting and oppressive as compulsory heterosexuality (Durber, 2006). The very different ways in which the men in this study expressed and experienced their sexuality and their difference speaks to this queer principle and is a reminder of the existence of homosexualities and the diversity of life experiences and identities within the gay population.

Stein and Plummer (1994) identify the key principles of queer theory as: 1) sexuality and sexual power is expressed in all levels of social life, is expressed discursively and reinforced through boundaries and binary divides; 2) sexual and gender identity categories and indeed all categories need to be problematized so as to displace identification and knowing; 3) rejection of civil rights strategies as with LGBT studies in favor of a politics of “carnival, transgression, and
parody, which allow a deconstruction and re-reading of texts; 4) and the examination of the role of sexuality in all domains, especially those viewed as essentially heterosexual or non-sexual.

Others view the aim of queer theory as engaging issues of identity, normativity and sexual fluidity (Bennet, 2006), to challenge hetero-normative constructions of sexuality (Angelides, 2006), and to destabilize identities both past and present (Butler, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990). Similarly, Jen Bacon (2006), views the purpose of queering as a set of practices linked to post-structuralism where, “cultural norms are tested, played with, and even turned upside down in the interest of challenging the very idea of normal” (p. 259). Bacon further differentiates the aims of LGBT studies and queer studies where:

If LGBT Studies is a progressive campaign to “de-other” lesbians and gays by creating safe spaces in the institution, the curriculum, and the classroom for lesbian and gay bodies, queer theory is a progressive campaign to “re-other” everything in the culture that has occupied a position of privilege, power, or normalcy, starting with heterosexuality. (p. 259)

From this perspective, then, queer theory and queer studies are not solely about the examination of the lives of LGBTs, but about re-interrogating many social domains with a sexuality (and gender) lens. Sasha Roseneil (2004) echoes this perspective in calling on social scientists to make a conscious effort to:

Think outside and beyond heterosexual familial relations, and allowing lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and all those whose lives transgress heteronormative assumptions a central place in our analysis. (p.410)

One might question however, the unique contribution of queer theory when feminists have, for years, critiqued theory, research and policy from a gendered lens. Though feminist theorists have concerned themselves primarily with gender and to a lesser extent sexuality (Cruikshank, 2003), Stein and Plummer argue that they have conflated the two with the result that the role of sexuality in everyday interactions is invisible. Queer theorists, however, continue to debate the primary object of queer studies vis-à-vis feminist research as both, to some extent,
have claimed some ownership over the related domains of sex, sexuality and gender. Earlier queer theorists attempted to piece apart the notions of sex as a biological indicator and gender as a socio-cultural concept; however, as later established it may be artificial and limiting to separate gender issues from sex and sexuality given that they are so closely interrelated (Butler, 1994). For this reason, though sexuality is what often defines queer studies, it is also examined in relation to questions of its social expression in terms of gender. Given the integration of many critical feminist ideas into the development of queer theory, I have chosen not to immerse myself in a study of feminist approaches to aging, though feminist ideas are certainly evident.

It remains, though, that queer studies, while interested in the intersections of race, culture, gender, etcetera, it is with their sexuality lens that they may have most to offer the field of gerontology. This study responds to this offering and attempts to pull apart the role that sexual identity plays in life transitions, trajectories and life course decisions in the lives of a select group of older gay men.

2.1.6.1 The Development of Queer Theory and its Relationship to LGBT Studies and Aging

Written over a decade ago by Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer (1994) the article entitled, "I Can’t Even Think Straight": Queer Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology, has been fundamental to my understanding of the potential usefulness of employing a queer theory approach to the study of the lives of aging gay men and indeed people of all sexual orientations. Although queer theory, at some level, would not seem to add anything different than postmodern critiques of social theory and social constructivist understandings of identity development, its focus on sexuality and, for some, the inseparable combination of sexuality and gender, provide a novel and much needed re-reading of aging and social science texts. As discussed above queer theory, unlike LGBT studies, does not start from a focus on gay and
lesbians as a deviant minority but rather interrogates sexual categories across the board. The construction of heterosexuality is as much up for examination as is homosexuality. As well, a sexualized lens, starting from an appreciation of the contributions of sexual nonconformity is not just concerned with the lived experience of sexual minorities, but is concerned with the role that sexuality plays in all social domains. For example, how are the fields of education, economics, religion or in fact aging (hetero)sexualized? Stein and Plummer (1994) cite the work of Michael Warner in stating that the goal of queer theory is, “to make theory queer and not just to have a theory about queers” (1991, p. 18). Though the work of queer theory was to go beyond an examination of the margins and to “de-centre” theory, according to Plummer, it has yet to realize this. Thompson (2004), however, in his observation of the recent growing literature on queer and gender studies, is hopeful of this body of literature’s potential to add to understandings of the social construction of femininities and masculinities and their intersection with sexuality and aging.

Queer theory would conceivably problematize any category of age and indeed any essential notion of an identity based on age. Old age as an identity unto itself may be allusive. In his presentation, Doing Research on Aging When Nobody is Old, Stephen Katz (2008) illustrates this point well. Katz describes an attempt to interview older adult members of a seniors’ gated community where to his amusement and perhaps frustration, no one admitted to being old, though they were quick to identify others in their community who definitely were. Queer theorists would then seem to present us with this similar dilemma in their rejection of essentialist notions of identity. In this study, however, the life narrative of John is particularly illustrative of the interplay and tensions between questions about aging as a gay man understood as a process and the experience of being an older gay man. For John, despite his efforts to resist this identity label, society imposes it and responds to him as an older man. Queer theorists, for the most part
silent on issues of aging and dismissive of subjective descriptions of experience, would do well to better consider the subjective experiences of older queer people in advancing their ideas. Old people have a life to look back on, one with a view to better understand the long-term consequences of previous decisions and to reflect on the durability of identity, sexuality and essential selves.

People make decisions, conscious or otherwise, about their relationship between their own sexual desire and the discourses available to make sense of that desire (Hammack & Cohler, 2009). Similarly, queer theorists view identities as being structured relationally and as such are open to change as the various relational influences in one’s life change (Angelides, 2006). Relational influences may include family and friends, but also the relational influences of policy, social attitudes and discourses. In this point the similarity with the life course principle of linked lives is clear. As illustrated in the stories told in this study, the virtual lack of public discourse on same-sex attraction may have offered a protective shield for identity development for those entering childhood prior to the war in a way that later moralistic, or pathology-based discourses did not. Similarly, rural environments, as revealed in the life narratives, would seem to differ from urban environments in terms of their discursive influences and the impact of key LGBT cohort markers.

Queer theory as outlined above and within an aging context would aim to queer the categories and stages associated with aging theories with a particular focus on the role of sexuality in constructing notions of aging. This queer sensibility has offered a revised view of my own study’s purpose in going beyond simply making visible the lives of older gay men, to an examination of how the lives of older gay men, reveal queer critiques of normal aging. Though many queer theorists would dismiss the value of subjective accounts of identity, I believe there is
value in considering how queer theory concepts resonate with the everyday-life challenges of very real gay men and women. Older gay men do exist outside of theories about them and arguably experience more than their share of environmental constraints to a successfully lived old age. In this regard, the empirically grounded knowledge of life course researchers can help us better understand to what extent sexual nonconformity has shaped the very real lives of older gay men. Queer theories need to be interrogated from the standpoint of empirical observations.

Queer theorists are rather silent on the insights of the aging process in understanding the complexities associated with sexuality and gender. In a recent overview of foundational queer theory writings (Lovaas, Elia & Yep, 2006) there is no mention of the experience of aging and its implications for queer theory. For a theory based on the notion of fluidity of identity which implies change over time, examinations of the life stories of aging gay men and women would seem most relevant. Though a growing body of work has been done with LGBT seniors (Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Hammack & Cohler, 2009; Kimmel, Rose & Luke, 2006), these studies have not been framed within a queer theory perspective and so have not added to its theoretical development.

### 2.1.7 Frameworks and Theories in Summary

Numerous theories helped me to make sense of the narratives that I have co-constructed with my participants and to guide the conceptualization of the study. Each of these theoretical frames contributes to what I believe is a unique collection of frameworks. The life course perspective has offered a structure and a means of organizing my findings. The narratives are loosely organized around life course transitions. Insights from narrative gerontology inform the study by providing models for narrative development and for interpreting narrative themes and meanings. The occupational and generativity perspectives provide an occupational lens through
which to examine the changing nature of the doings of aging, that is occupational aging and the occupational roles engaged in by older adults that impact on their families and communities. Queer theory offers particular insights into the complex dynamics associated with sexual identity development and an important critical perspective.

Though each theoretical framework provides important insights into aspects of the lives of the men in this study, no single theory, in itself is sufficient to explain and to honour the complex lives of these men. Earlier and preliminary efforts on this project, in fact, were aimed at doing quite the opposite. Initially and perhaps naively, I planned to explore the dialectic between life course, aging and queer theory. I hoped to critique queer theory in terms of its ability to explain the lives of aging gay men. However, I found myself force-fitting aspects of the participants’ stories into queer theory concepts. It felt forced and contrived. The men’s lives were somewhat artificially serving Theory. I abandoned this aim, which allowed the men’s lives to be considered in a less constrained and contrived manner. In a more fluid and emergent manner, I felt less compelled to have the men’s lives fit one theory. I allowed their stories to speak to a variety of perspectives making use of multiple theoretical frameworks to make sense of their life histories. Clearly, all lives are complex and cannot be expected to fit neatly into a single theory.

This discussion of theories that inform my understanding of the aging process is underpinned methodologically by a life history perspective. In the following description of methodology, I describe theories underlying my methodology as well as the more concrete task of outlining the actual methods used to elicit participant narratives.
Chapter 3
Methodology and Theories on the Construction of Knowledge

Photo by Barry Trentham

PHOTO 3. MEETING COYOTE ON THE FARM
August 2008

“ I don’t know much about them
I think they’re loners. ”

80 Year Old Woman
3.1 Introduction: Ways of Coming to Know the Experience of Aging

I have introduced the life course perspective as it relates to the what of the study of aging; more specifically a study of the life course of gay men aging in rural Canadian environments. This chapter considers how to study the life course using an approach that is epistemologically and methodologically consistent. Life history research methodology, its underlying assumptions, purposes, methods, guiding principles and indicators of quality, is described as an approach consistent with the purposes of life course inquiry and the value system that I bring to the research process.

There appear to be two main schools of life course research methods. Settersten (1997) comments on the meaning and narrative school, most commonly linked to European researchers who use detailed qualitative life histories to examine the meanings that individuals attribute to past events and how they make sense of life as well as how this changes over time. Much of the work by gerontologists referenced in Chapter 2 also reflects this approach (for example the work Gubrium, 2001; Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Randall, 2004; Rosenfeld, 1999, 2008, 2009 to name but a few). Another school emphasises larger scale studies using epidemiological and longitudinal studies to examine demographic changes over time and their associated contextual influences. Needless to say, my study is informed by the former narrative school though with a focus not solely on individual meaning making, but in addition, on how storied accounts of a life, speak to historical, political, social and other broad environmental influences. This added emphasis distinguishes a life history approach to the study of lives from more conventional narrative inquiry.
3.2 Linking Purpose to Methodology

My interest in linking individual aging experiences within larger contextual influences reflects both the influence of a life course perspective on aging (Elder, 1994; Settersten, 2003) and the ability of life histories to “place theoretical understanding in a practical light, making it possible to bridge gaps between understandings from micro and macro perspectives” (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995, p. 117). I believe as do others (Chapman, 2005, Randall & Kenyon, 2004; Rosenfeld, 1999) that diversity in life stories in terms of ethnicity, sexuality or religion adds to collective understanding of the complexities of an historically and contextually-based understanding of the aging process. And so I chose a life history approach that makes visible the lives of people like the participants in this study, whose life stories have seldom been told. The life history methodology also provides the framework from which to examine the contexts (i.e., historical, discourses, cultural, geographic, etc.) that shaped their stories. Though there are many angles from which to study aging, for example, biological aging, psychological aging, an occupational aging lens bounds my life history focus on occupational engagement and participation in family and community roles. This focus fits within a broader social capital perspective and is motivated by my belief that there is much to be gained from understanding how older gay men can contribute to society over the life course, a value shared by narrative gerontologists, discussed in Chapter 2 who highlight the social value of life storytelling (Carstensen, 1995; Pohlman, 2003; Tornstam, 2005).

A dominant contextual constraint in the lives of many sexual minorities is the experience of oppression and discrimination. Within a context of discrimination, Kenyon and Randall (2001) highlight the concern that much wisdom may be lost when both different ways of telling stories (styles, discourses) and different stories (content themes) remain hidden. Their
observation was further incentive for my use of a life history method to elicit stories of gay aging. Although I went into the interviews with a desire to better understand how discrimination shapes the aging process, the participants did not frame their stories in terms of discrimination. In fact, only one participant used the term.

A life history approach requires the researcher to engage in a reflexive process where participant stories are elicited, understood and interpreted in relation to the story of the researcher (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Plummer, 2001). Researching aging has demanded that I consider my own fears, expectations, hopes and desires as it relates to my aging process and as such how these shape the questions I ask as well as the lens through which I analyze participant life stories. My choice of life history methodology also reflects my natural inclination for collaborative work and the joy I experience during moments of shared discovery—certainly the case with this project.

My memories of growing up gay in Alberta were constantly evoked during the interviews. Rather than bracket these out as would be the directive within some other qualitative methods, I wove my autobiographical memories into the interpretive process in a manner that makes transparent to the reader how my story influences the research findings and process. I found that aspects of my life history often contrasted with those of the participants highlighting, among other things, how different historical contexts can shape experience. Though I have woven autobiographical material throughout this dissertation, mostly with respect to gay identity issues, my starting location in terms of values and beliefs, professional discourses and theoretical perspectives also informs my interpretation of participant stories and is outlined below.
3.2.1 Social Construction of Knowledge

By valuing the process of co-discovery, I am drawn to a social-constructionist understanding of how reality is understood and how we come to know; an assumption consistent with a life history approach. Life historians share the view with narrative gerontologists that we come to know through language. Language is understood to be basically metaphoric and storied (Kenyon, Clark & deVries, 2001; Nelson, 2003). Although language is storied, as the poststructuralists and queer theorists remind us, narratives should not be viewed as reflections of reality, but function to create our realities (Denzin, 1997). Life does not happen in clean, neat and unified stories but, rather, in disconnected fragments; therefore any attempt to unify experience in tidy narratives is false (Smith, 1994). I take what Gubrium (2001) calls the middle road with respect to this postmodern critique. He states that “institutions, organizations narratively mediate contemporary life through spheres of shared meaning and it is through these organizations that we seek community” (p.20) a view echoed by Linda Alcoff’s (2000) critique of rigid queer theorists’ rejection of any real experience of a shared identity. The spheres of shared meaning that Gubrium speaks of are our co-constructed, cultured stories that bind us to one another and help us make sense of our lived experience. We make meaning and develop new understandings through the stories that we tell. We create stories and are created by the stories that we live within and the contexts that afford opportunities and impose constraints on how and when to tell our stories (Nelson, 2003). I believe that the stories that we tell about ourselves are not fixed and vary depending on many factors, but primarily on who is listening.

3.3 Life History Guiding Principles and Components

As a life history researcher, unlike in approaches that rely on tools and measures or even brief structured qualitative interviews or surveys, I am the research tool. For this reason, the
importance of reflexivity in the research process is key; that is, knowing the self in terms of how my questions, life experiences and values shape the research process and interpretations. Life historians, therefore, value relationship building, inter-subjectivity and the establishment of a genuine and respectful concern for research participants. In accordance with these challenges my research process was guided by a set of life history research principles outlined by Cole and Knowles (2001). These principles guided my information gathering process, analysis, interpretation and representation processes as outlined below.

3.3.1 Relationality

As co-constructors of a life history, participants and researchers come together in relationship. The nature and depth of this relationship colours the quality of the process and outcome of the study. Relationality speaks to the importance of developing respect and trust in a manner that deeply honours the person (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In contrast to more conventional qualitative approaches, contemporary life history breaks down the barriers between researchers and researched. Distance, formality and clearly defined boundaries do not characterize this kind of research. Practices that reinforce the historical hierarchical power relations between researchers and research participants are to be acknowledged and avoided. The nature of the research relationship can never be outlined in advance, but is fluid and constantly renegotiated as the project advances.

With all three participants, the level of vulnerability in their responses and in my comfort in raising issues that were more intimate or perhaps even aspects of their life story that were contradictory was more evident in the latter stages of the research process. As might be noted in the life histories, the level of detail and insight conveyed by the stories varies as the participants varied in how forthcoming they were with information. My relationship with John had a kick-
start, due in part, no doubt, to the fact that we were raised in the same town and share a similar religious background. My interaction with Jake reflects his more matter-of-fact personality. He was also more concerned with confidentiality. Luke’s comfort with the level of confidentiality also changed over the course of the interviews. He became much more engaged in reflecting on his life, and actually wrote a short biography. He became very comfortable sharing intimate aspects of his sexuality.

I attempted to downplay my role as university researcher, and engaged the participants as fellow gay men. I was open about my own life history and rural roots. Jake conveyed to me after our first interview that he felt very comfortable with me and that he was pleasantly surprised to see that I was a regular guy.

3.3.2 Mutuality

This principle assumes that all parties engaged in a life history project share mutual interest in the outcomes of the research project. Both parties ideally should come to see themselves as collaborators. As such, questions of risk, confidentiality, choices of research information sources, and representation formats are negotiated together. This principle clearly has implications for the process in which ethical considerations are considered. Decisions that are pre-determined by the researcher on such things as managing information or representing life narratives are not seen as supportive of this principle. Roles, agendas and responsibilities within the collaborative project are openly discussed and re-discussed as the collaborators engage in the research process.

The challenges with respect to this principle were realized very soon into the project. I asked each participant to tell me what they hoped to get out of the project. All three had different expectations. Jake was the clearest in stating that he was doing it simply to help someone out and
that his story would hopefully help out other gay men. He had no desire to have his own copy of a finished life story. Like Jake, Luke was motivated to help out others, but also welcomed the opportunity to use the experience to reflect on his own life. He had no thoughts on the final format of his life story, but did in fact write his own biography, with no other expectations for the eventual audience. He did not feel the need to share his story with family members. Though Luke is quiet about his sexuality with family and non-gay friends, he did at one point suggest that this project may be his final coming out to a larger group. John was the most involved in the research process in terms of reviewing transcripts and reviewing drafts of his life story as well as his interest in reading the full dissertation. He was also eager to have some concrete product in the form of a written life story that he could use to give to his friends and family. Like Luke, he saw this project as a vehicle for his own personal growth and as a means to more fully complete his coming out process with his friends and family. With respect to mutuality, questions of confidentiality were discussed frequently. I was very conscious that I was working with men who, as they say, “don’t flaunt it.” I wanted to be as clear as possible about the possibilities of their identity being exposed.

Two public presentations given while this project was in process, one at the Canadian Association of Gerontology (Trentham, 2008), and another at the Institute on Aging and the Life Course at the University of Toronto (Trentham, 2009) meant that I needed to have another discussion with participants about confidentiality. They knew that the session would be web-cast and that I could not necessarily know who would be watching. Both Luke and John were unconcerned and preferred in fact to have their real names used. In discussions with Jake, we both agreed that given his degree of desired anonymity, I would use a pseudonym and change the name of the town where he currently lives. Due to the intersections between Luke’s and Jake’s story, in order to maintain Jake’s anonymity, I had to use a pseudonym for Luke as well. The
participants were also engaged in conversations about their comfort with having a transcriber, who had completed an oath of confidentiality, aware of their story. They were all adamant that this would not be a worry for them. Though they were also informed of the slight chance that email conversations could not be fully secure, though this form of communicating was infrequent (e.g., follow-up thoughts from conversations), they were unconcerned and occasionally chose to email me their thoughts. Luke was given the opportunity to use password protected files when reviewing drafts of his life narrative summary, but chose not to. So in many ways, apart from Jake, these life histories presented an opportunity for the participants to break through their own apprehensions about being known publicly as gay.

3.3.3 Empathy

The principle of empathy speaks to the aspiration of the research collaborator to realize inter-subjectivity or a shared understanding of what and how each person’s history, social location, values and other personal characteristics shape the course and outcome of the research project. This relates to the often discussed notion of reflexivity in qualitative research but is not limited to questions of how the researcher’s social location shapes the research, but in addition how the dynamic of the collaborative relationship affects the research.

I was very aware that with John, in particular, his telling and my reading of his story was highly influenced by my shared history living in the same small town as John and the fact that he knew my parents. Though he was assured of confidentiality, I would imagine that how he told his story was shaped by this shared history. He made frequent references to people and places that I may have known to make clear his point. In this way, there may have been more short-cuts or references used to convey meaning. In fact my first interpretation of John’s story makes reference to its similarity with the Jesus story. The telling of his story tells of a person who in
many ways lived out the values as espoused by Christianity; a lifestory of service and
selflessness. Was this retelling in some way, consciously or not, a reflection of a deep-seated
desire to tell a life story that is framed by what is thought to be a life well-lived according to
Christian values and grand narrative? Did my presence as the son of his fellow church going
peers add to this? Did he have my parents in mind when telling his story? I have no clear answer
to this but in some way our shared history would have had an impact on the interview dynamic.

Similarly, no doubt, my own interest in a role I refer to as Uncling comes through in this
research and likely influenced my questioning of Luke’s and John’s family roles as well as how I
have portrayed these roles. As a co-construction, it is our shared exploration of these life stories,
a mix of subjectivities, that reveals something true and meaningful and useful for others to use.

3.3.4 An Ethic of Care

Finally, life history researchers must aspire to what Cole and Knowles (2001) name as an
ethic of care. Within this ideal, the researcher conveys unconditional respect and sensitivity
towards their research participants. The manner in which decisions are made, the choice of
language used, the place and timing of interviews and the researcher’s response to emotionally
charged moments should reflect this concern for the well-being of the research participant. This
requires frequent check-ins to monitor the impact of the researcher’s approach on the participant.

I made every effort to meet with the participants at times and places that were convenient
for them, that is, usually their homes. They all had an opportunity to review drafts of transcripts,
though only John chose to, as well as a narrative summary of their life history. Corrections and
additions, deletions were made to the summaries according to their directives. They were asked
the question, “Does this narrative ring true with how you see yourself?” In all cases, with minor
changes, they answered with an emphatic, “Yes”, with two participants telling me that, “You’ve
hit the nail on the head!” Luke reviewed his life narrative closely and suggested changes and deletions which he felt no longer were representative of important aspects of his life.

I was very aware that the participants were sharing very intimate details with me. I felt honoured to be hearing their stories. They trusted me with their stories. I felt the responsibility of holding their stories and was sensitive to the many emotions that, especially in the case of John were being aroused in the telling of their stories. On a few occasions, in between interviews and during long stretches of no contact, I checked in with John, who was most heavily invested in the project, to let him know that I still had his story in mind and would fill him in on progress to date. Luke also became more engaged with the project as it moved forward. He was most active in writing about aspects of his life and sharing them with me via email.

On several occasions, I felt it necessary to outline that although I aimed to ensure their approval of their life narratives and to honour their role as co-constructors of their life narrative, as a researcher I have the responsibility for the analysis and interpretation of their narrative. I informed them that my interpretation may differ from their own.

The principles outlined above informed the entire research process including the manner in which information was gathered analyzed, interpreted, written and represented.

As per the life history components outlined by Cole and Knowles (2001, p. 59) together with the participants, I explored their lives by, “recounting memories of experiences and the meanings that they attribute to them.” The manner in which I write this dissertation and the knowledge translation activities that I hope follow speak to Cole and Knowles’ fourth principle of life history research which seeks a re-presentation of the participants’ story in a manner that,
“honours the individual, celebrates a life lived, while raising to consciousness important
understandings about the value of the life and its relation to larger questions of society” (p. 60).

Building on these components and linking them to the language of a life course
perspective on aging, a life history project seeks to make sense of how the political, social and
cultural contexts shape the life course transitions, trajectories and relationships of individuals and
how this, in turn, illuminates understandings of the micro-macro dynamic of the aging process
over time. Importantly, as with any historical approach, as a life history researcher, I am
particularly interested in an examination of the past in terms of its significance and meaning in
the present as well as its implications for the future of individuals, organizations, communities
and society. Further, as a life course researcher I hope to reveal through the lives of these
individuals how historical changes shape lives while at the same time illustrating the role of
individual agency in life course decisions.

With this concern for understanding the contextual influences on individual lives and,
correspondingly, social change over time, as a life history researcher I asked contextual
questions, observed participants in real life situations and, on a few occasions, included thoughts
of other people in the participants’ social circle to further appreciate the complexity of the
contextual factors in each participant’s life. On one occasion I had the opportunity to attend a
lesbian and gay social gathering in which two of the participants were active participants.

Given that the issue of same-sex attraction is loaded with questions related to: morality
and religion; culture and ethnicity; discrimination and public policy; rejection and family and
community experiences; as well as gender expectations and occupational choices, my life history
interviews necessarily needed to ask questions that elicit information about these contextual
domains.
3.3.5 The Life History Information Gathering Process

I developed the life histories of three older gay men living in Alberta between August 2008 and January 2010. With the exception of an introductory meeting completed with two of the three participants, the conversations were done individually in their homes. The interviews lasted anywhere between two and five hours. The conversations were starting points for my own individual exploration of the geographical, historical social and political contexts in which the participants have lived their lives. Aspects of the participants’ stories also triggered my own memories and insights about growing up gay in Alberta during the 1960s and 1970s. As I grew up at a relatively more socially liberal time than that of my participants, these autobiographical components serve to further contrast and highlight contextual shapers of a gay life course.

Together with the participants and over the course of our meetings, I facilitated a process of constructing a series of narratives using interview transcripts and other collected materials. Several participants also chose to send written vignettes by email. This information was also included as data as well as any email dialogues resulting from these written vignettes.

Prior to the initiation of interviews, participants were given a reflection guide, which outlined several themes that I hoped to explore. The first part of the interviews was focused on developing a rough time line of participants’ life course followed with more in-depth discussions about the motivating values, circumstances, experiences, etcetera that resulted in a more complete picture of the participants’ lives.

Participants were asked to reflect on specific themes related to the study and to discuss any photos, personal archival materials (e.g. membership cards, family photos), documents or symbolic objects that represent key contexts, persons, barriers, supports, and/or activities which they identified as illustrative of their social roles including family and community participation.
and associated contexts. Participants were invited to create short, written or taped memories to further facilitate our shared explorations into their life histories.

### 3.4 Analysis and Interpretation

Though I accept that there is an external reality that can be touched, observed and experienced, I believe that individuals make sense of these experiences through their own histories, locations, values and personal theoretical positions. I also believe that reality is not fixed, but is in an ongoing stage of transformation and change (Graveline, 1998; Tafoya, 1997). This implies then that there will be more than one interpretation of reality and that this interpretation can change within the same individual over time and that the intended audience can also have an impact on how a piece is interpreted (Cole & McIntyre, 2004). And so, in this study, I do not seek to draw generalizable conclusions about the *Old Gay Life*, nor do I believe that mine is the most accurate interpretation of the life histories of the three men in this study. I do hope, however, that the stories told to me over the past two years illustrate, challenge or further flesh out thinking about the life course with respect to the interlinked concepts of generativity, occupational aging and queer theorists’ critiques of gay sexual identity development.

As a life course researcher my analytical and interpretive process was initially informed by several key life history researchers and then adapted to the real-life needs and contingencies of this project. Wolcott (1994) describes three levels of analysis in qualitative research that offered a starting point. These are description, analysis and interpretation, not meant to be used as rigid distinct stages but rather as levels of deepening understanding of the participant’s story and its meaning. Cole and Knowles (2001) also describe a process of deepening analysis that develops as one becomes increasingly enmeshed in the data and through the process of writing.
As opposed to an objective of solely identifying, describing or recording meaning, as conveyed by participants, my appreciation of participant stories was achieved primarily through my writing of the participants’ stories. As Cole and Knowles state, the researcher attempts to “write for meaning” (p.123), where the creative act of writing is a process of meaning-making. As I became more aware of the chronological markers and developed a growing sense of the character profile of each participant, I considered how participants storied their accounts or what Mattingly (1994) and Polkinghorne (1995, 1995b) refer to as emplotment. I took Atkinson’s (2002), suggestion, however, to go beyond asking, who am I, (or what is their story) to also consider the questions of, why am I (or how do the changing contexts in their lives shape who they are) and, how am I (how have they constructed their story using what language, metaphors, and within which discourses).

In writing about who the characters are, I looked for any unifying metaphors, (e.g., steering my own ship) consistent themes, and narrative links between chronological events. I understand this search for a unified and consistent storyline to be, in a sense, a search for meaning and not a reflection of what really happened. In this, I echo Ray’s (2000) postmodern critique of such illusions in recognizing that lives are not so unified, clear and static, but rather dynamic and fragmentary. And so, initially I sought, or was more susceptible to, coherent life plots. They surfaced more readily, (more evident in John’s, story, perhaps as a reflection of his more reflective nature); for example, a life of resistance. I found myself reading into participant stories the classic hero’s journey. I was tempted to essentialize, as it reflected an image that the participants were perhaps unconsciously conveying and which I was very likely seeking. This tension may have reflected also the ongoing struggle between my role as researcher and a desire to give back to participants, to bring coherence to a life lived; the aim of narrative therapy and some forms of narrative research. The aim of life history research, however, reflects Atkinson’s
second and third questions, that is, *Why am I* and *How am I?* and, therefore, seeks
interconnections between people’s storied lives and changing contextual influences.

Loosely following this process, my analysis began with descriptive profiles in the form of
narrative summaries of the participants in an attempt to enter their understanding of *who they are*
and their place in the world. Narrative summaries were written for each participant for their
review and edits. The narratives were derived from a review of the transcripts and email
conversations where preliminary emergent themes and categories were identified directly on
transcripts for each participant and compiled to form a narrative in a manner similar to what
Polkinghorne (1995) refers to as *narrative analysis*; going from the parts to make a whole. The
narrative summaries were then reviewed with each participant with edits and changes made to
ensure accuracy with regards to factual information such as the timing of life events, names, and
places; as more than simply factual accounts, however, the narratives were interpretive
constructions of the narrative links between life events and, as such, required some level of
interpretation on my part. They represent an initial and important level of analysis. And so,
participants were asked to not only comment on the facts, but to let me know if I got their *story
right*. Did it resonate? Did the narratives get at the essence of who they are? This review of the
narrative summaries stimulated more discussion, taking us deeper into their story. These follow-
up conversations were also taped, transcribed and used in later revisions of the narrative
summaries and in the analysis process. Participants received copies of these summaries for their
own purposes. Throughout this process, I kept taped or written personal reflections on the
interviews including notations on my own emotional reactions, preliminary interpretations and
new questions. These notes were used as source materials and integrated into the interpretive
process.
The next phase of analysis involved identifying themes that were common across participant narratives, a process informed by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) description of constructivist thematic analysis. To do this, I re-read all the transcripts again, though this time as a complete collection, and electronically colour-coded the word files for emergent categories across participants. These categories reflected a life course framework and life course domains including such categories as, early years, linked-lives and relationships, coming to terms with sexuality. While colour-coding, I also made analytical comments and noted my thoughts on emerging themes.

At the same time, this next level of reading raised new questions and insights regarding the salience of participant comments. In some cases, this re-reading of the transcripts further clarified thematic headings and nuances within the individual narratives. Consequently, I made further changes to the narratives. Through this process, I also incorporated more direct quotes into the narratives as I felt that the earlier narrative summaries lacked a clear sense of the participants’ voices. This served as another quality check. I also constructed a loose matrix, matching life course periods with narrative themes within and across participants (as developed from the transcripts and narratives). Cross-cutting themes were clustered and organized according to major life domains (e.g. religion, family); trajectories, milestones or pivotal moments (e.g. sexual identity development). These cross-cutting themes represent similarities and differences across participants’ stories; however, it would be misleading to suggest that the use of such a matrix provided a tight, conclusive analytical tool. It was merely a means to play with, visualize or sift through the narrative themes in an attempt to make sense of them. The analysis was deepened further through writing and re-writing of the narratives as well as the writing and re-writing of my interpretation in the recursive manner typical of life history research.
where it is through the writing that meaning is found (Cole & Knowles; 2001; Richardson, 2000).

The cross-cutting themes were then contextually *interrogated* (Cole & Knowles, 2001) as I looked for connections between the cross-cutting themes and historical, socio-political, geographical and cultural events and influences. Wolcott (1994) describes this phase as a review of the essential features of the participant’s story in light of contextual interconnections. At this stage, I asked, *How did* this story come to be? What were the conditions that fostered its development, constrained its scope and shaped its characters? With the cross-cutting themes as a starting point, I revisited the historical LGBT literature, pulled on autobiographical memories, spoke to older friends and family and reviewed archival materials all of which helped me to interrogate or make contextual sense of the cross-cutting life themes.

In a further interpretation stage (Chapter 8) I ask more general theoretical questions about the nature of the aging process and role that a marginalized sexual identity plays in life course transitions, trajectories and occupational choices. Though the participants were involved in the narrative co-construction, the first level of analysis, I alone was involved in the interpretive level of interrogating the context in light of the participant narratives. I acknowledge that my interpretations of the *why* and *how* of life course transitions and trajectories may differ from other researchers and indeed the participants themselves and as such does not represent *The Truth*. I do hope, however, that it does reveal some truths and raise some questions about the context-structure-agency dynamic at play in the lives of a small group of older gay men living in rural Alberta.

While participants narrated their life histories, they did so in relation to the questions, prompts and interests that I brought to the process. My story became intertwined with theirs;
however, I made attempts to acknowledge through reflexive writing and transparent or “demarcated comments” (Plummer, 2001, p 182) how my story intersects and influences theirs both in how they tell it and how I interpret it.

### 3.5 Representational Forms

Cole and Knowles (2001) emphasize the importance of honouring the lives of research participants in the manner that the research findings are re-presented. The expectations of the participants in this study have varied in the degree to which they want to be involved in the final product and over the duration of the project, with Jake at one extreme showing no interest in being involved in the final product or even keeping a copy for his records (he remains quite closeted and does not want to leave a record of his gay life history); and John on the other, wanting to review copies of the final dissertation and to have a polished copy of his complete life story (reviewed and approved by him) for his legacy. Luke has been active in co-writing his life narrative wanting to ensure its accuracy but is less interested in the final overall analysis.

This dissertation has aimed to represent the participants’ stories of “who they are” in providing the reader with narrative profiles of their lives approved by them. As in the manner outlined by Plummer (2001) and Ray (2000), the stories and their interpretation are presented using both the actual voices of participants through, for example, participant written narratives, as well as using my own voice in my response to participant stories and interactions. As to the question of, “Why are they?” my voice as researcher becomes more prominent in making sense of the contextual influences on their lives, though every attempt is made to honour participant voices by referring to their verbatim accounts.
3.6 Questions of Rigor in Life History Research

Cole and Knowles’s (2001) discussion of rigor in life history research provided a guide from which to ensure the quality of my research analysis and representation. They outline eight defining elements of life history research. These include: the moral and intellectual intentionality of the researcher; evidence of researcher presence throughout the study; a methodological commitment to notions of relationality, mutuality, respect, empathy, care and sensitivity which are combined in an harmonious and reflexive manner; an holistic quality that is consistent, coherent and authentic; accessibility in communication style; attention to a representative, aesthetic form; presentation of knowledge claims with humility by avoiding conclusive, finite and universal claims; and clarity of theoretical and transformative potential.

In writing this dissertation, I also aimed to meet Richardson’s (2000) challenge, to “write a work that wants to be read,” (p. 931) through rhetorical effectiveness using devices such as metaphor. Her following questions are further criteria from which to evaluate the quality of this work. I leave these with the reader.

1. Does the project provide a substantive contribution to our understanding of the human condition?
2. Does the representation have aesthetic merit? Does it invite interpretation, action or movement?
3. Does the form have an emotional impact on the reader?

