Introduction

As the climate in the United States grows more accepting of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people, contemporary sexual minority youth are coming out at progressively younger ages (Russell & Fish, 2016). At the same time, sexual minorities continue to report higher rates of mental health problems, substance use, and victimization compared to heterosexual peers (CDC, 2018). Scholars have argued that sexual identity development processes coincide with a vulnerable period of adolescence for many sexual minorities, which likely contributes to the persistence of health disparities in this population (D'Augelli, 1994). Yet, to date, little is known about the timing and processes that characterize sexual identity development milestones— including the age of first awareness of same-sex attraction, first self-identification, first same-sex behavior, and first disclosure—for contemporary sexual minorities. Prior research utilizing convenience samples has demonstrated that sexual identity development is not a monolithic process but rather may differ by sex, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and generational cohort (e.g., Martos Nezhad, & Meyer, 2015). To date, however, there is a dearth of population-level research about the formation of sexual minority identity. Specifically, despite notable changes in social visibility, acceptance, and legal recognition and rights for sexual minorities over the last 50 years, little is known about how sociohistorical changes shape identity development formation across generations. Understanding the timing and patterns of sexual identity development processes, as well as how they vary across generations of LGB people, could provide foundational information for shedding light on the mechanisms that drive risk and protective factors for health and well-being.

The chronological age, time between (pacing), and sequence of same-sex attraction, self-identification, sexual behavior, and disclosure may be changing across generations. Using a community sample of gay men, Drasin (2008) found that awareness of attraction and same-sex sexual behavior was reported 1 year earlier in age for every 8-25 calendar years, while disclosure moved more rapidly, occurring 1 year earlier in age for every passage of 2-5 calendar years. In another community sample of LGB people aged 18-74, recent cohorts were more likely to report milestones at younger ages, and were more likely to self-identify prior to same-sex sexual behavior than were older cohorts (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Additionally, younger cohorts report less time between milestones, including same-sex attraction and same-sex relationships, relative to older cohorts (Martos et al., 2015). Although this research suggests that recent generations report relatively earlier milestones that progress more rapidly, these studies rely on convenience samples of sexual minority people, potentially introducing selection effects.

To address the gaps in prior research, the present study utilized the first nationally representative sample of sexual minority US adults to test differences in the timing of sexual identity development milestones across three generations of LGB people. Consistent with prior research (Martos et al., 2015), we hypothesized that: 1) older generations would report milestones at relatively later ages than would younger generations; 2) older generations would report more time between milestones than would younger generations; and 3) older generations would report same-sex sexual behavior prior to disclosing sexual identity, whereas younger generations would report disclosure prior to same-sex sexual behavior.

Method

Our sample included 1,331 LGB adults aged 18-59 from the Generations study, the first nationally representative survey of the health and lives of sexual minority people in the United States. Recruitment of three generational cohorts occurred between 2016-2017. At the time of

recruitment, the youngest cohort (n=570, 42%) was 18-25, the middle cohort (n=317, 24%) was 34-41, and the oldest cohort (n=444, 33%) was 52-59. The sample was restricted to those who provided a response to at least one milestone question and who reported a non-heterosexual sexual identity (analytic n= 1,313). **Sexual identity milestones** were assessed with 5 items that measured the age at which participants first: 1) were attracted to someone of the same sex; 2) realized they were a sexual minority; 3) had sex with a same-sex partner; 4) came out to a straight friend; 5) came out to a family member. Participants responded by either providing an age for each milestone, or replying "don't know" or "never". We coded milestones two ways. First, dichotomous variables were created to determine whether individuals ever reported the milestone. Second, a continuous variable was created to record age in years for participants who reported each milestone. **Sexual identity milestone pacing** measured the time between 5 milestones theorized to follow a temporal order (Troiden, 1989): the time between age of first attraction and first self-identification, the time between first self-identifying and first same-sex sexual behavior, the time between first same-sex sexual behavior and disclosing sexuality to a straight friend, the time between first same-sex sexual behavior and disclosing sexuality to a family member, and the time between disclosing to a straight friend and disclosing to a family member. Covariates include **sex at birth**, **sexual identity**, and **race/ethnicity**.

Analytical Approach

Data were analyzed using Stata 14 (StataCorp, 2015). We used the "svy" estimation command to account for sampling design and weights. First, Rao-Scott chi-square test of independence analyses were performed to test generational differences in the percentage of participants who had ever reported each milestone. Next, among those who reported an age score for milestones, ANCOVA analyses were performed to test age differences and time between milestones for each milestone by generational cohort. Bonferroni post-estimation and contrast procedures were used to test mean differences between groups.

