COMING OUT WITH STORIES: MACROCONTEXTUAL EFFECTS ON THE COMING OUT STORIES OF YOUNG GAY MEN

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Many theories of self-construction in memory narratives point to the potential for making sense of major identity changes. Across multiple narrative tellings, individual’s stories are shaped by the selective encouragement and suppression of story elements by listeners. While previous work has concentrated on the effect of listeners, other important contextual factors include shared beliefs and understanding about how identity changes occur. Repeated sharing may result in stories that increasingly reflect those shared beliefs about identity, evidenced in the stories told by individual group members. Thus, the longer an individual has identified as part of a particular group, the more his or her narrative will reflect the shared beliefs of this group. The present study examines whether the coming out stories of gay men (aged 18-28) increasingly reflect shared beliefs about the coming out process as length of time since coming out increases. Results (N=21) suggest that time since coming out positively predicts the degree to which individuals’ stories reflect group beliefs. As stories increasingly reflected shared beliefs, the degree to which individuals were integrated into the gay and lesbian community increased. Results are discussed in terms of theories of storytelling and identity development, as well as implications for social support.