

“You gotta give them hope”: A structural psychobiography of Harvey Milk (1930–1978)

Nic M. Weststrate¹  | Kate C. McLean²

¹Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

²Department of Psychology, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington, USA

Correspondence

Nic M. Weststrate, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois Chicago, 1040 W. Harrison St. (MC 147), Chicago, IL 60607, USA.
Email: nicwest@uic.edu

Abstract

Objective: In this psychobiographical study, we examined the life and times of social change agent Harvey Milk, one of the first openly gay public officials in the United States. Milk is remembered as a gay hero who fought for the rights of marginalized people, often by invoking the importance of hope. Milk was assassinated less than 1 year after his election.

Method: We adopt a structural psychobiographical approach, foregrounding social, cultural, political, and historical forces that intersect with personal factors to explain Milk's ascension to the status of social change agent.

Results: This psychobiography tells the story of a man not destined to become a social change agent but who became one anyway because of shifting tides in the political climate of San Francisco in the 1970s, because of a series of catalytic events that started him down this path, because of a history of persecution as a gay Jew, and because of his enduring need for a stage upon which he could express his generative concern.

Conclusions: Our analysis raises questions about the story that “belongs” to the agent of social change, and the story that “belongs” to the rest of us, as we remember him.

KEYWORDS

collective memory, cultural-historical analysis, Harvey Milk, LGBTQ+, narrative, psychobiography, social change, structural analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

The only thing [young gay people] have to look forward to is hope. And you have to give them hope. Hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great. Hope that all will be alright. Without hope, not only gays, but the blacks, the seniors, the handicapped, the us-es, the us-es will give up.

These are the words of Harvey Bernard Milk, spoken on the steps of San Francisco City Hall in 1978, in what is known as “The Hope Speech.” Milk was the first openly gay person elected to public office in California, and one of the first in the United States (US). He propelled forward the movement for gay civil rights, and the rights of other marginalized groups, in his short time in public service. But less than 1 year into office, he was assassinated and, in that moment, immortalized as a martyr for his commitment to social change.

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In this structural psychobiography, our task was to examine the life and times of Harvey Milk so that we may understand how he became an agent of social change. The enduring legacy of Milk's life appears at first glance to be a relatively neat and tidy redemption story of a gay Jewish kid who found his self and his purpose through his generative political activism, which brought hope *and* real change to a generation and beyond. However, in the structural approach, when taking up the question of *how Milk became a social change agent*, it becomes clear that the social, cultural, and political conditions of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in San Francisco, were necessary for Milk to emerge.

And the Milk that we remember is clearly a major historical figure, ensconced in history as a prominent social change agent. Milk was listed in the "Heroes and Icons" section of Time magazine's 1999 list of 100 most influential people of the 20th century—the only openly gay person on the list. He is the subject of two biographies (Faderman, 2018; Shilts, 1982), an award-winning documentary film (Epstein, 1984), an award-winning motion picture (Van Sant, 2008), the recipient of a posthumous Medal of Freedom in 2009, he is represented on a US postage stamp, had a combat logistics ship and, recently, a terminal at the San Francisco airport named after him, and is remembered and celebrated every May 22 in California on *Harvey Milk Day*. He has also been a source of inspiration for activists for the past 40 years.

2 | THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HARVEY MILK: A STRUCTURAL APPROACH

There are times, rare times, when the forces of social change collide with a series of dramatic events to produce moments which are later called historic ... The story of Harvey Milk is, to a large extent, the story of the gay movement in San Francisco, and, ultimately, the nation.

(Shilts, 1982, p. xiii)

The argument we advance in this paper is that Milk's role in the gay civil rights movement, and his accomplishments, can only be understood in the context of both the historical moment in which he worked and in relation to the structural changes that advanced his role in the cause. A crucial part of the structural approach is to acknowledge the role that larger social structures and cultural context play in shaping human development and functioning (e.g., McLean & Syed, 2016). Much of psychological research has focused on persons to the neglect of context, resulting in an overly individualistic perspective on human development and

functioning, celebrating the agency of the person rather than understanding the person as deeply embedded within cultural contexts and structural systems that can both support development and functioning, as well as severely restrict it. Taking a structural approach *requires* a serious consideration of social, cultural, political, historical, and other systemic forces. According to Syed and McLean (2021):

The implications of this reconfiguration are that structural factors must not only be considered when examining individual psychological phenomena, but that human psychological phenomena are fully intertwined with the structures, which can be "seen" even at the individual level. In other words, structural systems that uphold White supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and Christianity, to name a few, are not just "contexts" in which individuals develop, but rather are part of the fabric of their everyday lives. (p. 2)

Given that a structural approach necessitates a consideration of power, in the case of Milk, the fact that he was male and white must be considered as a part of the explanation for his success, along with other "tangible" elements of context that precluded and facilitated his rise. Thus, we paid close attention to legal and policy issues at the state and city level, national movements toward policy change that were ongoing, as well as the larger cultural and historical contexts in which Milk was living. Our argument is that Milk's place in history is as much about the events of history and the structure of society at the time he was living, as it is about his personality. Psychologists have long focused almost exclusively on the individual and new approaches are needed. In a reimagining of Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological systems model, recent advances in developmental and counseling psychology have proposed that to truly understand individual identity development, culture and history must be centered (Fish & Syed, 2018; Rogers, Niwa, et al., 2021). That is, we can no longer put the individual at the center of our thinking to understand his development and his role. To understand the individual's development and role, we must *first* understand when and where he was developing.

Thus, in the current endeavor, we aim to move beyond celebrating Milk as an agent of his own making, who led the charge for gay civil rights, at the head of the parade literally and figuratively. Instead, we see Milk as a product of his time and context, a person who could not have made such an impact without the historical and cultural movements and structural changes that made the breadth of his influence possible. In the effort to move the discipline of psychology in the direction of better appreciating history, culture, and structure, we

emphasize the structural part of this approach in our analysis, and we embrace a *transactional* approach to understanding self and society, focusing on their mutual influence (Erikson, 1968; Rogers, 2018). We examine how the structures in which Milk was working were both internalized and resisted in his words, actions, and identity, and how his words, actions, and identity, in turn, began to change those structures.

In short, we address the question of how Milk became a social change agent in a psychobiographical assessment that centers the historical and cultural contexts in which he lived and examine how those contexts interacted with his life story and identity development. Consistent with our commitment to honoring context, in this psychobiography, we often use the terms lesbian and gay, and sometimes homosexuality, to reflect the historical time on which we are focused, rather than using the more inclusive acronym LGBTQ+, which better reflects the diversity among sexual and gender identities as we understand them today.

3 | METHOD

We pre-registered our psychobiographical study on the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/npwxv/>) according to the template offered by Haven and Van Grootel (2019) for qualitative research. We included information about our research questions, study design, data collection, and analytical plan.