Results

Results from chi-square tests show that milestones varied significantly across generation. For example, 76% of the youngest cohort, 96% of the middle cohort, and 99% of the oldest cohort reported ever engaging in same-sex activity; 80% of the youngest cohort reported disclosing their LGB identity to a family member compared to 90% of middle and older cohorts.

ANCOVA results suggested significant generational differences in the mean age of all milestones (see Figure 1). Participants in the youngest generation reported significantly earlier ages of same-sex attraction than the oldest generation. Youngest, middle, and oldest generation participants all differed in the age at which they first self-identified as LGB. The youngest generation reported significantly earlier ages of first same-sex behavior than either the middle or oldest generation. All generations significantly differed in the ages at which they first disclosed to a straight friend and family member.

Results from ANCOVA also showed significant generational differences in the time between milestones (Table 1). All generations differed in the time from same-sex attraction to self-identification, with the youngest generation reporting the shortest time between milestones. The oldest cohort spent significantly less time between self-identification and same-sex sexual activity than did the youngest cohort. All groups differed in the time spent from first same-sex sexual behavior to disclosing to a straight friend or family member. For the youngest generation, disclosure to a straight friend occurred, on average, prior to same-sex sexual experiences. The

youngest generation had a smaller gap between disclosing to a straight friend and disclosing to family, relative to middle and older generations.

Finally, there were generational differences in the sequencing of sexual identity milestones. The oldest generation reported self-identification concurrently with sexual experiences. In the middle generation, participants first self-identified, then engaged in same-sex activity, and then disclosed. In the youngest generation, respondents self-identified first, then engaged in same-sex activity and disclosed their sexual identities concurrently.

Discussion

This study contributes to a growing body of literature demonstrating that sociohistorical changes play a role in the unfolding of sexual identity. Our results indicate that there are important generational differences in whether, when, how quickly, and in what order sexual minority people come to understand their sexual identities. Consistent with our hypotheses, the youngest generation experienced all milestones earlier than older generations, and advanced through milestones at a faster pace than the middle and oldest generations. These findings affirm prior research (Grov et al., 2006; Martos et al., 2015; Parks & Hughes, 2007) with contemporary, representative cohorts of LGB people.

Relatively fewer participants from the youngest cohort reported same-sex sexual behavior and disclosure to family. On one hand, those in the youngest cohort simply have had fewer years within which to experience sexual behavior or disclosure. Certainly over the following years more of the youngest cohort participants will disclose their sexual identities to others. Yet recent studies show that millennial and iGen cohorts report less sexual activity than prior cohorts (Twenge et al., 2017). Perhaps the same trends in sexual behavior are true for LGB populations; more research is needed to explore this hypothesis.

With regard to generational differences in the sequencing of milestones, our study suggests that the oldest generation self-identified and engaged in same-sex sex concurrently, then disclosed; the middle generation self-identified, then engaged in same-sex sex, then disclosed; and the youngest generation first self-identified, then engaged in same-sex sexual behavior and disclosure concurrently. These results align with prior research suggesting that more recent cohorts are more likely to report "identity-first" sequences (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Yet, our study extends these findings by mapping a sociohistorical shift from "sex-centered" identity formation processes in which sexual behavior may function to help resolve what Cass terms "identity confusion" (Cass, 1979) to identity-centered sequences where sexual behavior occurs after self-labeling, and serves as an enactment of identity commitment. The sociohistorical trend towards self-identification preceding sex and disclosure speaks to the growing acceptance of sexual minority identity, which may mean that contemporary cohorts are less likely to feel that they need to affirm their sexual identity through sexual experience.

Our study supports a growing body of literature demonstrating the many pathways through which sexual minorities form sexual identities, and the interpersonal and social contexts that inform them. Future research should examine the links between the timing of identity formation processes and health outcomes to determine whether and for whom such associations matter. These findings will, in turn, inform the extent to which population science should incorporate measures of milestones into studies related to populations and health.