3.7 Participants and Recruitment

I sought out individuals who were 70 years of age and older. I chose this age period as it is, for a growing number of older adults, a time of transition and increased vulnerability given the greater use of health care services as one ages. I wanted participants who were able to
articulate and willingly disclose in a narrative form their life story. I sought out participants that shared a similar geographical or residential community in order to limit the number of contextual variations being explored. The participants had no previous history of a professional relationship with me as a patient or client.

The participants were recruited through my existing LGBT networks within south central rural Alberta. Phone call conversations with the coordinators of social groups for older gay men (e.g., Primetimers in Calgary, the Calgary Gay Rodeo Organization) with follow-up information letters by email did not result in any participants. Recruitment was successful through more personalized contact. One of the participants, John, who grew up in the same community as I did, was known to me [by reputation], though I never knew him socially. Another participant was an acquaintance of friends of mine. In this case, information sheets were sent to my contact who forwarded them to his acquaintance. This person called me with his intention to participate and we further discussed the process and nature of the project. This also gave me a sense of his potential to be forthcoming in future interviews. This participant then recommended another potential candidate living in the town close to where his farm is located. An information letter and consent form was then sent to this third person. He also responded positively. I had a short conversation with him over the phone before setting a time to further discuss the project in person. I contacted another potential candidate on the recommendation of another friend of mine. After an initial telephone conversation with him, I decided not to further pursue his involvement. Given that he lived for most of his life in urban areas and was very involved in the care of his partner of 50 years who has Alzheimer’s disease, it was felt that he did not fit the criteria and that the research demands might be too great given his caregiving role.
I chose this rural part of Alberta for two reasons; it surrounds the area that I grew up in and am familiar with; and it is situated within a largely rural environment. I am interested in a rural setting given that so little has been written about the experiences of rural gay men and, because in my own experience, gay peoples’ experience of belonging, community and discrimination varies markedly from urban environments. Though I spent my formative years in a rural setting, I left as soon as I could (at 18), and have long wondered how my life would have continued as a gay man in such an environment without the benefit of any visible gay community. I perceived such environments to be hostile to gay people and was intrigued by gay men who chose to continue to live in such settings. I also thought that the very absence of any visible gay community might highlight its significance in the lives of gay people and provide a more in-depth discussion of the experience of exclusion and inclusion. The extent to which participants defined their communities reveals the extent to which I was completely ignorant of the rich community lives that are possible for older gay men.

I now introduce three men, John, Jake and Luke, hereinafter referred to as, “the research participants” who opened up their homes generously offering their hospitality and reflections with the hope of making a difference. Together, in mining our memories, we made a few discoveries that, apart from my academic aims, raised new questions for John, Jake, Luke and myself about who we are, why we do what we do, and where we hope to take our stories next.
3.8 Meeting John

It is a typically hot, arid and blue-sky summer Alberta day as I descend into the Drumheller valley. The tree-lined Red Deer River winds its way eastward and appears as a stitched seam holding together the two sides of this deep multi-leveled valley. It is a familiar view, one that evokes a cascade of emotions alternating between pleasant and warm with threat and anxiety. I was another person here, a younger person, perhaps more eager and energetic, but also more secretive, careful and on guard. My thoughts turn to the upcoming interview with John. Am I clear about the purpose? What are my opening questions? Will we like each other? Will he trust me with his story?
As a young boy, I have clear memories of John Liptak - a man who stood out amongst the other men of the church community where I first became aware of him. He had a strong baritone voice, an attractive, tanned face and neatly combed, thick hair. I remember his confident walk, as he returned to his seat from the communion rail on the left side of the small town Catholic church. Hands clasped as if to restrain the exuberance within. He was always well dressed in conservative though well coordinated colours. He paid attention to his presentation in a way that other prairie men did not.

I recall him reading during the Mass, his baritone voice well suited for the job. He could be heard clearly throughout the long, narrow, wooden-pewed interior of St. Anthony’s Catholic church. I noticed him. He had a presence. He was different. Though different in a way, for which at that time, I had no words. At some point, I no longer saw him at Sunday Mass. Did he move? Leave the Church? Was he asked to leave?

Years later, I was out with a group of high school friends and on our way to a “hill party”. En-route and while passing through the graveyard to the grey hills beyond, that same strong baritone voice was heard, calling from the direction of a cluster of houses perched on a ridge overlooking the graveyard.

“Kathy, be home by 12,” orders the baritone voice.

“Ya, Ok, Don’t worry.” Petite, doe-eyed Kathy offers no resistance.

“Who’s that?,” asks one of the group, a tall, lanky, blond-haired, broad-shouldered youth; his tight fitting, faded-blue-jeans marketing his teenage over-confident masculinity.

“It’s just my Uncle John,” Kathy replies.

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3 Hill parties are gatherings of mostly underage teenagers at a designated spot somewhere in the hills surrounding the Drumheller valley. The primary aim was illegal drinking away from the gaze of police or parents.
“Is that your gay uncle?,” asks Wendy as she flicks her Farah Fawcett-feathered hair and exhales slowly and deliberately, the smoke from her contraband Export A.

“Ya,” Kathy responds non-chalantly, with no hint of shame or judgment. My heart stopped! Thankfully, the enclosing dusk hid my flushed face. I’d never heard anyone so blasé about a word that would more usually invite a series of expletives. He was gay, the man with the baritone voice?! I kept my cover and remained silent.

“Woohah, get away, what’s with that, he’s a fag!?“ the lanky blond bellows.

“Oh, it’s no big deal, he’s gay, so what? He’s great, he stays with us sometimes. So which hill are we going to?“ That ended that discussion. No words of scorn spoken. An opening, a moment of fear, of recognition, of glee, of possibilities…

Some 30 years later the same, baritone-voiced John greets me on his front veranda with an enthusiastic smile and an outstretched hand. His abundant energy is evident immediately. Physically, at age 74, apart from his grey hair line, he hasn’t changed since the time I recall him walking down the church aisle. His attire is, as it was before, coordinated, but unlike his conservative for-church-wear of the 1960s, his black shirt with khaki shorts set off with a silver-link neck chain and bracelet could situate him comfortably at a café at Church and Wellesley streets in Toronto, 17Ave in Calgary, or Davie Street in Vancouver in a manner that my father (only a few years older) could never pull off.

John welcomes me into a warmly decorated living room. His home is just across the road from the cloudy Red Deer River, which foregrounds the soft brown and tope striated hills of the

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4 References to the gay village in each of these three cities.
badlands. His home is ordered and filled to capacity with furniture. The fresh toned blue and white walls and chair covers of the cozy living room complement the shades of mocha and grey that make up the sun-drenched landscape seen through a large picture window. Below the window and next to his writing tray are several bird books and crossword dictionaries that attest to John’s active and observant mind. Eclectic works of art line the living room walls. My eye is drawn to a black and white photo of John as a youngster with his sisters. Another grainy black and white photo of a group of school children lined up in order of height is an invitation to step into his story.

John tells a story of a man who is compassionate, responsible and grateful. He is strongly independent and clearly values authenticity, resisting being anyone other than himself. His nurturing spirit is evident in his caring and mentorship roles with his partner, friends, parents, nephews and nieces. He has made himself available for young people, the aging and the dying and takes pride in knowing how and when to help.
3.9 Meeting Jake

Another big-blue-sky day in Alberta, the mid-morning sun directs its warming rays over the maturing fields of prairie flax, barley and wheat as I cross the line, the abrupt divide between flat prairie and prairie town. The sudden appearance of combines, tractors and cultivators, for sale, wait in rows along the main road, silently, like battalions of frozen, extraterrestrial beings; a welcoming honour guard or hostile sentry. Passing the line, I enter Westview, a town of approximately 10,000 people, typically flat and unadorned. There is something unique about this town. Unlike Drumheller, where I have recently been interviewing, with its childlike depictions of dinosaurs that populate the corners of its dusty downtown, this town conveys a certain genteel
sophistication. Perhaps greater wealth, its inhabitants’ reward for having homesteader forefathers with the good sense to locate in one of Alberta’s most fertile farming areas. Or it could be its proximity to the province’s more progressive capital, Edmonton, just a two hour drive to the south-east.

An agricultural town that was founded by Scandinavians in the late 1800s, today Westview is also home to people of American, German, and British ancestry. I wonder what it is like to live in this small non-descript prairie town as a young queer student or an aging gay man. How welcoming is this place to visiting queer academics? As if in response to my ponderings, I turn to see, across the parkway, two churches. I am struck by my own gut response. Churches, for many I would guess, conjure images of warm welcoming feelings of sanctuary and community. I see only intolerance, ignorance and fear. To be sure, I am in Bible-belt country. I stop the car in a small parking lot to collect my thoughts and prepare a few notes for the interviews.

I meet both Jake 78 and Luke 73 in Jake’s condominium. As Luke lives some distance out of town on a farm, we thought it best to meet as a group and deal with the introductory questions together and complete the consent forms. Though it was not my original plan to meet with more than one person at a time, I agreed, sensing that they would feel safer to meet an unknown “researcher” in the company of someone with whom they felt comfortable.

The condo is a four-floor walk up, and looks to have been built within the last several years. I enter Jake’s sunlit apartment and am greeted with a warm welcome by a well-groomed and neatly dressed white-haired man. Jake’s apartment is very organized and tidy. Its four rooms—kitchen, bedroom, living room and den are open and bright. An intriguing large painting of a concert scene dominates the small living room. Books and magazines are neatly organized
on shelves and holders. An uncluttered working desk takes up space in the centre of the living room a few feet from the kitchen table, set up alongside the kitchen half/wall. He later tells me that he was often told by his ex-wife that he was the only person who thought the "Kitchen should be as clean as an O.R." He is aware of his organizational tendencies which he attributes to his years as a caterer, where, "If one was not organized, you wouldn’t survive.” I am offered a seat at a table beside another slightly younger looking, white-haired, white-mustached man with a broad smile and bright eyes.

“Now would you like coffee now or later?” I’m asked. I suggest we finish off with the paper work and then have a coffee. Though a straight-forward task, a simple signing of the forms takes more time as the two older gentleman are eager to share their stories of the life of older gay men in Westview, Alberta. They compete for airtime while sending shared local references and jibes back and forth to one another. They obviously know each other well.

I ask Jake about his last name as I had a university friend who is also gay with the same last name. It turns out that he is, in fact, related. They came across one another at a gay gathering many years ago. The prairie connections hold strong and provide an open door through which to enter into the lives of these two outgoing men.

Though he starts out by describing an unhappy childhood with the presence of a "belligerent, alcoholic father” and a mother who was distant and unavailable, Jake shares a life story that is about a successful small town businessman, who is by necessity community-minded, a caring father, and a generous man who continues to feel happy, socially engaged, free, and healthy. His responses to my questions are consistently decisive with no hint of ambiguity or uncertainty. I can clearly see the very efficient, organized and task-oriented business man, who has only limited time for introspection or ponderings on the meaning of life.
3.10 Meeting Luke

The next day, I drive the 14 kilometres along a dusty country gravel road past flat, cultivated grain fields to Luke’s farm; the same farm he was born on in 1936. I can see the farm in the distance, at first just a cluster of green trees that rise above the farm fields. I know to turn right at the tall evergreen trees that stand like sentinels at the entrance to a tree-lined laneway into a hidden farmyard. The farmhouse with faded, white paint peeling is surrounded by a Caragana hedge and scrappy, Manitoba maples. Perennials line the cracked sidewalk that lead to the back door. I notice a large black-earth garden just to the west of the house. Later, Luke pulls several asparagus sticks for me to take home from his garden. Once a mixed farm with grain, cattle, hogs and chickens, it now rests silent. The prairie winds that brush the surrounding trees
are background to the warning trill of a red-winged, black bird that accentuates the silence of this prairie space. The rusting bones of old farm equipment lie haphazardly about the farmyard resting in beds of tall, unrestrained prairie grasses. Grey with age, numerous wooden clapboard outbuildings, with contents spilling out through loose-hinged doors, reveal the many and mysterious tools and farm implements of another era. The farmyard has the feel of a graveyard; a graveyard of farm machines; a natural museum of prairie history. An old barn, its doorway open, draws me in like some sort of prairie whale with its mouth wide open, revealing its catch, held within its belly; old rusting cars, large angry looking hooks and chains hanging from the wooden rafters; leather straps and every sort of tool imaginable. It has a smell of oil, of metal and dirt, of old wood and age; an ambiance emulated the world over by the gay leather bar.  

Luke would seem to tolerate a lot of clutter. Unlike John’s and Jake’s neat, tidy and organized homes, Luke’s small house is plumb full with papers, books, knick-knacks, dishes, and photographs all competing for space on table tops, walls and shelves. His kitchen, where we sit, is filled with cooking materials, pots and pans, dishes, food-stuffs and papers. I clear a small space on the small kitchen table for my tape recorder and notebook. Luke tells me that he has the Saturday morning group over occasionally and jokes that, “housekeeping is not one of my strong points” so some of them must be quite uncomfortable when they come to visit. He seems quite content in his messy chaos.

Luke is dressed informally with a sweater and blue jeans. He greets me with a big hug. I’m offered a piece of homemade apple pie, which I’m told he is famous for. He insists that I,

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5 Leather bars are part of the gay bar scene. Usually roughly directed to convey a masculine aura with wood, leather, metal and dimly lit. Mostly frequented by gay men interested in S&M sex.
“take another pie back to Red Deer for the family.” Pies and prairie hospitality—I am reminded that some good things never change.

Luke is the youngest of the three participants at 73 years of age. With the exception of three years volunteering in Africa, and several years working in Edmonton at a factory, Luke has lived his entire life on this family farm. He is a warm, relaxed, open man who chuckles frequently throughout our conversations. He has a lot to say and jumps from topic to topic with one storied event triggering memories of another. I try to keep up.

Luke was eager to participate in the study right from the start. He was forthcoming with information and seemed to welcome the chance to talk about his life, his accomplishments and the social dynamics of his rich LGBT social network. Once the interviews were underway, Luke expressed his appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on his life and to make sense of it. He became so engaged, that following the first interview, he wrote a 14 page summary of his life. This was used to augment the taped interviews. As someone comfortable with email, he also sent several reflections between interview periods in response to questions that I had had about his biography. He carefully reviewed drafts of his life story summary, emailing corrections as the story developed. I spent approximately 15 hours with Luke over five visits in addition to numerous email interactions. I heard about his sense of family responsibility and roles, the influence of religion on his life, his sense of justice, his need to contribute to others, travel, sexuality and aging, and the joy that he experiences in growing older with others like him and in a space where he can continue to experience solitude.

It is these three men that I had the good fortune to get to know quite intimately over the following two years. They were generous with their time and trusting in my abilities to take care of their stories. At times I felt the heaviness of this responsibility, sometimes second-guessing
my abilities to accurately construct their narratives while seeking to respond to the objectives of this research study. What follows are three very different life narratives from three quite similar settings from three men with a lot to say and much to offer.
Chapter 4

John

PHOTO 4. LIPTAK FARM

Date unknown

"You see coyotes to me were just being part of nature. I used to have a very simple set of skis and I use to go out if there was a full moon and ski just out in the fields. Because you did not have a gun, one or two lone ones would parallel you and come not too far. If you did not have a gun, they knew, and I don’t think that they would ever attack you. They are a lot more social animals than we give them credit for."

John
The town of Nacmine (North American Coalmines) lies on the outskirts of Drumheller, Alberta. It was a busy place in the 1930’s. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, eager for jobs in the mines, joined the ranks of British, German, Belgian and Scandinavian farmers as well as trades people making this one of Alberta’s most multicultural centres. The town is supported not only by the coal mining industry, but also by the vast surrounding prairie that yields harvests of wheat, barley and oats. From its early days, the Drumheller Valley was known as a wild town. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police, on more than one occasion in the 1920s, were brought in to break up rioting miners who were protesting poor working conditions in the dirty coalmines. The government at the time feared that Drumheller was, with its large number of eastern European immigrants, a hotbed of communists. A quiet prairie town, it was not.

The miners of Nacmine were paid little with many living in very humble one or two-room miner shacks that were poorly furnished and equally poorly built. The thirties were not kind to anyone on the prairies. Old timers recall dust storms that would occlude the daylight for days at a time. During one such storm on October 9, 1931, it was said that the street lights had to be turned on during the day. By the mid-thirties, Palmer (1990) reports, that so bad was the soil erosion, that snowplows had to be employed by the CPR to remove sand and dust from the tracks. This was not an easy time for parents to be raising children. Many people were, like the Liptaks, poor.

It was into this dusty and politically charged environment separated along lines of class and ethnicity that John was born in 1934 to Hungarian immigrants. John was the middle child sandwiched between an older and younger sister. The first five years of John’s life were spent in a two-room home, the family of five sleeping in one room. The red-peaked coalmine tipple, in view from their home, was a reminder of the omnipresence of the coal mining company’s
influence in their lives. This was also a time of strong community bonds and when families relied on the kindness of others. John tells the story of his birth, where the family doctor, after the delivery in the Drumheller Hospital that was several miles away, drove the infant John and his mother home. He did not leave until he had properly stoked the fire. In summation of this story, John chuckles, “Times have changed.”

4.1 The Early Years and Experiencing Difference

One of John’s earliest childhood memories is of his first sexual experience with the boy next door. Barely five and hidden beneath the willowy reeds by the river’s edge, he and his preschool friend, “rubbed cocks.” John recalls the excitement of that moment and holds on to it even now in his 75th year. It was shortly after this that John’s father, concerned with his health and wanting to fulfill his long-time dream to own his own farm, put together enough money for a small parcel of land (¾ section) a few kilometres from Drumheller. He and his wife moved their three kids (John at the time was five), and 12 chickens with the help of another Hungarian farmer. At that point the farmhouse consisted of “several graineries attached together.”

The farm was located in an ethnically diverse area. John’s parents, however, made every effort to become as “Canadian” as possible. He knew he was different from the others with respect to the food that his family enjoyed. It was the coffee, garlic and absence of home made pies that differentiated his family from the neighbours. He recalls the diligence with which his mother took to learning how to make pies.

4.1.1 School Days and Experiencing Difference

Moving to the farm also meant attending the one-room country school that was a four-mile horse ride from his home. The school, with grades one to nine, had less than 20 students at the time John attended. The students, all farm kids, many of immigrant parents or immigrants
themselves, were from the range of northern and eastern European countries including, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Germany, Denmark and Hungary. John was asked to attend school early at age five as his sister, just a year older, did not want to ride the horse to school on her own.

At an early age John got the message that some interests were not boy-like within this rural prairie setting. He remembers dreaming about becoming a singer.

*I loved singing...I would sing at the top of my lungs on the farm...Even later on the tractor going round and round, different neighbors would comment... I said to my father, “I would love to take voice training” and he said, “You can’t do that”... It wasn’t something that father could afford– and of course I don’t think he would have thought that was a very manly thing to do.”* 

Fortunately a neighbouring farmer, who had many kids of his own, but none with an interest in music, recognized John’s passion for music. Knowing about John’s musical aspirations, (in his late teens, when John’s family first got a radio, he regularly listened to the Metropolitan Opera on CBC radio) he asked John to accompany him to Calgary to listen to the Calgary Philharmonic Orchestra. John was thrilled and accepted without hesitation.

Looking back, John recalls other instances where his interests differed from what was expected of a farm boy. For example, when thinking about what he wanted to do when he grew up, John imagined a future with lots of kids.

*I can remember in grade one for instance when I first started going to school, I thought, “I want to get married and have kids.” I would tell my mother, “I want to have a dozen children.” “Oh you don’t know what you’re talking about!” Of course I didn’t know what I was talking about, but I can remember thinking later that this idea of having children was just me and the kids and did not include a wife.*

Later in life, though John came to accept that marriage, (though attempting it once), was not to be part of his story, he held on to the idea of parenting and for a long time considered the idea of
fostering kids on the farm. Though this was not to happen, John was able to express his nurturing qualities in his role as an active and engaged uncle.

At age 15, John started high school in Drumheller. Although only 12 kilometres away, in 1951, the distance was too far to travel on a daily basis. And so, John and his sister stayed in the school’s dormitory. It was in grade 10, when he discovered his aptitude for math and he quickly progressed in this area. He was an excellent reader and tells me that:

*I was a voracious reader and in grade 10 I wrote book reviews for anything that most of the other students didn’t like, especially guys. They didn’t like reading and I could write a book review in no time. Anything I could get my hands on I would read. I still do today but I don’t do nearly as much reading as I used to. But reading was a real passion for me.*

Though he enjoyed school, it was during his high school years that John first remembers feeling like an outsider. No one ever said anything to him directly, nor does he recall any homophobic slurs.

*We are having a school reunion here but I am not going because I always felt I was an outsider in school. Let’s say I was walking home from school and one of the grade 12 guys that had nothing to do with me would walk with me and we would start to talk just like we were old friends but then once we got to where we were going, I always felt like they didn’t want anybody else to know that they were talking to me. I don’t think that it was quite that bad but it always seemed that I was outside of their world.*

Like John, most kids came from a variety of backgrounds, so there was something else at play, which John attempts to untangle.

*I felt it just as a Hungarian that you were somehow different....Well of course, I think it had something to do with me being gay as well, but I always felt that I was different than other guys my age because there were certain things that I didn’t think that I had to do to be a man. Like I never liked drinking and I never liked swearing. I never liked using four letter words at all. I just thought it wasn’t necessary. I thought we had a language that we could use.*

Reading and music engaged John; sports and rough and tumble play did not. He participated in the latter, but not with great enthusiasm. He does not describe feeling harassed for his interests,
but he does recall that his interests were not in keeping with the norm or his father’s expectations, as he says:

*I think Father sensed right from the start that I did not like the idea of smoking and drinking and stuff like that, that I was different, that I wasn’t that masculine.*

Though feeling like an outsider, even at an early age, he resisted the expectations of others:

*We are being programmed by different influences whether it is the church or your community or what society thinks you should be. And I was always anti-social in that sense. I didn’t see why I should have to do something just because it was more manly or that I could not do something if it wasn’t manly enough or that you had this stupid restriction instead of being who I am and of course this was far before I even thought of homosexuality.*

This same sentiment is expressed in his descriptions of his interactions with Drumheller’s business community and again later with the Calgary gay community and even now when talking about what it means to be older.

### 4.2 Becoming a Farmer: Hard Work, Connection with Nature and Family Values

John did very well in school, but his high school education was to be cut short when, in the summer of 1950, the area was hit by a hail storm that wiped out his family’s crops and damaged several of the farm buildings. Fortunately, at that time, farmers supported one another during difficult times and so within a short time their barn was rebuilt with the help of nearby neighbours. The damage was significant, however, and with little income from crops his parents could no longer afford to send him to school, although both his sisters were able to continue.

John helped out his father on the farm without reluctance or regret. He took grade 11 by correspondence, but did not complete it given the amount of time he was needed on the farm. Responsibility, the value of hard work, and duty towards family and community are values that are illustrated in John’s life choices. John expanded the farm by an additional three quarter
sections in 1958. This allowed him to work fulltime on the farm making enough money to free him from having to take on other part-time jobs. Besides a short stint as a salesman at a Sears heavy goods store in Drumheller (following a three week course in Regina—the furthest he had been away from the valley), John farmed fulltime until his retirement at age 44 in 1979. John loved being a farmer, working hard and being close to nature. He speaks of this connection in spiritual-like terms. His connection to the natural world was a strong tie, holding him back from ever fully leaving the country life.

Yes, being out with nature is incredible. When you talk about a singing career or any of that kind of stuff, you would be so restricted to the concrete jungle all of the time. I think there is no parallel to it because you are one with nature. You know what life and death is about all the time whether it is the plants that you are seeding in the spring and they grow and then harvest them in the fall or your animals that you know you have to send to slaughter. It brings a new meaning to what your existence is as a human being. And we like to think that we are at the top of the chain, but there is so much intelligence in animals that it is unbelievable, whether it is a horse or a dog or a cat or even birds; it seems so harmonious compared to ours. We are always going off on the wrong tangents. It is about what we want and not what we need and that is the sad part about our society.

Perhaps like many father-son relationships, John’s relationship with his father was complex and unlike many father-son relationships, complicated by their close working relationship on the farm. He and his father worked well together, though an underlying tension over farm decisions increased as he grew older and took on more responsibility. He was close to his father, in a task-oriented kind of way, but seldom spoke at an emotional level. He also describes a positive relationship with his mother, but similarly, conversations rarely touched on more intimate issues and certainly not about questions related to sexuality. As an adult, although he did not talk about his sexuality, he did not hide his gay friendships from his family:

Any of my gay friends that ever came here, I would always introduce them to my family, no matter who they were. I never introduced anybody as a gay friend. They were just my friends and that was just the way it was and I could not see why you had to make this differentiation.
John speaks in detail about the influence that his parents had on his values and his outlook on life as both an aging person and a gay man. About a sense of his own personal agency and the influences in his life, he tells me that:

You are always being influenced, but you never like to think that somebody else has influenced you and changed your mind. I know that growing up and living for 70 years, everyone has influenced me but basically I think my biggest influences were my parents and it was a good influence because they taught us the value of not being discriminatory. They would never say you can’t be friends with somebody. My mother for instance said that her best friend was from the only Jewish family in the little village—they owned the store. They actually hid the family in that village and they got them out of Hungary. She always taught us that you accept people for who they are, not what you are, a Hungarian, or a Jew or black or white.

A sense of responsibility for one’s own actions was also instilled in John from an early age. John was, “always told that whatever happens to you, that is your new starting point. Nobody else can do it for you. So I think that we were raised with the idea that we were solely responsible for ourselves.”

About being critical of what the world tells you he reflects:

During the second world war, my father would say that it is all propaganda, because just the poor people like us are the ones that are going to get killed. The people at the top just control. It doesn’t matter who they are and whether they kill you or we kill them, it is wrong. War never solves anything.

4.3 Community Participation and Resistance to, “Playing the Game”

While John worked on the farm, he was active in the community both at the civic and political level as well as his involvement with the local Catholic Church. At age 26 John became a member of the Kinsmen Club that was, as John describes, made up of the Drumheller elites; those with money, which as “just a poor farmer” he had not. John was a member for 13 years and left after completing terms as president and past-president. True to his sense of responsibility and strong conviction to adhere to what was right, he steered a tight ship. He describes himself as someone who follows the rules and strongly believes that if someone chooses to participate in an
organization he implicitly agrees to follow the rules. This did not always make him popular. He was not intimidated by status or the social position of others. John also became active in provincial and federal politics at the local level and was encouraged on several occasions to run for political office. Though he was drawn to this kind of political engagement, he knew that he could not make the compromises that political positions often required. Knowing of another closeted gay politician who was politically blackmailed, John was reluctant to run for office:

*I probably thought that if somebody in that position who has been there that long can be vulnerable, all of a sudden, they could do that to me; demean me amongst people who know my family. They may not say things to my family but could to other people that they are friends with.*

As an active volunteer to this day, neighbours would see John coming and say “*What do you want now?*” Apart from his active volunteer life, following retirement from the farm, John helped out in many local businesses. He worked part-time in a shoe store, a jewellery store, and a flower shop. While farming, he even drove a school bus for a short while. He has had a very versatile and unstructured career path.

John’s interests and activities continued to express his, perhaps unacknowledged, resistance to the usual gendered activities of the other men. Though a member of the Kinsmen, he was not interested in some of the stereotypically boys’ club pursuits. His resistance to being controlled comes up again in our discussion of his many roles in community organizations.

*I was in the farmer’s organization. I was secretary and president and all that sort of stuff over the course of time. I always felt that it was controlling my life and trying to shape me into something that I don’t want to be. And I always felt that if you belonged, you have got to abide by the rules and, I guess, I don’t like rules.*

4.4 **The Catholic Church Community: No Longer a Space for Participation**

Unlike his ongoing and closely connected spiritual relationship with the natural world, John’s conflicted relationship with the Catholic Church began at an early age. He recalls the
distrust that his own parents had with Catholicism as practiced in Hungary. The Church owned much of the land farmed by his parents and their neighbours. Tithes were paid to the Church before any other purchases could be made. The Church controlled the daily lives of the people in a way that would be considered medieval today. In moving to Canada, his parents were freed from such control, though the Church’s influence continued to have an impact on their lives and in particular on John’s growing sense of identity.

Though it was difficult for John to attend church regularly because of the distance, he was drawn to church services now interpreting this attraction as a foreshadowing of his gay sensibilities as he was drawn to the drama and colour of church rituals. He tells me that, “I liked the idea of the church and again I always felt that there was a gay element in the church.” The priests and altar boys in their costumes, the stage, the mystery, and the all-male cast of priests and serving altar boys—this place felt comfortable to the young John in a way that his school-world did not. From an early age he felt like an outsider with his school peers. John speaks warmly, however, of finding comfort in church space:

> I like the quietness—I liked going in the days before they locked the church. I liked to go into the church at night or in the evening...and just going into the church and I would just talk to God. It was communication. I felt that this was more of a reason for the building than anything else because it was such a calm, nice place.

John had many important friendships with Catholic priests. He described his attraction to one priest in one of our conversations, “He had that quiet sort of way. I just remember his face and he always had that serious look like he was in prayer all the time and I thought that is what I want to be like.”

The Catholic Church is no longer a source of comfort or community for John. Though his sense of a spiritual realm and the values that exemplify the idealized Christian life (i.e. service,
responsibility) are clearly evident, his connectedness with the institutional church has been replaced with disappointment.

To me, what happened to me as far as my religion, I always felt, even when I was involved with the church that my connection was not with the Church but was with God. I realized that your relationship as far as your spirituality is concerned, has nothing to do with organized religion. It doesn’t for me and I think that we quite obviously need the structure, just like we have stop signs on the street – but not quite to the extent that they carry it, when it becomes a matter of power and money. It doesn’t matter if it is the Catholic or the Protestant. I have never studied the other religions very much and I don’t know what their influence is. I just think that the other religions are a little bit more practical at realizing that we are sexual beings and not just animals that have young.

John relates with anger the early messages that he received from the Catholic Church that was so obsessed with sex,

The preacher would be here for about five or six nights and we would go every night to the church and he would be preaching fire and brimstone and it always seemed like it was something to do with sex. The worst possible thing was sex! I would drive down for these things and he would be preaching this fire and brimstone and I would think, “I know exactly what you are talking about, you are talking about me wanting to have sex with another man.” You know, you could kill somebody but in the eyes of the Church, sex was only for procreation and nothing else. That is the stupidity of all of this!

When asked about any left over feelings of guilt, John emphatically tells me that,

No, I don’t have that. I started getting rid of that quite a long time ago. That is also part of my homosexuality too when I realized that I wanted to be tall and slim: Then I thought “No”, you have to like yourself.” It probably took quite a few years before I actually liked myself.... In my 30s I finally decided that I wasn’t so bad after all.

Despite these feelings, however, John continued to be engaged with the Catholic Church up until relatively recently. I asked him how he was able to reconcile his feelings as a gay man with the prohibitions of the Church.

I wasn’t gay, I was just John and this was the way I was formed and if they don’t like it, that’s too bad. You do get hurt by remarks from people along the way, and I thought to myself, “It is your loss not mine, when you think there is something wrong with me being gay.” When I first started going to church in my late teens and early 20s, I just reconciled it. I don’t know how, but because I had such a liberal view of what Catholicism and Christianity is from my parents, I just thought there is a connection there that most people are missing because if you really believe what supposedly Christ said and what he wanted you to do, we are so far away from that now. It is so mixed up with all the ritual and you are worshipping about 15 different gods along the way. So I
just wiped that all aside and thought I’ve got my connection. I know exactly what it is. Nobody else has to tell me.

John’s active participation in the Catholic Church, though a source of conflict at times, offered many opportunities for John to contribute whether through readings at Mass, which for John was a very empowering experience, or helping out with a variety of other church functions. On one occasion, due to the unavailability of the parish priest, John took over as the key celeb rant for a celebration of the local Catholic Women’s League (CWL). He played all the roles that the priest would except for the important function of giving out communion.

John continues to have a rich spiritual life. When speaking of things spiritual, he speaks of the importance of solitude in his life and his connection with the natural world.

I love solitude! That is one of the most beautiful words in the English language. I know what solitude is—this contentment of being there and not worrying.

Today, John holds on to a more personal relationship with a higher power and tells me that:

I hate to use the word prayer because it sounds so sanctimonious, but when anytime something happens I will say, “Thank-you God for that.” I still believe that there is a higher power that gets us going and doing things, whatever it is.

4.5 Labels, Discrimination and Impacts on Community Participation

As I listen to John’s description of his involvement in his community, there are several comments that speak to me about the impact of a homophobic environment on the manner in which John interacts with his community. Though he does not initially use the term discrimination, I ask him about his experiences with it. The following discussion ensues:

I am sure you have felt it too, you feel it at different times, you are always discriminated against to a certain extent…but because I think that I am fairly outgoing they don’t know how to deal with it. Nobody has ever just come up and said to me, “You’re an asshole because you’re gay” – or anything like that but I know there has always been, and I’ve felt it, because I have also felt it as being Hungarian.

Even though I did not want to out myself, I know that I was always defensive when somebody made remarks about people who were gay, so I would say, “How do you know
that is true? If you are disparaging somebody’s character, do you think that if you were being talked about, would you like that?” But nobody liked to hear those things. I guess people must have thought I was just a twat or something.

“I really don’t care,” John responds, when I ask about being labeled as gay, and goes on to say:

If we go up town I will introduce you as Barry. I am not going to say this is Barry who is gay. You don’t have to use the label unless you want to separate yourself from the rest of society. So with myself, I can out myself in the sense that I don’t ever think that I would say that I am gay but I would rather say that I have sex with men. You see this labeling, people dislike it. And the reality is that that is more to the truth.

I ask him more about what the term gay means to him.

Well for me, I have gotten used to it, but I never liked it when it first started. My friend, Old Mrs. Wadell said, “Well gay used to mean light and lovely.”...so I don’t know how that came about to use the word gay…and of course Mrs. Wadell would always say, “It is homosexual, it is not gay.” Of course she is right but in today’s terminology look how words and phrases and things have changed. Everything has changed and so I guess the gay liberation movement is on. I guess it will stay forever.

I would love to just have the perfect world where you just go about your daily business and what I am doing and certainly my sexuality will make no difference, but it does!

“So what does that mean when people say you are a gay man? What does that conjure up in your mind,” I ask him.

Well the first thing it says to me that I am totally different than what they think I am. You might like who I am, but if I tell you that I am gay or that I like having sex with men, then suddenly it changes. I am not that guy that they like.

I ask about the impact of changing legislation regarding gay rights and how he sees the legislation as applying to him.

I always felt somehow that I was part of that [gay rights legislation] because I was gay and I see the injustice being done. I know that Alberta is so red-neck that they will never pass anything that would help bring about change. I mean Alberta was forced into accepting gay marriage. When they started this gay marriage issue, I looked at it and my first reaction was “Why? We don’t need the gay marriage.” But of course, you see, without it we don’t have any rights. And you can still lose your job, but that part for me has passed. So I am not too worried. I said to you I don’t know if people really knew over the years. I think some people did know or they suspected and I still go back to what I said, they knew as little about homosexuality as I did.
John’s active involvement in the Drumheller church community, political community, and charitable organizations was extensive. He was valued and played many roles, despite according to him, that others may have thought that he was one of those “different” sorts or “not the marrying kind,” but as long as he played by the rules and did not “flaunt it,” he was accepted. Working closely on community events with some of these rumoured men, there was no discussion of their assumed shared experience. But they too, performed the heterosexual game, they often married, and raised children, all the while having clandestine sexual relationships with other men. There was no formal organizing or collective or sense of community amongst these men. They may have been aware of one another, but had no forum for building a shared identity as gay men. In reference to his relationship with others in the community, he speaks of one mother of a gay son, who has come to him for advice. Though accepting of her son’s orientation, she wishes he could meet someone like him. As he tells me, “and of course he loves Orientals and of course his mother says to me, ‘Why can’t he get somebody like you?’