3.1 | Materials

Our analysis incorporated primary and secondary materials, including speeches, transcripts, published works, and letters from Milk (Black & Morris, 2013; Emery, 2017), two biographies (Faderman, 2018; Shilts, 1982), one memoir (Jones, 2016), scholarly publications (e.g., Donahue, 2014; Eyerman, 2012), a TV series (*When We Rise*; Van Sant et al., 2017), a film (*Milk*; Van Sant, 2008), and two documentaries (Epstein, 1984; Stein, 1998). This is an exhaustive list of the materials we used (du Plessis, 2017). In addition to these materials, to construct a larger understanding of Harvey Milk's evolving context, we also read a scholarly book about gay organizing in San Francisco from 1950 to 1994 (Armstrong, 2002).

3.2 | Procedure

3.2.1 | Reflexivity and positionality letters

Prior to our analysis, we located ourselves in relation to both the psychobiographical method and the subject of our

psychobiography (both Harvey Milk and San Francisco), by writing a letter to each other that was guided by the following prompts: Why do we want to do a psychobiography? What motivated us to choose Milk? What is our relationship to his life? What are our current feelings about Milk? What assumptions and beliefs do we have about Milk, his life, or his activism? What are our potential biases? Within the context of power and privilege and sociohistorical time, what aspects of our identities are important to this analysis? After reading each other's letters, we met to discuss the letters and respond with an assessment of strengths and concerns.

This was a lengthy and intimate reflexivity process. The most relevant themes and concerns for NMW surrounded his closeness to the LGBTQ+ community. As a gay man and researcher activist, he worried about overidentifying with Milk and assuming a kinship that would affect the objectivity of his analysis. He also worried about overvalorizing Milk because, for him, Milk had long been a cherished beacon of gay hope and inspiration. For NMW, this project was much more than an academic paper. This was a tribute to a legend, who he saw as directly connected to the privileges that he enjoys today. This was a heavy project, animated by a strong sense of duty to the LGBTQ+ community, past, and present.

KCM brought an intergenerational perspective, as she was born and raised in San Francisco, and both her parents attended the vigil on the night of Milk's assassination, a tattered flyer announcing the vigil hung in her father's room throughout her childhood and is now displayed in her home. Milk's life and legacy were a regular part of her family stories and an inspiration for the political activism socialized within her family. Her intimacy with the city of San Francisco, its history and politics, as well as her deep, personal connection to the LGBTQ+ community, although she identifies as straight, were central to her motivation for this project.

We also reflected on our varying positions of privilege, including gender, race/ethnicity, and sexuality, and how those did and did not overlap with Milk. We note that we did not discuss religion, as we were not yet aware of the role that religion played in Milk's life when we began the analysis. Finally, we also note that although we are at different stages in the academic hierarchy, we have a long history of collaboration and friendship that we think allows each of our voices to be heard.

Reflecting on our analysis, we were surprised by how emotional this process was for each of us in similar and different ways, at times overcome with either intense joy or sadness or both, and an unfathomably deep gratitude for this opportunity to step into Harvey's world. Neither of us expected to be so transformed through this liberating and fulfilling journey.

3.2.2 | Analytical strategy

Because this was a new method for us, we read a variety of methodological chapters, articles, and one book to develop our skills (Alexander, 1988, 1990; du Plessis, 2017; Mayer & Kovary, 2019; Schultz, 2005a; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017; Singer, 2017). Our analysis closely followed the stepwise approach outlined by du Plessis (2017).

We segmented our analysis into three phases. First, we began with constructing an understanding of the historical context of Milk's life as he rose to power in San Francisco, as well as the years following his assassination. Second, we conducted an in-depth reading of Milk's biography, from birth to death. Third, we analyzed archival materials involving Milk's own words—his speeches, interviews, and recordings—during his period of social activism. The sequencing of this strategy allowed us to use knowledge gleaned about Milk's historical and biographical context to interpret his actions and words.

Our analysis was informed by contemporary refinements of Erikson's (1968) psychosocial theory, which emphasized identity construction and generative concern as core developmental issues in young and middle adulthood, respectively, and Bronfenbrenner's (1974) ecological theory which further emphasized the importance of context for human development. In terms of Erikson, we adopted Rogers' (2018) recent emphasis on a transactional approach to the study of self and society, in which she foregrounds Erikson's emphasis on psycho-social development. In terms of Bronfenbrenner, we employed Rogers, Niwa, et al.'s (2021) and Fish and Syed's (2018) re-working of the ecological theory which centers culture and history in understanding individual development. Thus, we began our analysis with materials focused on culture and history, and we located our analysis of the individual within that context.

In each phase, we read or watched the psychobiographical materials independently, took extensive notes, and came together for discussion and collaborative analysis. In addition to our overarching research questions, prior to engaging with each set of materials, we established a list of customized questions that would guide our analysis for those specific materials. Prior to each stage of the analysis, we uploaded our questions to our OSF page. In addition to asking new questions of each set of materials, informed by our ongoing analysis, we also carried forward our previous questions, remaining flexible and open to updating our findings as we encountered new information (Anderson & Dunlop, 2019).

Our approach to coding was informed by Alexander's (1988, 1990) principal identifiers of salience and, in particular, frequency, emphasis, uniqueness, and omission (see also Schultz, 2005b). Given our commitment

to a structural approach, we paid close attention to themes centering historical and contextual negotiations, and information about when structural and historical conditions enabled and disabled Milk's identity development process.

4 | RESULTS

We present our analysis by chronologically detailing the contours of Milk's life, always in the context of history and culture. That is, we focus on the developmental ecologies and broader structural context as they interact with Milk's psychological characteristics and experiences. As we will elaborate, Milk was enamored with theater, and spent much of his life searching for the right stage. Thus, in honor of his passion, we present Milk's life in four acts. Our analysis showcases how one's personal story is intricately and intimately tied to the context in which it develops, harnessing the person and the moment to catalyze social change.

4.1 | Act one: "Othered" from early on

In the early part of the 20th century, the Mausche family settled on Long Island, beginning with Harvey's grandfather, an immigrant from Lithuania. Harvey's grandfather decided to anglicize his name (Mausche became Milk), sent for his wife and children in Lithuania, and became the owner of a successful department store. One of those children, Hieke (who would be called Bill in America) was Harvey's father. Bill was 6 years old at the time of migration, had no formal education beyond 6th grade, was a rebellious teenager, and then a relatively frustrated and volatile man, who worked in his father's store for his adult life. Harvey was born to Bill and Minnie Milk in Woodmere, NY on May 22, 1930. Harvey was not particularly close to his father, who never seemed to approve of him. In his adult years, Harvey would continue to recreate the archetypal father-son relationship in his intimate life, seeking to make up what he was deprived of (Faderman, 2018). Surprisingly, even until his death in 1976, Bill never knew that Harvey was gay, an irony not lost, as one of the driving messages of Milk's political life was the call for closeted gay people to "come out," to change people's hearts and minds, to change policies, and to give youth hope.