Figure 1. Generational differences in age and sequence of sexual identity milestones.
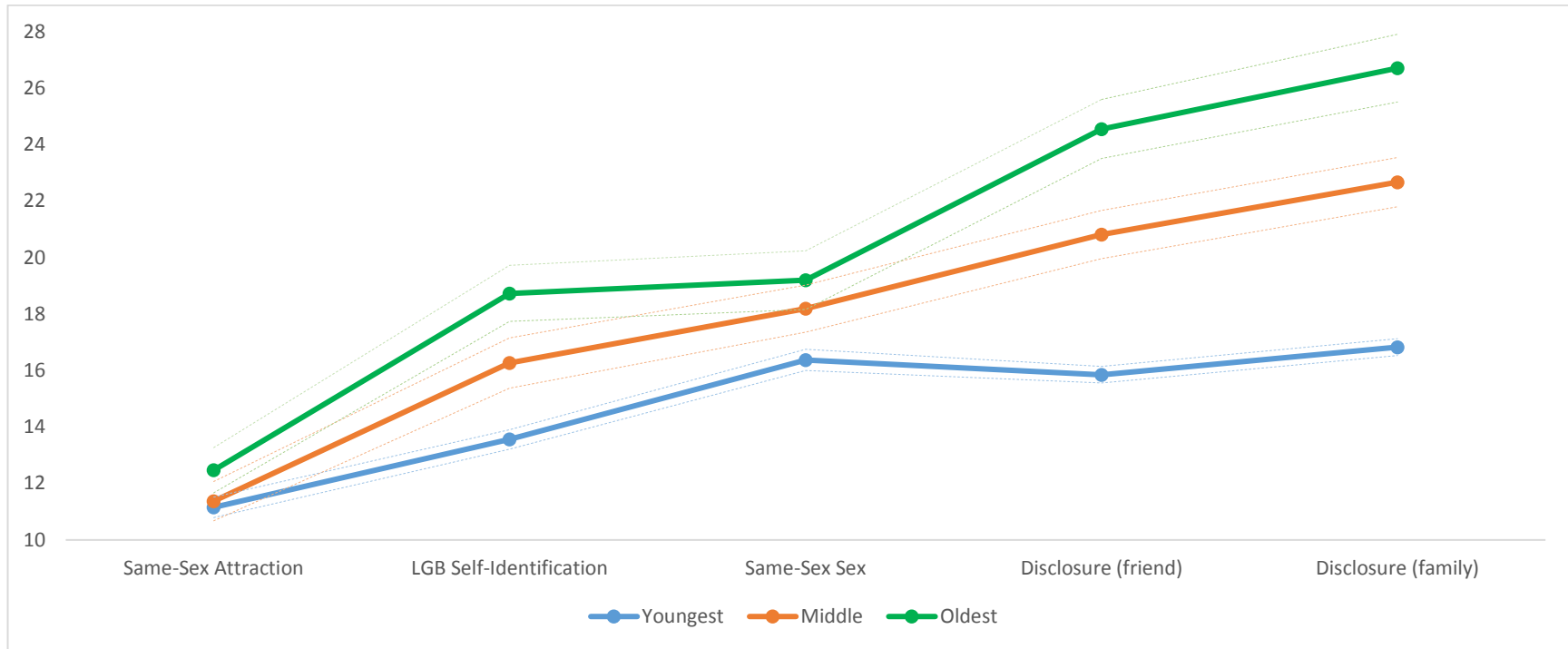
Note. Solid lines indicate mean age by cohort. Dashed lines indicate 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1. ANCOVA post-hoc pairwise comparison of generational differences in the time between sexual identity development milestones.

	Attraction to LGB Self-Identification		Self-Identification to Sex		Sex to Disclosure (friend)		Sex to Disclosure (family)		Disclosure (friend) to disclosure (family)	
	M	95% CI	*M*	95% CI	*M*	95% CI	*M*	95% CI	*M*	95% CI
Youngest	2.36[ab]	(2.01, 2.71)	3.13[a]	(2.73, 3.53)	-0.76[ab]	(-1.13, -0.39)	0.41[ab]	(0.02, 0.80)	1.24[ab]	(1.04, 1.44)
Middle	4.75[ac]	(3.99, 5.51)	1.98	(1.13, 2.83)	2.41[ac]	(1.54, 3.28)	4.37[ac]	(3.37, 5.36)	2.12[a]	(1.56, 2.68)
Oldest	6.18[bc]	(5.37, 6.99)	0.48[a]	(-0.58, 1.54)	5.48[bc]	(4.64, 6.32)	7.94[bc]	(6.83, 9.05)	2.37[b]	(1.71, 3.02)

Note. Superscripts indicate significance at the p<.05 level. Bonferroni post-hoc comparisons were used to minimize type 1 error.