4.6 Tall, Thin Cowboys and Coming to Terms with His Sexuality

John figures he was about 15 by the time he knew that there was something very different about his sexuality. The shame and guilt that he felt about this was to take many years to dissipate. His growing self-awareness began with early fantasies that were largely romantic in nature and not overtly sexual. He was intrigued by images and stories of Greeks and Romans where strong intergenerational friendships were celebrated. He tells me about the image of the cabin boy, a homoerotic image shared by one of the other participants. Not familiar with this notion, I ask John more about it.

_I would like to be the cabin boy. All these guys that went on these long trips, they always had a cabin boy with them. I am talking about on ships, the first explorers. I would like to be the cabin boy because I knew that he was being looked after and I am sure that he was being touched and coddled._
From an early age he wanted to be held and loved by another man, preferably an older man, who would ideally be quite different from him with his stocky body type. He would be the image of the tall, thin cowboy. Beyond romantic notions, however, he does recall that even as an eight year old, episodes at the swimming pool, where he liked, “to look at guys in swimsuits;” feeling conflicted at the same time, “to me that seemed so mixed up.”

Reinforcing these misgivings were the Church’s veiled references to homosexuality that left him with the strong impression that his secret desires were evil. Outside of church, the aggressive tone used by other males including his father who he says, “would use the word cocksucker as a swear thing. I thought I guess I had better not do that,” and so, he would keep, “pushing those urges aside” worried that his father would “break down” if he were to find out. He felt alone in this shame, not thinking that there may be others like him.

Though John had fantasies of tall, thin cowboys who would take him in their arms, he had no opportunities to live out these fantasies for many years to come. He had not really even seen the bodies of another male apart from his father. He recalls seeing his father’s penis and being intrigued. He wanted to be like his father. He explains this fascination in terms of an oedipal-like scenario for a young gay boy. He also remembers looking at bodybuilding magazines and was excited to realize that some men were interested in other men’s bodies. In high school people commented positively about his body. This was a surprise to John as he often felt uncomfortable with his own body, feeling that he was too short and too fat and not at all like the tall, thin cowboy who was the object of his desires. Besides, homo-erotic sub-texts in some novels (e.g., E.M. Forrester’s, Passage to India), there were few male characters in the popular media with whom he could identify. He does, however remember the rumours about the sexuality of Rock Hudson feeling excited upon discovering that there were others like him.
John kept his desires repressed for many years. When asked, he does not recall having
crushes on other boys, nor did he have any significant sexual experiences until in his 30s with
“the young man from the gas station … He was a tall slim guy.” They had sex a couple of times
out on the farm “but he wanted anal intercourse, and of course I didn’t want to have that.”

When asked when he came out, John, found it difficult to answer and replied that he does
not know if he has ever really come out, though his life story points to several occasions where
his growing acceptance of his sexuality allowed him to be more comfortable. For many years and
into his adult years, however, he felt shame and guilt about his sexual fantasies. He desperately
wanted it to go away and in quiet moments in prayer at the local church, frequently asked, “Why
me?” He wondered if anyone could ever love him. John recalls that his biggest fear was of his
parents finding about his secret. He could not bear the thought of shaming his parents. He long
felt as if he was disappointing his father, not doing the manly thing and getting married; feeling
guilty as he was the only son and the last in line to carry on the family name. He was letting his
forefathers down. Perhaps in an effort to meet the expectations of his father and others John
dated a few girls briefly while in the Drumheller dormitory. Surprisingly and not until our final
interview does John tells me, uncharacteristically, without details, that he was married for a short
while, less than a year, “It just did not work out.”

In 1966 his parents moved to town leaving John on the farm on his own. He saw this as a
chance for greater privacy. By this time, at age 32, he was realizing that his desires for an
intimate relationship with another man were not going away. His fantasies continued to be more
relationship focused with less emphasis on sex. After his parents left him to farm on his own he
was excited at the possibility of meeting that tall skinny, cowboy. He secretly hoped he could
find a hired man, who could live with him, unnoticed and with whom he could develop a
relationship. In fact, a tall, thin cowboy did, one day, show up on the farm, a rancher from down south, wanting to sell some heifers.

*He was a slim cowboy with tight jeans and so I said, “Oh I see your camper.” I can still see this picture in my mind that we had gone into the camper and we were just sort of looking around, and there was a seat, a double seat and he was stretched out on it and I thought, he was so nice and I said, “Oh maybe we’ll get together again,” but of course it never happened.*

John recalls feeling the sexual tension. Though he was sure the feeling was mutual, he was “never bold enough to make the first move.” The moment was lost and the cowboy carried on.

John, although aware of his sexual orientation, desperately wanted it to go away. He believes that at some point he recognized that this was who he was, but when I commented on the time between his self-recognition and his efforts to engage in a sexual romantic relationship, he thought that he must have sub-consciously isolated himself on the farm. It was time to find others like him, having a few clues that there were others, like him, out there.

### 4.6.1 Leaving the Farm and the Journey of Self-Discovery

In 1978, John sold the farm. The time was right. Land prices were at a peak and it was difficult for a small family farming operation to remain competitive when, for example, a combine could cost $100,000.

*I could travel and of course I wanted to get into my gay lifestyle which I really had not expressed too often, and so, I thought that there was so much out there that I had not experienced and I thought, “Well if I travel maybe I can pick-up and find out who I am.”*

At age 44, John knew that, despite years of prayer and abstinence, his sexual desires were not going to change. He also knew that it was unlikely that he would ever find a partner while isolated on the farm. He was ready and eager to seek out other gay men. He purchased a house in Newcastle, a village just up river from Drumheller. This was his home base. Not tied to regular employment or parental obligations, he was free to come and go as he pleased. After buying,
what his friends later referred to as, “The Love Machine;” a 1979 GMC van, he set out for a North American journey eager to, “explore what all these other people, that were like me – how they lived and what they did.”

Having read a personal advertisement, in what he thought was probably the Western Producer (a farming newspaper), from a farmer in Wisconsin who was looking for male companionship, he made Wisconsin his first destination. A chance with another tall, thin cowboy, John was not to let this opportunity go. He spent several weeks with the Wisconsin cowboy. In between eager love-making sessions and daily chores, they would talk for hours about horses and farming. It would have seemed his dream relationship come true, had it not been for the fact that his tall, thin cowboy was already in a relationship with another farmer. Though he tried to convince John that they could work something out, John wanted something more than a sexual relationship. John’s desire for a traditional love relationship kept him from staying. From Wisconsin, he travelled east and south, meeting many interesting and unusual people along the way, discovering that, “people are people no matter where you go.” He also quickly discovered that at the truck stops along the way, “there is always cruising going on,” and that some rest stops were particularly busy and to his surprise, some of the truckers wanting to pick him up. He was however hesitant to participate, not knowing, “what I was going to get myself into.” He did meet another gay cowboy, a Texan, who he spent some time with, but no relationship ensued. After his three month journey, and while not finding his true love, he did return from the trip feeling that he accomplished what he had set out to do; he found others like him.

In 1979 and on his return from the van trip, he took a bartending course in Calgary. Being a very social person, he thought this would be a great way to meet people and he did! It was
through his restaurant contacts that he met Tom, one of the first men in Calgary who had approached him to have sex. This was memorable, as for the longest time, John could not imagine someone being attracted to him. This was not to be a romance, however, as Tom was also very much into anal sex, a sexual practice that John was not interested in. Through Tom, John connected to a wider circle of friends which included a number of gay men who were mostly business owners.

John was initially reluctant to go to the gay bars in Calgary, “paranoid that I might be seen” and fearing that he might be caught in a police raid. Though bar raids had become almost a thing of the past by 1979, it was not uncommon for the police to raid the gay bathhouses. To add to his fears, John’s brother-in-law worked with the Calgary City Police, making a simple trip to the gay bar an even more precarious adventure.

His “bartending” years were to be of his most memorable and were clearly a turning point in John’s life in terms of his social connections and how he felt about himself. He reflects on these years with much nostalgia,

_The bartending – that was the most fun I ever had – I felt like I was just God. It was the most liberating experience I ever had because I also started my homosexuality, well my feelings and actually accepting the fact that somebody wanted to be with me – you know, the acceptance of who you are. That was the strongest sense that I belonged and I just had a sense of empowerment that I was who I was and I was doing what I wanted to do and I had a lover and he cared about me!_

Although John had several good gay friends in the restaurant and bartending business while living in Calgary, he did not in his words “become immersed in the gay community.” In reference to his Calgary years:

_Of course it changed me, even in subtle ways like when I first said to a guy, “Can I take you home with me?” I was learning all the things that most gays learn when they are 19 or 20._
While he enjoyed going out dancing with his friends, he was not actively involved in any gay organizations. He never really left his home in Drumheller, even while working in Calgary, he continued to maintain his home in Drumheller, while at the same time staying with friends in Calgary. He became more comfortable having sex with other men, though remained cautious with anyone looking for just a one-night stand. John would not put up with anyone who would pretend that they did not know him the day after. Many of the friendships he developed during his Calgary years remain to this day.

John was tightly connected to his Drumheller community and family and did not want to be separated from them despite his desire to be with other gay people. John expressed bewilderment at how so many gay people seemed to separate themselves entirely from the straight world and chose to associate only with other gay people.

4.6.2 Partnering

John has had two significant gay relationships in his life. He met his first partner through friends in Calgary. John does not elaborate much about this relationship that lasted about three years. His partner at this time lived in Victoria. It was a long distance relationship that was difficult to maintain. The second and most important relationship was with Michael who he was with for close to 10 years. His relationship with Michael ended tragically with Michael’s sudden death in 1992.

John met Michael in 1983 through his friend Fred at a Calgary gay bar. They started up a conversation. He invited him to his van where they continued talking through the night. At that time, Michael was working odd jobs and had “very little self-esteem.” John took him to Drumheller for regular visits and introduced him to his Drumheller friends and family. Michael moved to Drumheller to live with John, even though he was initially concerned about “what
people would say” in this small town. While Michael was 21 years younger than John, they connected on many different levels. Though there was no explicit statement about the nature of their relationship, Michael was accepted by John’s close friends and family. He regularly attended family functions. About Michael’s relationship with John’s family, John tells me that:

Michael is one of these people that related really well to the kids [John’s nephews and nieces] and to my dad. My dad really liked him. With my mother, it is not that she didn’t like him but there was more problem. I think they both knew but she never said anything. It was just her mannerisms. But Father when he needed help and stuff like that, Michael was good at that. He was good at helping people. Dad said to me, “I am so glad that you are not alone now.” That was his confirmation. My mother never said that to me. And yet they got along well. And no matter what was going on in the family, we were always there together.

They remained somewhat cautious about revealing explicitly the nature of their relationship. For example, though they slept together, they had a spare room, that was known as Michael’s room to anyone visiting the house.

True to his nature, John was, initially at least, the key nurturer in the relationship and encouraged Michael to develop his skills. Though 21 years his senior, John told Michael upfront that:

If you think that I am going to be a father figure to you, then you can forget about it, because it is not going to work because I think of you as an equal on whatever level it is. I am not going to be a sugar daddy. That is one thing I will never be.” I said, “You have to earn your way,” and he always did.

However, John tells me that he loved to look after Michael and found that living with someone else gave him a feeling of being more rounded as you, “Don’t get into yourself too much.” He goes on to describe a tender and mutually rewarding relationship:

Surprisingly, at the beginning, I think I was the nurturer, but I found out once he moved to Drumheller and we were together all the time, I found that he took the rough edges off me. You would change without realizing it because he had such a nice way of doing it. Just to give you an example, I’d get up in the morning and he would get up as early as I would and he would always run downstairs and have a shower. He would usually put the coffee on and then I would make breakfast and I always liked making him lunch. I just liked looking after him quite obviously and maybe I was becoming a parent in that way.
but he would say, after he had come up from the shower and before I would go down and have mine, “Now come and sit down for a few minutes.” Well I never wanted to sit down for a few minutes, but I did and I gradually would and when he came up, we would both sit here for a while. In the wintertime, it was dark, Michael loved the dark and he loved fog. He always felt comfortable because it would close things in. It was like a cocoon I guess and I would say, “You are back in the womb Michael.” But anyway that is just one small example of how he just sort of changed me and I think that I changed him.

One thing that I did give him a lot of support for was trying to encourage him because when he first came here he did not have any job. I remember when he went to Greentree [a primary school] and talked to the Principal and I said, “Well Michael, you have got to tell him that you really want this job and don’t pay attention to this ‘We will call you. Don’t call us’.” I said, “You go up and talk to him.” And so the next day he came home and said, “I got it. I got it.” The job he wanted. And so it just became what I thought life should be about. I hate to use the word normal, but it was just normal.

Later on reflecting on these initial reflections he tells me that,

It worked out well for me and when you say, did I nurture Michael – I did. Even though, I did not want him to look at me like a sugar daddy because that is not what I wanted to do, I never looked at him like a son even though he was certainly young enough to be my son. I just felt we were equals and it worked. It certainly worked for me. I don’t know how it worked for him. I think we still would have been together. I don’t know, it is hard to say.

I would have wanted to stay together, but with that much difference in age, there was bound to be something and I think the fact that when he went on his little jaunts that sort of gave him enough of whatever fulfillment he needed. But we just had a good relationship.

Although John wanted a monogamous relationship, and was monogamous himself, Michael did not wish this and chose to have sex outside of the relationship when he traveled. John accepted this.

In 1992 Michael died suddenly from a blood clot. Unfortunately, John was unable to get to the Calgary hospital before Michael died. To add to this, the Catholic Church could not accommodate Michael’s funeral wishes (as he was cremated) and so his friends, an Anglican minister and her husband, performed a service. John was taken aback by the support of his Drumheller community of friends after the death of Michael. He tells me that:
There was confirmation from people that I never expected. And I mean I am talking about people that I have known for quite a while and some are younger, half my age. I just thought it was amazing!

No one from his Catholic Church community was present to support him and not necessarily or overtly at least, due to the relationship with Michael, but, “the cremation was still considered almost as if you were committing a sin.” He adds that he will, “never understand why they would make life so difficult for you.” Michael’s death occurred when John was 58. Though surrounded by family, friends and community, John was to enter his senior years as a single man, telling me that:

I guess I have been quite content and I would always be okay if there were somebody my age that would want to get together…but you get so used to being by yourself and there are a lot of pluses.

4.7 Ongoing and Engaged Family Participation

4.7.1 An Involved Uncle

I ask John about his relationship with his nephews and nieces who he makes reference to often. His affection is obvious when he talks about them. He tells me that with Kathy [not her real name],

It is very good because she quite obviously knows where I am coming from and she has become good friends with [friends—a gay couple] Don and Greg [not their real names] through me when they moved to Vancouver. And they have been really good to her and they see each other quite a bit – like every so often she has them over for dinner or goes over there for dinner.

John sees his nephew Ben [not his real name] often as he and his wife live in Drumheller. Ben lived in John’s house for a year while John was going back and forth to Calgary. He also still sees his nephew Cass [not his real name] who is aware of his sexual orientation, though they have never discussed it. It was Cass and his wife who gave John a copy of the gay-themed film about two cowboys in love, Brokeback Mountain. Cass’s wife, after the death of John’s partner,
expressed her concern for him, encouraging him to find another companion, worried about him being too lonely.

John is less close to his Sister Sonya’s [not her real name] children though they would visit the farm often as kids. “They were out there for quite a while and they were really fun. But as they got older, there wasn’t a connection and it wasn’t a very happy marriage for my sister.” He did however travel to Ontario to accompany Sonya and one of her sons who was critically ill and later died of Crohn’s disease. He was always there for them. Ben, Kathy and Cass continue to be a central part of John’s social world. With a smile on his face he recounts early baby-sitting memories:

> When Bill and Marge first adopted Ben, I would go down to mass early in the morning and then I would go and baby-sit and they would go to the Anglican Church. And Ben was just the most placid individual and he was very easy to baby-sit. There was more than once that I lay down on their sofa after they left when Ben was really quite small, not even walking yet, and I would just lay him on my stomach and I would fall asleep and they would come home and there is me sleeping and Ben is sucking on his bottom lip. Ben loved touching! I have never seen a kid like this. He liked to touch your hair, he had very sensitive fingers and he would just barely touch it, or a fur coat, just barely touching it. He was just the best kid and he loved coming with me. When he got a little bit older, I would be hauling grain and I would stop with the truck and pick him up in the morning and he would stay out at the farm all day and he just loved it! We would load up the grain or whatever we were doing and we would have lunch at the farm and after the last load I would drop him off at home

> I remember Kathy and changing her. She started screaming the minute you started changing her diaper so I would get everything ready and of course in those days they had cloth diapers with pins, so I would get everything ready and they had a little table in the bathroom that was a change table, so I would grab her by the legs like this and put my arms across and she would kick and scream. I would take off her dirty diaper and put on the clean one and then hold her down while I pinned it. And as soon as you pinned it and put on her pant things she was laughing.

4.7.2 Caregiving: “Because I give it away!”

Beyond his active uncling role, John has been an active caregiver for family and non-family members. He was active in supporting his sister’s family after the suicide of her husband encouraging his nephews and nieces to attend counseling. He cared for both his parents during
their final days. He is grateful for these opportunities to be present with his parents in a way that he had not been previously.

You see in both cases—I never felt really, really close—particularly between a father and a son and being on the farm is a different story because you are competing. Your father thinks you are taking over from him. But I never really felt close until the last years and that was so nice for me, with my dad, I got to know him better toward the end, the last four or five years of his life. With Mom, I was so lucky because I had the time to do it and of course she did not want me living with her but the last six or eight months I decided that instead of making breakfast for myself, I am going to go over and I will have breakfast with Mom because it is easier for her. I was lucky enough to be able to go over and do that which she got more comfortable with. I would go over and sweep up the kitchen and I always did the laundry. I would change the bed and put clean sheets on and wash the other ones.

Besides his family, John has always been quick to offer help to others living with terminal illness, including people he barely knew. He has learned over the years how to support others living with terminal illness and speaks with confidence about the sensitivity required in such a role.

When you are looking after somebody who is extremely ill, it takes up everything there is of your time. I have done it with people at different stages with their illness. You have to get the feeling for what the rest of the family and everybody else wants of you. You don’t want to be centre stage because you are not related to them and that kind of thing. I always think that you have to be careful, that you tread lightly with the help. To me it is just like if I go see somebody in the hospital that is really sick I don’t stay more than five minutes. I seem to have a sense for knowing when somebody needs help, even a total stranger. There are some people that you can go up and say, “Are you okay?” and there are others that you know that you can’t approach.

In his 70s and contrary to gender stereotypes John continues to be a sensitive neighbour, helping out where he can.

It still happens today in small ways. I like to help out next door neighbours in small ways and doing things. Even my sister Sonya said to me, “Why do you bake so much?” and I said, “Because I give it away.”

In fact, his bank tellers have often been the beneficiaries of his baked goods.
4.8 Resistance to Growing Old, “Nobody gets old, they just get older.”

Like his resistance to having to act according to gender norms, John also resists being put into an *old* mould. As he ages, he continues to feel a sense of belonging to his family, neighbours and to nature, all strong reasons for him to stay in Drumheller. He wants to do what he wants to do, and has never felt limited to do so, despite living in a rural area.

*There is not enough time for everything and I just think that is a good way to live where you never have enough time for all the things you want to do. I can’t imagine people like Dad’s contemporaries that sold their farm and they had no other interests and they moved into town and they just sort of faded away.*

He shares his mother’s view that chronological age is not an indication of aging.

*We never celebrated birthdays. My mother never thought age meant anything. But I can tell you at different times when different people have met me and I tell them how old I am, it changes. Their attitude toward me changes.*

Like his resistance to being told what to do, whether it is by gay men or straight male gender role expectations, his resistance to doing what is expected of him as an older man comes through strongly.

*I always had confidence in myself in the sense that I never wanted to fit into a pattern. I always felt as an outsider just because of that, apart from the fact that I was gay. I know that whether you are gay or straight within your mind, without realizing it, we have set these ideas of what people should be or should be doing whether it is age or anything else. Maybe you could be just as happy if you were just doing what you want to do in this life, rather than doing what society thinks or your parents think that you should be doing. Like people will say, “Why don’t you go to the senior centre here – the pioneer trail centre?” And I say I would not mind just going and playing cards and stuff. The problem with going there is that then they want you to stay....*

Staying to John seems to mean isolating oneself to a particular group who have a particular way of doing things, and a set way of being old.

*I just think that you continue life. It is the same thing about the gay lifestyle, that they isolate. I don’t want to isolate myself. Like my sister and brother-in-law and they both like to golf and that is their life. And they go down for the winter. It is again, what they expect of you, just like me wearing shorts. It is just like a standing joke to her, “How come you haven’t got your shorts on already?” Because I am an older person, am I not*
to wear shorts? There is so much more to life. There is so much more to learn. You never ever stop learning and stop finding new things and new ways of looking at things and I think if you keep your mind open, you realize that you have to change with the times as much as you don’t like it. I mean like the computer is my bane. I don’t like it but I got one because I don’t want to stay in the horse and buggy days.

John has been a very independent person all his life and is loath to seek help from others, this despite the fact that he is ever ready to help and support others. His model for aging was his mother. She did not complain despite ailing health and never asked for help, even though at times she clearly needed it from his perspective. His father died at age 84 in 1985 when John was 51. His mother died 16 years later at 92 and John was 67. John’s life took a turn at age 69. He spent some time in a hospital in Calgary in a coma for three days, following a heart attack. This was a big surprise for him as he has always lived a very active life and never smoked or drank more than wine at meals. When asked how this experience impacted on him, at first he states that it really did not have any effect, besides the impact of medications on his ability to have orgasms, but later, in reflection he is much more philosophical about how the heart attack was a turning point in his life highlighting a sense of gratitude, “I just have the sense that I am in my 40s or 50s. That was the best time of my life in the 40s, the 50s and even into my 60s – until I had my heart attack.”

I think my heart attack and the whole thing was another learning process. It was something that I learned from and it strengthens your character a little bit. I say to people that if it wasn’t for the fact that they worked so hard on me to keep me alive, I wouldn’t even be taking these drugs because I don’t know what they are doing to me and neither do they but it is supposed to be keeping me alive to a certain extent. I appreciate that and I am going to keep this up [taking medications and looking after self] because they worked so hard to keep me alive.

Physical changes, such as knee problems, which limit his ability, tell John that he is getting older. He resents not being at the head of the crowd with respect to his physical endurance as he was always in very good shape. I ask more about his experience of aging, particularly as it relates to his identity as a gay man. When asked if he feels he is aging in a way that is
different from his heterosexual peers, he ponders for a bit and then with a smile he responds with certainty:

*Yes, there is something different. It is hard to explain, but I always think I know something that they don’t! It’s about knowing that you don’t have to play the macho game. But I think that I experience things in a different way than they do because they are living the stereotypical life so much more than they need to.*

He gives an example of going to visit his nephew at his work place. He sees and hears the macho games that are being played and is aware that they are games. He knows his nephew in a different light. He wants to tell these guys that they do not need to pretend like this. They can really just be who they want to be. He thinks other men get caught in a way of being that they cannot get out of. As a gay man, he feels he is more aware of the gender games that people play. He feels liberated from having to play these games and finds joy in being who he is and expressing himself in whatever way feels natural.

### 4.9 Reflections on a Life Well Lived

When discussing the first draft of his narrative summary, John tells me that I, “hit the nail on the head with most things. It opened my eyes…. I don’t know why I did some of the things I did.” This is an opening to explore his life choices in more depth and to reflect on what his story says about his guiding philosophies about life and aging. What follows are John’s thoughts on several aspects of his life course from the vantage point of old age. I welcome them as lessons on aging well, with several of his points mirroring what numerous gerontologists have found to be important components of successful aging.

During one of our final interviews when asked if he would have changed anything, he says:

*I think that I would have been in California. I would either have smartened up and tried to get back to school and of course if I could have, I would be in Hollywood to be an actor or a singer.*
As if to jolt me out of the image he has presented about himself so far, he later tells me with respect to unmet dreams that:

_I know that I would have been, this is a stupid thing to say, but I always thought to myself, “I wouldn’t have minded being a slut!” The exact opposite of all of my morals and what I think is the proper thing. Of course you are raised in this idea of marriage and children and white picket fence and it is amazing how brain washed you get. But you don’t realize because it is happening slowly over a period of time._

_“The only other thing,” he tells me, “is when I started my bartending course, I wanted to bartend on a cruise ship because that is the only way I would ever go on a cruise ship is to bartend but I think that is sort of fading away a little bit now.”_ But overall he is satisfied with what he has done with his life telling me that:

_I did a lot more than I thought I ever would – when you grow up seeing your parents struggle and I mean you have your basic things and I don’t know why we think all these material things add so much to our life because you get bored with them very quickly. There are very few things in my house that I can say that I spent quite a bit of money on and they don’t mean as much as what is left of my mother’s little tea set that Father bought her. That was made in Japan with the cup and saucer or those figures that that Hungarian man painted by hand. There is more value to that because there is a story to it._

John talks about staying energized through helping others and tells me:

_What I think it is that the positive attitude that we got growing up, that everything is up to you. There is not going to be anybody else. There is nobody with a free handout and if you always just want things and don’t see the needs of other people. If I help you, you don’t have to return the favour. Return it to someone else and spread it around._

And about freedom, time and aging, John says that,

_When I traveled with my van, I never thought of time. It just did not make any difference. It did not matter whether it was late at night or early in the morning or anything else. It was just how I felt and if I felt like being up I was up and if I did not I went to bed. That is a real feeling of freedom. We have to constrain ourselves I guess because we have to live with other people. No matter what it is I do, it is just what I feel like doing at the time._

I question John about internalized homophobia and any feelings of leftover shame related to his homosexuality. He responds thoughtfully:
I don’t think anybody likes to feel like they are ashamed of something. Just like when you were a kid and were ashamed. I guess feeling ashamed is so illogical after you get older and you think about these things and that there is really nothing to be ashamed of. Well you probably do, but there are certain things that you don’t want to admit about yourself. I think that everybody is the same way you don’t want to admit that you have actually made mistakes.

Unlike others in the study, John, does not feel the need to clean-up his house of its gay content. He tells me that he has gay books, but that he is not:

...destroying them just because someone will think that he is gay. They know I am gay anyway, but nobody talks about it. I remember talking to one of my nephews and I said, “Maybe I should throw some of this stuff out.” And he said, “Just leave it Uncle.” I said, “You guys can do whatever you want with it.”

And when asked about future plans, John emphasizes that as he has no wife and children to look after him, he feels that his life is different from others. He has been very active in the lives of his nephews and nieces and knows that they will be there for him, but he does not want them to think that they have to look after him. He has no fear of being alone and revels in his solitude. He has prepared his power of attorney and his family knows that he does not want a formal funeral service. John has no worries, but for the fear of becoming dependent on his nephews and nieces. “My hope is that I just drop dead and I am not having to be looked after.” He does add, though that the, “consolation of turning older for me is hopefully that I am a little bit wiser even though I don’t think that I am…but that I can cope with whatever comes along.”
Chapter 5
Jake

PHOTO 5. PRAIRIE CHICKEN COOP
July 2006

“They’re not liked much
They’re a nuisance”
“They’re pretty sneaky
They steal chickens!”

80 Year Old Man
“Normal memories,” Jake responds immediately when asked about significant early childhood memories. We are talking over morning coffee in his sunny apartment. It is my second day in Westview and I am alone with Jake. He is a busy man on a schedule and tells me that he has until 11:30 to talk at which time he needs to visit his mother. After setting us up with another cup of coffee, Jake jumps right back into the conversation and pointedly informs me that:

*I don’t think, I have a typical gay story, if there is such a thing as a typical gay story. The fact that I did not have any idea what I was until much later in life is the result of the environment that I was raised in.*

It was years before Jake identified as a gay man. In fact it was not until his 40s and increasingly surrounded by those like him, that he was, like them, “a homosexual.” Though Jake speaks of numerous same-sex encounters throughout his life, it never occurred to him that this was unusual or that other boys did not feel this way. There was no name or label, derogatory or otherwise, that differentiated him from others. He had no sense of being different and certainly no identification with a marginalized group, nor was he aware of others labeling him so. He does not describe his experience in terms of discrimination, not in his youth or even now as a closeted older gay man.

I am intrigued with his opening comments as Jake, unknowingly, challenges conventional gay story lines of a lonely childhood besought with secret and shameful desires. Questions of sexual identity are in his straightforward comments made more complicated. But first a few more details about Jake’s early years.

5.1 Early Years: “Boys Don’t Take Music Lessons”

Born on September 8, 1930 in Gallum Hospital to second generation descendants of homesteaders from North Dakota, Jake grew up in the small town of Astor, Alberta that has a
population of 250. He was born into a strict Catholic family, but today Jake considers himself an agnostic telling me emphatically that religion plays no role in his life today. He recalls,

*I got thinking that back in my childhood, a fellow student died. He was protestant and we were not allowed to go to the funeral because it wasn’t in the Catholic Church. And you know the controls the Catholic Church has on the homosexual thing and whatnot. It makes you stop and think – there is something wrong here.*

He later speaks of his adult struggles to “deprogram himself” from damaging religious ideas.

Referring back to his early memories, he succinctly tells me that, “*I had a girlfriend. I attended a small country school right up until grade 12. I was married.*” Jake thinks he could have done more under different circumstances, referring to his former wife’s appraisal of him, “*that if you’d had a happier childhood you’d have been university material. Unhappy children do not learn; happy children learn.*”

Jake’s early interests come out as he gives me a tour of his well-organized apartment. He directs me to the large oil painting of the concert scene that I had noticed earlier in the living room. He explains that the painting is taken at the opening of the Symphony Hall of the Winspear Centre for Music in Edmonton where the Edmonton Symphony Orchestra performs. He is a season ticket holder. “*Unlike anyone else in my family, I have always loved classical music*” In fact, as a young boy, Jake would secretly take the place of his sister at her music lessons, “*I loved it! I loved it!*” The lessons were short lived, however, once his mother found out. His father would never approve as, “*Boys don’t take music lessons!*” He was very disappointed by his father’s prohibition. With pride in his voice, however, and with an air of victory, he draws me to the large painting of the symphony scene in his living room and points to a figure seated in the first balcony box above the stage and tells me, “*That’s me.*” His passion for music was never extinguished though, regretfully, he never did learn to play an instrument.
5.2 Sexual Identity Development: “I didn’t know I was gay”

Following Jake’s lead, we discuss the more personal aspects of Jake’s experience of being gay and of aging as a gay man. According to Jake, there was nothing, no books, no stories, no church messages. The only issue was to, “find a girl and get married.” He tells me that:

I did not know I was gay, until my wife was pregnant. Growing up, I never knew the word, never heard the word, did not know what it was, did not know that I was gay. Nothing! Nothing out here in the prairies, nothing! Sexuality was never discussed.

He adds with a knowing, boy-like mischievous tone, “I was an altar boy and was never touched, the Catholic church owes me.” Though he did not identify as being gay, Jake had no lack of same-sex sexual experiences. His first memories of sex are of the neighbour boy, who he “jerked-off” with throughout his teenage years. He denies any kind of romantic attachment with these boys. He did not think it was unusual, he had no name for it, but “just thought that is the things that young boys do.” He pauses this narrative to share his theory on homophobia, which he sees as a result of the fact that so many boys have had same-sex, sex play. When they are older these memories may haunt them and they fear this inclination in themselves.

Once past his teens, there were no other sexual encounters till his late 30s or early 40s.

I have been a swimmer all my life and I met this guy at the swimming pool. He was over there and I was here and we were looking at each other, both of us getting erections and having to cover up because there were children. It was weeks before we ever got together – the sex was terrible – but he did take me downtown and introduce me to the gay community or some of it in Edmonton. And that is when I started putting it together. I think back to this. I had to start figuring out, Jake, you are homosexual! I realized there were such people as homosexuals in the world and that I was one of them.

Later he realizes that,

The gay world is much bigger than one thinks. It is like you are the only one in the world and then you meet someone else and then there is another one. You know how it evolves that way...It keeps getting bigger.

While living in Flemmington, and while still married, he would take frequent week-end trips to Edmonton, officially to pick up “supplies” for the hotel when, in fact, the main
destination was the downtown YMCA; a frequent meeting place for male to male sexual encounters. Jake describes how the “Y” worked in the 1960s,

You could rent rooms there like a hotel. I think the bathrooms were down the hall. And if you were interested in meeting another guy, your door was left ajar or you walked down the halls and there was a door left ajar and you could look in and size up the guy and if you were interested, make a contact, and if not, walk on. It operated like a bathhouse.

His first actual gay gathering space was in 1965 where he went to the steam baths, having been introduced to them by a then closeted politician who he had previously met in a cruising washroom. At that time there was always the fear of the baths being raided. Accurate identification had to be given when you entered in order to be admitted, adding to fears of being raided; however, sex was a strong enough draw to keep him going. Jake had his first adult affair (Jake’s term for a sexual relationship beyond anonymous sexual encounters) with someone he met at the steam baths in Edmonton in 1983 at the age of 53. He had his “affairs out at the cottage”. His longest affair was for about four years, but he was never monogamous. He has never had, nor has he desired a “live-in relationship.” He had no lack of regular anonymous sex and enjoyed it with strangers telling me jokingly, “I believe the word is a slut.” He does not, however, “do anal, neither active or passive,” though he is becoming a more active sexual partner. In fact he is just now trying to learn to give “blow-jobs.” But basically, he tells me, “I am a hugger and a cuddler – yes very much so.” When asked about AIDS, he tells me that it has not affected his life too much as he has always had safe sex. He has occasional phone sex with a guy from another small town.

Well the one guy, I don’t know whether he is married. His name is Shane, he likes phone sex and there is another guy in Carbertown who is married. When his wife goes out he phones me. I fake it all the time, but I feel that these married guys have to have their outlets too and I don’t dislike phone sex, but it is not the ultimate.
Jake assures me that, “there actually is” a sexually active gay life in Westview and surrounding areas; many of the men being married. He also takes advantage occasionally of on-line networks including Silver Daddies\(^6\). He tells me:

> I am not a big on-line connector. I am on Silver Daddies…what can you do with someone in Germany….You just go in Edmonton [Silver Daddies location options], any place you want and the names come up and then you can contact them. I have yet to contact someone. I have never done it. I have had lots of people contact me…but for some reason…and I had a camera and all of that set up but I am not beating off in front of a camera…like where is the fun…each to their own but that doesn’t do it for me.

With obvious pride he tells me, “Oh I would not say that I am as active as I ever was because of age but I am still able to have the enjoyment – I’ll put it that way. 78 years old, so I am very, very fortunate I think.”

### 5.2.1 Identifying as Gay and Making Compromises

As Jake did not identify as gay until much later in life he had no sense of being different. Jake emphasizes that he has no experience of direct discrimination, which he attributes to his “good luck and good judgement, because I could have been the victim just the same as anybody else but because of good luck I wasn’t.” Good judgment refers to what he calls, “keeping your hands [referring to limp wrists] in your pockets.” Interestingly, it was not until his 40s when he started connecting with the Westview Saturday Morning Breakfast Club, that he became conscious of how his mannerisms could be viewed as gay. He is not out, nor does he have any aspiration to be out. He feels that his life is not impeded as it is. He does what he wants to do and with whom, though also recognizing that he has had to make compromises, “but I think that

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\(^6\) Silver Daddies is world-wide on-line social/sex networking site that provides a “meeting place for mature men and other men (both daddies and younger) who are interested in keeping their daddy happy and/or sexually satisfied.” Retrieved on August 3, 2010 at: [http://www.silverdaddies.com/](http://www.silverdaddies.com/)
over the years of having to compromise – having to live with it – you reach the point where you accept the situation the way it is.” Being gay has not prevented him from doing anything.

Jake does not recall the heated debates about homosexuality brought on by Anita Bryant in the 1970s and 1980s. Jake did not feel a connection to other gay people at that time, so did not feel that it related to him. He was aware of the changing nature of gay related laws and how his own province remains, “in the dark ages” when it comes to treatment of homosexuality. He refers to the teacher, Delwin Vriend\(^7\), who was fired from his job as a teacher at King’s College, a Protestant Christian college in Edmonton. Jake has followed this legal battle with interest. Though Delwin won that battle, Jake informs me that “Alberta still has not changed its laws.” In fact it was not until 2009 that the Human Rights Act was finally amended.