Milk's mother, Minnie, on the other hand, was a force, deeply committed to generative actions in the spirit of her Jewish faith and *tikkun olam*, or the repair of the world. As Faderman (2018) puts it, "her passion for social justice would be her eventual legacy to Harvey" (p. 14). In November 1962, Minnie quite literally died preparing a

turkey for a mission on the lower east side of New York. The combination of a father who gave him little affection or mentoring, and a mother who poured her energy into generative social action, may have been part of Harvey's motivation to be a generative force for the next generation—providing what he had not experienced from his father but had seen modeled so powerfully by his mother.

The historical and cultural context of Harvey's childhood was centered on the family's deep involvement in the growing Jewish community on Long Island. His grandfather was a leader in the community, helping to establish a country club where Jews could congregate free of anti-Semitism, as well as a local synagogue, where Harvey would later have his bar mitzvah (Faderman, 2018). Yet, this was juxtaposed with growing anti-Semitism and Klan activity in the 1920s and 1930s (Faderman, 2018). A nearby camp was established by a Nazi organization that hosted weekend events to gin up anti-Semitic fever, with participants in Nazi uniforms and flying Nazi flags. A teacher was not hired in the local school because she was Jewish, something Harvey's parents protested with the board. His early adolescence was marked by radio reports from Europe, including the news of the fall of the Warsaw ghetto in the days before his bar mitzvah, a self-defining memory for Harvey (Faderman, 2018). Although he did not continue to practice Judaism, he very much defined himself as a "Jew." According to Faderman (2018), "The *intersections* of his identities as a Jew and a gay reinforced his awareness of the injustices suffered by all who were other" (p. 18, emphasis added). Milk would later invoke the Holocaust in his speeches as a warning to others about what could happen if injustice was left unaddressed.

Milk's sexual identity was realized in his early adolescence during his Saturday afternoon trips to see opera at the Met in New York, where clandestine sexual encounters between gay men occurred (Faderman, 2018; Shilts, 1982). Despite his clear self-awareness, he remained closeted during an era when gay men were regularly arrested in Central Park for "indecent exposure." In August 1947, Milk himself was arrested in Central Park for having his shirt off in a gay cruising area, although he was never booked. These early structural oppressions may have nurtured an internalized homophobia that Milk clearly resisted in his later life, but that lingered nonetheless, at least in his relationships with family, to some whom, like his father, Milk was never fully out.

The story of the heroic Jews who rose against Nazi troops in the Warsaw ghetto and the memory of the time he was arrested for indecent exposure were the only two events from Milk's childhood and adolescence that he would talk about in his later life (Shilts, 1982). These two stories convey a powerful early theme. According to

Faderman (2018), "As a Jew and a homosexual, [Milk] felt doubly an outsider" (p. 5). Milk was extremely sensitive to the oppression that was experienced, first, by Jews, and later, by gay people. Joe Campbell, an early romantic partner and longtime friend, would tell him that he had a persecution complex (Shilts, 1982). This persecution complex may have emboldened Milk and sharpened his sense of justice. These two memories were likely the seeds of Milk's social change agency (Black & Morris, 2013; Shilts, 1982).

Despite the marginalization of his identities, Harvey's early life was, in other ways, very ordinary. Through high school and college, he was a relatively popular kid and an athlete, personas he may have developed, we speculate, to deflect attention from his burgeoning sexuality, given the stigma associated with homosexuality at that time. He was known, even then, as an entertainer in need of a stage, "cultivat[ing] a persona as the class clown, always ready with a wisecrack" (Faderman, 2018, p. 24).

In short, Milk was born into a family marked by a strong connection to their Jewish community, in the context of a growing and visceral threat to that community. His identities as gay and Jewish came with the mark of shame and danger. But the messages he internalized about the importance of standing up to hate and building the Jewish community, would eventually be expanded to the gay community, as well as other marginalized groups.

4.2 | Act two: An actor in search of a stage

Milk's emerging and early adult years were a period of vast identity exploration. He was referred to as a drifter and wanderer, searching for "the niche from which he could fulfill the high, vague aspirations of his childhood." (Faderman, 2018), p. 3). In the space between Long Island and San Francisco, Milk lived many places and assumed many roles. Faderman (2018) named her biography "Harvey Milk: His *Lives* and Death" (emphasis added) and Emery (2017) called part one of his book "The First Eight Lives of Harvey Milk." These vicissitudes are rarely portrayed in the public narrative of Milk's life, despite being crucial to his life story.

After graduating from college in Albany, New York, across the years 1951 to 1972, an untethered Milk moved to an astonishing number of cities, sometimes multiple times, settling and resettling as though searching for "home." Milk and his various romantic partners lived in Rhode Island, San Diego, Miami, Long Island, Dallas, New York City, Nashville, Puerto Rico, Los Angeles, and, finally, San Francisco. Perhaps, more important than these geographic shifts were the identity shifts that accompanied the many roles that Milk "tried on," suggesting

a deep restlessness. Faderman (2018) captured the complexity of Milk's identity experimentation:

There was Harvey the super-macho college jock and navy deep-sea diver. Harvey the high school math teacher and earnest mentor to young people. Harvey the buttoned-down Wall Street securities research analyst and cheerleader for the protoliberalist presidential candidate and darling of the right wing Barry Goldwater. Harvey the long-haired, bead-wearing hippie. Harvey the actor, associate producer, and gofer to a Broadway celebrity. (p. 3)

Reading this list, one might wonder how Milk ended up on the path toward becoming a social change agent of historic proportions. In fact, Milk was living and working in New York City during the Stonewall Inn Riots in June of 1969, yet did not engage himself in activism, despite his lover at the time, Craig Rodwell, playing a crucial role in those riots. As we will see, in the next act of his life, and within 3 years of the Stonewall uprising, Harvey would step into his path of becoming a community organizer, progressive politician, and gay hero. How that comes to be is the focus of the next section.

For now, we want to dwell for a moment on Milk's identity search. In this developmental stage, identity construction is a normative task, but Milk's process was remarkable in at least two ways. First, in the sheer number of roles that Milk assumed. Faderman (2018) speculated that Harvey's reluctance to stay in one place and the impermanence of any particular identity commitment was energized by the lack of approval he received from his father. Second, and perhaps most interestingly, were the contradictions that existed between these personas. Quite appropriately, Faderman (2018) described Milk as a complex person who was a "study in opposites" (p. 4). For example, while in San Francisco in 1969, Milk worked as a securities research analyst for an investment firm by day and lived with the cast of *Hair* by night. These communities were worlds apart socially, politically, and culturally.

Milk appeared to adopt new roles with gusto, surprising those who knew him from his previous lives. After reading a story in the Sunday New York Times magazine about his participation in *Hair*, Craig Rodwell, who knew Milk as a conservative banker and Goldwater supporter, would comment, "Long, long hair. Faded jeans. Pretty beads! Is this the same Harvey Milk?" (Shilts, 1982, p. 44). Similarly, Milk's Wall Street associates could not fathom "Harvey the hippie." Milk's task over this time was to construct some sense of personal coherence out of these contradictions. According to Shilts (1982), Milk's managers

on Wall Street could see that Milk "was not cut from the Wall Street mold," and that "it was a race between talent and wanderlust" to see which would ultimately define Milk's future (Shilts, 1982, p. 31). It was clear to others that Milk's involvement in the experimental theater scene and broader geopolitical tensions of that time were clearly "eroding Milk's conservatism." (Shilts, 1982, p. 38).