5.3 Work and Community Roles

After leaving high school in Astor in 1949, he went to St Jacob’s College, Edmonton, an all boys school, to complete his grade 12. Shortly thereafter he began his business career as a salesmen of men’s clothes at Eaton’s Department Store in Edmonton and then later at Woodwards. With his parents and his wife, Jake successfully ran a number of businesses. He owned a hardware store in Flemmington, a town of 1,400, where in the 1960s and 1970s he was a town counsellor and later the Mayor. He was always active in community organizations even as a busy businessman. He was a member of the Lions Club and was instrumental in starting a local baseball team.

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\(^7\) Delwin Vriend, a teacher at Kings College, a religious-based college in Alberta, was fired from his job in 1991 when it became known that he was in a same-sex relationship. He took the case to the Alberta Human Rights Commission but was refused as discrimination based on sexual orientation was not considered grounds for a human rights case. After several court cases and an appeal by the Alberta government to appeal a ruling in favour of Vriend at an Alberta court, Vriend took the Alberta Government to the Supreme Court where it was ruled in 1998 that sexual orientation must be read into Alberta’s Human Rights Act as a grounds for discrimination.
In 1980, at the age of 50 and after graduating "top of the class" from a business program at an Edmonton college he ran a catering company in Westview. This turned into a successful business, which he speaks about with pride. In 1995 after selling his share of another business at a local café, he retired for the third and final time. Retirement freed him from his many work responsibilities providing more time to engage in his social and leisure pursuits, most of which began to involve his growing gay social circle. He built and designed a cottage southeast of Westview. It provided a private space to have friends out for week-ends.

5.4 A Family Man

In 1958 he married Heather, a teacher who rented the basement suite of his duplex in Edmonton. He does not elaborate on their courtship and is matter-of-fact in his account of his married life. As he later comments, this is what one did, there was no other option, you grew up and "married a female." He did have a, "very good sex life" with his wife. They had one son, Cam, who was born in 1962. They lived in a number of small towns, including Denton, just outside of Calgary, Flemmington and Westview. Cam, following in the footsteps of his father, now works in food-related small business. Jake sees him and his children, not infrequently, but strives to not be at his "doorstep" on a regular basis. He holds to his independence.

Heather lived with an anxiety disorder, the reason she gives for their eventual break-up, which he assured her was not the case, though keeping the real reason—his sexual orientation—to himself. They were separated in 1984 and divorced in 1994. They have a good relationship now, though he has never disclosed his sexual orientation, commenting that, "We are better friends and get along better now than we did when we were married." Heather attends all family functions. She continues to be part of his family.
Jake’s son recently asked if he had any gay friends. He said yes, to which his son responded, “So do we Dad.” Even though Jake interpreted this to mean that his son was conveying that it was ok if he was gay, he remains steadfastly in the closet. When prompted, he stated that his, “grandson doesn’t need to know that his grandfather is a faggot.” He feels that this would be too much of a source of shame for his grandson. He knows they will ultimately find out, once they clean things up after he passes on, but this does not worry him. He felt that if his son were to outright ask him, he would tell him.

Jake has one brother in Edmonton, with whom he is not close. He remains close to his brother and sister-in-law and their children who live in the same town. They watch out for each other and meet over regular family holidays. He makes sure that his house is “cleaned-up” of any gay-identifying materials when they visit. He is very much liked by his nephews and nieces and continues to be involved in family gatherings. Jake attends his grandson’s football games that he does not enjoy, but goes for his grandson’s sake. At the time of the first few interviews, Jake’s mother was still alive and in a nursing home where he visited her routinely.

5.5 Aging with Inner Happiness and an Active Social Network

When asked about the nature of his social world now and how or if it has changed as he gets closer to 80, he tells me that he has a rich circle of friends. His gay world consists of two gay social groups; the Prime Timers and the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club; ex-lovers and people he connects with on the on-line social network, Silver Daddies. Many of his lovers have become friends. His ex-lover from Victoria, BC (where Jake has a condo) calls him every Monday morning “as regular as clockwork to check in on me.” He visits him in Victoria every other month. His communities of support go far beyond the town of Westview.
Jake has travelled a lot, particularly after his retirement where he expanded his gay social circle beyond the Westview and Edmonton world. He was a frequent visitor to Palm Springs with its thriving gay community. He has travelled often throughout North America and has made a number of trips to England, the home of his ex-wife. As he ages, however, he is less interested in traveling to other climates. A previous traveler to Mexico, he dislikes being, “approached by bands of hustlers in the gay bars.”

Apart from socializing with friends from the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club (described below) and the Prime Timers, he remains active. A long-time, competitive swimmer, he swam with the Master’s Swim Club until just a few years ago where he had to quit due to psoriasis. He shows me several photos of his swimming achievements over the years including a gold medal. He points out that it was one of his first pick-ups in an Edmonton swimming pool, who engaged him in the Master’s Swim Club world. He remains interested in cooking, though he doesn’t entertain often except to host his annual Christmas dinner, when the members of the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club are invited to attend. He proudly states that he “never watches TV.” Instead, he does jigsaw puzzles and reads trade magazines. He is the treasurer of Prime Timers in Edmonton. He thinks that if he lived in the city he would be more involved in gay related activities.

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8 There are chapters of Prime Timers groups across North America. As a social group it brings together older LGBT as well as those who like to socialize with older LGBT. They advertise their purpose as: “a social organization that provides older gay & bisexual men the opportunity to enrich their lives.” The organization is open to anyone over the age of 21. The Edmonton chapter meets monthly for dinner receptions sometimes featuring a speaker. Often members go out to the gay clubs afterward. Some members from the Edmonton Chapter also attend monthly dinner theatre events in Edmonton. The Prime Timers world-wide website is at: http://www.primetimersww.org/
Through Silver Daddies Jake meets a lot of younger people. I ask about the potential of being taken advantage of for those in search of sugar daddies:

Well, you have probably figured it out by now Barry, that I am a pretty good judge of personalities, so I think I had a little advantage there. There is one guy, we called him Widow Larry. These older gentlemen, he has them change their will and when they die, he is the beneficiary. It is very obvious what is going on.

He reminds me however that for some intergenerational relationships, it is mutual, “It is not a problem. It is going on, but it is not a problem. That is fine.” He believes that there are other reasons why younger people like older people. “Often it is because they were missing something in their younger life, like their relationship with their father wasn’t very good or something.” He has a few young guys who he speaks to several times per week. One “dumps on” him regularly. What does he get out of this, I ask? He feels, “the satisfaction of helping someone younger.”

He chooses not to have a “live-in lover” as that person, “would have to be strong enough to support me emotionally. And I have not so far met that person.” He looks after people, they do not look after him, although he feels that he would be ok asking for help. He sees himself as, “Very independent. I have no trouble being on my own at all.” He knows that he has people who would be able to help him if needed.

As he ages, his social world is focused more and more on his gay friends. He is now less involved with civic issues, feeling that he has done his job with community organizing; however, along with his friend Luke he likes to support his nephew’s hockey team by attending the occasional fundraising event. He adds:

I have difficulty being in the straight world. Even if I am with my family at Christmas time for a couple of days or something, I can’t wait to get back to the gay world. In a totally straight world I am very uncomfortable.
5.5.1 The Saturday Morning Breakfast Club and The Prime Timers

I am enthusiastically told about the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club—a group of gay men and women of all ages, though mostly over 40, who meet regularly on Saturday mornings for coffee. Jake was the initiator of these gatherings in 1982-83, when he started organizing coffee parties. A friend of his lived in a duplex where they held the coffee parties. “People were very closeted. It was (the coffee parties) my way of reaching out to other people, because I knew how difficult it is.” People find out about the group through word of mouth and for some through their on-line connections, particularly through Silver Daddies.

The group grew as word got out. If everyone were present there would now be 16 people. This is the only gay group in Westview that Jake is aware of. There are many other gay people, but they are very discreet and closeted. The Saturday Morning Breakfast Club seems to be the key link for a core group of gay men and women. Its newest member is trans-gendered. This revelation clearly surprises me as I am intrigued by the fact that a trans-gendered person chooses to live in a small prairie town. To my further surprise, I am told that she is a well-liked care provider at a care home for senior citizens.

The group now meets at a local restaurant. When I ask if this is thought to be risky by members, I am told that for the most part it is not a problem and that, “they are careful” but there is at least one member who chooses not to attend as he does not want to be seen in public with the group. I pick-up on Jake’s use of the word, “careful.” I ask him what it means to be careful with a group of gay peers while meeting in a public spot. He responds with a chuckle. It is about keeping “it under control.” What are you keeping under control? “Well, you know, not flaunting it.” I further prompt him to tell me what flaunting it means in Westview, “Acting, not flaunting the feminine side of us. Whereas you know as well as I do that that part of us comes out
when we are in our own little group sometimes, you know, we exaggerate.” Jake comments
lightheartedly how one of the women in the group keeps an eye on him and lets him know, “if
my wrists are getting too limp.”

I ask him if he resents having to be more careful in a small town given what he knows
about gay life in bigger cities such as Edmonton. He does not see this as a particular issue. Being
close to Edmonton has its advantages for this group of people who choose to live in a rural
setting, but who can benefit from the contacts and venues of a larger centre close by. For
example, many of his peers in the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club connect through
Edmonton’s Prime Timers. In the Prime Timers group:

We can be a little more queeny, you know, ‘cause we’re all faggots together. We can hug
and kiss and all that. We call each other she and her. The feminine in us comes out,
though we are pretty careful when out with the group. Once I found out that I was gay, I
learned how to act from them” [referring to the language, behaviours].

Jake tells me that he feels very much loved in this group. This leads us into further discussion
about what it means for Jake to be part of this group and how it is different from a group of
straight people. Though he has few occasions to socialize with non-gay people, with the
exception of family holiday events which he tells me, “is as much as I can handle.”

Though Jake speaks of the gender-bending banter of the group with affection, he is quick
to inform me that he does not embrace all aspects of gay culture. “We are not part of the arts,
creative, or fashion part of the gay world, but we know it exists.” In particular he has problems
with drag. He said he dressed in drag once and he hated it!

It is clear from the detailed and animated descriptions by Jake that the Saturday Morning
Breakfast Club plays an important role in his life. I am enthusiastically invited to join the group
for breakfast one Saturday. The following spring, I have the opportunity to join the group and
get a much better picture of the role that Jake plays in this group and the role of the group in his life. I am also given more of a glimpse into gay life in general in Westview. A short vignette of this visit follows.

5.5.1.1 Joining in on the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club

I arrive at the restaurant at 9:00 a.m. Jake and Luke (the third participant whose story is outlined in the next chapter) and two other men are waiting for me outside the non-descript prairie building; its only distinguishing feature were the large windows. The restaurant is on Highway 29 that bisects the town from north to south. It is nestled between gas stations, a motel and fast food stops. We are welcomed into the dining area with a familiar, “Hi Guys” by a cheerful, short heavy-set woman. Her manner suggests that my companions are well known to her and that she could, in fact, fit right in with this brunch crowd. I wonder how tuned in she is to the common thread that connects us. I make a mental note to ask about this later. The restaurant, open and sun-filled, is almost full. Several other customers greet us with cheery good-mornings as we make our way to a table. Again, I wonder if they know of our common bond? We find a table next to the large east-facing windows. Within no time we are joined by several other grey-haired men and women. Jake instructs me to sit across from him at one end of the table. There is a shuffling and rearranging of chairs and tables to make sure that there is room for all.

People greet each other with warm smiles, short quips, and easy laughter. This could be any queer gathering in any urban setting, but for the noticeable absence of any physical contact. No hugs or two-cheek kisses. I recall Jake’s comments in an earlier interview, that he, “learned to control it” as I take note of my own self-consciousness in being careful not to out the group in what I say or do. I wonder if I can even mention the word gay, though later I do out of necessity, but in a hushed tone, taking my cues from Luke. Luke tells me that some members of the group
were coached to “tone it down,” if they were thought to be speaking too loudly using language or mannerisms that could out the group to other customers. This is said without any judgement or resentment but as a matter of course. I am aware of my own sense of defiance, in my mind thinking, “but this is not right—I no longer have to live this way.” I know that in my downtown Toronto life, I have grown accustomed to, and have taken for granted, a relatively unrestrained expression of who I am, how I express my affections and my sexuality. In this restaurant, amidst the smiles and laughter and friendly prairie ways, I have a sense of going back to another time, a remembered emotion; vigilance, constraint, restraint, vulnerability. As a group, my brunch companions may incite suspicion and risk exposure but at the same time they are offered a shield against vulnerability. Though numbers do increase visibility and exposure, safety may still be found in them. This is a paradox that these men and woman must face daily.

I am introduced to the others by Luke, as his and Jake’s, “friend from Toronto.” I add that I am originally from Drumheller, quick to provide my prairie credentials, being aware of the history of distrust of easterners, especially those from Toronto. No further explanation is given for my presence at the table, nor are any questions asked of me. The man next to me, a former member of the armed forces, is quick to tell me that he has, “lived in Toronto and visited Drumheller and much prefers the latter.” He does not hide his dislike of the city that he once lived in, finding it to be far too big to be “live-able.”

The group consists of six men and two women. One, a trans-women, came here from Vancouver a number of years ago. I am impressed with how well she passes. The other woman is a local teacher. “She’s a regular but she’s not gay—she just likes our company,” Luke informs me. At the end of the table is a blonde haired man, who looks to be in his early 40s, the youngest by at least 20 years. I am told that he, along with the trans-woman and another man work as
home-care assistants. A very thin looking man who lives in Vancouver is a good friend of the younger guy at the end of the table. He attends the gatherings often during the summer. He was an academic earlier in life. I was later told that he was educated in philosophy and was reportedly known to "lecture" other group members, talking down to them as if they were ignorant. Luke tells me that this has changed as he has come to realize that other members of the group are also knowledgeable people who have a sense of how the world works. The two remaining men are teachers.

The waitress seems to have a particular fondness for this group. Coffee arrives immediately with frequent top-ups. I am told by Jake that I should order a "special" and that all I need say is my preference for "toast, brown or white; eggs, scrambled, easy-over or poached; and bacon or sausage." I comply, follow the lead of others and order in short-hand, "brown, scrambled, bacon."

The talk is easy and covers a diversity of topics, largely about happenings with other members of the group, birthday celebration plans, the upcoming Pride Day events in Edmonton, later plans for participation in a local fund-raising drive, signing up for a group lotto ticket, and reminiscences about past vacations. Reference is made to the children of several group members. Later in the conversation, I ask about the recent adoption of Bill 144 (Alberta legislation that requires teachers to inform parents in advance when they plan to include content on religion, sexuality or sexual orientation). This then gives parents the option of pulling their kids out of school. This legislation was offered as an olive branch to the Alberta religious right to calm them over the final adoption of previous legislation affording equal rights for gays and lesbians, a law put in place in most other provinces a decade ago. This question stimulates a collective response from the group, their anger and frustration with such a law is very obvious. The straight female
teacher is especially vocal and tells of the efforts by teachers’ groups to block the Bill’s passing. She notes that the students are as perplexed by the passing of the legislation as are the teachers. Others chime in on the underhanded way that the law was brought forward and at the ineptness of the current premier to deal effectively with the religious right. Though not a majority, I’m told that the religious right has the Government’s ear. This leads into a discussion of previous Alberta governments and the history of politics in Alberta. One member notes that the original Social Credit Party was actually very progressive in many of its policies, but that this all changed under the leadership of Ernst Manning in the 1940s.

At a point in the conversation, one of the men turns to Luke and Jake who, in years and time spent with the group, are clearly the senior members and asks if it would be acceptable to bring another woman from his work to brunch gatherings. Though straight, she is gay-friendly and enjoys the company of the three other queer care providers. He adds that she feels left out in not being able to join her companions for brunch. Neither Luke nor Jake respond definitively, though they ask a few more questions about her interest. I sense some hesitation and wonder why. In the end I have no sense of whether she will be invited to the group or not.

The gathering starts to break up within two hours, although a few of us remain with Luke and Jake and continue the conversation of the history of politics in Alberta. Both Luke and the visiting friend from Vancouver have been well-connected to the political life in Alberta. This being a rural area, Luke seems to know several of the players in current and past provincial politics. Once again, mention is made of a long-standing Alberta politician, now deceased, who was well-known to be closeted. He is spoken of with much respect and thought to have been highly ethical in his political practice.
We say our good-byes to the other members and I agree to be in touch with Jake again. I am encouraged to join the Breakfast Club again when I am next in town. I am told that I, “fit very well into the group.”

5.5.2 Back to Jake and Aging with “Inner happiness”

Back at Jake’s condominium and during our final session together, I attempt to steer our conversation back to questions of aging as a gay man in a rural environment. I ask Jake about his thoughts on aging successfully as a gay man. He responds by saying “people if needed should get help to find inner happiness.” When prompted about what he means by inner happiness, he tells me that, “I am not sure where it comes from, but I’m sure I have it.” Despite having a very difficult childhood, with very difficult parents, he told himself early on that he was not going to be like his parents. In his typical matter-of-fact manner, he summarizes his thoughts on aging by telling me that he is comfortable with how he is getting older. He thinks he is aging differently than other aging straight men because, “they don’t have as much sex as gay men.” He is on medication for an enlarged prostate; other than that he is pretty healthy. His blood pressure is slightly high. He has had no hospitalization and no limitations. He is doing well!

5.6 Unfinished Tasks and “Cleaning up”

I ask Jake what he expects to achieve through the telling of his story. He hopes that others will find it helpful, but has no desire to leave it for his family. This starts a conversation about “cleaning-up,” a topic recently raised in one of his social gatherings. “Other gay people in my age group have been mentioning this and so this has got me thinking about it. Like when I am gone, it doesn’t make any difference and do I care then?” I comment that he seems more concerned now about cleaning-up than he did earlier. He responds, “I am not worried about it – it is just what is new in the current conversation.” But he adds:
It has changed. You are quite right – that has changed. And it is because some of my friends have been talking about it and it has put my mind to thinking about maybe I should clean up things.

His friend Garth gave him a set of sketched nude males. And Garth, ”was cleaning out and so he gave it to me. This is how it evolves.” And what do you want to clean up, I ask.

Like out at the cottage there are some porno things – there is not very much but there is some out there. There are the Prime Timers files which, after this term, I will be getting rid of because I am not going to be the Treasurer anymore. I’m not going to be on the Board now. I have been on it for years and years and years so it is time for new blood. So I will get that cleaned up. There is – there would be things on the computer – whether my survivors would be interested or would do anything about that I don’t know – mainly Silver Daddies contacts and stuff like that.

I ask who he is worried about finding the material. “It would be my family. My grandchildren probably– I am not worried about my son very much. I actually think he knows, but it is just not talked about.” I ask him, what would be his biggest fear about them finding out. “It would cause a jolt in their life. I am of the nature that I would rather be kind than anything else.” And to be kind would be to prevent them from... “Anybody being uncomfortable.” I ask him, what he does want them to know about him:

Well my swimming legacy will be one. They will find that. There are medals and things like that. Awards for the chef school. There is a Man of the Year award from the village of Carbertown. But that is hanging there and I think they all know about that anyway. I think that they know me quite well. Even cousins or nieces and nephews – Uncle Jake is known as a pretty neat guy. That is the way they say it. I am not quite sure exactly what that means but it has been said many times. I will just say thank you – I don’t pursue it. Better than anything else being said I guess.

I ask about the photos of him and his gay friends, which he is going through with me. He is not worried about these as he does not think that they will be revealing telling me that, “The one and only time I did drag, that has all been destroyed a long time ago. I think mostly I don’t want any porno around.” I express a sense of sadness that the richness of his gay life, his contributions and tight circle of friends, which has made up much of his last 30 years; much of his life story
will disappear. He is not concerned with this, stating that, “I would rather my personality was remembered.”

Now identifying as a gay man, he has figured out how to make things work for him. He identifies one of his ongoing motivating values is his desire to “not hurt people.” He agrees that this is also what is behind his reluctance to let his family know that he is gay. He thinks it would, for example, cause pain to his grandson, knowing that his grandfather, “was a faggot!!” He does feel that there is some shame that remains for him regarding his gay identity that he attributes to the influence of the Church. He comments on how much work was involved in deprogramming himself from its influence, where he had to keep, “thinking and thinking and thinking…and discussing with friends and running ideas past friends.”

Like others, he fears being in an institution. He has a very specific fear of being found in a nursing home, not knowing what he is doing, and walking around playing with himself. He knows this is an odd fear, but it is real for him. He loves the idea of a special place for older gay men in a nursing home and tells me, “I have always thought that if I won the lottery, that would be one of my goals to build a place like that.”

Jake provides a summation of his life by stating, “This is a story of how a gay guy grew up on the prairies. He grew up not knowing that he was gay or knowing that there was such a thing as being gay.” He never felt different.
Chapter 6
Luke

Photo 6. RAINBOW ON THE PRAIRIES
June 2006

“\nI’ve got to liking them now. Not when I was a farmer. Let me tell you, they are the most adaptable animals on the face of this earth. They will eat anything, berries, insects, rabbits, gophers. They are smart buggers.”

80 Year Old Farmer
A winter blizzard howls outside as dusk settles over the prairie landscape. Pre-natal Luke prompts his mother and brings on the labour pains, announcing his imminent birth. Why tonight of all nights? Would the doctor make it through the blizzard? Just in case, Luke’s Dad took the team of horses to fetch the midwife; a good thing as Luke could not wait for the doctor. Just after his birth, a light from a lantern could be seen in the distance, gradually getting brighter as it came closer. It was the doctor, “he walked a couple of miles in the snow, in the blizzard. It was a different time,” Luke emphasizes. Such was the dedication of the prairie family doctor and the necessity of having supportive, reliable neighbours.

6.1 Early Years: School Days and Doing What Boys Do

Luke was born on March 22, 1936, the peak of the Depression years; the Dirty Thirties. Today, Luke lives in the same yard and on the same farm where he was born 74 years ago. The middle child of five boys, he was kept busy with the many farm chores. He started school in 1942 and spent the first five years of his school years in a one-room school house, Vodenskjold, about 2 ½ miles from his home. Besides the school, Vodenskjold had a barn to accommodate the horses of the students who travelled to school by horse and sleigh or buggy. This region was pioneered by Scandinavian settlers. His classmates were mostly from Scandinavian or German backgrounds. Luke attended the one-room school until 1949, at which time a bussing system was established allowing school kids to go to a larger school in the village of Calarna. After grade 10, he moved to a boarding school to finish his grade 11 and 12. He graduated from high school in 1955.

Luke played the games that most other prairie boys played enjoying hockey and baseball and big game hunting. He had no sense of being different from any other boy until much later in life. Defying many gay stereotypes, his childhood leisure activity choices left no hint of his
emerging sexual orientation. He was just a regular boy. Luke describes himself as outgoing. He had numerous friends and maintains many of the friendships that he made during these early school years.

6.2 Work: Factories and Farms

Luke started work in 1957 working in several manufacturing plants in Edmonton returning home on week-ends to help his dad on the farm. By 1966, at the age of 30, Luke was tired of the factory work. He applied for and received a green card with the plan to move to the USA to look for work. Jobs were scarce in the States then, so he headed down to Mexico where he travelled for several months. Returning to the States he applied for a job at Pitney Bowes in Los Angeles, liking the warm California climate. He was turned down due to some findings on a psychological test and tells me:

*I passed the mechanical test with excellent marks but the question that seemed to cause me a problem was: if I felt uncomfortable while in a crowd of people whom I did not know. At this point in my life I answered truthfully because I probably would have felt uncomfortable. There were several related questions in this line and in retrospect I probably should have lied and said this would have been no problem. As I later learned in life, sometimes a little fudging of the truth might be necessary.*

Who knows what direction his life would have gone had he “fudged” some of the answers. In any case, he decided that the big city was not for him, so he called home, talked with his parents and decided to work full-time on the farm with them. At age 30, he returned home.

Luke enjoyed farm work and worked closely with his father. He and his father were not especially close, but they worked well together. Over the years, and with the money that he earned from his factory work, he bought another quarter section of land and added machinery to the farm operation. At the age of 40, and following the death of his father, who died at the age of 67, Luke was left to farm on his own with some assistance from his mother. A subsequent decision by his younger brother to return to the farm caused some family tensions. Luke had
been used to calling the shots on the farm and had much more experience. This was a source of arguments making this period of his life very uncomfortable. An out was offered to Luke—a chance to volunteer with a funded African project (to be discussed later).

6.3 Sexual Attractions and the Long Road to Acceptance

6.3.1 Early Sexual Experiences

Living on the farm exposed Luke at an early age to the mechanics of sex, at least as demonstrated by copulating farm animals. Sex, though confusing and strange to him at first, was all part of the natural order; though how the mysteries of sex applied to him was a much later discovery. His schoolhouse had an outhouse where he and his male grade six school chums made frequent visits and not just to use the latrine. He was often the ring-leader in shared group explorations of sexual pleasure through same-sex sex play. When asked, he does not recall any shame attached to these activities and “wouldn’t say that it was a gay act.”

Later, in high school and while staying at the dorm, there were more opportunities for same-sex sexual activity. He remembers the boy across the hall, who would often join him in mutual masturbation sessions, often hiding under the bed, so as not to get caught by the Men’s Dean. They had a few close calls. Again, it did not occur to him that this activity was any signifier of anything different about him; it was just what boys did. He does not recall, “any sort of homosexual guilt with this activity, but was afraid of being caught breaking the rules; no going from one’s own room to another after lights out.”

While, in retrospect, during these teenage years, Luke does not think he knew what a homosexual was. He does recall the term “corn-hole” being bantered about, which to him meant what a man would do to a boy when he could not satisfy his sexual needs with a woman. Like a
then popular rhyme about sailors suggested to him, such behavior was a result of a lack of access to women and not an indication of homosexuality:

“The cabin boy, the cabin boy, the naughty little nippur, he filled his ass with broken glass and circumcised the skipper.”

Luke remembers having what he describes as a crush on a school friend with whom he spent a lot of time. They would go out to hockey games and other events. He enjoyed spending time with him and did so as much as possible including sleep-overs. Though there was no sexual activity during these sleep-overs, Luke does remember feeling that it felt good just to sleep together. He never did share his romantic or sexual feelings with this guy, not yet fully admitting them to himself.

Luke had a girlfriend in high school, who he says he “half-heartedly dated” just to be “in-tune with what society expected.” He found dating boring and would have much rather been with his male friends. He had no urge to be with his girlfriend in a sexual way. Though he did not link his feelings with any concept of homosexuality, he realized that he was not interested in women’s bodies. It took him several more years and an episode with a deck of playing cards, however, before he firmly gave up the idea of marriage to a woman. Given his religious upbringing he thought it would be unfair to marry someone with whom he would not want to have sex.

A growing awareness of the prohibitive societal norms associated with same-sex, sexual behaviour was linked to an incident that happened the summer after graduation. Luke was boarding at the home of a friend while working a summer job in town. They shared the same

9 A Google search of these lyrics indicate that they are from an old rugby song. Various versions of the lyric exist. No clear indication of authorship or date.
bed. There was some attempt at sex-play initiated by his friend, though the friend later reneged. Following this event, this same friend gave him the cold shoulder and made numerous derogatory comments about him. It became too uncomfortable for Luke to stay at this house so he moved out. They were able to patch up this tiff eventually and are now good friends. In fact this friend has recently on several occasions made supportive comments about gay rights. Luke interprets these comments to be an indication that he is aware of Luke’s sexual orientation. Although he has not been open about his sexual orientation with him, were his friend (or anyone else) to ask him directly, he would tell them that he is gay.

In 1956 and after high school, while upgrading his high school grades at Alberta College in Edmonton, he describes two key incidents in the development of his emerging self-awareness of his sexual orientation. He feels some level of regret when recounting a story about an effeminate classmate who was ridiculed frequently. Though Luke did not join in on the teasing, he did nothing to stop it.

Another incident occurred when he was at Alberta College. While there, he chummed around with an older student who would have been in his 20s at that time. This friend invited Luke to visit him in Drumheller at the end of the school year. Luke had never been there and was eager to go. The man lived with his parents, but had a separate loft in the attic. Luke had to share his bed. One night, the man made sexual advances towards him but Luke brushed him aside. He felt confused and uncomfortable about the feelings that this episode elicited. He decided to leave the next day, a day earlier than previously planned. The man asked if he was leaving because of the incident the night before, but Luke denied that this was the reason. Luke feels badly about this, having lied to his friend and unfortunately has not seen him since.
6.3.2 Early Adult Years: “Those naked women pictures were not doing a thing for me”

On his 21st birthday Luke took an overnight train trip to Chilliwack, British Colombia to visit his brother. A soldier was seated across from him. They chatted to pass the time. At nightfall, the soldier asked if he wanted to share a berth. Luke declined. Once the lights went out, the soldier put a newspaper over the two of them. To Luke’s great surprise the soldier started to play with his fly. The guy wanted oral sex. This was an “unknown experience” for Luke and he was “intrigued as to what would happen next.” Though he was aroused, he was also worried about disease, so he excused himself to go to the washroom; then returned wearing a condom. The soldier put his mouth on his penis, something never done to Luke before. The soldier was surprised and clearly not pleased with the condom. Luke, indignant, turned his back to the soldier. The next morning there was no sign of the soldier. On disembarking he noticed a group of soldiers standing on the platform. He felt their eyes on him, staring accusingly with disgust. Whether or not they were really staring accusingly at him cannot be known but he does recall feelings of guilt. By this time, same sex, sex-play was no longer innocent child play and had become associated with something shameful in Luke’s mind and needed to be kept hidden.

While working in Edmonton, Luke often took winter trips to Mexico. During these visits, he was occasionally approached by Mexicans wanting him to visit their “whorehouse.” In Acapulco, he accepted an invitation by a pimp to have a prostitute come to his room. Though he agreed to it, Luke was not at all interested in having sex with the prostitute and would have much rather had sex with the pimp. He recognizes now that at this point, in his 20s, he still had not fully accepted that he was not attracted to women and kept hoping and trying to change his sexual desires.
Not yet 30 when working in Edmonton, Luke, still not fully accepting or comfortable with his sexual attractions, describes a scene that he views as pivotal in his sexual identity development. A set of playing cards was passed around at work. The cards showed photos of mostly naked women, though one had a photo of a naked man. He asked to take them home, fascinated and aroused at the image of a naked man. He tells me:

You see I think even at that time, and this would be in my 20s, I was still thinking I would probably meet a woman and get married. I realized after that that all of those naked women pictures were not doing a thing for me.

Although he was aware at some level and for some time of his lack of interest in the female body, his fascination with, and singular erotic attraction to, the male body was becoming more and more evident. Though not realizing this at the time, it now seems clear to Luke that it was likely his sexual attraction to men that drew him to befriend several of the men at his work, though these friendships remained asexual. At that point there remained a clear distinction for Luke between sexual attraction and any sort of emotional bonding. His thoughts on this convey the distinction, “We were kind of interested in one another from a personality point. I don’t think it would have been a gay thing. Maybe some of it was?” The episode with the cards was a turning point for Luke, finally coming to terms with the fact that he could not ever ethically marry a woman. This realization, however, did not yet signify full acceptance.

“Well, which one of us is going to be in the barrel?” asked a summer student employee and fellow worker of Luke’s who was staying with him for a few days before heading off to university. Luke was puzzled and asked what he meant.

Well sometimes when there is a group of men and they are feeling the desire to have sex, and there is no woman around, one guy is chosen to be in the barrel with holes in it and the other guys put their cocks into the hole and the guy sucks the guys off.
Luke now realizes that the barrel story was really an invitation to have sex, but at that point, he was not yet brave enough to pick up on it. This student eventually became a senior CEO of a big oil company and is now divorced.

At age 34 and during another winter trip to Mexico, Luke was approached by a very friendly Mexican who seemed eager to get to know him. They connected quickly and ended up in Luke’s hotel room. Though the young man wanted to stay the night, Luke felt this inappropriate. But later, so enamoured with this young man was Luke that, unable to get him out of his mind, he travelled 16 hours on a Mexican bus to see him again. Interestingly, Luke had not yet interpreted his sexual attractions as a gay indicator. To him it was just two men enjoying each other sexually without any desire for any long-lasting relationship or lasting commitment.

Up until this point for Luke, sex, same-sex relationships and identity were all very separate. This amorous adventure seems to have been another significant point in Luke’s sexual identity development for it was this infatuation that made Luke realize that it was possible not only to be sexually attracted to another man, but to also become emotionally involved. This changed things for him as he began to consider the possibility of a loving, on-going sexual and mutually caring relationship with another man. His same-sex encounters to this point were brief with little opportunity for any romantic involvement. He could not imagine the possibility of having a “live-in” relationship with a man, viewing this as unfair to his parents. It would be impossible for him to carry on his work as a farmer in his small community as,

_You see I don’t know if I have ever [thought of having a committed relationship] I think really because of my relationship with family and friends, I think that I resigned myself to that fact, …so of course then, the sexual thing was more a need to get some sort of sexual satisfaction, but not to take it any further._

### 6.3.3 Actively Seeking Others as “Celibacy Was Not a Lot of Fun.”

Once he was back working full-time on the farm and in his mid 30s, he began to more actively explore his sexuality. His attraction to other men was not going to go away. He wanted
in on some of the action. Through a farmer’s newspaper, he found out about the sale of previously banned books such as *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*, *Fanny Hill* and the *Trials of Oscar Wilde* and other literature, some with gay sub-themes.

> *When I started reading some of these other books, I started to realize, you know being celibate is not a lot of fun and that is when I realized, “Oh for goodness sakes, there are places where you can meet guys. So then I thought, “Okay, let’s see how that goes.”*

He also found out about gay magazines and ordered some of the more risqué ones but was at one point very anxious as his mailbox was broken into with the magazines inside. Nothing was to come of this, though it does reveal the level of anxiety associated with keeping secret such desires. It was through these books and magazines, and reading about same-sex desires between men, that he came to realize that there were other men out there just like him. Through his reading, he was further exposed to the possibility that two men could experience long-term, committed relationships. His readings about gay life in San Francisco made frequent mention of the YMCA. He thought that the “Y” in Edmonton (about two hours away) would be a good place to start actively looking for other men like himself. At this point he was still very cautious telling me that, “*What really held me back was that I was so concerned that somebody might come by and see my car [around a known gay cruising area]. That was my main concern.*”

On his first visit to the Edmonton Y at age 34 when he was about to enter, a young man was leaving. He decided to follow him. Before long, Luke was walking beside him. They started to talk. The young man was a tourist from Spain. He asked Luke what there was to see in the area. Luke offered to drive him around eventually heading away from the city. The Spanish man did not seem alarmed or suspicious. On a country road, Luke stopped the car and reached over to him; they embraced. Luke gave his first “blow-job” and loved it!

The Spanish man, impressed with his obvious sexual enthusiasm, told him:
I'm glad you enjoyed yourself, but you’re going to have to make up your mind whether you want to be with a man or a woman. You appear to be quite new at this and if you continue you are going to find that you enjoy it even more. So you see I was also rather a late bloomer.

Luke drove him back to the city and dropped him off at the Y. This experience changed Luke’s perception of himself. He knew that it was men that he wanted to be with and that he would have to work at finding them. Interestingly though, this recognition, still did not at this point provide any strong acceptance or even any recognition of a gay identity. This step was still years away.

Having found out about the options for same-sex cruising, Luke found time to slip away, once the other family members were in bed. He would drive to Edmonton or Calgary arriving back home early in the morning and ready for chores with nobody knowing that he had even been gone. It was around this time, during the early 1970s that he heard about the gay clubs that were sprouting up in the larger cities.