After many years of migration and experimentation, Milk experienced a significant turning point in his life story (McAdams et al., 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013). By this point, we speculate that Milk's bifurcated self was the source of increasing internal tension. It was becoming more difficult for Milk to hold his nonconformist and growing anti-establishment sentiments in the same space as his enterprising Wall Street persona. On April 29, 1970, the uneasy marriage between his multiple selves collapsed, when the United States announced its invasion of Cambodia. Immediately, demonstrations against the invasion materialized across the country. Despite having served in the Navy himself roughly 20 years earlier, Milk was infuriated by this breaking news and blamed corporate America for warmongering and profiteering. This must have induced intense dissonance in Milk, who, at the time, was working for J. Barth Co. in San Francisco. During his lunch hour, Milk joined protesters at the Pacific Stock Exchange and publicly burned his BankAmericard in a "burst of characteristic theatricality" that earned him—as a representative of the 'three-piece-suits'—a thunderous ovation (Shilts, 1982, p. 40). *Milk had found his stage*. Later that afternoon, executives at J. Barth Co. gave Milk an ultimatum—cut your hair or quit. Milk did neither and was fired.

This turning point event was important for several reasons. First, Milk's identity seemed to finally coalesce around the values, commitments, and shared beliefs of his left-leaning, anti-establishment community. A line had been drawn in the sand. Despite being on their payroll for years, his newly manifested opposition to power-wielding major corporations foreshadowed his future political platform—protecting the rights and interests of the most vulnerable and marginalized in society from the abuses and exploits of the privileged and powerful. Second, Milk had his first exhilarating and addictive taste of the theater that is politics. Although Milk was entrenched in the subversive theater scene, he was not seriously interested in acting or producing. Author and poet, Eve Merriam, was quoted by Shilts (1982) saying, "If [Milk] couldn't do *politics in theater*, it made sense that he would try *theater in politics*." (p. 79, emphasis added). Following his dismissal from corporate America, Milk then moved briefly to Los Angeles and back to New York, before permanently returning to San Francisco in January 1972, where he would finally claim the role of the leading actor on a stage that

was primed, ready, and waiting for someone like Harvey Milk.

Before moving on to the next section, we want to momentarily revisit Milk's stint in the Navy because new information has been recently unearthed regarding the context of his dismissal that supports a theme we have been developing in this psychobiography—namely, Milk's sense of persecution and injustice perpetrated by powerful organizations. Milk enlisted in the Navy in the summer of 1951, during the Korean War. He quickly rose in the ranks, receiving medals and awards and was discharged in 1955. As a Navy officer, he served as a deep-sea diver and instructor. Shilts (1982) cites Milk's story that he was dishonorably discharged for being gay, whereas Emery (2017) and Faderman (2018) state that he was honorably discharged. However, based on a recent investigation by the Bay Area Reporter, it appears that the evidence for his alleged honorable discharge came from a forged document in the San Francisco Public Library archives; however, the Navy's official discharge papers indicate plainly that the character of Milk's separation from the Navy was "Other Than Honorable" (Bajko, 2020). Milk was forced to resign on February 7, 1955 or be court-martialed on the basis of his sexuality. Later, Milk's dishonorable discharge would become a rhetorical talking point in his speeches. We found it curious that Milk's discharge from the Navy did not feature with greater frequency and importance in the psychobiographical materials that we analyzed. This felt like an omission worth noting. We speculate that this event had a more significant influence on Milk's latent social justice ethic than can be observed from the documentation of his life.

4.3 | Act three: The rise of the social change agent

In January 1972, Milk moved to San Francisco, landing in North Beach. By October, Milk and his partner, Scott Smith, relocated to Castro Street to be closer to the Midnight Sun bar and Bud's Ice Cream in Noe Valley. In this section, we articulate the importance of Milk arriving in San Francisco in 1972, and specifically the Castro district, arguing that time and place mattered tremendously for Milk's ascendancy to social change legend.

4.3.1 | Cultural-historical context: Brief overview of gay history in the United States

In her history of gay rights movements in the US, Elizabeth Armstrong (2002) described the trajectory as a fast-moving pendulum. Prior to 1950, Armstrong identified

no clear organized movement or organizations that centered on sexual identity. Beginning in 1950 and through 1968, she described the *Homophile Movement*, developing during a time of continued relative closeting and assimilation. The goals of these emerging organizations (e.g., Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis) were to protect rights and improve public opinion through educating liberal elites, such as psychologists and legislators. This was followed by a dramatic shift in the pendulum's swing to the *Gay Liberation Movement* in 1969, in which a public collective identity, traditionally quieted and implicit for the Homophile Movement, was centered. "Coming out" stories started to punctuate the discourse, providing space for individuals to fully express themselves and providing models for others to follow, creating a more public, and political, identity. Further, the Gay Liberation Movement was aligned with the New Left and other liberatory movements (e.g., Black Power) seeking total societal transformation, in which the needs of one particular group (in this case, gays and lesbians) were viewed as part of a larger need for radical redistribution of resources for economic, gender, and racial justice. The *Gay Identity Movement* followed and defined the 1970s, shifting to a more moderate and practical ideology. This movement represented a meeting in the middle of the Homophile and Gay Liberation Movements. The focus was now on brokering strategic political power within the system, shifting attention from gay liberation to *gay identity* while maintaining a focus on gay rights and freedoms, and attending to the psychological health and growth of its community members.

4.3.2 | San Francisco and the Castro district

It was in this broad context of the Gay Identity Movement that Milk found his home. And the actual context was the glittering city by the bay and the sunshiny streets of the Castro. Like the fast-paced gay rights movements, San Francisco and the Castro had seen recent and dramatic changes. Known as a mecca for the "weird," the "alternative," and the "seekers," San Francisco was transforming. Of course, the 1960s and the summer of love in 1967 made an indelible mark on the history of The City, as do the various political movements of the 1960s and 70s—the Black Panthers, The Occupation of Alcatraz, Jim Jones and the People's Temple, and of course the burgeoning gay rights movement.

As San Francisco was being intentionally transformed from a port city to a financial center, an influx of young men began to shape particular neighborhoods (Armstrong, 2002). The Castro—with its easy access to the financial center of the city, a temperate climate, and cheap

housing—became a draw. Indeed, as the working-class families began to move to the suburbs, rents and housing opened up, and the neighborhood quickly transformed from “Eureka Valley” to “The Castro” (Stein, 1998).