6.3.4 Intimate, but not, “Live-in relationships”

On one of his late-night ventures to Edmonton in the mid 1970s, when Luke was close to 40, he met a young man a few years younger than himself who had had a troubled past, having come from an abusive family. Jeff had left his Ontario home early for San Francisco where he found sexual freedom in this city with its large gay population. He was a bartender at the Boot Camp Bar, “quite a famous bar at the time.” San Francisco was a Mecca for gay people at this very sexually liberated time, a time before AIDS. It was in San Francisco that Jeff was shot “through the shoulder and bore the scars where the 45 slug went right through, so both front and back bore the bullet scar.” Luke alludes to fact that Jeff was somehow connected to a “ sketchy” group of people. Jeff returned to Canada and to Edmonton where he met Luke.
Unlike his other encounters, Luke connected with Jeff in a more emotional way. They saw each other often and a relationship developed. Luke invited him to help out on the farm. He agreed and worked with Luke and his dad during the day and slept with Luke at night, under his parent’s roof! This did not seem to raise any eyebrows as it was not unheard of to have hired men staying on farms to do seasonal work.

Wanting to get out of Edmonton permanently, Jeff bought a small house not far from Luke’s farm. For a while Luke was able to both live on the farm he loved and continue with this clandestine relationship. The relationship lasted for several years, though at some point the inequity in the relationship began to weigh on Luke. He began to feel that he was being taken advantage of, with Jeff expecting more financial support than he was willing to give. As well, his sexual relationship with Jeff was unsatisfying. Though Jeff was very open to being pleasured by Luke, the same was not reciprocated. Jeff was also into what Luke calls, “rough sex” which Luke had no desire for. And so, Luke’s first and most enduring “love-relationship” was to come to an end not quite four years after it started, though they remained friends for about 10 years.

Luke’s only other romantic relationship was also cut short. He met Horst in Edmonton, about a year before leaving on his African volunteer program. Horst was 12 years younger than Luke, who was in his early 40s by this time. Though the two of them connected Horst, who was more open about his sexuality, wanted to become much more openly involved in the gay community, and to have a “live-in-relationship”—something that Luke found threatening. Horst moved to Vancouver which ended this relationship about three years after it began; however, the two remained friends.

After Horst, Luke’s only encounters with men were strictly based on sex without any ongoing relationship or emotional attachment. His desire to remain on the farm, in his mind
precluded anything more permanent. Luke had no contacts with the formalized gay community nor had he yet developed any type of gay social support network. Luke’s life trajectory was to change, however, as a result of his decision to move to Africa.

6.4 Africa: Gateway to the Other Worlds and Possibilities

In the late seventies, one of Luke’s younger brothers and his family chose to move back to the farm. Luke was not happy with the arrangement. He needed an out. In one of the farming papers Luke noticed an add recruiting experienced farmers to volunteer for an international farming support program in Africa. He applied, not so much for any particularly strong humanitarian reasons, but saw this as a means to get away from the growing tensions on the farm. If lucky he would at least get a free trip to Ottawa for the interview. With land prices at an all-time high, he jumped at the opportunity and sold his portion of the farm. With enough funds to sustain him for the three year program, in 1980 at the age of 44, he left for a rural farming area outside of Arusha, Tanzania. This decision to accept the offer and head to Africa was one of the key turning events in his life. His trip to Africa exposed him to the excitement of travel and different cultures and the pride that comes with using one’s knowledge and skills to help others.

Upon arriving in Arusha he was greeted with some skepticism by the African-based, Canadian coordinator. The coordinator thought that without the support of a wife, Luke would be unlikely able to cope with the emotional challenges associated with this kind of development work. Luke does not think that his skepticism had anything to do with any homophobia related concerns.

This was also around the time that John sold his farm. High land prices allowed both men the opportunity to sell their land and go on their adventures, what they referred to as their first retirement. Both were in their early 40s.
Luke did well in Africa working with educated Tanzanians who were hired by the Tanzanian agricultural arm, the National Agriculture and Food Company referred to as (NAFCO). Luke tells me that his:

...work with the Africans on the farm became a bit awkward when I became too friendly with some of the workers, friendly not in a sexual way but knowing that some had more potential than others. I was encouraging them by passing on my farm knowledge and machinery repair skills. This was looked upon as favoritism of some over others; therefore, I made a conscious decision to focus on the tribal people as then none of the workers I worked with could accuse me of favouritism.

In his first year in Africa, Luke was asked to oversee unloading and transporting of the machinery for the farm he worked on from the port of Tanga. It was here he met a young medical student named Talo. They have remained in contact over the years. Talo has subsequently married and has three children. Talo has visited Luke in Canada on two occasions when he was in North America taking work-related courses. Luke made a return trip to Tanzania in 2006 and met Talo's family. Luke continues to send money to this family to help with the children's education.

Luke worked on the project for three years, with regular visits home. After completion of the project, Luke bought a round-the-world ticket and spent over nine months travelling throughout Africa, Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia and the USA, telling me that, it “was the African experience that got me travelling.” This was the early ‘80s and travel at that time was still relatively cheap. He was fascinated by the many different cultures to which he was exposed. He also discovered how easy it was to have sex with men in many of the countries he travelled to. “There were some interesting times in Egypt because I tell you, those Egyptians are such horny guys.” Men would openly convey their interest, some by flashing him in public market stalls. I ask him what it was about him that elicited this kind of behaviour. He has no idea.
Africa instilled in Luke a growing interest in other cultures and the joys of world travel. He also discovered in himself how rewarding it felt to use his experience to help others. This world trip was the beginning of a life long pursuit. Every year, over the past many years, Luke has spent lengthy periods of time in parts of Asia, mostly Thailand where he has developed ongoing friendships. One friendship in particular is with a young married man. This young man has acted as a tour guide and host during several of Luke’s trips to Thailand. Luke has for many years sent money to this family, supporting the children and at least one child who has attended school as a result of his generosity.

6.5 Staying Rooted in Community but Shedding Religion

Following his round-the-world trip, Luke returned to the farm. Not wanting to take on full responsibility for the farm management, Luke worked as an employee on the family farm, doing the physical labour while his brother managed the farm’s affairs. At the same time he took on several odd jobs including doing some farming on another farmer’s land. Luke has always been active in his local community. Prior to his African trip, he was active in rural politics and actually ran for the New Democratic Party (NDP). Such an undertaking is some indication of Luke’s strength of character as it takes a brave man un-deterred by the opinions of others to run for the left-leaning NDP in a province known for its commitment to right-wing governments. He knew he would not win, but wanted to create some opposition and therefore some debate. Luke was also active during the 1970s with the National Farmers’ Union. The Union had sympathy for poor working people, a value shared by Luke; however, he had trouble with how they referred to their mission statement as the “Union’s Manifesto.” For this he was called an “Alberta redneck.” As he says,

*I wasn’t worried about the content but the naming of this document, knowing full-well that the majority of farmers in Alberta would immediately bring up the Communist*
boogie man when seeing the word, manifesto. If I remember right the manifesto was dropped because of my argument.

Luke worked with the Union until the untimely death of his father after heart surgery in 1976. Without his dad, he had to put all his energies into the farm full-time.

For many years, Luke socialized with neighbours, all presumably straight, who lived on farms nearby. They took turns hosting parties and dinners. This has changed over the past number of years as he tells me that, “I have few straight friends now. I find they are very difficult to be with. Too much to associate with [in reference to family troubles].” His gay friends, most of whom are part of the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club or Prime Timers, have become his primary reference group.

Asked whether he thinks that people in Westview know that he is gay or not, he replies:

I don’t know and I don’t care. I have never been confronted, and I think if I were, say for instance, if a neighbour just came and said, are you gay? I think I would answer, “If I am, would that make a difference?”

6.5.1 Shedding Religion and The Church Community

Luke’s parents held traditional Christian values rooted in a Baptist tradition. He and his siblings attended Sunday School at the country Baptist church which was about ten miles away. From an early age he describes having a questioning attitude toward religion, wondering why, for example, Jews would need to be circumcised and why Catholic priests must be celibate. A one-room school house memory sticks in Luke’s mind. It happened around the time of World War II. He recalls a school inspector visiting the school.

I can remember this so plain. He asked, “Now is there anybody here that is Jewish?” I then remember he went to the blackboard and he drew a picture of a man with a big nose. It was during the war and of course I was just a little kid so I don’t remember why on earth he would dream that up. Do you know when you stop to think about it, it had to be a bit of a racist thing.
He told the class that the figure on the board was, “a Jew.” Looking back, he has no idea why this story was being told, but recalls feeling disturbed by it. Sometime later, Luke recounts his confusion on learning about circumcision at a church service and questioned his mother. He could not see how a boy’s sexual anatomy could become a concern of religion. He thinks that this early questioning of various religious and cultural prohibitions made it easier to later question his own religion’s prohibitions against homosexuality. He also relates this memory to the value, instilled in him by his mother, of respect for people who are not like him. The respectful manner in which she responded to his questions about circumcision, conveyed to him a need to respect the beliefs of other cultures who see things differently than he does. Though raised “in the church,” today Luke describes himself as, “not a religious person, in fact I think that it is a lot of the trouble” as “we do not choose to be who we are.”

6.6 Family Roles: A Caregiving Son and Connected Uncle

Luke who “was somewhat closer to his mother than his father” worked well with his father. He was actively involved with his nephews and nieces who spent many summers at the farm. He feels fortunate in being able to assist in raising his nephews and nieces, telling me, that “some people would say [in reference to being a gay childless male] you have never had the experience [of raising kids]…and actually I have had…the good part of it that is, I did not have to change the diapers – which I could have done.” He is still close to them and in many ways, now that his mother has passed away, he is the connector or the bridge within his extended families. This last summer he hosted a family reunion on his farm bringing together over 40 of his extended family. This was a particularly risky undertaking as, following the death of his mother, there have been some rifts in the family. It was a success, however. He remains closer to some family members than others, visiting his nearby brother almost daily.
Starting at age 56, Luke cared for his mom after she suffered a stroke in 1992 until her death at age 81. He tells me, “I did feel responsible for my mother and it always caused some problem.” in terms of more actively exploring relationships with men as that, “wouldn’t be an option because my mother was still alive.” He believes that his mother was aware of his sexuality. As he tells me,

Mother was a wise woman, and it was obvious she loved her sons dearly; she was not a righteous bigot but a wise person who, although a firm Christian believer, was not so rigid as to allow the gay issue to affect her relationship with me. Whether or not she knew or suspected me as being gay, one will never know.

He reflects that perhaps, because of her religious views, it was better left unstated for if his sexual orientation were to be named, she would have been obliged to take a stand.

An 84 year-old second cousin once came right out and asked him if he was gay. His response, though indirect, “sometime, we will have to talk about that” implied an affirmative answer. He thinks that his nephews and nieces would not care if they knew he was gay and he suspects they already know. He does not feel the need to directly discuss his orientation with them.

6.7 Growing Older and Re-Building Community

When Luke was in his late fifties, at a gay bar in Edmonton, he met Ben Fair, a man about his age. Ben and a small group of gay men were starting a social club for older gay men called Prime Timers. Ben invited Luke to join the group. Luke agreed and attended one of the inaugural meetings. This connection was crucial in shaping how his social support network was to develop over the next few years. Though there is some tension within the group as to the degree of out-ness, as Luke relates:

Some [in the group] like me are not openly gay. Now we were really criticized one time by one of the Presidents that we had, because we did not take part in the gay parade and he was chastising the members for that. Well, we set him straight!
Luke met Jake, also from Westview, through the Prime Timers. This Westview connection led to others and resulted in what is now the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club. Prime Timers and the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club represent the first venues for Luke to build friendships with other gay men where sexual encounters are not the primary aim. For many years Luke’s life was compartmentalized between his gay life, which was experienced in other places, countries and cities, and his family and straight life; centred around his home and community in Westview. His two lives remain pretty much at arms’ length, though the centre of his social life has become the relationships that he has developed through The Prime Timers and the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club. It is through these groups that he experiences mutually supportive relationships and where he feels a strong sense of belonging. He has fewer straight friends these days finding their lives to be too full of “drama” with family stressors. Luke talks about the importance of cultivating friendships as one gets older. He tells me that you have to be good to your friends to keep them connected. Luke acknowledges that his “sexual days are done for me and not likely to return even if someone else came on the horizon.” Throughout the interviews, Luke has expressed his contentment with his current living situation and social life; he enjoys being single and the solitude of his country farm.

Luke continues to travel at least once a year, mostly to Thailand where he has several acquaintances. His last trip however has made him reconsider whether this will continue. Returning from Thailand, his computer was searched with, “the assumption that I was a pedophile because I had been in Thailand.” His anger was evident as he described this episode viewing it as a clear case of “profiling.” He resents the stereotype that all older white men, travelling alone and coming from Asia must be pedophiles. Should he discontinue these annual trips it will be a clear disruption in his decades-old pattern of world travel. This is significant as,
judging by the numerous mementos and photos around the house, this leisure pursuit is part of what defines Luke; a farmer and world traveler.

Luke is in good health, keeping his high blood pressure under control with medication. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 2006 and had surgery at age 69. This has had a negative impact on his ability to have sex and orgasms. This surgery also represents a significant point in his life. He speaks of a conversation that he had with his urologist triggered by the prostate surgery where he realized that he was getting closer to what is known to be the average life span for Canadian men, “and this was a bit of a shocker ‘cause he said .. you know you should put things in order.” Though this realization has not changed his life much, he knows that he should be putting his intentions in order (i.e., getting a lawyer, making a will).

When asked about the future Luke tells me that he wants to stay on the farm as long as possible. It is important for him to be independent. If he should be unable to drive, he will have to move into town; something he does not look forward to, but knows may be necessary. I ask him about his preferences for retirement homes. Without hesitation, if the option existed, he would prefer to live in an LGBT residential facility if and when necessary.

6.8 A Life in Reflection: Steering His Own Ship and Making Compromises

When reflecting on his story Luke, in referring to his life, says that it is, “probably not a traditional evolution of gayness.” When asked to explain this, he states that, “Maybe if things would have been different, I would have thought about being in a relationship, but I guess I never was driven hard enough to do that.”
Luke also differentiates himself from other gay people as portrayed in the popular media which seems to imply that all gay people, “can’t wait to get away from their situation.” Their family? I ask. “Yes and their community” he responds. He does not feel like he had to get away from anything because he is gay. Feeling content about his life choices he accepts the compromises he has had to make, stating that he is, “quite happy and pleased that certain things happened the way they did;” and that although opportunities did arise, it was he who took charge of his life and made decisions. In reflecting on his African adventure, he tells me that the fact that over a period of three to four years he made repeated efforts to apply is an indication of his persistence. His life choices also necessarily resulted in compromises. In choosing to stay in the small town and on the farm, in his mind, he could not entertain the idea of someday having a live-in, same-sex relationship. “You see family was quite important to me and it still is as a matter of fact,” and it outweighed the need for a live-in-relationship. He feels that this choice may not have been necessary had he moved to the city.

Luke re-emphasises the several turning points in his life: realizing the strength of his own same-sex attractions at seeing the photo of the naked man on the playing cards while in his 20s; his first serious infatuation to the young man in Mexico when he was in his 30s, followed by his sexual rendezvous with the Spanish man in Edmonton. Africa, however, was probably the single most important turning point in his life as it introduced him to the joys of travel and learning about other cultures. The last significant turning point took place about six years after returning from his world trip when, in his early 50s, he met his friend Ben in a bar in Edmonton. It was at this point that he began to develop a close group of older gay and lesbian friends both in Edmonton as part of Prime Timers and in Westview with the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club.
Luke’s life has been rich in friendships, family, travel and meaningful work. His story speaks of his hospitality, the value that he places on duty to family and friendships and the importance of tolerance and respect for others. He has been an active contributor and builder of community, both in terms of the local Westview community and his small community of older gay men and woman. Luke conveys contentment and satisfaction with his life. He feels optimistic about his ability to navigate his future and to continue to, “steer his own ship.”
Chapter 7
Interpretation: Cross-Cutting Themes and Contextual Influences

PHOTO 7. PRAIRIE FRAMED THROUGH THE SADDLE HOUSE
July 2005

“Halfway around the park Smith, her boys, and I hear a familiar howl, ‘Coyotes,’ I say. ‘Coy-otes.’ She corrects in purebred prairie parlance, pointing out that ‘coy-o-tees’ is Spanish, ‘coy-otes’ is Albertan.”

Excerpt of a conversation between Danielle Smith, the leader of Alberta’s new Wild Rose Party, a party to the right of the current Progressive Conservative government, and Peter Worden from the Alberta based literary and current affairs magazine, Alberta Views. March 2010, p.39.
In this chapter, I examine the shared themes across John’s, Jake’s and Luke’s narratives in light of the changing historical, political and socio-cultural context over the 70 year plus span of their lives. To contextually interrogate the life themes, I reviewed relevant LGBT literature and archival materials, reflected on conversations with individuals who live or lived within a similar context as that of the participants and reflected on my own lived experience as a gay man who grew up in rural Alberta. The key main themes interrogated represent three key life domains (sexual identity development, relationships and linked lives, aging well and aging differently in a rural environment) common to all participants. The first two themes lead into or culminate into the third, revealing how contextually influenced life course trajectories, transitions, and choices shape the aging experience. Each one of these life domains is broken down to sub-themes that represent life course periods or life course tasks/domains (occupations). Several life course principles (e.g., timing of life transitions and linked lives) provide an additional structural element to organize and further develop the thematic ideas. This chapter concludes with summary thoughts on the possible influences of the interpersonal dynamics between myself and the participants on the manner in which the participants storied their life accounts.

7.1 Contextual Shapers of Sexual Identity Development Over Time

7.1.1 Boys Experiencing Difference or Not

Born between 1930 and 1936, the participants’ school years spanned the period just prior to, during, and just after, World War II with the youngest, Luke, finishing high school in 1954. Participants made little mention of the war years, the only related references made to comments about suspected anti-German feelings resulting in occasional schoolyard fights or, on one occasion, a confusing classroom description of what a Jewish person looks like. Both John and Luke made several references to early awareness of societal discrimination against Jews
alongside parental modeling of respect for people of different backgrounds. As Jews may have been the most clearly defined other at the time for these country boys, it is possible that it was their stories that provided the most salient models of otherness from which to, later in reflection, make sense of their own growing experience of difference. This may have been reinforced by the anti-Semitic rhetoric of the Social Credit Party during the depression and war years where Jewish conspiracy theories held Jews responsible for the economic crash of the 1930s (Palmer, 1990).

This period, particularly on the rural prairies and prior to any significant political debates regarding homosexuality, offered little public discussion about difference in terms of homosexuality. Will Fellows (1998) also made this observation in his collected biographies of American Midwest gay farm boys. He describes the 1930s and early 1940s as a time of homosexual invisibility and makes reference to the work of Robert C. Reinhart’s *A History of Shadows* (1982) where the only suggestion of the existence of homosexuality could be found in psychiatric journals or news reports of hazy, sexual transgressions. It was unlikely that such sources would have penetrated the mindset of rural Canadian, largely uneducated populations. Fellows notes that the “veil was drawn back from homosexuality” (p.31) with the publication in 1948 of Truman Capote’s, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* and Gore Vidal’s, *The City and the Pillar.* Such works, though perhaps discussed and debated by the chattering classes in the homes of educated urbanites, unlikely engaged a broader audience, nor was there any reference made to them by participants.

Perhaps having more of a trickle down effect on public discourse was the publication of the Kinsey Report, referred to by Canadian sexuality historian, Gary Kinsman as, “The Kinsey Earthquake” (p.113) in that same year. Though participants made no reference to it, it is conceivable that its influence would have eventually had some impact on a broader audience.
Kinsey’s findings published in, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953) along with Freudian psychoanalytic theory were used to inform the practices of medical and psychiatric providers and eventually federal legislation regulating sexuality. Its findings were widely published in popular magazines in Canada (Kinsman, 1987), though without television and only limited radio news broadcasts, its influence on the early childrearing patterns of boys born in the 1930s would have been largely absent. Conservatively speaking, by the time the participants were in their teens, Kinsey’s findings would have raised awareness in the general public about the actual existence and extent of homosexual activity. Kinsman writes that it was this increased awareness and the resultant fear and outrage that stimulated a later backlash bringing on the post WWII campaign against supposed homosexual childhood predators and molesters.

Kinsey examined the prevalence and diversity of human acts and made no claim to understand the link between sexuality and identity and even questioned if such a thing as a gay identity existed (Kinsman, 1987). His findings, when combined with Freudian ideas on sexuality development, were to later raise the alarm bells of the dangers of over-mothering on the gender and sexual development of little boys in particular (Cohler, 2009; Kinsman). The influence on the practices of mental health professionals of Freud’s pathologizing of homosexuality, during the 1940s and 1950s would likely have had little impact on farming parents with limited access to medical doctors at a time prior to universal health care coverage established under National Medicare established in 1966, not to mention the lack of mental health professionals. The invisibility of homosexuality during the participants’ early childhood may in fact have been a blessing; with no visibility, there was less scrutiny and arguably less anxiety about raising homosexual boys.
The participants’ stories of their teen years suggest that it was not a medical/psychiatric discourse that provided the foundation for difference and shame, but a moral and religious discourse. Public comments about homosexuality, when rarely and vaguely referred to, were more likely framed as moral abominations from the pulpit. In any case, the participant narratives suggest that homosexuality was not much discussed on the prairies during their school years.

The three participants in this study did, however, experience difference at different times and in different ways. Luke describes childhood pursuits not unlike his straight peers, engaging in the usual rough and tumble sports and adventures, typical of what was expected of the real boy of the early and mid-twentieth century (Cohler, 2009; Friedman & Downey, 2002; Pollack, 1998). He was also busy with the farm chores expected of a boy and in keeping with the rigid gender divisions of this time and place. Luke had no sense of being different with respect to his behaviours, leisure activities or interests. His sense of difference was to come later when he discovered that his sexual attractions were definitely unlike most of his peers. Similarly, as Jake states, he had, “only normal memories” having no sense of difference until much later in life when starting to socialize and identify with other gay men. Interestingly, however, he did get the message early that playing piano was definitely not something that boys did or at least not in rural Alberta in the 1930s. This occupational interest, however, was not in his mind, linked to sexual identity.

Quite differently, John did experience a sense of being an “outsider” and attributed this sense of difference, not to his sexual attractions, but to his occupational interests and behaviours and to a lesser extent his Hungarian background. For example, he makes reference to his interest in reading, singing and his disinterest in, “drinking, smoking and swearing.” In retrospect, he comments on how his dream of having “a dozen kids” was probably not in keeping with the
usual gender role expectations of a small seven year old farm boy. Gender roles in most farming communities were well segregated with boys focused on outdoor work and girls on home-based tasks (Fellows, 1998; Salamon, 1992). Prior to the development of any same-sex attraction, it was gender non-conformity that in the case of John signaled some sort of difference and for Jake, provided him with early lessons on what real boys were supposed to enjoy.

John’s nurturing qualities were expressed throughout his life in his roles with nephews, nieces and his caregiving roles with his parents and others. No link is made between his sexual identity and occupational interests in his narrative, nor in Jake’s who also demonstrated some gender atypical interests for his time and location. Expressions such as “sissy boys” did exist, but did not necessarily at this point indicate any sort of fixed sexual identity (Kinsman, 1987; Thurer, 2005). Nevertheless, such terms were part of prairie vocabulary and needless to say were not the source of pride for prairie parents. My father, a contemporary of John, growing up in the same context shares this observation. Though he recalls that boys would be teased for being sissies or for not liking sports, no link was made between gender role interests or behaviors and sexual orientation. It wasn’t even, “on our radar” (personal communication). Though my father’s comments can in no way be considered evidence for what existed as the prevailing local theories on homosexuality, they do connect with John’s narration of his identity development. At some point my father’s ideas must have been further informed by a developing discourse on homosexuality. I recall as an undergraduate student in the 1980s, walking him around my University of Alberta campus and pointing out the Fine Arts building at which point he asked, “So this is where all the gays are, is it?”

Importantly, however, John was actively involved in stereotypically masculine occupational pursuits also. For John, like many of the men in Fellow’s farm boy biographies, the
realities of work on the farm required that he participate in gender-typical outdoor physical farm work that he enjoyed. Though John, in comparison to the other participants, most exemplified gender non-conformist interests, I could not fail to observe that now, as older adults, each of the participants showed pride in sharing their baked goods with me—not a typical behaviour of the older straight men that I grew up with. In all cases, the occupational interests of all the participants, gender-atypical or not, were never fully extinguished and were expressed in some way throughout their lives.

While gender role expectations have loosened over time, fears persist within popular culture as to causal links between occupational interests and sexual orientation. See for example the popularity of productions like *Billy Elliot*. The discourse regarding gender role interests and sexuality has similarly ebbed and flowed over the period of the participants’ lifetime. During the 1970s and eighties, likely as a result of feminist challenges to essentialist understandings of gender roles, gender-neutral parenting ideals became popular. Similarly, Fellows (2004) observes that even within the LGBT community there has been a similar downplaying of any correlation between sexual orientation and gender-role interests. He finds this puzzling in light of his own observation that of the over 75 American gay farm boys (raised at a time and place outside of gay urban cultural imperatives) in his study, a large proportion were drawn to more stereotypically female occupational interests. Though there are many exceptions, and Luke’s story is one of them; and while not considered causal, gender-atypical interests in boys and girls have been found to correlate with sexual orientation (Thurer, 2005). Neither Jake nor Luke linked his interests to any foreshadowing of a gay identity, though John does reveal some

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11 *Billy Elliot* a film and later a Theatre Production produced by Elton John depicts a young boy whose gender-atypical interest in ballet raises fears in a working-class British family.
growing awareness and eventual link between his interests and his sexual attractions, perhaps in response to the changing discursive options available to him in the sixties and later with respect to same-sex attractions.

7.1.2 Same–sex Desire and Entry Points to Self-awareness

At some point each of the participants discovered that there might be others like them. Their growing appreciation that their same-sex attractions signified, what at the time was considered deviant, did not yet translate to self-acceptance for many years to come. This process illustrates what Cass (1979)\(^{12}\) in his classic six stage theory of sexual identity development would label as *identity tolerance*, a precursor to *identity acceptance*. By the 1950s and early sixties, at least in urban settings, the heightened awareness of, and associated panic related to, homosexuality, then popularly associated with child-molesting predators were well entrenched (Kinsman, 1987). Fortunately for the participants, timing was on their side, for as John states:

*Sometimes, (maybe more than I like to admit), I would think how people would react if they knew I was gay and I think a lot of people had suspicions, but in the earlier days people were as uneducated about gays as gays themselves, so I think in a way it helped me with whatever I did.*

The participants’ narratives convey the continued dominant influence of a religious and moralistic discourse on their growing sense of identity though the religious messages were occasional and vague. There were hidden clues in the veiled references to shameless acts preached from pulpits and code words used amongst peers. John talks of knowing who and what they were talking about, feeling their fingers pointed at him, when church leaders preached hell and damnation for those committing unclean acts. Apart from church settings, the participants did not experience homophobic slurs or explicit terms directed at them though later, expressions

\(^{12}\) Cass’s identity development model includes the six stages including: identity confusion, comparison, tolerance, acceptance, pride and synthesis.
such as, “He’s not the marrying kind” were used to denote a homosexual orientation in others. Jake insists that he never heard any term that might suggest that there existed a group of men or women predominantly attracted to their same-sex. Although they were aware of same-sex behaviour and participated in same-sex play from an early age, neither Luke nor Jake connected these behaviours to gay identity or to same-sex love relationships. They both assumed that men might have sex with other men at times probably out of necessity when they had no access to women. For these two participants there appeared to be a clear distinction between same-sex activity and same sex-emotional/romantic relationships. This does not hold true for John whose narration conveys a more emotional attachment to his own sex at an earlier age that was not as yet linked to erotic desire. Unlike Luke and Jake, John continuously presented a more emotionally-based relationship ideal throughout his life story. For example, the homo-erotic image of the cabin boy\(^\text{13}\), made reference to by both John and Luke appealed to John because of its affectionate and romantic same-sex aspects and not so much about its sexual undertones. He remembers fantasizing about being the cabin boy, being held and looked after by the seafaring captain. In a similar, yet contrasting image, Luke recites a more overtly sexual image of the cabin boy, making reference to the rugby poem, “the cabin boy, the cabin boy, the dirty little nipper, he filled his ass with broken glass and circumcised the skipper.” Sexual or romantic, these were the few clues that same-sex activity and attractions existed beyond their own experience.

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\(^{13}\) The cabin boy image portrayed in adventure stories and referred to in sports songs often portrayed an older sea-faring captain who had as a younger companion, a young boy who served his every need. Historical records reveal instances where sailors were charged with buggery on cabin boys as early as the 17\(^{th}\) century. See for example, Burg, B.R. (1983). *Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition: English Sea-Rovers in the Seventeenth-Century Caribbean*, New York: New York University Press.
During the fifties and sixties, there were no television programs, gay and lesbian newspapers or on-line contacts. Rural settings offered little if any access to gay magazines or literature until the 1970s. Muscle magazines, however, did exist and offered someone like John the suggestion that there were other men who were interested in other men’s bodies. Muscle magazines were most popular in the 1950s and were consumed largely by gay male audiences. The muscle magazine phenomenon of the 1950s is well described in the 1999 documentary, *Beefcake*, by director Thom Fitzgerald, which brings to light the link between gay sub-culture and the muscle magazine industry.

Local rural libraries would not have carried any of the early popular gay romance novels. Even heterosexual oriented books with explicit sexual depictions were hard to access. Luke, hungry for some sexual information, straight or gay, talks about ordering banned books, including D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* (1928) and *Women in Love* (1920). As readers, both Luke and John detected the heavily shrouded gay sub-plots in popular fiction (e.g., E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India* (1924)) and Hollywood films. These were all welcome clues that there were others like them, out there, somewhere. The 1995 documentary, *The Celluloid Closet*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, identifies films from the fifties and sixties such as: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (Brooks, 1958) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Feldman & Kazan, 1951) that offered, for those with a queer eye, glimpses into homoerotic romance. John recalls hearing rumours of the Hollywood actor Rock Hudson’s homosexuality and took every opportunity to see his films. Importantly, many films seen in other parts of North America that may have portrayed gay characters however veiled they were, would have been banned in Alberta which was under tight censorship control. Conditions would have changed significantly by the late 1970s for John to discover a personal ad in a western farmers magazine of a farmer in Wisconsin, who was “seeking a male companion.”
Frequent references to the “Y” throughout the interviews warrant special attention given the central role that the Y\textsuperscript{14} played as an entry point into homosexual sex and potentially gay culture. As Jake describes in his narrative, it was possible to have sex with other men without too much difficulty. The Y’s reputation spread through the gay network. Both Luke and Jake found out about the Y and it was there that they made some of their first contacts with other gay men.

Washrooms provided another anonymous space for men to pick up men. Their location was spread by word of mouth. Jake makes mention of his visits to the cruising washrooms in Edmonton and, on at least one occasion, ran into one prominent politician. Washrooms known as tea rooms offered a level of safety that many of the bathhouses did not. Many bathhouses required patrons to sign in and show ID, a barrier at a time where such places were frequently raided. Washroom cruising, however, did not offer a space for social interaction with peers, with connections being quick and anonymous. The fear of police raids on gay baths and even gay bars persisted up until the early 1980s, potentially limiting access for some people who could benefit from taking advantage of these more social settings. It is hard to build community or friendships without a meeting place. Though gay bars were not often raided in the 1970s or 1980s, people like John were still worried about being found in a gay bar, the reason for his initial reluctance to go there.

\textsuperscript{14} The YMCA or the Y, the Young Men’s Christian Association was a popular meeting place for gay men. This role was made famous in the once often heard song from the 1970s by the Village People, YMCA (see Wikipedia at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Y.M.C.A._(song). It is still played frequently at heterosexual weddings. I often wonder how many of the wedding guests appreciate the origins and meanings behind this song. In large cities across North America, the “Y” offered cheap and temporary accommodation for men in a male-only environment. These centres were usually located in downtown areas where many gay men gathered. Single rooms were rented out allowing a clustering of unattached men in one place. Today, the Y continues as a meeting place for many gay men, though it now provides support services and athletic facilities. Notably the Y was one of the first community-based organizations to formally develop policies supportive of gay-positive space.
The last bath raid in Alberta occurred on May 29, 1981, at the Pisces Health Club and Spa in Edmonton. This was a turning point for the gay community in Alberta, galvanizing what had until then been largely an invisible community. The names of 56 “found-ins” were published in the media, raising fear for many, particularly closeted men (Phair, 2008).

I recall these raids, as I was living in Edmonton at the time. In the process of coming out myself, I had gotten up the courage to go to a drop-in at the Gay Alliance Towards Equality (GATE) office. The conversation centered around the recent bath raids at the Pisces. These raids occurred almost four months after the famous bathhouse raid that occurred in Toronto on February 5, 1981. There, over 300 men were arrested, making this the largest mass arrest since the October crisis (McKenna, 1981). The protest riots that followed the arrests are thought to be a central moment in the history of Canada’s gay liberation movement and raised a lot of fear for many mostly closeted men who were frequent patrons of bathhouses.

Surprisingly, participants did not spontaneously refer to the impact of Anita Bryant on their increasingly self-acknowledged same-sex attractions, though both Luke and John recall her media campaign. Their response to my questions about her influence in their lives suggests that these events, as background happenings in another far away place, had little impact on them.

15 An audio recording of the report is available through the CBC archives at: http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/topics/599-3233/.

16 Anita Bryant’s American anti-gay Christian campaign to repeal anti-discrimination laws in Florida was at its height in 1977 when all the participants were in their 40s around the time that John and Luke in particular were beginning to take more active steps in connecting with other gay people (see Wikipedia at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anita_Bryant ).
In contrast, as a young adolescent in 1977, the year of Bryant’s crusade to “save our children,” I clearly remember her face in the news and was intrigued, and probably somewhat disturbed, by this woman’s crusade to, in her words, “do away with the homosexuals” (YouTube, Such is Life Video, 1990) and put a stop to the homosexual agenda. At that point, as an impressionable and probably somewhat anxious teenager at the peak of adolescence questioning my sexuality and full of internalized homophobia, I remember her well. The timing of Bryant’s fear mongering in the life course of the participants meant in all likelihood that they were less vulnerable to her attacks; being more mature with a more fully developed and critical understanding of themselves and their identity in relation to the world around them. Though older than I by some 30 years Jake, who at that point did not fully identify with a gay culture, had only a vague recollection of her activities. He did not take her anti-gay message personally; he did not think it applied to him. Not surprisingly, eventually, the ongoing homophobic crusades by Christian moralists against gay people were a strong incentive for all participants to not only leave the church, but to question its very validity. Ironically Bryant’s crusade and its very vocal response from the gay community raised awareness of the extent of, and the increasingly organized nature of, the gay community. Not only were there people out there like us, but there were lots of them!

The entry points described above offered the participants a first step into actualizing their sexual orientation. For some, quick sexual encounters was all they were looking for with anything more posing a significant threat to their home and community lives. For others like John, casual sex at that point in his life was not enough nor desired. His living environment offered him a place and opportunities to meet more freely and socialize with other gay men. He

\[17\] Refer to video file retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX6i5Y6t1nI&NR=1
also spent three years in Calgary where he was exposed to many other gay men, enjoying their company, and other aspects of the Calgary gay culture (i.e., dancing, dinner parties etc.).

7.1.3 Not Flaunting It vs. Not Being Controlled: Coming to Terms with Sexuality

Each participant responded to the largely homophobic environments where they grew up in a manner reflective of their personalities and values. None of the participants was fully out to family and friends, though John’s family and several straight friends do know he is gay. With the exception of his close female friends, he does not discuss his sexuality openly. Though all participants suspect that others in the community know of their orientation, there would seem to be a, don’t ask, don’t tell\(^\text{18}\) approach to naming their sexuality. For the most part, the participants felt that they were able to do what they wanted to do and be who they wanted to be.

In the case of Luke and Jake, doing so meant that they adhere to unwritten, but understood, rules regarding any public expression of homosexuality including as suggested by Jake’s story, “keeping it under control”. Any show of non-masculine behaviour or effeminacy was to be avoided during the regular group outings of the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club illustrating what Rosenfeld (1999, 2009) refers to the impact of post-war homonormativities that saw as the ideal the straight acting gay man. Both Luke and Jake make reference to managing outward expressions, and use the term, “not flaunting it,” a term that is seldom heard in current, urban, gay common parlance. Descriptions about the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club indicated a shared, though unspoken, agreement to not openly divulge the group’s identity. In follow-up

\(^{18}\) Don’t ask, don’t tell, in reference to the American policy on the military where as long as gay people did not name their sexuality, they were free to be in the military; however, should it be found out that they are gay, either through their own outing or being outed by others, they would be expelled from the army. An estimated 13,000 men and women have been expelled from the military since this policy under President Bill Clinton was put into effect in 1993 (Wikipedia retrieved at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don’t_ask,_don’t_tell](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don’t_ask,_don’t_tell)).
conversations with Luke, I was told that the trans-woman has left this group, after being asked to tone down, a request she felt she could not honour. I felt very constrained while joining in with the group, feeling a self-consciousness that I had not felt for some time. Luke and Jake did not express any resentment about having to “control it,” not expressing any entitlement to equal treatment, more likely a characteristic of younger urban cohorts such as myself. Neither do they frame this restriction on their public behaviours in terms of discrimination.

Although all participants thought that many people including those who they were close to, knew they were gay there was a discomfort or reluctance to name it, or label themselves. There were two reasons for this. For Luke, by giving a label to his orientation, people like his mother would be forced “to take a position” and given her religious values, it may not have been supportive. By not naming it, the sin is not knowingly committed and friends and families can carry on in willful ignorance, not forced to take a stand. John gives a second reason for not labeling himself as gay. He feels that the label gay would limit how people think of him with all the baggage that most people bring to this term. He prefers to “name” himself simply as John, who just happens to like sex with other men. He assumes that many in the community know he is gay, but as throughout his life, he resists being put into a box and labels such as gay clearly put him in one camp. John reflects Cass’s (1979) final stage of identity development, identity synthesis, in insisting that his gay identity is but one aspect of himself; in his words, he is also a farmer and an uncle in addition to numerous other aspects that make up who he is in his entirety.

John’s strong sense of agency comes through in his repeated references to his resistance to living up to the expectations of others, particularly with respect to engaging in activities or behaviours thought of as gender appropriate. His resistance to cultural expectations continued on to his later involvement with the gay community where he resisted what he observed as gay
men’s tendency to isolate themselves from non-gay people including their families. Though John’s interests and gendered behaviours would seem to go against the norms for the small rural Drumheller area, he presents as a very confident person and does not concern himself with what others might think. As he says he is able to “disarm others” with his very extroverted and friendly manner. What remains a question in my mind is that, although John is courageous in being who he is, through for the most part, he has not discussed explicitly his sexual orientation with his nephews and nieces or others in his social world. Though assumed, it is not up for discussion. When I raised this question with John at one of our later interviews, asking if he still feels some residue of shame associated with naming his sexual orientation, he stopped to consider. It goes against his grain to think that he might be doing something or not doing something out of shame, feeling that, at his age, he should be beyond this; however, he does consider that, given the influences of society including earlier religious influences, it is hard to shed some of these deep-seated internalizations.

The participants in this study have traversed many changes in social attitudes. Starting early in life, Jake speaks of a time and place where there was no homosexual discourse, no word for a homosexual. Later, the participants reflect a more progressive, though still limiting and homonormative social discourse—don’t ask, don’t tell, or, it is ok to live and let live, but just “don’t flaunt it.” Even though there have been more expressions of support within their community, and what could be perceived as invitations to be open about their sexuality, these men have chosen not to come out fully and publicly. Jake resists the idea that, in order to be complete, a gay man must come out completely, rejecting mainstream gay cultural imperatives including assumptions behind Cass’s (1979) identity development model.
The coming out process for these men is not over, as it is not over for most gay people since they continually choose when and how to come out depending on the setting. During the course of this research project, both John and Luke have remarked on the impact that this project has had on them and on their thoughts about their life choices. They have both come to view the project as an opportunity to open the closet door wider.

None of the participants conveyed a strong sense of political allegiance with, or identification with, the gay community nor a strong sense of a shared struggle with other gay people. I question whether this may reflect an unquestioned and un-entitled position that they do not have a right to be gay and proud. Both Jake and Luke distanced themselves from mainstream gay culture, which Jake referred to as, “the creative part of the gay world— the fashion part.” Whether this response is reflective of their political upbringing, or level of education and class, or perhaps a function of their much more vulnerable position in a small community is not clear. Sexuality is viewed as very much a private matter. Perhaps mirroring the dominant view of homosexuality as constructed in the 1969 omnibus reform legislation that separated homosexuality into private acts—not a concern of the law, and public acts—criminal acts. Prior to the legislative changes with the Criminal Law Amendments Act in 1969, men could be jailed indefinitely simply for being homosexual (Kinsman, 1987). Though none of the participants spoke about the illegal aspects of gay activity, knowing that they could be jailed would certainly have had some enduring influence on comfort levels with being publicly

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19 The Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau on May 14, 1969 after being introduced almost two years earlier by the then Minister of Justice Pierre Trudeau. It resulted in heated debate as it contained two controversial changes; decriminalization of homosexuality and liberalization of the abortion laws. The Criminal Law Amendment Act or omnibus bill delineated private and public acts; the former a matter of morality, the latter an issue for the courts. It also entrenched an illness model into homosexuality, qualifying that, although legal, homosexuality was considered a sickness that should be treated (Kinsman, 1987; Phair & Wells, 2006).
identified as gay or not and an incentive to remain hidden. In any case, they do not convey an obligation to come out (which has had strong cultural press at different times, for example the outing activities of the group, Act Up\textsuperscript{20}). Though I came out around the same time as John and Luke, in the early 1980s, I recall the peer pressure to come out and \textit{to be counted}. It was seen as a gay person’s responsibility to the whole gay community as well as an expression of authenticity (Rosenfeld, 2009). The significance of the timing of my own coming out is highlighted here. The impact of the gay liberation movement, had a much greater influence on a 19 year old than it would have had on a 40 year old, who had much more to lose if he were to come out.

The responses of the participants to resisting or adapting to gay-hostile environments, despite remarkable changes in broader social attitudes and legislative changes is interesting. Just because society has changed does not undo immediately the impact of homophobia on an individual’s psyche. As Haber (2009) suggests, there may remain an enduring internalized homophobia that can impact on life course decisions (e.g., living arrangements, moving into public nursing homes, public acknowledgement of relationships, etc.)

Although involved in incidental same-sex acts to various extents since their teen or early adult years, the participants did not actively seek out other gay men until close to their 40s. John set out on his epic journey across North America, Luke to Africa and then onto sexual adventures during his around the world trip; and Jake though married, sought anonymous sex with men in Edmonton washrooms and bathhouses. John was also married for a short time in his

\textsuperscript{20} Act Up was a movement in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic and consequent anti-gay backlash. The group called on all gay people to come out in order to better fight discrimination and stigma related to AIDS and sexual orientation. Act Up was responsible for outing many public figures (Act Up History Capsule retrieved at: \url{http://www.actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html}).
30s. It was a long gradual process for these men to not only acknowledge their same sex attractions, but also to accept these attractions without shame. Identification with a broader circle of gay men took even longer. John had the fortune to connect with the gay community in Calgary, though Jake’s and Luke’s contacts with a supportive community were years to come. It is as if these men, now in their 40s, were coming into a sexual adolescence of sorts and were eager to experiment with their sexual options. While these men were exploring their identity and same-sex relationships they continued to live within several communities. Jake, going back and forth between Edmonton and the west coast; Luke, between Westview, Edmonton, Mexico and the Far East; and John between Calgary, Drumheller and the West Coast. They were all active in community volunteering and politics, while maintaining close and caring relationship with their families and neighbours. It was these close family and community relationships that were given as their primary reason for remaining (or returning) to their rural communities. By remaining silent about their orientation, they were able to maintain these links.

7.2 Relationships and Linked Lives

7.2.1 Affairs or Live in Partners: Sexual Identity and Relationships

There are many important differences between the participants in their experience of intimate relationships. Both John and Jake were married, John only briefly; Jake for most of his adult life. John is reluctant to speak much about his short marriage and perhaps significantly did not discuss it until the last interview and even then only when asked directly. He had few details to offer as to his reasons for getting married, though viewed it as a mistake telling me that it is, “the same old story, to try to be straight.” Earlier during our first meeting, he stated that it would have not been right for him to marry as it would not have been fair to the woman, though this was a perhaps a realization that he came to only afterwards. His reluctance to be open about this
is unclear. Were there feelings of regret, guilt? Did it not fit into the image that he was narrating for me? Was his desire to live up to the expectations of his father, being the only son, added pressure? John grew up an active Catholic. Catholicism, though recognizing the existence of homosexuality, views it as disordered and requires that its homosexual adherents remain celibate. Though he worked at this for many years, by his later 30s John found celibacy unfulfilling and unattainable. With the Church’s influence on his life waning, he opted to seek out a committed same-sex relationship.

Jake on the other hand was married from age 28, separated at 54 and divorced at 64. Though by the time of his marriage he had been having sex with other men, he did not identify as gay; never the less he did what he thought he was supposed to do, “grow-up and marry a female.” This script was unquestioned. He continued to have sex with other men throughout his married life, thinking that this was perhaps no different than what other married men might be doing, not thinking that it would mean that he was gay. Jake gives no impression that he thinks there was an ethical issue with his getting married. He does not question it.

Jake’s marriage was not unusual for gay men in the 1950s and 60s. Due to the limited studies it is not possible to have clear estimates, but some suggest that the pressures to marry resulted in great numbers of gay men getting married for many years (Cody & Welch, 1997). Both John and Jake pointed out several times that many of the gay men that they know in their rural communities are married. The same heterosexist pressures exist today in many countries or cultural groups.

Only a few years older than the other participants, Jake would have been exposed to similar environmental constraints as the other two, but responded differently, perhaps reflecting his task-oriented approach to life; you do what needs or is expected to get done, with little time
for introspection. Both John and Jake, having travelled and read more broadly, their understanding and self-awareness of who they were and knowledge about the existence of diverse ways of expressing and living out one’s sexuality was perhaps much greater. John had met other male couples and desired a loving relationship with a man. He was aware of the options. Similarly, Luke, feeling that he could not ethically marry a woman as, “it wouldn’t be fair to her,” had travelled broadly and had also been introduced to the idea that two men could live together in a committed relationship.

While Luke had had two significant and long-term relationships with men, he could not entertain the option of having a “live-in relationship” given his choice to live and work on the farm with his family. He felt that it would have been too hurtful to his parents and disrespectful of the family’s reputation for him to be in a relationship. Having a live-in partner would out him as a gay man. In choosing to stay on the farm and close to the Westview community he knew he would have to forego a live-in relationship. For many years, Luke sought out sexual partners outside of his community. In his travels through Asia and Mexico he found no shortage of potential sex partners far from the eyes of neighbours and family. Such encounters, brief as they were, did not present emotional complications that would upset his plan to remain unattached. Somehow he was able to carry on with a relationship with his partner Jeff, right under the noses of his parents. Neither of Luke’s relationships seem to have been fully equitable, mutually loving and compatible. I wonder to what extent Luke’s choice to stay on the farm and to avoid emotionally engaged connections with other men prevented him from fully realizing his sexuality. Luke’s travels offered him opportunities for sex, but little in the way of companionship. I view this as the impact of homophobia. Luke does not frame it in such terms, viewing it as a conscious decision to not hurt his family. Interestingly, it was not until rather late in his life and during his 30s that Luke actually connected sex and the possibility of love. It
would seem that sex without love was not necessarily gay, but once emotions were involved that
would have put him very clearly in the gay camp. Both Luke and Jake appeared to have had
more compartmentalized lives. The furtive, often anonymous same-sex activities were
experienced as a distinct and separate part of their life from their home, family and work life.

The gay social context at the time may also have reinforced the value of non-
monogamous long-term relationships. The years in between the Stonewall riots\textsuperscript{21}, the 1969
Criminal Law Amendment Act and the onset of the AIDS epidemic was a time of sexual
liberation and experimentation for gay people. A new-found pride in breaking down heterosexist
norms about what constituted healthy sexuality and relationships was evident in the growing
popular gay press in urban settings. I recall that in the early 1980s, it was considered a cop-out to
be in a monogamous relationship. Non-monogamous gay relationships challenged heterosexual
marriage, an institution viewed as reinforcing sexual ownership of another person. To be
sexually restrained was frowned upon; unlimited sexual expression the preferred option. Though
none of the participants spoke directly to these pre-AIDS gay cultural norms (though John did
discuss his disinterest in engaging in casual, anonymous sex, what he perceived to be a norm),
gay culture at that time did not offer many supports, symbolic or otherwise that might foster the
maintenance of long-term relationships.

Contrasting Luke’s and Jake’s desire to maintain the separateness of their lives, John
sought to connect both his family and the Drumheller community with his gay friends and
partner. Though he did not introduce his partner or gay friends as such to his family and

\textsuperscript{21} The Stonewall riots took place over several days beginning on June 28, 1969 at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in
New York City frequented by drag-queens. Gay bars were frequently raided by the police. This time, however, the
occupants, mostly transvestites, fought back. This event is commonly thought to be the beginning of the Gay
Liberation Movement in North America (Kinsmen, 1986).
Drumheller friends, he made an effort to introduce them. John’s life long pattern of resisting gender expectations, and being true to oneself, (even though he was less successful at resisting some family expectations such as getting married, staying on the farm), may have enabled him to live out his sexuality more fully. Living apart from his parents also afforded more privacy. Unlike Luke and Jake, at an earlier period in his life, in his early 40s, John was connected to a community of men like himself; spending time within a gay urban world, feeling liberated likely exposed him to possibilities. Luke and Jake were not connected to a gay community and appeared to function independently of any community support. Had they connected with a community of support, would their life course choices have changed? The venues where they chose to meet other men did not offer much in terms of friendship building and were likely often frequented by other closeted men. It would seem that an important contextual influence on the life course decisions of gay men would be the presence of a community of like-minded people who could expose one to possibilities. Luke gives the impression that neither of his relationships with men were completely fulfilling due to incompatibilities related to sex and differences in attitudes to being out and connected to the gay community. In order to stay connected to the people he most cared about, he felt that he could not entertain the idea of more of an established gay relationship within a supportive gay culture.

The live-in presence of his partner Michael offered John an additional bridge between his gay and straight worlds. For John, two men living together in small town Alberta during the 1980s certainly would have been noticed. Although John dismisses any notion that he may have felt self-conscious, the spare room was known as, “Michael’s room” as if to give visitors, who might be uncomfortable with the relationship, an out. As a couple they interacted freely with neighbours and colleagues. John, who was over 20 years Michael’s senior, initially provided a nurturing and mentoring role in the relationship. Described by John as someone lacking in self-
esteem, Michael did not object. It was only the sudden death of Michael at the age of 37 when John was 58 that brought the relationship to an end. John was overwhelmed with the positive support received from his straight Drumheller friends and neighbours at the loss of his partner, signaling another shift in rural social attitudes. His relationship was acknowledged, though not by all; no cards of sympathy were received from members of his former Catholic Church community.

John also lost his brother-in-law within that same year of Michael’s death. He supported his sister and family at the loss of her son to Crohn’s disease and was to become the primary caregiver for his parents. He cared for them all, continuing to build his caregiving skills augmenting his long-standing nurturing qualities.

7.2.2 Uncling

All participants have had significant involvement with their nephews and nieces, though less so for Jake who has a son of his own. John describes with obvious affection his interactions with nephews and nieces. He continues to be connected to them, with one of his nephews currently a regular part of his life. His niece has become closely linked with two of John’s close gay friends who live on the west coast. He has cared for, and is cared for, by these family members.

Similarly, Luke, does not fit the lonely old homosexual stereotype when describing his relationships with his nephews and nieces. Early on, as kids, they spent a lot of time on the farm and so he was able to develop close relationships with many of them. With his mother now gone, it has been Luke who has acted as the connector between extended family members; recently hosting a family reunion at his house. He continues to be involved in their lives, for example, attending fund raising events for his nephew’s hockey team and watching his games whenever
possible. Though less involved in the lives of his siblings’ children, having his own family responsibilities, Jake is known by his grandchildren and nephew and niece as the "cool guy". Though he does not see them regularly he remains connected.

John and Luke were particularly interested in responding to my questions about their role with nephews and nieces and provide an alternative narrative to mainstream portrayals of gay men’s lives as characterized by the pursuit of selfish pleasures and hedonism. In my own social circle, I have long been aware of the role that many gay men play in the lives of their siblings’ children. Many of my friends have close relationships with nephews and nieces, as do my partner and I. In the interviews I was particularly tuned into discussions about these family roles as they are not celebrated or even discussed in either gay or mainstream press.

Despite the potential roles that older gay men can play in the lives of their nephews and nieces, this can only occur if siblings are trusting and accepting of their sexual orientation. Gay men have long been accused of recruiting children into a homosexual lifestyle. Long held misinformed stereotypes of gay men as pedophilic predators have been difficult to shed despite the fact that it has been well documented (Kinsman, 1987) that the largest percentage of pedophilic acts are committed at the hands of heterosexual men. Ironically, these stereotypes may have been reinforced by the very legislative act that served to de-criminalize homosexuality; the Omnibus bill of 1969. Many of the proponents of this legislation, in an effort perhaps to distance themselves from overly positive or non-pathological understanding of homosexuality, would juxtapose their support by clearly stating their objection to any homosexual acts involving under age minors (see, for example, the CBC Digital Archives production of A psychiatric problem, 1959, which may be found at http://archives.cbc.ca/politics/rights_freedoms/clips/3222/) or comment on the need for
appropriate rehabilitation. Popular American social hygiene/social education films of the ‘50s and early ‘60s promoted fear of homosexual men by portraying them as a threat to young people who used crafty and sinister ways to lure young boys into their cars. See for example, Sid Davis’ Production of, *Boys Beware* (1961) (see video link at: http://www.archive.org/details/boys_beware).

Similarly, Kinsman refers to numerous church, legal and police archival records which express the predominant post Kinsey report hysteria that homosexual “strangers” were out to recruit the nation’s youth. Such was the social discourse on homosexuality in the 1960s and 1970s at a time when the participants of this study were in their prime parenting, or what I term, their *uncling* period and a time when they could be of most help to their siblings. It may be no surprise then that the participants did not chose to openly disclose their orientation to their siblings, the parents of the children they were *uncling*. By being open, they would force family members to take a stand, to make judgments as to the safety of their children within an environment that repeatedly painted gay men as a serious threat to the wellbeing of children.

The gay popular media itself may have reinforced the disconnection between the potentially mutually beneficial relationship between gay men and younger people. Seldom would one, even today, read about the role of gay men in the lives of their families. One is more likely to read about the estrangement of gay men and their families of origin although this is the case in fewer situations than might be expected (Kennedy, 2007). More recently, there has been greater academic interest in the role of older gay men and women mentoring younger gay and lesbian identified teenagers, but there remains still little about the positive role that gay men or women could play in the lives of younger generations (Hostetler, 2009).
Coming out in the 1980s, I too felt the impact of this unfortunate depiction of gay people, often feeling that I would be suspect if showing an interest in working with children. I was well aware that in the minds of many, homosexuality and pedophilia were one and the same. In fact this misinformation was perpetrated in the popular media where a double standard existed for heterosexuality versus homosexuality. The age of consent for homosexual sexual relations was set at 21 (it has since been lowered to 16) at the time of the Omnibus bill, whereas for heterosexuals it remained at 16. Though pedophilia technically applies to a sexual attraction for pre-pubescent boys or girls, in the popular press it was applied to gay men who were sexually attracted to anyone under 21 (Kinsman, 1987). The feeling that I would always be under close scrutiny, if known to be a gay man, had much to do with my decision to not work in pediatric occupational therapy. From personal conversations with other gay men, I know that I am not alone in this experience of self-imposed occupational restriction.

7.2.3 Caregivers

All participants were actively involved in caring for aging and unwell parents, more so than what might often be assumed of men of their generation. Both John and Luke were closer to their mothers than their fathers, a characteristic observed by Will Fellows (1996) of a large number of the 75 men that he interviewed as part of his mid-west gay farm boy research project. John talks with pride about how he learned about caregiving by being present with both his father and mother as they lived through chronic illness and end-of-life struggles. Jake, during the time of our interviews, and despite a difficult relationship with his mother, visited her regularly at the nearby care home until her death. Luke lived with his mother and cared for her during the years remaining after her stroke.
John had much to say about his role as caregiver, pointing out that he had learned, through experience, how to care for someone; that is, being respectful of the care recipient’s wishes for autonomy and space. It is clear that this is a role that he took seriously. This role extended beyond family members, assisting where he could with neighbours and community members living with life threatening illnesses. After the suicide of his brother-in-law, he was instrumental in encouraging other family members to consider counselling finding it very helpful for him to sort out the impact of this tragic loss on his life and relationships. He describes this process in a way that conveys that he developed a language to name his fears and to express personal struggles, a skill-set not often associated with older prairie men. Not seeing caregiving as a burden, John describes the joy he experienced getting to know his father, caring for him during his final days, getting to know him in a way that he never could when they worked side-by-side on the farm. The time he spent caring for his mother offered him a role model for aging well.

Luke’s life choices would seem to have been directly impacted by his choice to care for his mother at home following her stroke. Undeterred by the pressures and concerns of children, he was able to focus on the needs of his mother. In hearing of his close devotion to his mother, I wonder how he was perceived in his community given this life choice. Another, pseudonym for gay men, though not always used exclusively to refer to them, is a *Mama’s Boy* (see for example, Jennings, 2006, *Mama’s Boy, Preacher’s Son*). On the outside, Luke would have fit this image, a single adult man still living with his mother—an image that conveys, immaturity, low-self-esteem, inadequacy and someone not able to make it through life’s challenges and life course events on his own. On the inside, however, it is clear that Luke was a caring competent son. This relationship did not deter him from coming and going from the farm, allowing him to make connections with other gay men in other locations. Now, whenever I hear the derogatory term,
*mama’s boy* in reference to adult men living with parents, I question what motivations are truly underlying this relationship, and that perhaps this is a relationship that could be celebrated rather than judged as a function of inadequacy.

It may be that the rural environment, particularly with farm families, afforded more opportunities for older gay men to be supportive of aging parents. The farm at least historically, has been a place for multi-generational living arrangements with the space available for such arrangements. My father, growing up in the same environment and period as my participants, told stories of unattached men, independent farmers who would often attach themselves to other families sometimes acting as primary caregivers to aging parents or other family members. I was surprised to hear that unattached men were not uncommon in that part of the world, leaving me wondering how much of their single status was due to choice or circumstance, what aspects of their stories were never told or heard.

Particularly for Jake and Luke, their familiarity with caregiving is proving itself useful as they age together with the other men and women of their community, particularly those connected to the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club. All the participants in my study have experienced some illness related to aging, whether it be cardiac related, arthritis or prostate problems. Both Jake and Luke feel that they can rely on each other and other members of this group to support them when needed, through not ruling out support from their family members. For example, Jake has checked in on Luke following his surgery for prostate cancer. Luke feels he can rely on Jake. Their close bonds and committed support for each other speak to the roles that *chosen families* (Friend, 1996) play in the lives of gay men of all ages. Though some have questioned the durability of these chosen families in times of significant illness and support
needs (Hostetler, 2004) so far, Luke’s and Jake’s chosen families have been there for them. They expect to be there for each other in the future.

John does not describe a similar gay-specific chosen family as do Jake and Luke, perhaps there is less need for such. Though he has other older gay friends and some younger gay acquaintances, I did not get the feeling that these bonds were as tight. John’s closer gay friends live out of town, either in Calgary, or on the west coast. He is also close friends with several straight women, one in particular has connected him with numerous other gay contacts. When thinking about any future health care support needs, he thinks first of his family, his nephews and nieces, though as a very independent person, his major fear is to have to become a burden to them.

My analysis of this caregiver role is no doubt influenced by my own caregiving roles within my own family. Though considerably younger than my participants, I too was able to be available for my mother during her terminal illness and took a coordinating role in directing her home and hospice care. Though my siblings were also involved, without the responsibility of kids, and with a more flexible job, I could be more available. In reflection, particularly with respect to John’s description of his caregiving relationship with his own parents and the importance of this time in his life, he added an extra layer of meaning to my caregiving role with my mother. Hearing John’s story reinforced for me the importance of taking the time to be with my mother during her final months and to take advantage of this quality time. Aware of my mother’s terminal illness, the participants were all very supportive, and on more than one occasion sent me back to Red Deer laden with freshly baked goods and garden vegetables for my family. Without realizing it at the time, these men were serving as role models and provided a calm appreciation of what I was experiencing.
7.3 Aging Well and Aging Differently in Rural Environments

7.3.1 Social Networks Beyond the Rural: Creating and Maintaining Multiple Communities,

To a greater or lesser extent, the need to expand their social network beyond their rural hometowns in order to connect with other gay men was part of the experience of all the men in this study. None of the men remained solely connected to their hometown. John made connections with the gay community in Calgary and lived there for three years. He maintains friendships there and on the west coast where some of his friends have since moved. His journey across North America was also a quest to connect with others like him, tired as he was of, “isolating himself on the farm”. Jake maintains a home in Victoria, BC and friendships in Edmonton. Similarly, Luke has maintained several friendships in Edmonton in addition to the connections that he has made with several men he met during his around the world trip over twenty years ago. The maintenance of these friendships has been made easier through the use of internet and email. Maintaining linkages with their gay friends who live elsewhere has required a fair amount of mobility and flexibility to travel. Sufficient financial means would also seem necessary in order to afford the maintenance of these relationships.

The internet and on-line social networking have expanded both Jake’s and Luke’s international community beyond the rural environment. Recent studies reveal that adults over the age of 65 are the fastest growing group of social network users (Public Health Canada, 2007). Older gay men have quickly taken advantage of social networks as they offer safety, anonymity and access for older people who because of distance or disability, may have difficulty connecting with others (Furlong, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Vota, & de Vries, 2001). Luke and Jake connect with other gay men on-line across the country and around the world, though as Jake tells me, “What do I want to talk to a guy in Holland for?” Jake describes in mentor-like terms his
on-line connections with some of the younger men using Silver Daddies. In a sense this social network has added an opportunity for community engagement roles for someone like Jake, who has always been an active community member. So perhaps, unlike their heterosexual contemporaries, by necessity, the communities that each of these men belong to has become broad and diverse.

The diversity of these community connections could also be seen in terms of their intergenerational make-up. No one spoke explicitly about ageism nor referred to the experience of being side-lined by younger gay men. I found this to be surprising, given that this is an issue that is raised regularly at older LGBT forums that I have attended over the past several years in Toronto. Urban gay men clearly feel the isolation associated with living within the largely youth oriented gay urban culture. Perhaps, by the sheer lack of numbers, in rural areas older gay men have more opportunities to come into contact with younger gay people. The Saturday Morning Breakfast Club, while made up of mostly older members, does include an age range from approximately 40 to 80. In Drumheller, John, known to be gay by several parents of younger gay children, has been called upon to offer advice either to the parents themselves or the younger gay men. Though, given the scope of this study, I cannot make generalizations about greater role opportunities for gay men in rural areas versus urban centres, as with other studies of aging in rural environments there may be more role demands on older adults in smaller areas as there are often more jobs to be filled than workers available. Elder and Conger (2000) observed this intergenerational dynamic at play in their life course study of intergenerational relations in rural settings. They found that geographical location and associated intergenerational interactions act as behavioural imperative mechanisms to shape the experience of aging in rural areas.

Environments where there are many tasks and few people to do them, such as is the case in small towns, create behavioural expectations for even the least skilled members to be involved in
community or family tasks. Accordingly, they found that in small rural communities, both old and young community members were very involved in one another’s lives through their engagement in various community roles. This influences skill development and maintenance in a manner that would not be apparent in urban environments. The underlying mechanism of these behavioural imperatives has been theorized to account for the decrease in social capital of older people as a result of the shift to urban environments (Elder & Johnson, 2003). And so, with a smaller population of gay people, small town LGBTs would be more aware of each other and more likely to intersect in each other’s lives.

For Jake and Luke, their social world has become more homogenously gay by choice, although John remains connected to his neighbours, family and friends. Both Jake and Luke have been active participants with the two main gay social groups that they are members of and have contributed to their maintenance. This represents a continuation from their earlier active civic involvement in community organizations. Though John is not part of any gay-focused groups at this time like Jake and Luke, he was an active member of the community volunteering in many organizations and helping out neighbours and friends often. Contrary to what I went into this study expecting, none of the participants felt that their level of involvement within the mainstream rural community was impacted by their sexual orientation. They do not feel that their choices were limited. With prompts, John did speak to his reluctance to carry on with a political career as he was aware of the possibility of being blackmailed as had been the situation with others. It seems that for Luke and Jake it is only recently, (over the past 10 years) when in their senior years, that their sexual orientation has shaped how they participate in the community, with greater engagement within the gay social clubs to the exclusion of their previous mainstream involvement. If we are to accept Luke’s and Jake’s positive self-assessment of their life and gay identity, their increasingly exclusive participation in a gay social world would seem to contradict
the assumptions behind Cass’s (1979) final stage of identity development, *identity synthesis*. At this final stage of development, individuals are thought to view their gay identity as only one aspect of who they are and are open to participation in a wide variety of social groups. Based on, in particular, Jake’s preferred exclusive engagement with his gay friends, Cass would likely situate him within the penultimate stage, *identity pride*. As with many psychologically based stage theories, the impact of the sociocultural environment may not have been fully integrated into this study. Cass would likely also view Luke’s and Jake’s more closeted status as limiting their identity development, when it could be viewed within their rural context to be adaptive.

Also playing a role in expanding opportunities for connections with the broader community for gay men in rural contexts are, ironically, given their negative influence earlier in life, the socially progressive church communities. During the 1990s with the participants in their sixties and seventies, the United Church debates and to a lesser extent, the Anglican Church debates over same-sex marriage and gay ordination opened up space for public discussion on the topic of gay rights. Perhaps, even in a way that changes to legislation could not, church-based debates on homosexuality were particularly important in rural areas for opening up discussion. Participants commented on the 1969 Criminal Amendment Act that included legislation decriminalizing homosexuality only after prompting, leaving me with the question that such distal contextual changes, though transformative in the long run, had little impact on their comfort in being open in their communities. Unlike federal legislation, religious and church-based debates are more central to rural and small town life touching the lives of many people. These debates forced people across the country to consider the options, many choosing to openly welcome gay people. It was these church people who have recently initiated discussion with Luke and Jake, and in a way that conveyed an acceptance of them, though as yet, neither of them has chosen to accept the invitation to be open. In another twist, it is a friend of John’s who is a
Catholic nun, who he feels most free to share his experiences as a gay man. It is clear, after speaking with her briefly, that she cares a great deal for John and is very aware of his anger with the Catholic Church. Together, however, they are able to explore and express their shared spirituality in a supportive manner.

7.3.2 Identity and Gender Flexibility in Old Age

The participants were all very eager to reminisce and to describe their early years in terms of friendships, family roles, travels, and accomplishments including coming to terms with their sexuality. Refocusing the conversations on the experience of aging or on being an older gay man and the gay life course seemed to take more effort. Though, as reminded often by life course theorists, aging is not something that happens during the last quarter of one’s life, it is rather, a life-long process. The reluctance of the participants (with perhaps the exception of Jake), to discuss questions in terms of old age is a reminder that aging and old age are not the same thing. Old age is viewed in our society as a distinct life period and carries with it society’s fears and inequities (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). That being said, I was interested in hearing from the participants about how they were experiencing their aging process as gay men aging in a rural environment. John in particular seemed pulled off-guard and initially resisted being put into either of these camps. He describes a coming out process with no distinct time or period where he felt he was completely out, it is a work in progress; and one that is further facilitated by his involvement in this project. Similarly, his coming to identify as an older man is a project still in progress. In his mind he has difficulty identifying with the label, older man, and has been surprised when others have treated him as such. With these objections noted, further discussions on aging did reveal a few key turning points. The same holds true for Luke. Jake on the other hand did not problematize any of these concepts and responded to my questions in a very direct and decisive manner.
At the age of 69, John went into a coma for three days following heart surgery. It was a close call, a wake up call. But as I would have thought, it was not this close call that he sees as pivotal. For John, getting old, “is about not being able to do the things that you once did.” Also, others now see him as older, as evidenced in the manner in which younger gay men, in particular, have responded to him, once he tells them his age. On appearance, John appears very strong and youthful, more like someone in his late 50s or early 60s and not someone coming onto 80. He remarks with pride that on several occasions younger men have tried to pick him up. Flattered, he has been open to it, but once they find out his chronological age they make their excuses and dash away. As his narrative reveals, he does not consider chronological age to be any true reflection of the true aging process and resists being slotted accordingly.

When asked about any differences between his aging process and that of his straight peers, John becomes more thoughtful and shares his theory about what gay men know that straight men do not. In describing his frustration at seeing his straight peers carry on with their macho ways, knowing perfectly well that that is not truly who they are, he challenges the rigid gender role expectations of his generation and rural geographic location. As noted earlier, unlike their more urban counterparts, young men of any orientation growing up on the prairies during the first part of the last century were not offered a lot of variation in male gender roles. Celebrated were men like those portrayed in popular media, the Marlboro man, silent and strong cowboy types, typified by John Wayne movies. The seafaring adventure stories that John makes reference to did not demonstrate the possibility of grown men openly expressing their feelings and affections while tuning into the feelings and perspectives of others. These were not options. In taking on roles and behaviours that challenged these norms, John had to in some way come to terms with his difference. He managed to overcome any inclination to fall in line and engage in the world in a way that went against his grain. John reflects the notion discussed in the literature
and observed of many minorities, that of crisis competence. Crisis competence of LGBT was found to develop as a consequence of overcoming the impact of discrimination (Balsam & D’Augelli, 2006; Kimmel, 1978, 1995). Such a competence might be a necessary life task for aging gay men and an expression of agency and resistance that gay men may have in common with other marginalized groups. It was not resistance to overt discrimination that John demonstrates, but rather a resistance to following rigid gender rules.

7.3.3 Having Fun and Other Occupational Pursuits

Luke’s and Jake’s thoughts on gay aging are somewhat less philosophical than John’s. In a matter of fact manner, Jake clearly feels that older gay men have “more fun” than their heterosexual peers, going on to describe the many social activities that he is involved with. A review of his photographs see him surrounded by groups of men at his cottage, at house parties, sometimes wearing crazy costumes which suggests that both he and Luke have a rich social network, once again defying the dominant narrative of the older, bitter and lonely homosexual. He and Luke talk about some of the happenings at the Saturday Morning Club or Prime Timers. Like Jake, Luke avoids heterosexual gatherings finding that many older people his age seem to have too much “drama” in their lives having to deal with the difficulties of their children or grandchildren. His social world has become increasingly and homogeneously gay as he gets older.

Though prostate surgery has affected to some extent sexual activity for all the participants, all three have been sexually active over the past while. Luke, though, feels that this chapter of his life is coming to a close, finding the complications from the prostate surgery too much of a deterrent. Both Jake and John expressed some pride in their continued interest in sex and particularly for Jake, the oldest, who appears to be the most sexually active of the three;
often with men much younger than he. Sexual encounters are made easier with the use of on-line social networks. Aware that connections made this way, can sometimes lead to older men being taken advantage of financially by younger men has not prevented Jake in particular from making contacts. He tells me that he can pick up on a guy who is in search of a sugar daddy pretty quickly and is not worried. There are members within the Prime Timers who are clearly involved in Sugar Daddy\textsuperscript{22} relationships, though this is understood as being mutually beneficial and not judged.

All the men describe a fair amount of travel with trips to the West Coast, Palm Springs (a city known for its large and aging gay population) and for Luke, his annual trips to visit his friends in Thailand. Jake, however, limits his travel to North America finding the badgering by young hustlers who frequent gay tourist venues in countries like Mexico too unappealing. As single men (at least in the case of Luke and John), not having dependent children offers more free time for leisure time activities.