Between 1970 and 1972, the movements of the prior 20 years had blossomed into a vibrant gay community in San Francisco with unprecedented power, visibility, and the capacity for organization and mobilization. “Expansion in the numbers of gay identity organizations, the forging of the Castro as a gay neighborhood, and the growth of the sexual subculture provided the numbers and spatial concentration that made for a powerful gay rights voting bloc” (Armstrong, 2002, pp. 113–114). The notion of “gay power” was taking root in people’s consciousness and starting to materialize in concrete ways. Estimates were that by 1978, “one out of every five adults and one out of every three or four voters was gay. A great proportion of these people—half of them or more—had moved into the city within the past eight years. And most of these immigrants were young, white, and male.” (Armstrong, 2002, p. 118).

4.3.3 | Milk’s political awakening

Prior to 1973, although Milk had a political awakening in the aftermath of the invasion of Cambodia, he had not thought much about going into politics. Then, three catalytic events occurred in a relatively short time interval, each constituting a moral shock that would compel him to political action (Black & Morris, 2013; Faderman, 2018; Shilts, 1982). First, after opening his store, Castro Camera, in March 1973, Milk was visited by a state bureaucrat, who informed Milk that he would have to pay a \$100 deposit against sales taxes, should he wish to operate his business. His libertarian sensibilities offended, Milk was outraged by what he considered a flagrant display of government interference in free-enterprise America that would unjustly benefit the wealthy and perpetuate growing income disparities. A few weeks later, a teacher asked Milk if she could borrow a slide projector from Castro Camera because her school was so underfunded that she would need to wait a month to acquire one. Finally, Milk was incensed by former Attorney General John Mitchell’s dishonest and evasive performance in the televised Senate Watergate Committee hearings.

On July 26, 1973, exactly 2 weeks after the conclusion of Mitchell’s testimony at the Watergate hearings, Milk launched his first campaign for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, officially filing for candidacy on August 23. Following his announcement, in an interview, the 43-year-old Milk proclaimed, “I can concentrate on making a lot of money while I enjoy perhaps another ten years

of active gay life. Then, after fifty-three, I can just coast. Call the whole thing good. Or I can get involved and do something about the things that are wrong in this society. I’ve got to fight not just for me but for my lover and his next lover eventually. It’s got to be better for them than it was for me.” (Shilts, 1982, p. 72). With echoes of his mother Minnie and a sensitivity to persecution sharpened by his gay Jewish identity, Milk’s generativity was beginning to manifest, but only because that is what San Francisco in 1973 needed and allowed. We return later to Milk’s interesting and somewhat unexpected framing of time in this quote.

4.3.4 | Early losses, but also early wins

Milk lost his first election for supervisor, but it was not a total defeat. He had paltry campaign funding and multiple stigmas (e.g., long hair, gay, no experience, a New Yorker), but he got 17,000 votes—winning in neighborhoods like the Castro, and those populated by students and by hippies (Shilts, 1982). Milk was fired up and ready to go. His anger toward gay moderates who had supported other liberal candidates over “one of their own,” as well as his disdain for liberal nods toward tolerance was visceral in his concession speech. Shilts (1982) quotes Milk saying that liberals’ toleration was “a crumb thrown to keep [gay people] happy, to let us feel we should be getting something when in reality we should be getting our freedom. I have tasted freedom. I will not give up that which I have tasted. I have a lot more to drink. For that reason, the political numbers game will be played. I know the rules of their game now and how to play it. All human beings have power ... You are just one person, but you have power ...” (p. 80).

Milk had motivation, and there was a structural solution to this loss: district elections. An initiative on the ballot in that first election would have required that supervisors be elected by their districts, their neighborhoods, rather than the entire city voting for each supervisor. This initiative also failed, but Milk had a game plan, as he now understood the game. He also cut his hair, stopped smoking pot, and stopped going to bathhouses (Shilts, 1982). Milk’s metamorphosis may reflect an internalization of the normative structural expectations of heteromascularity or “straightness,” broadly defined, which may have been necessary for a successful campaign in those times. We do not know whether this was a conflict for him, but it is an example of the need to negotiate with larger structures as one navigates personal and cultural development.

The summer of 1973 brought more structural change. When the Eureka Valley Merchants Association denied

membership to Milk's camera store because he was gay, he founded the Castro Village Association, with an inclusive membership plan. With his usual vim and vigor, he got multiple merchants on board, including the local Hibernia Bank, which was pushed to join once Milk pointed out that this was where most gay neighborhood residents did their banking. Following this, "The Eureka Valley Merchants Association disbanded, most members having sold their businesses—primarily to gays—and fled what they considered Sodom" (Faderman, 2018, p. 87).

The new business association illustrated Milk's rising leadership in the neighborhood, which already had a ready coalition of activists primed to showcase the strength of this new constituency. Milk took advantage of this growing movement, revealing the rising economic power of the gay community with the Coors Beer Boycott. The Teamsters union was fighting for a contract with Coors, and Milk got every gay bar in town to boycott Coors—for nearly 4 years—a dramatic move that helped the Teamsters win their fight, and at the same time engendering their support. Indeed, in return for Milk's support, the Teamsters hired gay drivers. Speaking to Teamsters officials, Allan Baird, the union activist who worked with Milk on the boycott, said, "Those guys in the gay community are real powerful. I don't think you understand their power yet ... They can turn something on and off just like that." (Shilts, 1982, p. 84). When it was all said and done, Allan Baird gave Milk his red and white bullhorn, battered as it was by police batons, because he figured Milk would be needing it in the years to come—and he was right (Faderman, 2018). This kind of coalition-based political action—across the lines of particular groups or constituencies—would become a hallmark of Milk's platform. And it is an example of how personal identities become a force for structural change.

Milk's rising activism was noted by the "gay establishment" of San Francisco, members of the Society for Individual Rights, the Daughters of Bilitis, and the Alice B. Toklas Memorial Democratic Club—all of whom had set the foundation for the gay rights movement, organizing for years. There was a resentment to the entitled New Yorker taking over "their" territory, and they wanted him to pay his dues. Jim Foster, a leader in San Francisco's gay establishment, famously told Harvey, "You don't get to dance unless you put up the chairs. I've never seen you put up the chairs." (Faderman, 2018, p. 77; see also Shilts, 1982). The establishment's goal was to elect "gay friendly" politicians, whereas Milk demanded actual representation. In a 1973 speech to the Longshoreman and Warehouse Unions, Milk was not shy about who he was, which he coupled with his unique form of libertarian social justice:

Let me have my tax money go for my protection and not for my prosecution. Let my tax money go for the protection of me. Protect my home, protect my streets, protect my car, protect my life, protect my property. Let my minister worry about me playing bar dice. Let my minister and not some politician worry about my moral life. Worry about gun control and not marijuana control ... worry about dental care for the elderly and not about hookers ... worry about child care centers and not what books I want to read ... worry about becoming a human being and not about how you can prevent others from enjoying their lives because of your own inabilities to adjust to life. (Black & Morris, 2013, p. 74)

Milk's dramatic, theatrical, and passionate style of activism resonated with the San Francisco of the early 70s—the times were changing.

By now, Milk was considered by his followers as the "Mayor of Castro Street" (Faderman, 2018; Shilts, 1982), and he was ready for the next election in 1975. The hair was gone, the hedonism was curbed, his new column in the Bay Area Reporter—The Milk Forum—was increasing his visibility, and his campaign crew expanded to include women like Anne Kronenberg and other voices. But the character he created needed one more addition. "During his theater years, when jeans and love beads had been his sartorial preference, he emptied his closets of the Brooks Brothers suits he wore to work on Wall Street because they felt like a costume. Now he needed that costume back." (Faderman, 2018, p. 96). Finding used suits at a local thrift store, Milk was ready for opening night. Faderman (Faderman, 2018) reflected, "If he looked the role and acted the role, he could inhabit the role" (p. 97).

But in 1975 ... Milk lost one more time.

4.3.5 | First gay city supervisor

There were two final pieces to the structural puzzle. The first was the move to district elections, which San Franciscans finally voted in favor of in the November 1976 general election. Milk would run as the supervisor for The Castro. The second piece was the national and statewide initiatives devoted to the destruction of gay participation in community and civic life. The "Save Our Children" campaign led by singer, former beauty queen, and Christian crusader, Anita Bryant, resulted in the repeal of a gay rights ordinance in Florida on what

has been dubbed “Orange Tuesday.” The campaign was marked by dangerous vitriol with Bryant’s “hysterical message ... that homosexuals were child molesters and giving them civil rights would encourage their criminality and immorality” (Faderman, 2018, p. 143). The protests in reaction to Orange Tuesday were big and loud and, in San Francisco, they were led by Milk with his battered bull horn. One of Milk’s skills was corralling anger and frustration at losses and attacks on gay rights into lengthy marches from The Castro, down Market Street to City Hall, to Polk Street. The energy spent on the march left little appetite for actual destruction. Still, voices were heard, and they were part of the transformation happening in San Francisco politics and the gay rights movement of the 1970s. Indeed, Cleve Jones (2016) recalled Milk’s response to him after expressing his fear over what the Bryant defeat might mean for the movement: “No, Cleve, it’s just what we need” (p. 135). Milk considered Orange Tuesday to be a watershed event. He went so far as to thank Bryant for provoking a true national gay movement. By twisting the narrative, Milk shaped public discourse around Orange Tuesday (Black & Morris, 2013). At midnight on the night of the march, Milk picked up his bullhorn and exclaimed, “This is the power of the gay community ... Anita’s going to create a national gay force” (Shilts, 1982, p. 159).

The Briggs Initiative, on the ballot the same year as Milk’s third try for supervisor, sought to ban gays and lesbians from teaching in California. Along with Sally Miller Gearhart, Milk’s astute critiques of the Initiative’s arguments and passionate pleas for people to come out, coupled with his emerging message of hope, struck a chord. He evoked hope for the city by focusing on the people, as illustrated in this quote taken from a stump speech in 1978: “There are no statistics to quote ... no miles of highway to brag about, no statistics of giant buildings built under your administration. What you have is instead a city that breathes, one that is alive and where people are more important than highways” (Black & Morris, 2013, p. 72). In a column in the Bay Area Reporter in August 1978, he wrote of the spirit of hope in the city and its people:

... can be summed up by calling attention to the Gay physicians and psychiatrists who in the face of a possible witch hunt have broken down their closet doors and ‘come out,’ destroying myths in doing so ... giving hope in doing so. That spirit can be summed up by the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Marching Band and Twirling Corps and the powerful sense of excitement they bring at each of their performances. That spirit can be summed up by the Gay-Police charity softball game which,

once again, on many levels, showed what co-existence means. The Bryants/Briggs would never be able to understand the spirit of that game and the long-term ramifications. Bigots don’t understand. Finally, that spirit can be summed up by those who are taking an active part in the anti-Briggs campaign. The task set out to them is huge, and they are tackling it—now. (Black & Morris, 2013, pp. 231–232)

Milk won the 1977 election in a landslide, representing District 5, The Castro.

4.4 | Fourth and final act: Milk’s death and legacy

Death was a recurring theme in Milk’s life. Not only was suicide a prominent worry in his romantic relationships as an adult (which came to fruition in the suicide of Jack Lira), a disturbingly prescient Milk was convinced at an early age he would live an unnaturally short life. Jim Bruton, a friend of Milk, recalled a conversation, provoked by an energetic volleyball match on a sunny afternoon in 1964, in which Milk reportedly said, “I’ve known it since I was a kid. I’ll never make it to fifty. There’s just something sinister down the road. I don’t know what it is, but it’s there.” (Shilts, 1982, p. 35). Bruton remembered another time he scolded Milk for failing to save his money for the future. Milk responded, “What for? I’ll never live to enjoy it. I’ve got to live fast. I know I’m not going to live long.” (Shilts, 1982, p. 35). We speculate that the salience of his own death in Milk’s mind might explain, in part, his intense commitment to generative action at a relatively early age.

Returning to the issue of time that came up in an earlier quote and here again, it is unclear why Milk saw his lifespan being cut so short, but it brings up questions related to the meaning of time and temporalities for LGBTQ+ people. Milk’s preoccupation with his own death could reflect his internal struggle with *chrononormativity* or the feeling of being “out of temporal alignment” with norms and expectations of society (Farrier, 2015, p. 1400). Milk seemed to understand that he was living in what Halberstam (2005) referred to as *queer time* or the idea that queer lives follow their own temporal logic, both in the everyday sense and in the developmental sense, including beliefs about what is possible for the events in one’s life and their longevity. It is important to note from a structural perspective that Milk’s ideas about the limits of his *lifespan* would have been influenced by his particular *life space*. At that time, Milk would not have had access to models of successful

gay aging, as the gay men who came before him were members of the Invisible and Silent Generations (Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2016). Before Milk, older gay men were absent from the public sphere, either because they were repressed or in hiding due to harmful discourses around homosexuality as criminal, pathological, and immoral. All of this would have influenced Milk's temporal landscape, which would have in turn impacted his generative actions.

Following his emergence as a public figure, Milk received several death threats, which, ever the class clown, he mostly shrugged off with humor. But they lingered on his consciousness. While participating in the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade, he asked Anne Kronenberg, who was driving his car at the time, "Do you know the closest route to the hospital? You've got to be aware, Anne." (Faderman, 2018, p. 189). On Friday, November 18, 1977, Milk recorded his own political will in which he outlined his wishes, should he be assassinated. Almost exactly 1 year later, after 42 and a half weeks in office, on November 27, 1978, Milk was assassinated by an embittered and homophobic former city supervisor and colleague, Dan White, who also shot and killed the mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone.