7.3.4 Leaving a Clean Legacy and Illustrations of Generativity

Not wanting his family to have a copy of the narrative or to have any record of his gay life, Jake has been thinking more about \textit{“cleaning up.”} He has been asked by some of his older closeted peers, whether he has \textit{“cleaned up yet”} and if not, that he should consider it as he might never know when it might be too late. Cleaning up according to Jake, refers to clearing his apartment, bookshelves, and computer files of any clues of his sexual orientation. Jake tells me that this is what people his age are talking about lately. In his no-nonsense manner, he goes on to tell me that he has already cleaned most things up, but needs to make sure he has no porno or

\textsuperscript{22} Sugar Daddy is an older man who, in exchange for the sexual favours of a younger male (or female) partner, provides him or her with financial support.
evidence of his work with the Prime Timers on his computer or in his files. As we go through his box of photographs, there are many photos of a younger, good looking Jake with groups of men, some with his Masters Swim club friends, others of house parties and various trips. I ask if these are to be cleaned-up as well. He thinks most are okay, though to my mind, the photos, reveal his mostly same-sex social circle and give strong clues to his identity. What was upsetting during this interaction was the realization, that at a time when gerontologists and therapists write and speak about the prevalence of, interest in and relevance of leaving a legacy as part of the aging process, I am struck with the idea that one of the life course tasks of many older closeted gay men may be about quite the opposite, that is, cleaning up their legacy.

I am reminded of the recommendations of some of my peers, over twenty years ago and at the height of the AIDS epidemic to, clean up. At that point many gay men were living and dying of AIDS, some reconnecting with family members who never knew they were gay, raising the question of the need to maintain a secret identity or not. It was an end-of-life task to work through the question of whether or not to die with a clean-slate or to make coming out to family and friends a last project. For many just having AIDS forced the decision, though many chose to die without family contact, leaving obituaries without a clear indication of the reasons for their death. So for me to hear this term again in reference to an end-of-life task for older gay, rural, closeted men, took me back and provided some sense as to the world that many of these men may inhabit, a world, in their minds, not that unchanged from the 1980s or even earlier decades where one had to be careful not to be caught with anything suspect, unclean or dirty. In any case, perhaps unlike their straight peers, the end-of-life task of making a final decision as to their level of outness with family and friends, remains an important one for many older gay men and distinguishes them from their non-gay counterparts.
Luke and John are less concerned about cleaning-up. John is not concerned that any of his family will find anything for which he should be ashamed. He is quite interested in sharing his life narrative with them. Luke, as this process has developed, has become more open to the idea that his life narrative might be shared with some family members. All the participants are hopeful that their narratives will be useful for other gay men, young and old, and their families. They hope their narrated life makes a difference. Their desire to pass something on to another generation speaks to the notion of generativity in the lives of older gay men. As with the community, *unclinging* and caregiving roles discussed above, the many contributions of gay men throughout their lives to their communities and society are not part of mainstream storying of gay lives. In fact, as gay men, we live in a world that would portray quite the opposite, the hedonistic image of the wild and free gay lifestyle. King, Burton, and Geise (2009) have written insightfully about this observation, highlighting the need to reconsider gay lives in terms of generativity. This is reconsidered in Chapter 8, though it is important to recognize here in terms of the potential negative influence of this type of discourse on the life expectations and valuing of gay lives. What impact could such limited narratives have on the sense of self-worth of gay men, particularly older gay men as they re-story their lives in terms of dominant and often disparate narratives?

7.4 Summary: Master Narratives and the Researcher as a Contextual Influence

Hammack and Cohler, (2009) point out, “personal narratives of identity are always constructed in reference to, or through engagement with the master narrative of their time” (p. 14). Overall, unlike the identity narratives that Hammock and Cohler found to be characteristic of the post-Stonewall (1969), struggle and success, and the more recent narrative influenced by
more recent post-modern sensibilities that reject labeling and social categorization, the identity narratives in this study would seem to speak to themes of adaptation and accommodation.

These narratives of adaptation and accommodation are shaped by the, “local spheres of meaning” (Gubrium, 2001, p.20) that I, along with the participants inhabit. As the story listener, with a particular history, age, and developing relationship with the participants I too am part of the context that shapes how these men narrate their lives. This was a question particularly running through my mind as I spoke with John. John is from my hometown, attended the same church that I did and knows my parents. He is aware of the values that I grew up with. Because of this, how much of his story was shaped by a desire (conscious or unconscious) to tell a story in keeping with his unconscious assumptions of our shared master narrative of the good life? He describes a life of the ideal Christian (though not identifying himself as such at this point in his life), that is, a life of personal struggle with demons and temptations, abstinence, prayer, and compassionate service to others. John is a well-read person and has the mind of an intellectual, always asking questions and seeking to understand. His description of his van years, with its diversions and temptations along the way is told almost like the archetypal hero’s journey or the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness. He was faced with many life course decisions along the way (e.g., living with the cowboy couple, marrying the girl in Texas and having kids with her, buying into a Krispee Kreme franchise), but moving forward without taking up on these options knowing that his purpose was, “not to have sex with a lot of people” but with an anthropologist-like approach he sought out others like him to discover how they live.

I also wonder to what extent John’s early Catholic anti-sex contextual influences shaped his male romantic relationship ideals. As with some of his comments, he seemed to downplay the sexual side of same-sex love. It is possible that John adjusted his life story somewhat to fit his assumption of who I am and what my value system is. To what extent does there remain for John
a left over residue of Catholic anti-sexuality sentiment? When discussing this with him later, he is surprised. Interestingly, as if to re-balance this perception, he made several comments following this conversation that highlighted a more sex-positive John. In one instance when asked about regrets, he tells me that yes, that besides not having lived his dream of bar tending on a cruise ship, he tells me emphatically, that he would have been, “more of a slut.”

John, perhaps more than all the participants, reveals how complex sexual identity is and how even in old age, it is a work in progress. Though in many ways, John portrays a fully actualized and self-accepting gay man, there remain pockets of uncertainty, contradiction and regret. Sexual identity development, contrary to stage theorists, may be harder to capture and categorize than is implied in their clearly delineated stages developed within urban contexts. I cannot help but notice the parallels between his North American journey at the age of 40 to find role models, with my own journey out west and “back home” to seek out role models for gay aging; to find others who have lessons to share about gay life course options.

I am less clear of how my social location and personal biography may have influenced how Luke and Jake storied their lives with me. All the participants, without prompts, were quick to comment on how they were still sexually active despite the aging process or physical ailments. Luke, however, later in the interviews commented that this aspect of his life was something of the past. He seemed to be re-thinking the importance of sex in his life. I questioned whether the participants wanted to impress upon me their youthfulness in being sexual despite their age. I questioned why sex as an activity was privileged as an indicator of their youthfulness? How would they have responded differently were I a straight man or a woman of whatever sexual orientation?
Jake was also quick to emphasize that his childhood was as normal as anyone else, making this point several times. I wondered to what extent his perception of me as a researcher influenced this response. Was he simply eager to tell the world that gay people were really quite normal people, or was he more apt to downplay aspects of the gay experience that might be thought of as unique or problematic thinking as many may, that as a researcher, I would be most interested in the unusual, the sensational or stereotypical? I do not know the answer to these questions but do know that, no doubt, who I am and what my story is had some influence on the participants’ responses to my questions.

In this chapter, I have identified several themes (sexual identity development, relationships and linked lives, aging well and aging differently in a rural environment) that cut across the participants’ life narratives and which I feel are particularly salient to the research questions related to life course processes. I have expanded on the participants’ themes, going from the particular to the general in examining what these cross-cutting themes reveal about the contextual shapers of the life histories of three gay men aging in rural Alberta. In the next chapter, informed by the themes discussed in this chapter, I re-converge and expand on several life course constructs that the life histories of these three men particularly well illustrate.
Chapter 8
Implications for Aging Research, Practice, and Gay Men of All Ages

Photo by Barry Trentham

PHOTO 8. BRIDGE OVER THE RED DEER RIVER
DRUMHELLER, ALBERTA
June 2007

“City counselors ask city officials to develop guidelines on how to deal with coyotes.”

Toronto City Pulse 24 Hour News.
[2010, March 7]. Headline.
8.1 Gay Men Aging in Rural Environments: Implications for Life Course Studies

Life histories offer the possibility of exploring, in-depth, how discriminatory environments influence identity development and thus the aging process from the perspective of participants. As Hammock and Cohler (2009) state, “the voices of sexual subjects reveal possibilities for empowerment even as they illuminate the social injustice of subjugation in a heterosexist society” (p.16). Cole and Knowles (2001) suggest that, if done well, a life history, challenges conventional story lines, theoretical models and limiting stereotypes often held of minority or marginalized groups and as Plummer (2009) proposes, many such stories are counter-stories in their potential to break down grand theories about lives in general. I believe that the life histories co-constructed with the three men of this study have achieved this goal. The life narratives of John, Jake and Luke in revealing complex, rich, and engaged lives reflect gratefulness, generosity, resistance and adaptability while containing life’s many contradictions and struggles. The narratives as told, clearly reject the image and conventional storyline of the lonely old homosexual and bitter old queen. In contrast to the narratives told in this study, I am reminded of the negative images of gay men found by Berger to be prevalent during a period where the men in this study were becoming more accepting of their sexual orientation.

Older [homosexual] men are depicted as isolated from other homosexual males, both young and old, who place great importance on the good looks of youth. Older homosexual men are believed to have unhappy sex lives, if any, and to resort to ‘tearooms’, hustlers and young children for sexual gratification. They become effeminate, are socially unacceptable to other adults and are labelled as ‘old queens’. (Berger, 1980, p. 163)

The narratives created with the men in this study, though perhaps slanting towards the bright side of life, may reflect our (myself along with the participants) shared wish for tales of meaningful gay lives—tales that are quite the opposite of that portrayed in Berger’s quote above. Without doubt, even on the prairies, the world has become more welcoming, provocatively so,
but like the coyote with the baited trap, some older gay men remain wary. As King (2006) champions, it is through a close examination of human interactions and the details of social lives that a sense of complexity and injustice can be appreciated. But in addition to making visible the lives of an oppressed minority group, by rising to the challenge of queer theorists, the examination of gay men’s lives should also ideally queer aging theory (Stein & Plummer, 1994; Warner, 1991) and de-centre mainstream, taken for granted assumptions of aging and life course processes. In the discussion that follows, I aim to do this by revisiting the literature from a renewed and queer lens, as informed by John’s, Jake’s and Luke’s narratives and as filtered through my own story. The narratives point to many aspects of aging that could be reconsidered, however, I am choosing to focus on several key themes identified in Chapter 7 that speak to topics that have not yet been fully explored by gerontologists, queer theorists or LGBT researchers and which respond to the purpose and original research questions of this study.

To review, the original purpose of this study was to learn from the life narratives of gay men aging in rural environments in Alberta, Canada with respect to life course processes with a particular focus on how sexual identity development and marginalization intersect with shifting social contexts to shape the aging process in terms of engagement in social role opportunities. Findings were considered in terms of how they reflect or challenge established explanations of life course transitions and trajectories as well as the tensions experienced between cultural influences and individual agency throughout the aging experience. At the outset of this study I wanted this work to inform, not only theoretical understandings of the aging process, but also health care providers working with LGBT people and other clients from diverse backgrounds. I expected the study to have relevance to questions about social capital and social cohesion in terms of the unacknowledged and perhaps untapped social resource that older gay men offer.
Related to my primary research question of what can be learned from the life narratives of gay men aging in rural environments I also identified several specific sub-questions that asked:

1. How do changing social contexts influence occupational choices and engagement over the life course in terms of community and family participation?

2. How have changing social contexts influenced participation in social networks over the life course?

3. How do participants define and experience their social networks over the life course?

4. How does a participant’s degree of “outness” impact on his social network participation and how has this changed over his life course?

The following discussion responds to these questions by organizing [and making sense of] and interpreting the findings within several constructs that are conceptually related to life course principles. These are questions of generativity, social capital and gay aging; agency-structure dynamics as revealed through gay/old age identity development; and queer notions of family as social support networks. Although perhaps contradictory from the standpoint of queer theory purists, a gay identity is assumed in each of these three discussion points; however, I do value the importance of examining a gay identity as revealed through the aging process, but I also seek (dis)connections that, as points of transgression, shake up commonly held views on aging and destabilize academic discourse on the life course. In addition to these interpretive discussion points, this chapter revisits the notion of the rural as context and as a privileged point of assumed influence on the lives of gay men. Problems associated with an assumed rural-urban divide are raised, while reiterating findings that would seem to speak to unique contextual influences of the participants’ rural setting.
8.2 Generativity, Social Capital and Gay Aging

Though interested in examining the role of older gay men as contributors to family and community life, I did not anticipate pulling on notions of generativity as a foundational concept for this study. But, given the strong resonance of the participants’ narratives with my own in terms of our shared roles within the family and the next generation, I re-considered their narratives through a generativity lens; a lens that, as Hostetler (2009) observes, is seldom used to view the lives of gay men. Added reason to consider this perspective were several studies that speak to the role of gay people in family caregiving and other family support roles (Grant & National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, 2010; Grossman, Anthony & Dragowski, 2007; King, Burton & Geise, 2009; MetLife Mature Market Institute, 2006; Vasey & VanderLaan, 2010). The concept of generativity also serves as a conceptual link to the idea of social capital, a concept considered at the outset of this project and which I define as the environmental supports (e.g. resources, social networks) that build social trust enabling individuals to engage in community activities (Lynch & Kaplan, 1997).

Erikson (1963) first developed the notion of generativity as part of his developmental stage theory on the life cycle. Originally positioned as the penultimate stage where individuals face the challenge of generativity versus stagnation, Erikson (1997) later came to appreciate the importance of generative relationships as a necessary component of developing ego integrity (versus despair) during the latter stages of old age. This observation, by both Erik Erikson and his wife Joan Erikson, has more recently been supported by others (Cheng, 2009; James & Zarret, 2006). Though originally concerned with the ability of middle-aged adults to give back to society in terms of parenting roles, Erikson’s stage theory became more broadly understood to include pursuits that as Kotre (1984) describes, outlive the individual person. The notion of
Generative concern was later developed as part of McAdam’s and de St. Aubin’s (1992) seven-facet model that more closely examines the impact of cultural demands for generative actions on the motivation of elders to engage in generative acts. This is significant as Erikson’s conception of generativity was criticized, along with similar psychologically-based stage theories for insufficient attention to the sociocultural context of the aging process. Cheng’s (2009) investigation of the contextual forces shaping the expression of generative concern for the latter stages of old age are particularly relevant to this discussion of generativity in the lives of aging gay men. Cheng considers the impact of cultural contexts that inhibit ego integrity development in old age due to a dismissal or lack of respect for what older people may have to offer future generations. Cheng postulates that this “lack of respect” leads to further “disengagement from generative goals” (p. 51) resulting in barriers to ego integrity in late life. Cheng’s discussion also suggests that unlike mid-life generative actions, there is more cultural demand for, older adults may be more vulnerable to the lack of respect from younger generations highlighting again the relevance of social context in any discussion of generativity. Related to this is Keyes and Ryff’s (1998) suggestion that generativity in late life may also be characterized by a greater concern with the future well-being of non-kin through engagement in civic activities, pointing to the need for a civic society that is open to, and respectful of, the generative offerings of a diversity of older adults. Not surprisingly, Cheng’s very astute observations, though highlighting the importance of an environmental press for generative concern, are discussed within normative heterosexual life course assumptions and imply a seemingly pre-requisite concern for child rearing and grandparenting generative roles. Cheng’s study speaks to intergenerational disconnects and their impact on generativity. The gay narratives in this study clearly offer life course theorists, particularly those interested in questions of generativity and aging, further reason to better integrate narratives of diversity, stigmatization and marginalization in order to
better understand the potential constraints experienced by elders with generative concern, but with minimal generative cultural demand for their generative offerings.

Hostetler (2009) situates generativity more explicitly within a life course perspective viewing it as “an individual’s relationship with the future” but also about “the construction of a personal past” that “anchors the individual life course in the flow of sociohistorical time in a way that is true of no other developmental task in adulthood” (p. 397). From his perspective, generativity would seem to require that an individual is able to story their life accomplishments in a manner that demonstrates how their life as lived made (and makes) a difference to future generations leaving a lasting legacy.

I agree with Hostetler’s (2009) observation that generativity and homosexuality are not commonly viewed as compatible constructs. The gay life style is frequently portrayed by the popular media as hedonistic concerned primarily with easy sex (e.g., Queer as Folk see Davies, 2000-2005) and aesthetic designer sensibilities (e.g., Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, see Smith et al, 2003 and Designer Guys, see Darling, 2001) to mention only a few. Admittedly, similar consumeristic portrayals are associated with the general population of older adults as seen in marketing campaigns with images of fit seniors leisurely passing time on green golf courses or sipping wine at luxurious resorts, reflecting what Katz and Marshall (2003) observe as the, “overpowering influence of late-capitalist consumer society” (p.5) on the postmodern life course. With fewer, alternative images, however, such common narrations of the gay life course doom gay people to lives of pleasure seeking and superficiality acting as consumeristic pawns of the market place, a shift in gay identity that Rosenfeld (2009) identifies as the new “neo liberal homocomformativity” (p. 621). Such limited narratives do not consider the numerous and creative ways that gay people contribute to the social fabric or highlight the many historical
environmental constraints that have limited gay people in their drive to be part of something bigger than themselves, to connect with younger generations and to make a difference. Queer theorists have called for a closer examination of how these normative discourses particularly hetero-normative constructions of sexuality shape the lives of all people, but especially how they limit the potential expression of gay identified men and women (Bennett, 2006) as the dominant heterosexual discourse offers only limited role options. Admittedly, a recent increase in the variability of gay lives as portrayed on television is evident, for example, *A Modern Family* (Winer, Hudin, Einhorn, Koch, & Spiller, 2009) and offers a greater diversity of gay role models for younger LGBT cohorts.

The life histories of John, Jake and Luke, illustrate the importance of generative concern directed not only (and perhaps most evidently) at family members but also for other gay people, both young and old and for the broader community. The participant narratives all describe the many ways in which participants were engaged in their communities and broader social worlds. Beyond their work roles, all participants participated to some extent in community organizations (e.g., Rotary Club), church, sports fundraising activities, or provincial politics contributing to the wider world. Though their life histories demonstrate a great deal of generative concern for their local communities earlier in their lives as evidenced by their many volunteer occupations, it is not so clear as to what extent their identity development over time as gay men shaped this involvement. I can only speculate that the concern and sensitivity expressed by both Luke and John for other oppressed minorities as well as their active involvement in provincial politics, has some basis in their own experience of being marginalized. Though Jake was also involved in civic politics and while he expresses generative concern to make a difference in the lives of other gay people through his involvement in this project, and in his community building roles with senior’s gay groups, his stated motivation for his very active civic involvement, prior to his gay
life was, according to him, due to his career as a small town business man, where in his words, “it was part of being in business.”

None saw their sexual identity as a barrier to their involvement in community. Had they been openly gay, their participation in such organizations as the Catholic Church and fundraising clubs like the Rotary Club, would likely have been limited. So, in their rural community roles, there are no clear indications that their participation in community was any different from their straight peers. Having said this, however, there may be differences in situations where public scrutiny of personal lives could be a problem. For example John gives the example of a closeted politician who he suspects was blackmailed as a pressure tactic to get him to take on actions contrary to his values. John did not want to be put in a similar situation. Though, I have not done a comparative study, I have no indication that the extent of the participants’ civic involvement would be any different for these men than for their non-gay peers. For this reason, I will focus the remainder of this discussion on generativity on the roles of these men in giving back to society through caregiving, mentoring and providing support for future generations.

In no way do I claim generalizability from the three life stories that I have co-narrated, but I do believe that the findings illustrate how intimately connected the participants are with their families of origin, namely their nephews and nieces. The importance of family connections in the lives of rural men who have sex with men (MSMs) is an observation also noted by Kennedy (2007). As, for the most part, these men have not been open about their sexuality throughout much of their lives, they have never the less managed to adapt to social constraints and to take advantage of the many opportunities available to them in terms of family involvement. It could be argued that it was precisely because they were not open about their sexuality, at least initially, that they have been able to remain so connected to their families. For
many, coming out during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s to family and friends could result in the severing of family ties and limited opportunity for family engagement (Fellows, 1998; Kimmel, Rose & David, 2006; Riordon, 1986). By not coming out, these men were demonstrating an adaptive response to a homophobic society not yet ready to embrace the many gifts that they could potentially contribute.

Others have examined more the supportive roles that LGBTs, like Luke and John, play in the lives of nieces and nephews. A recent study by two evolutionary biologists Vassey and Vander Laan (2010) from the University of Lethbridge made headlines in the gay press recently by suggesting that homosexuality may provide an evolutionary advantage to families, finding that androphilic males (i.e., men attracted to other men) in Samoa known as Fa’afafine are more highly supportive of their nephews and nieces than gynephilic men or androphilic women. This differed from earlier findings of Rahman and Hull (2005) and Bobrow and Bailey (2001) who found no difference between straight and gay men in Western cultures in terms of their relative support of kin versus non-kin children. Though there are dangers in comparing indigenous constructions of sexual and gender orientations, Vassey and Vander Laan hypothesize that the lack of supported roles for gay men in the more homophobic west could in part explain the differences in the findings. Though Vassey and Vander Laan seek an evolutionary biological explanation for the existence of homosexuality and support a primarily genetic basis for homosexuality, not the aim of this study, the participants in this study do illustrate the potential roles that gay men can play in the lives of their extended families and suggests a need for further exploration of this phenomenon. The implications for the unrecognized social capital of gay men supporting future generations is particularly important for current family cohorts stretched by two career parents and intergenerational demands.
If the concept of generativity is understood to refer to actions aimed at giving back to society, then the caregiving roles described by the participants need also be considered. All participants in this study commented on the active role that they have played in caring for aging parents. This may not be an isolated finding. In an online survey of 1,000 LGBT Baby Boomer Americans a study by the MetLife Mature Market Institute (2006) found that older LGBT baby boomers participate as caregivers to other adults (family of origin as well as families of choice including a growing number of LGBT friends aging with HIV) in larger percentages than non-LGBT U.S. citizens. They expect this trend to increase as the baby boomers age and take on caregiving responsibilities with partners. Perhaps this is not surprising as most LGBT are not responsible for a growing family and may be more available to care for other members. Apart from their availability; however, Thurer’s (2005) summary of research findings that suggest that a greater proportion of LGBTs demonstrate gender non-conformist behaviours and interests indicate that there may be something else at play that draws some gay men to more relationally-based occupations. While it is beyond the scope of this study to answer this question, there may be value in better understanding how some gay men, like John, manage to resist gender role expectations throughout life in a manner that would seem to better equip them for challenges related to aging. Besides their generative contribution to relatives, the men in this study also demonstrated a concern for the wellbeing of non-related younger gay men. John provides an example of providing support for the gay son of an acquaintance; Jake refers to the time he spends on-line providing support and mentorship to younger gay men and Luke speaks of his financial support for at least two families in other countries and his support for local youth sports teams. This has implications for life course theory more broadly. Much life course theorizing is limited by its underlying and insidious heteronormative stance (Rosenfeld, 1999, 2009b) where men perform *doing male* within what sociologist Eric Anderson (2009) calls, an environment of
homo hysteria, that limits the potential expressions of masculinities. With a relaxation of this hysteria in some spheres, Anderson has found that men are better able to separate their sexuality from their performance of being male freeing them up for more flexibility in role expressions. I would argue that such a freeing up adds to the potential occupational repertoire of aging men, better equipping them for the challenges of old age. My reading of the life course literature does not fully consider the impacts of these constraints on the occupational aspects of aging and their associated trajectories.

8.2.1 Status Passages and Generativity

Life course researchers consider the concept of status passages as developmental milestones that shape and mark the aging process. I see a link between questions of generativity and the life course concept of status passages. By identifying the various status passages in a life, we are given some clues as to how society affords or acknowledges achievements with respect to an individual’s influence or impact on others. Though the heterosexual life course has many status markers related to education, family and retirement, some of which will be shared by gay men and women, there is little knowledge of any unique status passages associated with a gay life course and, in particular, status passages associated with old age. In life course parlance, societal age-structures (e.g., government policies, family, church, etc) determine markers for status passage that may be influential at both local or more distal social spheres (Settersten, 1997, 1999, 2003). The literature identifies several age structures that can impact on the gay life course. The role of religion in legitimizing relationship achievement as a status passage and the changing place of the state in regulating desire and participation in society by gay people have been well outlined in Kinsman’s (1987) seminal work on the history of homosexuality in Canada. Looking back at his work from a twenty-first century lens where arguably, the state and church have diminished roles in regulating the lives of gay people, the influence of consumer
culture on promoting options for aging with associated status makers is made more clear. Each year at Toronto’s Pride Parade, a common critique heard is the extent to which the parade has become a corporate event. Likewise, images of gay men as marketers, often unwittingly, of designer homes, high fashion, and other lifestyle consumables are prevalent. As with mainstream culture, the market would seem to be the primary arbiter of status markers, a role that was once the domain of church or state. Once one’s youthful marketability has been spent, purchasing power is demonstrated by exotic vacations, expensive food and wine, and various home and garden consumables. These all suggest achievement influence and a passage of sorts. Though these markers are also true for non-gay people, I would suggest that, given the limited images of gay lives, gay people may be more vulnerable to this overwhelming and singular market driven gay aging discursive option. King (2006) also argues that the status afforded to consumeristic roles remains weak and does little to offset the stigmatization of old age.

Status passages as discussed by Settersten assume progress through a particular realm or social institution. For example, one passes through a student role to a worker role. This transition is marked by a graduation ceremony of some sort. And so without recognized and valued social occupational roles, there can be no status passages. Beyond the usual occupational roles of student or worker, unlike straight people, gay people at least until recently seldom took on husband, wife, parenting, grand-parenting roles. Importantly, many gay men and women did marry and did raise families, particularly in rural environments without these achievements being marked or celebrated by the gay community. Without the availability of such recognized occupational roles in later life, what passages can be marked and what status can be achieved, and what impact does this have on well-being and successful aging?
I reconsidered the lives of the men in this study with this life course concept in mind. Though reference was made to travel to the queer Mecca-like destinations such as Palm Springs and San Francisco, the narratives did not reveal clear illustrations of gay status passages. This may be due to the fact that the men in this study were not fully immersed in gay culture. But even if immersed in that culture, apart from consumer power, what do(es) the gay community(ies) offer in the way of positive status passages? In terms of generativity, is this lack of status markers a further barrier to generative behaviours for older gay men? If status translates to influence, what opportunities exist for older gay men to use their influence and how could they or should they be marked or acknowledged?

Each of the participants in this study walks in some manner in two worlds, whether it is the straight-gay worlds, male- female, old-young worlds or rural vs urban worlds. Using Robert Putman’s (2000) concept of bridging—a necessary dimension of social capital where individuals make links across social networks—the men in this study and other LGBTs like them serve as important social resources as bridgers. Putman contrasts bridging capital with bonding capital where connections are supported within a particular social group. He gives the examples of religious affiliation as a form of bonding capital. Reimer (2008) proposes that bridging capital

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23 Some traditional First Nations communities speak of gender non-conformist men or women often referred to as Two Spirits as walking in two worlds. Reference is made to the responsibility that Two-Spirits have for the well-being of the community. As a Crow Elder states, “We don’t waste people like White society does. Everyone has their gift.” (as cited in Williams, 1986). Great enthusiasm is evident in Two-Spirit efforts to reclaim their sacred role in community, the common theme being the significance of their position at the cross-roads of the spirit world. Though some have argued that in their eagerness to reclaim greater status in their communities their roles have been overstated and tinged by romantic notions of the past (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997). Indeed, the descriptors of the sacred roles of Two-Spirits in my readings are numerous including: Healers, Teachers, Medicine People, negotiators, mediators, Elders, child namers, caregivers of the young and the old, Shamans, Ceremonial Dancers and Singers (Jacobs, Thomas & Lang, 1997; Lovejoy, 1999; Roscoe, 1988; Williams, 1986) and this list is not exhaustive. In light of this underlying foundation and their perceived ability to walk in “two worlds”, many Two-Spirit people have taken on roles as negotiators and mediators or roles that Burns (1988) describes as the “go-betweens” (p. 5). I find these ideas inspiring and ones that offer an alternative cultural model.
becomes most important in diverse cultures such as Canada’s. In my experience identity, based on a shared sense of homophobic discrimination, can bring together people from diverse ethnic, religious and class backgrounds in a manner not seen in non-gay settings.

As *bridgers*, the participants walk in many worlds. Yet, Western culture affords no honourary status markers for such roles in general, and much less so for aging LGBTs who may also lack the status passages of parent and grandparent. Beyond concern for the aging LGBT community, our society has few age structures to mark passage through the significant time period between retirement and end-of-life for most old people; a suggestion in keeping with Riley, Khan and Foner’s (1994) conclusion that society lags behind changes in the life course in terms of providing occupational opportunities for older people that acknowledge their role in an inclusive society.

8.3 Agency and Structure in Identity Development

Settersten (1999) views the main goal of life course research to, “map changing individual lives” (p. 197). If successful, this map will link a life with the changing environment and will highlight the tensions of individual agency and structural influences. Other researchers have also called for a greater focus on the role of human agency (Baltes, 1997; Gubrium, 2001) in the aging process and a need to better grasp “individuals’ perception of their environments and how these perceptions shape their actions, reactions and interactions in their environments as it is perceived, constructed and represented in the minds of individuals” (Settersten, 1999, p. 197). Settersten adds that a life course perspective seeks to, “integrate action oriented and structure oriented perspectives, and to examine reciprocal interaction” (p 30) referring to models of agency within structure. He encourages researchers to examine the variability within and across
individuals, cohorts and groups; and to link individual development to proximal environments (family, friends etc) and to more distal environments (state, policy, culture, nation, history).

Hammack and Cohler (2009) use the term narrative engagement to refer to the ability of an individual or group to contest the content of a master narrative from within, and in the process re-story their lives. They view the development of identity as an example of narrative engagement and it in itself reveals the role of agency by resisting constraining social structures. At a collective level, they add that narrative engagement is a, “vitaly social process and can in fact, catalyze collective action for social change” (Cohler & Hammack, 2009, p. 455).

The life histories of John, Jake and Luke reveal many narrated illustrations of expressions of individual agency as expressed in their responses to societal pressures to conform to heteronormative behaviour and identity. All participants had to consciously navigate many hurdles on their journey towards positive gay self-identities. Though, not negating the impact of a restrictive homophobic environment, these men found ways within very real environmental constraints to achieve success in most, if not all life domains. Perhaps most illustrative of the agency-structure dynamic in these narratives is the manner in which participants developed a gay positive identity despite environmental press to the contrary. For example, John’s resistance to do the things that boys and men are supposed to do, whether it be as per the norms of the straight, gay or religious community, illustrate how a strong sense of self and desire to be authentic made it possible for him to come to terms with his sexuality. He attributes the development of values related to independent thinking and concern for others, including those considered different, to his parents’ critical perspective on issues related to religion and politics. These values were foundational to his eventual acceptance as a gay man, as were the supportive friendships he developed during his time in more gay positive spaces in Calgary. From a life
course perspective, it is interesting to note that John’s sense of personal agency in defying gender role expectations continues on through his life and is reflected not only in his resistance to gender role expectations, but also to the social pressures within the gay culture to act and be a certain way, and later to his resistance to unwritten social expectations of how an older man is supposed to act. By resisting society’s potentially negative appraisal of his interests and attractions, he overcomes an identity crisis that provides a template for later resistance to limiting ageist identity expectations.

For all the men, the strength of the historical rural environmental press towards denial and negation of their sexual identities did shape how, and when, they came to identify positively as gay men, but only in relation to their unique circumstances and values. For example, what appears as a shared value to, “not hurt anyone” in the process of coming out, reflects a community or family perspective more typical of earlier rural life (Fellows, 1998). This contrasts with the more individualistic value-set underlying a be true to yourself perspective arguably more characteristic of later and more urban cohorts (Rosenfeld, 2009). From the perspective of those born in more liberal (though still restrictive) times, the don’t ask, don’t tell approach of not naming one’s sexual identity, could be interpreted as a passive response to discrimination that reinforces the silencing of LGBT voices and indicative of an individual not yet at the ultimate stage of gay identity development (Cass, 1979). However, given the value placed on continued connection to community and family, theirs was arguably a very adaptive and agentic response to a hostile environment. John’s repeated use of terms such as, “not being programmed” or “not being regulated” clearly highlight a conscious response to structural constraints, though he still played largely within the rules of the game, that is, within the existing social structure. Kennedy (2007) in his study of MSM in rural Ontario comes to similar conclusions about the limitations of classic gay identity stage theories.
Jake’s relatively late identification with a gay identity reveals another aspect of gay identity development that reinforces queer theorist assumptions about the relational construction of gay identities, that is, gay identities that are performed in relation to a hegemonic heterosexual dynamic that serves to other sexual non-conformists. Prior to any identification as a gay man, his behaviours and actions were not given any label. He did not see himself as different or discriminated against. He was who he was. Of all the participants, Jake’s mannerisms would likely raise some question as to his sexuality. It was not until he was surrounded by a group of men that he learned, in order not to out the entire group, that he should “control it” that is, control those behaviours seen by others as effeminate and indicative of homosexuality. He was to discover that there were aspects of himself that he should distinguish. Jake came to identify these mannerisms as gay, though they were no different than how he interacted in the world as a straight identified man. In so doing he learned to “normalize” heterosexual masculinist notions.

At the same time group norms, expressed within the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club, illustrate what Rosenfeld (2009) refers to as post-war homonormative behaviours in Jake’s efforts to keep his “wrists straight”; that is, to perform straight and to not behave in a manner that transgresses gender norms when in a public sphere. Paradoxically he also came to play with these mannerisms and act more “queeny” in safe gay-only settings. He seemed to revel in these queer performances. In a manner, he learned, to use queer theorist Judith Butler’s (1994) term, to perform gay in his late 40s and re-constructed a gay identity that would seem to be relationally in direct opposition to heterosexual identities. He then came to reconsider his activities and his participation in civic events in keeping with this newly constructed identity eschewing heterosexual gatherings for gay-only ones where he could be himself and have “more fun”. Jake did not seem overly concerned to discover that he had effeminate mannerisms. He denies ever being teased for these mannerisms in early life. Fortunately for him, this discovery occurred
later in life when his sense of self was well developed and beyond the time when his younger more, impressionable self would likely have been more vulnerable to such an attack on his personhood. The differential impacts of timing of life events on life trajectories, a life course consideration, is made clear with Jake’s identity development narrative. Though, Butler would seem to suggest that this construction of identity was primarily the result of social forces, Jake does not present as a passive actor. Within the discursive options available, he actively chooses which identities of the few available to take on. His agency is expressed in choice-making, though it does not extend toward challenging or questioning the discursive options available or breaking down barriers that maintain a restrictive heterosexist environment. In small town Alberta this agency-structure balance makes sense in light of Jake’s desire to remain engaged in his community. It works for him at this time in his life and in the rural setting.

Illustrations of agentic resistance to normative ideals in the men’s narratives also crosses identity categories. As revealed, particularly in Jake’s and John’s comments on aging, the tug-of-war like internal struggle of accepting versus resisting societal identity restraints is clear. As John states in reference to his own aging:

*Without realizing it, we have set ideas of what people should be doing whether it is age or anything else..... Maybe you could be just as happy if you were just doing what you want to do in this life, rather than doing what society thinks, or your parents think you should be doing.*

The ability to overcome identity threats to sexual identity development would seem to augment individuals’ struggles to renegotiate aging identity options later in life. Others have observed this form of *crisis competence* in the lives of LGBT believing it to develop as a consequence of overcoming the impact of discrimination (Balsam & D’Augelli, 2006; Kimmel, 1978, 1995). But perhaps more specifically, beyond the competence that is developed in a *fighting back* response to overt and covert discrimination, its observed genesis in the experience
of visible minorities—what might be more salient for gay people in terms of crisis competence, whose identity struggles are more likely, at least initially, unseen and solitary—is the competence achieved through active resistance to societal scripts that say you are evil, sick and a threat to the community. The initial crisis that a gay person must face is an identity crisis, an attack on his very personhood. It is not so much about equal rights or access to resources; it is about basic goodness, rightness or value as a person. This crisis competence is clearly illustrated in Jake’s description of his conscious and repeated efforts to “deprogram” himself from the self-hatred fostered by the Church. The competencies required to achieve a sense of moral self-worth hopefully generalize to the challenges associated with aging where one’s identity, personhood, and value is questioned, threatened and negated. As such, this aspect of crisis competence could be viewed as a necessary life course transition for aging LGBT men and women.