Many feared Milk's assassination would shutter the burgeoning gay rights movement, and other movements local and otherwise, which were sparked by Milk's activism. Milk spoke directly to this fear in the closing lines of his political will. He concluded with one final and simple request for those he inspired (Black & Morris, 2013):

And that's all I ask. That's all. I ask for the movement to continue, for the movement to grow because last week, I got a phone call from Altoona, Pennsylvania,¹ and my election gave somebody else, one more person, hope. And after all it's what this is all about. It's not about personal gain, not about ego, not about power—it's about giving those young people out there in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias hope. You gotta give them hope. (p. 249)

The movement continued, and Harvey's hope lived on. Vast candlelight vigils commemorated his life. In San Francisco, thousands of mourners marched down Market Street, led by the spirit of Milk and his battered bullhorn. The legendary White Night Riots were incited by the egregiously unjust sentencing of his murderer on May 21, 1979, 1 day before what would have been Milk's 49th birthday. Over time, his memory sustained the gay rights movement and changed the landscape for LGBTQ+ people forever, and not just in the US, but everywhere. Perhaps, the most

poignant reflection of Milk's legacy, at least in the near wake of his passing, was the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, which took place on October 14, 1979, less than 1 year after his assassination. Milk was on the organizing committee of the march prior to his death. Following his death, the planning took on new meaning and fervor. The march was an embodiment of everything Milk represented, envisaged, and hoped for the gay rights movement—it was a profound statement that gay people existed and would not be ignored. Every person who came out for that march was walking in the footsteps of Harvey Milk, and those young people out there in the Altoona, Pennsylvanias felt hope. The second march on Washington on October 11, 1987, largely centered on injustices related to the AIDS crisis, was commemorated 1 year later as National Coming Out Day. Today, we hear echoes of Harvey's message in contemporary movements like the "It Gets Better" campaign. We see Harvey's legacy in "out and proud" politicians like the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and gay presidential candidate, Pete Buttigieg, who, on May 22, 2019, tweeted: "Harvey Milk would have been 89 today. We are forever indebted to him for showing the world what an out LGBTQ elected leader could do—a local official with global impact. Hope will never be silenced. #HarveyMilkDay." And so goes the unbroken chain of events that define the collective history of the LGBTQ+ movement.

5 | DISCUSSION

In this structural psychobiography, we examined the life, and especially the times, of Harvey Milk, centering social, cultural, political, and historical contexts to showcase their necessity for understanding Milk's development as a social change agent. Among other structural factors, Milk would not be the Milk we remember without the political and cultural work of those who came before him, without the migration of the white working class from Eureka Valley leaving space for the emergence of the Castro, without Anita Bryant and the Briggs initiative, without the Coors Boycott and the mutual support of the Teamsters, without district elections, and without the stage of San Francisco. In his memoir, Jack Fritscher (2008), then editor-in-chief of the local leather magazine *Drummer*, vividly captures the crucial role of context, and further supports the need for a structural approach to Milk's psychobiography, in the following recollection.

[Milk] was selected because he was gay, not because he was 'Harvey Milk.' It was not personal ... Beyond even Harvey's control, he was swept up in a symbolic role in ritual politics. The convergence of his time, not his life,

propelled him. His latter-day sainthood came through a martyrdom that could have happened to anyone playing the role of gay supervisor. It was his bad fortune that, 'Tonight the role of gay supervisor will be played by Harvey Milk.' (p. 99)

But his life mattered too. We would say, the convergence of his time *and* his life propelled him. Milk also would not be the Milk we know without the disconnection from his father and the intergenerational transmission of activism from his grandfather and mother, without the stark realities of Jewish persecution that he observed, without his own fears of persecution for his sexuality, and without his need for a stage to find and commit to an identity. It all mattered, and it is time for psychologists to consider the structural forces—social, cultural, political, and historical context—to be as important, if not more important, than personal factors in understanding human development (Fish & Syed, 2018; Rogers, Niwa, et al., 2021).

As a tangible takeaway from our analysis, we offer some thoughts on how to incorporate a structural analysis into psychological work. There are at least two ways to think about this: the process and the data. The former is most relevant here. In terms of the process, we began our analysis by generating an understanding of the cultural and historical context—for example, the political machinery and legislative nuance that became critical for Milk's ascendance. In fact, the *last* material we read were Milk's own words. Thus, in our process, we began with structure, hoping that we would then be unable to see Milk's life without first seeing the context of it (Fish & Syed, 2018). We note that there are excellent examples available of how to collect and use data from a structural perspective (e.g., Rogers, Niwa, et al., 2021; Rogers, Rosario, et al., 2021).

We also reiterate that a structural approach is inherently about power (McLean & Syed, 2016; Syed & McLean, 2021). Our motivation to examine and address issues of justice and equity in our research means that we *must* take a structural approach. Such work necessitates humility in our practices of reflexivity, thinking deeply about our own positions of power and marginalization. For example, our lack of attunement to religion early on limited our attention to Milk's Judaism in our initial reflexivity work. Understanding how we as researchers are part of systems of power in the work that we do shines a light on how we give voice to and silence different elements of people and systems.

Finally, strong arguments have been made for the necessity of taking unique, culturally informed approaches to research with marginalized populations (e.g., Fish & Syed, 2018). In many ways, a structural psychobiography was a logical fit for our subject, a member of the LGBTQ+

community. Structural psychobiography does the work of queering dominant psychobiographical research methods. In advocating for a structural psychobiographical approach, we are intentionally subverting, challenging, and critiquing—*queering*—dominant methodologies (Browne & Nash, 2010; Ghaziani & Brim, 2019; Warner, 2004). The turn to structural psychobiography is an act of liberation from hegemonic ways of knowing that continue to filter the experiences of oppressed people through the lens of power holders. By foregrounding the role of social, cultural, political, and historical forces when understanding and explaining human development, structural psychobiography resists psychology's bias toward universalism, essentialism, and individualism. This resistance is consistent with major tenets of queer theory and methods (Ghaziani & Brim, 2019). Although it would require further consideration, we offer the possibility that a structural psychobiography is a form of *queer psychobiography*.

5.1 | Remembering the Harvey Milk story

American history is peppered with heroes and champions worth remembering. But there was something special, it seems, about Harvey Milk. His legacy is deeply imprinted on our minds and hearts. A part of the reason for his memorability is that Milk was among the first openly gay elected officials in the US. By the time of his election in 1977, only Kathy Kozachenko and Elaine Noble had been elected as out lesbians to public office. Milk, however, was the first gay male-identified politician to be elected. This alone made his death extremely newsworthy. Eyerman (2012) points to two additional factors that contributed to Milk's iconic status in our memory. First was the way he died. Milk was assassinated "in a public place by a man whom he had known and befriended" (Eyerman, 2012, p. 410). Moreover, Milk was not simply assassinated for what he did, but also for who he was—not just a politician, but a *gay* politician. His death was imbued with symbolism in a way that Mayor Moscone's was not.

The second factor instrumental to his enduring memory rests in the power of community—the marginalized, oppressed individuals and organizations involved in the gay rights movement who *needed* Milk to be remembered. These groups were the authors of Harvey's story and, "saw to it that Milk was remembered, and remembered in a particular way." (Eyerman, 2012). This is true not just for the people who were alive at the time of his death. Milk's story has been transmitted across time both through commemorative vehicles in mainstream media (e.g., film, documentary, books, and news articles; see Armstrong & Crage, 2006) and

within the LGBTQ+ community through intergenerational storytelling (Weststrate et al., 2022; Weststrate & McLean, 2022). Schiff et al. (2001) argued that stories like that of Milk can be “collected” by people and internalized as part of their own life story, even though it falls outside of their direct experience. These vicarious stories are rich with symbolism and meaning that provide people with a sense of clarity and coherence. Milk’s story can be used by individuals for self-understanding and self-definition, and by contemporary social activists looking to advance human rights. Thus, there is a functional explanation for the persistence of the Milk myth, as it is remembered by particular people, at particular places, and with particular goals in mind (McLean et al., 2007).

With that said, like any story, a person must *encounter* it before they can *collect* it (Schiff et al., 2001). While Milk’s story is a potential developmental resource when transmitted intergenerationally (Weststrate et al., 2022; Weststrate & McLean, 2022), such transmission is itself influenced by social, cultural, political, and historical factors at play in contemporary society that create unequal access to this narrative of hope. We must be careful not to assume that Milk’s story will hold the same meaning and the same power for all members of the vastly diverse LGBTQ+ communities.

5.2 | When narrative truth upstages historical truth

In writing this psychobiography, we encountered what Eyerman (2012) presented as doubt surrounding the authenticity of the Harvey Milk story as we collectively remember it. We were left wondering about the nuance between the story that “belongs” to the agent of social change, or the person, and the story that “belongs” to the rest of us.

On the one hand, we have argued that Milk’s legacy endures because he understood that social change is powered by hope. This theme, which pervaded his speeches and writings, was more than a trite rhetorical device to win an election; it represented both a philosophical and pragmatic approach to change making. And, most relevant here, we remember this intense generativity and unwavering hope as deeply internalized into Milk’s life story. As we remember it, Milk’s life story was structured as a classic redemption narrative—a highly prized master narrative in North American culture, which people want to hear (McLean et al., 2020), and which sustains generative acts (McAdams, 2006). In a way, it seems fitting that we would remember Milk in a way that is fiercely consistent with the hope narrative that he used to inspire the masses.

On the other hand, Milk’s life was tragic in both the literal and literary sense—a so-called contamination story (McAdams et al., 2001). As we alluded to earlier, beyond Milk’s own tragic end, his life was intensely affected by loss, especially by suicides and attempted suicides by close relations of Milk. The most poignant example is Milk’s final lover, Jack Lira. Disillusioned with Milk’s political life and aspirations, on August 28, 1978, Lira, hung himself in their enclosed back porch, behind a huge black velvet curtain that was attached to the beam. Pinned to the curtain was a note on which Lira wrote, “You’ve always loved the circus, Harvey. How do you like my last act?” (Shilts, 1982, p. 233). Ever the protector and nurturer of lost souls, these losses hurt Milk deeply.

Milk himself, although a martyr, was not always a saint (on the 25th anniversary of Milk’s assassination, an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* quite literally commemorated “St. Harvey”). For example, Milk, insistent that all gays and lesbians must come out to ensure social progress, controversially outed struggling Vietnam War veteran, Oliver Sipple, who was briefly a national hero for deflecting the bullet that would have killed President Gerald Ford (Faderman, 2018; Jones, 2016). Although Sipple was closeted to his family and desired anonymity, Milk seized this moment to ensure that all major newspapers knew Sipple was gay (e.g., the *Los Angeles Times* reported the headline on September 25, 1975, “Hero in Ford Shooting Active Among San Francisco Gays”). Milk did not just want the public to celebrate a hero, he wanted them to celebrate a *gay* hero. The tactic of “outing” was not in the spirit of Milk’s typical approach to activism, and outing would be later weaponized by militant groups like ACT UP in the 1980s at the peak of the AIDS crisis.

While serving as City Supervisor, Milk was also implicated in a scandal that triggered an FBI investigation. Milk was accused by the San Francisco Pride Foundation of essentially stealing their written proposal for a new Gay Community Center (Faderman, 2018). According to the federal complaint, after being handed the proposal by Mayor Moscone, Milk allegedly rewrote sections of the proposal on the basis that it neglected certain developments that were important to the community (e.g., mental health facility, venereal disease clinic) and applied for funding in his own name, erasing the Pride Foundation entirely.

And yet, these undesirable memories are not reflected in the public narrative of Milk’s life. Perhaps because they do not sustain social activism in the same way that hope does. Or because they do not fit the cultural expectations for the story arc we want to hear (McLean et al., 2020). But there might be lessons to be learned from these missteps and tragedies in the part of Milk’s life that has been untold or unheard. We simply do not know because this story

has not been given time to breathe. This raises important questions about how we, as a society, put limits on narratives that do not meet our storied expectations.

5.3 | The educational potential of Milk's story

Does it matter which story of Harvey Milk we remember and teach to others? We argue, yes. Increasingly, US state legislatures are passing inclusive curriculum laws that are requiring public educators to teach about LGBTQ+ history within the context of, say, social studies curricula. A common approach in this direction is to highlight the story of a hero. Following an analysis of lesson plans designed for teaching about Milk, Donahue (2014) argued that there are both limitations and opportunities to uplifting Milk's story in school curricula. Consistent with our structural analysis, Donahue identified one significant problem with the exemplar approach—it perpetuates “the ‘great man’ notion of history” (p. 36). That is, elevating one person to the status of gay hero—especially a gay white man—runs the risk of erasing or undermining the intersecting social, cultural, political, and historical factors that made Milk's social agency possible. Milk was not just a special type of virtuous person that students should seek to emulate. Social change never depends on one great leader. This is a romantic oversimplification of Milk's story and heroes like him. Social studies teachers should situate these heroes in the messiness of their context and emphasize their humanity, including their vulnerabilities and vices. And, in doing so, challenge the oppressively redemptive and illusionary “one great man” master narrative that too often frames how we remember history. To be sure, Harvey Milk certainly was a great man. But that is just part of the story.

6 | CONCLUSION

Despite his legendary status, Milk's work as a social change agent lasted fewer than 7 years, and in that time, he accomplished extraordinary feats. Milk was not born a social change agent, he was not even destined to become one, and yet he did. He became a social change agent because of an opportunity presented by a rapidly shifting political context in San Francisco because of outrage provoked by a few catalytic events that steered him down this path, because of a history of individual and collective persecution as a gay Jew, and because of the enduring need for a stage—a stage upon which he could express *tikkun olam*, a cultural and familial legacy of generative concern. Somehow, Milk knew that his days on this earth were

numbered. The “us-es,” and all of us, were so fortunate to have him for that short time.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors contributed equally to all aspects of this study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This article does not report any results in which human or animal subjects were involved.

ORCID

Nic M. Weststrate  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5272-472X>

ENDNOTE

¹ A reference to a closeted gay teen who had called to express his gratitude to Milk's efforts for gay rights.

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How to cite this article: Weststrate, N. M., & McLean, K. C. (2023). “You gotta give them hope”: A structural psychobiography of Harvey Milk (1930–1978). *Journal of Personality*, 91, 105–119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12744>