As I write this, I am reminded of the queer theorists’ aim to out binary thinking. The discussion around the notion of crisis competence suggests you have it or you do not; you overcome the challenge or you do not and once armed with a new set of crisis management gear, you are set to overcome the next battle. John’s quote above suggests that it is not so straightforward. Identity negotiation and maintenance is an ongoing struggle in response to both changing external behavioural prescriptions (e.g., “old people don’t wear shorts”) and internal (body-mind) states (e.g., arthritis, prostate cancer, “I cannot run as fast anymore, but in my mind I am no different”). As with the coming out process—that for each of these men is ongoing—competence may never be fully attained, but fluctuates in response to changing conditions and opportunities for further growth. The often heard quotation from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) suggests that this process is at the root of wisdom development.
Niebuhr’s quotation, from a prayer later to be known as the Serenity Prayer and adopted by American Alcoholics Anonymous groups, speaks to the ultimate challenge of identity development whether as a function of aging or sexual orientation. The participants, after years of resisting their inner voice, eventually accept that they cannot change their sexual desires. It then took courage to embrace a positive self-identity. It also required courage and perhaps wisdom to resist the need to take on a pre-fabricated gay identity; a limited identity constructed as some would suggest to reinforce the primacy of heterosexuality (Butler, 1994; Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006; Stein & Plummer, 1994; Sedgwick, 1990). As active agents, the participants in this study clearly rejected some aspects of gay culture. For example, as Jake tells us in reference to the creative, fashion aspects of gay cultures, “we are not part of that” and as John and Luke convey in their resistance to immerse themselves in the gay community; a choice that would likely have distanced them from family and community. As with their gay identity, they are now negotiating new identities as old men; identities culturally shaped by shifting old identity discursive options. As a group, they present as critical of what aspects of that identity (as reflected in what they do and how they do it) they wish to embrace. John resists the gendered norms of his straight prairie aging peers (e.g., by baking, caretaking), while for example accepting changes in sexual activities as a result of prostate cancer. Aging for these men does seem to be a very conscious process, highlighted perhaps by the fact that they see clear contrasts between their process and that of their straight peers.

John’s comments on what he believes, “we know what they don’t” on the surface rings of essentialist thinking that serves to reinforce distinct *us versus them* categories. On a closer look, however, his comments speaks to how discriminatory environments (not inherent individual characteristics) may offer another crisis that gay people must overcome and which, if successful, offers another resource for aging well. This point is further explored using Meadows and Davidson’s (2006) understanding of hegemonic masculinity maintenance strategies discussed below.

Meadows and Davidson (2006) discuss the challenges faced by men as they attempt to maintain hegemonic masculinities (dominance of men over women) in old age, a time associated with loss of power. Strategies used respond to changes in their *production relations, power relations and emotional attachments*. Productivity is primarily concerned with the ability to do; where *doing* is the idealized form of manhood (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). To combat threats to the *doing* nature of manhood, like John and Jake, the narratives of Meadow and Davidson’s male participants highlighted what they still could do. As John clearly emphasized, aging was linked to physical decline with a downplaying of chronological age. This is a strategy according to Gilleard and Higgs (2000) where aging identity is formed through resistance. To offset threats to hegemonic male power relations, Meadows and David observed that men make downward comparisons to show that they are better than others. Following this observation, both John and Jake, in their comparisons to their straight peers with regards to knowing something that they do not or in comparing their quality of life, exemplify this strategy. So while challenging hegemonic masculinity in occupational engagement, they may reinforce hegemonic masculinities by attempting to establish power over others. With respect to emotional relations, Meadows and Davidson discuss the strategy as described by Reynold (2004) for some men to disassociate themselves with homosexuality through jokes or derogatory references. The men in my study,
without prompting, were very quick to comment on their sexual abilities. Though quite
obviously there was no need to establish their heterosexuality, they did make clear their
distinction from straight men. Meadows and David go on to demonstrate that when older men
are, out of necessity, put into feminized spaces (e.g., caregiver roles), that these strategies are
amplified. However, not everyone is able to maintain these hegemonic strategies and these men
are then left to negotiate an alternative masculine identity that for some comes at a great
emotional and social cost (Reynolds, 2004). As Calasanti (2006) observes it is the men who
have lived lives of unchallenged privilege who may find this shift of identity most troubling. For
many gay men, who may have had to negotiate this shift at a much younger age, it is likely that
they will find this aspect of the aging identity negotiation process less emotionally threatening. It
would be a mistake to jump to dichotomous thinking and revert to gay-straight stereotypes. For
example, though John makes critical comments on the “macho game” that he sees his nephew
playing suggesting that he has thought through this challenge to his masculinity and has
successfully redefined the rules of the game in a way that does not require him to maintain power
over someone else, he also projects hegemonic masculine strategies in comparing his physical
doing activities to maintain productive relations and by resisting the stigma of old age by
negating chronological markers.

8.3.1 Queering Occupations as Acts of Resistance

John’s narrative suggests that by being true to yourself in terms of doing those activities
that one enjoys, despite gendered expectations to the contrary, resilience is developed. But apart
from resilience, and the renegotiation of identity at a more practical level, engagement in
gendered atypical activities during younger years may add to their repertoire of valuable life
skills that are facilitative of successful aging. Granted, John’s experience of gender non-
conformity does not apply to all gay men, and in fact applies to many non-gay men, but it is gay
men perhaps who have led the way in queering occupational categories and in creating spaces where gender non-conformity is accepted and even celebrated. So, for someone like Luke who tells a more gender typical boy story, later in life, his gay peers would more likely celebrate and support the development of gender atypical occupations, that may be more necessary for the caregiving roles that he later took on. That is, he eventually found a sub-culture that enabled the development of a broad range of occupational skill sets that in turn could bolster his capital within his social support network (e.g., sending me home with baked goods for unwell parents). In transgressing gendered occupational roles, the participants challenge conventional and limiting expectations of what one can or should do in old age.

Though each of the men in this study transgressed gender role expectations to some extent, they did not fully embrace the more activist and destabilizing power of transgressive queer camp culture. Each made reference to camp aspects of gay culture, but found such practices to be distasteful and distanced themselves in particular, from drag queen cultural expressions. This is not surprising given that such practices undermine their own attempts to fit in and to adapt to heterosexist environments.

Gay performances of camp are characterized by parody, irony and making fun of mainstream sacred ideas of gender/sex binaries and cracks open the fragility of these rigid identities and in so doing, offers spaces for gender role experimentation. Drag is the ultimate gender transgressive performance and openly flies in the face of heteronormative culture. The relevance to this study of this queering of long-held ideas is best described in Jen Bacon’s comments (2006) about the queering process as a set of practices linked to post-structuralism where, “cultural norms are tested, played with, and even turned upside down in the interest of challenging the very idea of normal.” (p. 259). Queer culture has not yet extended these
destabilizing tactics to challenge *normal* ideas of aging, but it could and should. I would imagine that unlike mainstream critical challenges to aging with images of the active senior golfing, water skiing and other energetic and sportsman-like activities, that a queering of old age may broaden these images to include playing with these rigidly gendered and arguably sexist activity portrayals and might explore the more nurturing or caregiving skill sets of men while allowing for more actively public engagement models for women. Instead of Grandpa and Grandma on the golf course, how about Grandpa (or Uncle Jack) baking with his grandson, and Grandma (Aunt Jane) building a tree house for her granddaughter? The end goal here is not the inversion or swapping of occupational roles, but merely opening up the possibilities that allow people to build the skills and relationships that engage them or that, due to necessity, they are required to develop (e.g., caregiving for an unwell wife or supporting a dying friend). Arguably, the gender non-conformist occupational repertoires that all three participants developed earlier in life have served them well in old age. The relational-nurturing skills associated with female roles may become useful in old age given that such skill sets are in demand and serve to link people with one another.

8.4 Expanding Notions of Family, Social Support and Linked Lives

Though social and organizational structural influences are well noted in the literature, in keeping with Elder’s notion of linked lives, Settersten (2003) reminds us to be considerate of the manner in which communities, neighbourhoods and families shape lives. The gay experience of community or the frequently discussed, but poorly empirically supported concept of *chosen families* (Friend, 1996; Hostetler, 2004; Lee, 1991) may offer particular insights into the role of place in shaping aging lives and is further discussed in relation to queer theory later in this text.
Numerous studies on the aging process point to the importance of social networks for health and well-being. For most, kin relationships serve this purpose. Though this is also the case for gay people (Herdt & de Vries, 2004; Hostetler, 2004; Kennedy, 2007) the idea of family of choice or chosen family has become entrenched in LGBT aging discourse, though the durability of these connections in time of difficulty have not yet been determined, their importance within the gay culture has never the less been assumed. Jake’s and Luke’s social network speak to this form of social support system. Roseneil (2004) picks up on this observation of the gay life course and further examines it with a queer lens. She comments on the well-documented observation that the boundaries between friends, lovers and partners is not so clear as it is in heterosexual relationships—an observation that resonates with Jake’s story in particular. Long-time friends become lovers and vice-versa. The place of sexuality in both continuing friendships and spousal partnerships, is much more complex within the lives of gay men and lesbian women and may play an as yet unexamined vital role in the aging process. According to Roseneil, this insight leads to a de-centred view of the privileged role of conjugal relationships in the life course, a role that is uncontested in my reading of the life course perspective literature. Roseneil’s appreciation of the complexity and richness of the social networks of gay men is exemplified in the richness of the social support networks described by the participants in this study. Clearly, for many gay older men, policies and health care services that limit their understanding of social networks to biological nuclear families may not be tapping into the social resources available to not only gay men, but single older woman, collectivist cultures relying on extended families and perhaps many others who benefit from the support of a broader network.

The explanation often given for the development of chosen families is the alienation from biological families that many LGBTs are assumed to experience. Needless to say these assumptions are based on the experiences of urban gay men who, like me, have left the rural
setting. The men in this study chose to stay (or return in the case of John) to the towns or rural areas where they feel strongly connected to family and rooted in the community. As the men in this study illustrate, the genesis of a chosen family network, does not need to be associated with alienation from biological family. The chosen family simply builds on the biological family network. By necessity gay men do seek out similar others for identity validation, connection and support; a key theme in the unpublished research of Millar’s (1998) *Lesbian and Gay Life in Alberta*.

8.4.1 Queer Theory, Identity and Implications for Linked Lives

I question how one comes to understand the role of gay identity in fostering community and collective action, if identity is as some queer theorists suggest, an illusory limitation? This would seem to have important implications for older people, whose community support network is known to be very important for the maintenance of health (Grossman, D’Augelli & Hershberger, 2000; Hostetler, 2004; Shippy, Cantor & Brennan, 2004). This critique of queer theory is shared by Kirsch (2006) who links the development of queer theory as a by-product of capitalist emphasis on individualism that leads to exclusion rather than its original aim of greater inclusion. Gerontologists have demonstrated the important role that life story telling plays in linking individuals to one another in community (Gibson, 2004; Kenyon, 2003; Kivnick, Stoffel, & Hanlon, 2003; Pohlman, 2003). As illustrated in this project, I believe that how, if and when someone comes out (i.e., tells their life story), has an impact on how they engage with both gay and non-gay communities. Importantly from a life course perspective, Grierson and Smith (2005) found that based on a study of 32 Australian men, shifting social attitudes change the function, timing and meaning of the coming-out narrative across cohorts. They suggest that eventually there will be a disappearance of this distinct LGBT developmental process, as younger cohorts grow up in a time where, as a 15 year old gay teen once told his mother (a colleague of mine), “I
was never in the closet.” The Australian study proposes that this eventual shift may, in turn, impact on LGBT social and organizational structures resulting in a less defined and demarcated gay community. This empirical finding, though not framed within a queer theory perspective speaks not only to the relationship of coming-out with community, but raises questions about the need for identification with a gay community, in order to age well as a gay person.

In this study, John’s resistance to claiming a gay identity would seem to reflect a queer critique of essentialist identity development. John resists the limiting option of gay as an identifier or label for himself. He feels that he is much more than the label connotes; he is a farmer, a worker, a Hungarian-Canadian, but he is more than each of these. John, as compared to Jake and Luke does not describe the same level of community connection to other LGBTs, nor does he express any desire to. By resisting such an identity, does he, as Kirsch (2006) suggests forego opportunities to contribute to, or benefit from, a gay community as he ages? Perhaps, but on the other hand, he also has the support of a family and a rural community that he has chosen to identify more strongly with and this is the reference group from whom he seeks support and to which he contributes. Will this community network continue to provide the needed identity maintenance function that may become more salient should he find himself in institutional environments (e.g., nursing home, rehabilitation facilities) that do not recognize or validate all of who is? This is a question for another study.

8.5 Problematizing ‘Rural’ in the Gay Rural Experience

Throughout this paper I privilege the rural aspect of the participants’ experience with respect to its influence on the aging gay life course. The rural experience was my starting point and I make reference to it throughout the paper as the overarching contextual shaper. I viewed the rural experience as different from my own current experience and that of other urban gay
men whose lived experiences are most often discussed and dissected in the LGBT literature. This project has pushed me to question how different, in fact, is the rural experience especially in today’s linked-in world. Have I over-simplified the urban-rural divide? This section revisits the notion of the rural, highlighting some of the key rural influences on the aging of gay men that I observed in this study, while reviewing with a critical eye assumptions about the uniqueness of the rural experience.

Kennedy (2007) in his doctoral thesis on the sexual identity management of rural MSM, provides a useful overview of critiques of the notion of rurality and how the concept has been shaped by popular images and social representations. He makes it clear that there exists no clear definition of rural, that it is a concept that has loose edges; can denote a physical place, an experience, or a culture; is malleable and changing; and that it cannot be defined solely as the polar opposite of urban. While it has not been my objective to examine in-depth the social discourses associated with rurality, Kennedy’s close examination of this concept is a reminder of the need for definitional clarity and to provide clear descriptions of the rural environments under study; added reason for the detailed contextual descriptions in this thesis.

When I chose to seek out gay men aging in rural environments, the idea or image of rural that informed my search was based on my experience of living in what was referred to as rural Alberta between the years 1961 and 1979. At its most basic, my working definition focused on what rural is not in terms of its gayness. In this sense, rural had something to do with what Riordan (1996) refers to as places where gays and lesbians, “lack the critical mass of our [gays and lesbians] urban cousins” (p. xii). I wanted to talk to gay men who were aging away from a visible, vibrant, gay community as I was aware of the importance of social connections in the aging process and questioned how this could be realized in, what I presumed to be, the isolated
lives of rural older gay men. Other characteristics such as population density, relative access to various professional services and social entertainment venues, levels of education, the extent of cultural diversity and employment opportunities are also markers of what rural means to me. I assumed that rural areas would be less accepting of diversity than urban settings, an assumption supported by Reimer (2008) in his analysis of survey results of 1,600 Canadians on attitudes towards diversity. Although these remain important indicators, it quickly became clear that the men in this study are influenced by contexts beyond the immediate rural setting where they live. All have lived in larger centres for short periods of time and all are within two hours of a major urban setting. During earlier periods of the participants’ lives their experience of the rural would have been more distinct from those living in larger urban areas such as Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver. There was less travel and, unlike today, the participants had no access to gay-positive entertainment such as Out TV\(^{25}\), email or other internet-based ways to connect with other gay people, the larger world, its ideas and influences.

Having qualified what I mean by rural and while noting the porous nature of this concept, I believe that there were some unique characteristics of the changing rural experience that have shaped the life course and aging process of these men. Each of the narratives makes reference to the more rigid gender roles associated with the rural environment in earlier periods; an observation made by others (for example, Fellows, 1998; Kennedy, 2007; Kramer, 1995; Riordan, 1996; Salamon, 1992). Chapter 7 makes reference to the work of Elder and Conger (2000) on how the lower densities of rural areas can create opportunities for greater intergenerational engagement. This factor, in addition to the smaller pool of available social capital, provides a press for older adults to become more engaged in a variety of community

\[^{25}\text{Out TV is a cable channel that offers only LGBT content including talk-shows, movies, sitcoms and news.}\]
functions as there are fewer individuals (human resources) than occupational opportunities. Perhaps related to this experience, the men in this study did not refer to a sense of exclusion from younger gay people in their social circle, a lament often heard, in my own experience, from urban gay men. This is not surprising as there exists no highly visible gay community promoting a youth culture as evident in the larger centres. Finally, I have noted what appeared to be the relative salience of church-based influences on changing attitudes towards LGBT issues. Each of the participants spoke of the impact of the debates, particularly within the United Church of Canada, on same-sex marriage and ordination. These were highlighted in a way that discussions about changing legislation or even events like Stonewall or the bath raids of the early 1980s were not; an observation also made by Preston, D’Augelli, Cain and Schulze (2006) who suggest that religious influences play a relatively greater role in the lives of small town residents than in urban settings. In contrast to this supportive influence and of relevance to discussions of the Alberta context, with its strong conservative Protestant influences, is Bibby’s (2006) finding that of all Christian groups, conservative Protestants are the least comfortable meeting homosexuals.

8.6 Implications for Occupational Therapy and Allied Health Professionals

Leaders and researchers in the fields of occupational science and occupational therapy have only recently considered the role that sexual orientation plays in the occupational development, engagement and participation of individuals and have called for greater research into this area (Bergan-Gander & von Kurthy, 2006; Jackson, 1995, 2000; Williamson, 2000; Kingsley & Molineux, 2000). A review of these studies suggests that the overall theme speaks to the impact that discriminatory heterosexist environments have on the occupational performance and participation choices of individuals and the need for therapists to gain sensitivity and awareness about the sexual orientation of their clients. Little mention is made of the gender-
sexual identity dynamic, queer theoretical critiques or in-depth historically based analysis of gay occupational life courses. In contrast, in this study, the lives of three gay men are examined in context and retrospectively, and although speaking to the influence of discrimination on life course and occupational transitions and choices, reveal more clearly the impact of discrimination on gay positive identity development over time. Not storying themselves as passive victims of homophobic environments, these men demonstrate agency in adapting to heterosexism. To successfully engage in occupations assumes, as per the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance and Engagement (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007), the active role of individuals interacting within environmental constraints and opportunities and in sync with the occupational demands of any given activity. Though agency-structure dynamics are implied within this model, its changing nature over time and in relation to the shifting meanings associated with the gendered nature of occupational engagement is seldom questioned in occupational science and occupational therapy literature. As well, and although seldom discussed within occupational literature, discrimination in the form of homophobia is primarily concerned with sexual orientation understood as an essential identity. From this perspective concern is aimed at discrimination in terms of who one is, their beingness. Alternatively, as illustrated in John’s narrative, it is his doings that highlight his difference that are the potential target of discrimination. This study points to the complex relationship between how one navigates gender non-conformist doings and gay identity development. It is John’s resistance to a hegemonic masculinity in terms of his occupational aptitudes, interests and behaviours that is most revealing. Though gay culture provide a more accepting environment for gender variant expression, gay people are not alone in their resistance to a hegemonic masculinity. John’s occupational choices have clearly served him well over time and perhaps even offer him an advantage in his occupational aging process. How many other non-gay men or women might be
better equipped for the challenges of old age in a culture supportive of a broader array of occupations that could serve them well in old age? How could a more fluid understanding of gender and sexual identity be facilitative of the occupational aging process and offer a more enlightened queer-positive approach to enabling occupation? Such questions seek to understand how socio-cultural structures, systems and processes could better support, recognize, validate and foster the caregiving and unclinging occupational capacity of gay men and other queer identified people within their families and communities.

Others in the health care field can take lessons from the life histories of these three men. For example, Jake is critical of the notion held by academics and gay activists alike that, “you cannot be fully developed unless you are completely out.” On the contrary, it may be highly adaptive to remain closeted in some environments. As individuals who have developed the skill of adapting to homophobic environments, it may be counterproductive to expect full disclosure of such individuals when they are using health care and social service care. Providers must be respectful of this, while working toward the development of gay positive environments and protocols. This point has been made by other health care researchers (for example see, Kertzner, Meyer, & Dolezal, 2004; Rawls, 2004). In my own experience as a health care provider educator I am reminded often during my own student lectures that this point is not well understood. For example, during presentations on the topic of LGBT history/sensitivity with occupational therapy students, I am often asked by younger cohorts, why is this necessary in this “day and age”; why should one’s sexual orientation be an issue? Younger urban practitioners may mistake their own comfort with issues of sexual orientation as universal and not appreciate the very real fears that many older LGBT have experienced. When I share personal vignettes from older LGBT including excerpts from the lives of John, Jake and Luke, along with historical video footage revealing explicitly homophobic social attitudes, students are at first shocked and somewhat
disbelieving, but do gain a greater appreciation for the historical implications of older LGBTs’
distrust of health care providers. Knowledge of a client’s life history (in context) is clearly
needed in order for providers to develop the trust necessary for an effective therapeutic alliance.

8.7 Summary and Looking Back at Original Expectations

In the Prologue of this thesis I outlined my expectations for this study. I hoped that the
life narratives of John, Luke and Jake and my interpretations of these lives would meet the ideals
of life story telling (as espoused in the writings of Deloria, 2006; Graveline, 1998; Whitehead,
2006) and be powerful in their capacity to teach life lessons in context, to reveal the
interconnections among people and their worlds and to heal individuals through the
transformative effect of illuminating how power structures constrain or enable life choices. I
wanted this work to be of relevance to not only academics, but to gay people of all ages as well
as the health and social care professionals who aim to serve them. While I am confident in the
work’s illustration of the complex interconnections between historical, geographical and social
contexts and the life path ways of three gay men living in rural areas, I am less certain of the
transformative power of the work for a broader audience. In this sense, the work is unfinished
and will require re-telling using different formats accessible for specific audiences.

If my own journey of discovery is to be any indication of the power to transform, then
these life histories will have an impact. I began this work with my own misgivings about the gay
aging process and troubled by the dearth of gay aging well narratives I was fairly pessimistic
about what life could be like for gay men aging in rural areas. I assumed, perhaps under the
influence of years of negative stereotypes, and my own memories of the narrowness of small
town social attitudes, that older gay men would be isolated and disconnected from both the
straight and the gay world. Though the academic literature has begun to challenge the myths
about gay life in rural settings, no compelling picture has been painted that clearly refutes the limiting depictions of aging gay life, particularly in rural areas. To my knowledge, while there is a growing literature on gay aging, and a separate and growing literature on the rural gay experience, there is a complete absence of literature that explores the combination of these two experiences; the life courses of gay men aging in rural environments. But apart from what the literature says or does not say, it was my experience of being immersed in these men’s stories that was truly transformative. I could imagine being happy and old and gay, and yes, perhaps even, living in a rural area. This combination no longer seems incompatible. As well, whereas at the outset of this study, I lamented the invisibility of older gay men, I now see older gay men everywhere. What was blocking my vision?

In Chapter 2, I made reference to the various purposes of life storytelling within a narrative gerontology perspective where life narration is understood in terms of a therapeutic activity (Webster & McCall, 1999; Wong & Watt, 1991), a way to come to understand aging (Kenyon & Randall, 2001) and a means to connect people socially (Birren & Cockran, 2001; Carstensen, 1995; Pohlman, 2003; Tornstam, 2005). Although in their entirety, these do not represent the primary aims of this research project, I believe that all three purposes were realized. Participants made reference to insights about themselves, their relationship with coming out and how they view their own sexuality as they age. They have questioned their own ideas on aging and as such have come to reconsider their hopes for the future; that is, to re-story their future. This project itself came to be seen as an important turning point in their lives. Similarly, the life storytelling process helped the men revisit, revalue and rethink the relationships in their lives. The storytelling and retelling process highlighted for them the important roles that they play in their social worlds. Luke and John have both expressed an interest in connecting with one
another through the Saturday Morning Breakfast Club even though it is some distance from
where John lives. Who knows where this will lead?

In Chapter 7, I comment on the possible *intersubjectivities* at play during the participants’
narrative interviews and the narrative co-construction process. No doubt my location as a
relatively younger gay man from urban Toronto, (although with some prairie credentials)
influenced how the participants told their story. Was their initial emphasis on sexual activity in
their storytelling a response to creating an image of youthfulness or to defy asexual stereotypes
of aging? As a gay man, is that what they thought I might be most interested in? Did the big-city
versus small town dynamic play a role in painting a rather positive picture of life as a gay man
aging in small town Alberta? In portraying men who have successfully overcome the hostilities
of a homophobic world while downplaying personal struggles, how much of this *hero’s journey*
represents, consciously or not, their generative message to me and to other younger readers that
it is possible for gay men to age well? And finally, to what extent did our shared religious
upbringings and struggles; that is, the metanarratives within which we all live, contribute to
conveying a good and moral life according to these dominant storylines? Clearly many such
factors are at play in the narrative co-construction process, but ideally, the truths revealed in the
narratives, however highly influenced by interpersonal dynamics, remain valuable.

While much can be learned from these narratives about aging LGBTs, the queer theorists’
call to go beyond a *theory about queers* and to *queer theory* itself has been a thread running
through this thesis. There may be more to the story(ies) of aging than revealed by dominant
heterosexual life pathways. The life course pathways revealed through the three narratives
diverge significantly from the taken for granted story lines of heteronormative life course
narratives and suggest age-related tasks and occupational pursuits that may need to be further
considered in the lives of all people as they age. The typical trajectories of school, marriage, work, retirement and grandparenting do not consider the complex identity work required of individuals and groups who do not share dominant identity scripts. The notion of cleaning up highlights what may be for many people an unconscious process of re-storying or a conscious project to leave a legacy that meets the normative expectations of a particular audience. Further, each of the men experienced a life course with atypical transitions and trajectories that challenge taken for granted life course norms including for example, several and temporary retirements, and sexual explorations and identity development later in life. As well, the complex and wide ranging social networks with lovers, former lovers, friends and family members that expand notions of social support and question the privileging of conjugal and nuclear family unions. In addition to the various cohort effects experienced by men of their generation, these men were to experience and integrate into their identities several discursive shifts in how homosexuality and gay culture were conceptualized and structured, from the pre-war silence to the post-war homonormativities of don’t ask, don’t tell or don’t flaunt it through to the post-stonewall, out and proud years to more recent postmodernist questioning of the very existence of a gay identity. The timing of these events no doubt impacted on their sexual identity development and growing sense of self and have shaped their experience of the aging process. Much can be gleaned then, from these narratives, that speaks to the heteronormative biases within aging and life course research and that has broader implications for a much broader population.

This thesis serves as a jumping-off place for several research topics that require further examination. As the narratives in this study suggest a connection between the manner in which identity threats are managed early in the life course may have an impact on how identity threats are managed in old age, research is needed that further examines the relationships between other stigmatized or marginalized identities, aging and the life course. Several ideas and concepts
introduced in this thesis also warrant a closer look. The *cleaning up* process as a task for old age needs to be better understood with respect to its impact on mental health and well-being later in life. Health and social service providers may need to better consider how to be sensitive to, and enabling of, such a process. The social value and constraints placed on the role of gay *uncling* as well as the complexities associated with the undervalued role of gay men as caregivers to friends and family is worth further exploration. This is particularly important given increasing societal concerns about growing threats to social capital resources. Further development and refinement of another concept, *occupational aging*, that I introduce in this thesis is needed. *Occupational aging*, a transaction of personal, sociocultural and environmental factors refers to the meanings associated with changing patterns of occupations as one ages that serves to both mask and express aging identities. Related to the concept of *occupational aging* is the question about the extent to which gendered occupational repertoires are enabling or disabling in the aging process.

In closing, the stories of aging of these three men are compelling. The life history process has allowed me to, in a sense, experience another human being, in a manner that conventional qualitative or quantitative research would not have done. While not providing a road map, the lives of John, Luke and Jake present possibilities for engaged, meaningful, generative and connected lives. I do hope that others may be similarly engaged by the life histories of these men and draw hope from their example while appreciating their very real struggles, accommodations and adaptations; all necessary to live and age well in places where, at times, and in some situations, one must remain on guard and wary.
Photo 8.1. Howling Coyote

Date Unknown

“I would imitate their howling sounds and if you listen carefully, you think they’re the same, but they’re all different. I thought I was talking to them. Like wolves, people think they’re all vicious, but they’re really quite family oriented.”

John Liptak [2010, July]
References


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Appendix A
Interview Themes

- Key Life Events and Turning Points
  - Various time lines
    - Work, leisure, education, occupational histories
    - Key celebrations – Family
    - If appropriate, any institutional links i.e. health care, residential care

- Memories and meanings of community and community participation
  - how is community understood/what is the meaning/experience of community and how has this changed over time. Gay/non-gay community experience.
  - involvement; civic, neighbourhood, religious
  - current communities or related social groupings

- Social structures and their influence- religious, educational, work, government policies, legal, work environments, health and social care systems

- Linked lives-memories and meanings of friendships, family and family participation – experience and meaning of; changes to how family is understood

- Coming-out process (How story shared, when, to whom, influences and impacts)

- Sexual identity, sexuality and gender roles– changing meanings, influential experiences, reflections on impact of sexual identity on life course decisions, occupational choices

- Experiences of discrimination such as, ageism, heterosexism, racism, sexism: Choices made, not made

- Illness/disability/health— perceived influences on above life events, sexual identity and associated social participation on illness/disability/health
Appendix B
Information Sheet

Information Letter

Investigator: Barry Trentham
Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Ardra Cole
Address: Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy
University of Toronto
500 University Ave. – room 160
Toronto, Ontario M5G 1V7

Project Title: Another way of Aging: Life Histories of Older Gay Men

You are invited to consider taking part in a research study on the life histories of older gay men. I am asking you to consider this because you represent the kind of person that I hope to include in my study. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to further discuss taking part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn about the social, personal and cultural influences on the aging process of gay men who live in rural environments as well as to better understand the role that their sexual orientation plays in the aging process. More specifically, I am interested in how your participation in community and family roles has changed over your life and as you have aged.

What I will ask you to do: If you agree to be in this study, I will conduct a series of in-depth interviews with you at a time and place convenient to you. The interviews will include questions about your community and family participation over time. I will also ask you about the role that your sexual identity has played in your life and how you have chosen to share your identity as a gay man and whether or not this has changed over time. The interviews will each last approximately 1-2 hours. The number of interviews will vary on how much you choose to share and could amount to as many as 5-7 interviews over a period of six months. With your permission, I would also like to tape-record the interviews as well as review any photos, documents or artifacts that you feel would contribute to our understanding of your life story. At some point I may ask you to identify others in your life who may be able to contribute to our understanding of your life story. I may also ask to take photos of you and/or places or objects of importance to you.

Risks and benefits: Some people may find that reflecting on their life may raise some uncomfortable memories. Just as likely, many people find it rewarding to revisit aspects of their life and to share these with others. You will not receive any financial compensation for your participation, but may benefit from knowing that your life story will add to a better understanding of the aging process of aging gay men as well as other minorities.

Confidentiality will be maintained if you so choose. Research records and materials will be kept in a locked file. I will be the only one with access to these files, though my research supervisors may have the chance to review excerpts from our interviews. If you provide me with
consent to tape-record the interview, I will destroy the tapes and typed transcripts no more than three years after completion of the study. Should you so choose, your identity will not be made known in any reports or publications that result from this study. There may be the opportunity to have your story made available to a broader public audience including your family and friends. However, you will have complete control over how much you make public. You will also have control over the level of confidentiality maintained in any research reports that are published as a result of this study. If desired, pseudonyms and fictional name places will be used to maintain your confidentiality in all published reports. If you decide that you would like your identity to be revealed in any published or publicly displayed work at that time you will be required to sign the necessary forms allowing disclosure [these forms are specific to the organization or journal to which the publication would be submitted].

**If you have questions:** Please let me know if you have any questions about your involvement in this study or are interested in further discussing your potential role in this study.

My contact information is: Email: b.trentham@utoronto.ca; Phone: 416 722-3554.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, can contact the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto at: Email: ethics.review@utoronto.ca; Phone: 416-946-3273.

My supervisor, Dr. Ardra Cole, can also be contacted at: Email: acole@oise.utoronto.ca; Phone: (416) 978-0759

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.
Appendix C
Consent Form

Statement of Consent for Study Participation

I have read the attached information letter regarding Barry Trentham’s study on the life histories of older gay men. The study has been explained to me and I have received answers to all questions I have asked. I know I may ask more questions at any time in the future about the study. I am aware that I may withdraw from this study at any time without providing a reason and am able to choose to not have certain or all my life history used for the purposes of this study.

I consent to:

(check all that apply)

☐ take part in this study.

☐ have my interviews audiotaped.

☐ have selected photos, documents or archival material be used to convey my life story to the researcher and future audiences of my life story.

Your Name_________________________

Your Signature ____________________ Date _____________________

Witness Signature __________________ Date______________________

Witness Name (printed) _________________________________________
Appendix D
Letter of Request to Participants

Another way of Aging: Life Histories of Older Gay Men
Letter of Request to Participate

Date:

Dear Sir,

I am a former resident of Drumheller, Alberta, and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy at the University of Toronto. Currently I am also completing my doctoral studies in Adult Education and Community Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. My doctoral research is concerned with the lessons that can be learned from the life histories of older gay men.

The purpose of this letter is to invite you to consider participating in my research. If you are interested in discussing the possibility of your involvement in this study, I have attached more details of the project for your review. Basically, your involvement in this research project would consist of a series of face-to-face interviews to document your life history as a gay man who chose to remain living in a rural setting. I would like to meet with you briefly to explain the purpose of the project and your potential role in it. This initial meeting shouldn’t take more than an hour of your time. Should we both agree to work together on creating your life history, I would like to meet with you approximately five to seven times over the next six months at times and places that are convenient for you. You will have complete authority over what is written and published about your life. The information you provide will remain confidential subject to your release. You may at any time during the process withdraw from the study.

If you are interested in further discussing your possible participation in this project or have further questions about the project, please contact me at (416 722-3554), or email me at b.trentham@utoronto.ca.

I appreciate you taking the time to consider this request and look forward to meeting you in person.

Regards,

Barry Trentham

PhD Candidate
Department of Adult Education and Community Development
OISE/University of Toronto
Appendix E
Telephone Script

Hello:

My name is Barry Trentham and I am a former resident of Drumheller and currently a PhD student at the University of Toronto. I am currently conducting research on the life histories of older gay men who live in rural areas. I was given your name by …..

The study will involve interviews about the participant’s life story as a gay man living in a rural environment. The interviews will take place over a period of several months starting in August and would each last between one and two hours.

If you are at all interested in discussing your possible participation in this study, I will send you an information letter which outlines all the details of the study along with my contact information. This letter will help you decide whether or not you want to further talk about participating in this study.

You are under no obligation to agree to participate in this study now. By giving me permission to send you this information, you are not agreeing to participate in the study, but only to discuss the possibility of doing so. Once you receive the information, I will ask you to call me within one week of receiving it to inform me of your decision to further discuss your possible participation in the study. I will also follow-up with you after one week if I have not heard from you.

Please let me know by email or phone if you are interested in receiving more information on this study and if you have any questions.

My email is b.trentham@utoronto.ca

My phone number is…..

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you.
Appendix F
Demographics Form

Demographics Form

Name: 

Mailing Address: 

Phone number: 

Date of Birth (month/day/year): 

Family Make-up:

Family of Origin: 

Current Family: 

Your Self-Identified Ethnicity/Culture/Race: 

Country of Origin: 