



Adolescence

by Dustin Tamashiro

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Adolescence is commonly conceptualized as a period when youth begin to assert their independence and explore their newfound sexuality. It is a period of dramatic change, marked by a series of turbulent physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional milestones that cause both uncertainty and confusion in maturing young adults.

The hallmark of this period--the all-consuming adolescent drive--is the need to pursue attractions with the hope of developing long-term sexual relationships. Opposite-sex attractions of youth find a great deal of support from society; not only do these youth have a number of heterosexual role models who act out opposite-sex courting rituals, but established institutions such as high school proms and sports programs serve to reinforce gender norms, and family and friends consciously or unconsciously affirm opposite-sex attraction and dating.

Same-sex attractions are generally condemned by society. Homosexual youth, thus, have relatively few positive role models, and they are punished when they disregard societal norms and engage in gender atypical behavior. Indeed, homosexual adolescents may become ostracized for the mere disclosure of same-sex attractions.

Discrimination against and disdain for homosexuality, often referred to as heterosexism or homophobia, frequently emerge from both small familial enclaves and society at large. Because of their pervasiveness, heterosexism and homophobia create detrimental long- and short-term effects on gay and lesbian adolescents, especially as they "come out," or acknowledge their homosexuality to themselves and others.

The challenges facing a homosexual youth are to learn to accept his or her sexual identity, overcome society's heterosexist assumptions of what it means to be a man or a woman, and deal with internal and external homophobia.

Gender Norms

Like stereotypes, gender role expectations persist in Western societies because they serve an important function: they create categories, or *schemas*, to help people understand and interpret the world. By using these schemas, people can make instantaneous judgments and avoid potentially hazardous situations.

As children mature into adults they not only learn to utilize these schemas, but learn that deviating from them can result in a variety of negative consequences. Children are thus compelled to conform to the societal definition of "normality" in order to fit in with others and save themselves a great deal of trouble in the near and distant future. A variety of detailed social scripts are inculcated into children to preempt potential unfortunate *faux pas*--from cutting in line at a fast food restaurant to neglecting to say "thank you" when presented with a gift.

With regard to gender, society has defined a comprehensive set of masculine and feminine behavioral

scripts. Within these broad categories people can find a variety of scripts to guide their day-to-day behavior; for instance, some notable masculine scripts are the "strong and silent" script, the "tough guy" script, the "give-'em-Hell" script, the "playboy" script, the "winner" script, the "independent" script, and the "homophobic" script.

When these scripts are taken into context, the difficulties faced by homosexual adolescents become readily apparent: it would be difficult for a male homosexual adolescent to feel like a "winner" when he is supposed to be a "playboy" with the opposite sex, hate his own sexual orientation, and retain a degree of independence from groups of people that often disagree with his way of life.

Adolescent lesbians not only have to overcome implicit societal oppression with relation to their sexual orientation, but they also have to deal with restraints on female sexuality, including double standards with regard to sexual behavior, legal or religious restrictions on sexual activity, and a variety of forms of sexual objectification in the media. Precocious sexual activity by women has traditionally been treated as deviant behavior, and can often be intensified by sexual minority status.

Very little research has been done on transgender and bisexual youth, but one can easily understand how they would have intense feelings of anxiety during their adolescence. Both heterosexuals and homosexuals have been found to discriminate against bisexuals, putting them in a unique position as a sexual minority who does not receive validation from either the majority or other minorities. Transgendered youth are a relatively new subject pool, and many recent studies have come under fire for "misrepresenting" this population, but there is no doubt that they challenge longstanding beliefs about gender and frequently suffer as a consequence.

Family

Glbtc adolescents, because of their lack of economic autonomy, are heavily dependent upon their families for both economic and social support. According to a recent study by Mohr and Fasinger, a large portion of a homosexual youth's positive or negative self-identity is derived from the quality of his or her parent-child relationship. They found that the most influential factors in the development of a negative self-identity for homosexual youth are a lack of paternal support, and feelings of anxiety and avoidance with regard to their parents. Other factors, such as maternal support and parental sensitivity, were not as highly correlated with adult self-identity as the previous three.

In terms of siblings, recent research suggests that the combination of more older brothers and a lower birth order is positively correlated with the likelihood that a young man will be sexually attracted toward, and have sex with, other men. This effect is greater in terms of sexual behavior compared to attraction, and is not affected by younger male siblings, or older or younger female siblings. Lesbians were not affected by either younger or older siblings of any combination or by birth order.

School and Society

Most homosexual adolescents are not fully open about their sexual orientation in high school, if only because they realize the danger openness can bring. At school, an "out" homosexual youth is often limited in his or her selection of friends, and is frequently harassed by heterosexual peers who cannot easily fathom an open acknowledgment of attraction to a member of the same sex.

"Fag" is one of the most common insults among high school students, and even the word "gay" is often used as self-evidently derogatory, as in "That's so gay."

A study by Blake and others reported that homosexual youth were more than four times as likely as heterosexual youth to have missed school because of an unsafe environment; more than three times as likely to have been threatened or injured; and almost twice as likely to have had their property damaged or

stolen.

Gay and lesbian adolescents who are not out are generally spared most of the harassment experienced by out adolescents, but they also pay a price, often in terms of feeling inauthentic or living a lie.

Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships and sexual experimentation are characteristic of adolescence. Homosexual youth, however, tend to have much higher rates of high-risk sexual experimentation compared to their heterosexual peers (that is, the number of partners, overall percentage, and age of first intercourse). They also tend to have higher levels of drug and alcohol-induced sex, perhaps because of the prevalence of substance abuse within the gay and lesbian adolescent community.

At the same time, however, many homosexual youth refrain from sexual experimentation because of anxiety over heterosexual expectations and homophobia. Often social interactions with both opposite- and same-sex classmates are fraught with tension and anxiety. In response, many glbtq adolescents attempt to find a sense of community with other sexual minority adolescents, but others feel isolated and lonely during these years.

Suicide

Several studies have reported that lesbian and gay youth are at increased risk for suicide. The most commonly cited studies have found that a homosexual youth's suicide risk is more than twice that of a heterosexual peer.

Researchers have recently discovered that merely identifying as a homosexual, or being attracted to members of the same sex, does not increase the likelihood of suicide attempt. Rather, the increased risk may be the result of the victimization that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth frequently face because of their sexual minority status or alternate gender expression.

Conclusion

The study of glbtq adolescents is only beginning. Research is impeded by ethical considerations, such as the need for informed consent, and by hostility toward research on sexuality. Researchers often find it difficult to obtain permission from parents or guardians. Thus, most data regarding glbtq adolescents has been gained through large-scale surveys administered at liberal universities, or through groups and organizations that service glbtq clientele; and often the data is "retrospective," based on adults' recollections of their feelings and experiences as adolescents.

What is clear is that glbtq adolescents badly need support from family members, peers, and the larger society. Gay and lesbian adults who might serve as effective role models for glbtq youth are often reluctant to become involved with adolescents because of the accusations of "recruitment" frequently leveled at homosexuals by political and religious conservatives. Gay and lesbian adults may experience significant backlash at work, home, and in the community if their intentions are misconstrued.

Despite all this, various successful youth initiatives from the gay and lesbian community have been made, such as those by New York City's Martin-Hetrick Institute and Los Angeles's Unified School District's Project 10, which provide glbtq-sensitive education to teachers and administrators.

These efforts are complemented by the nationwide campaign to increase awareness about HIV and sexually transmitted diseases among sexual minority youth, as well as the recent movement spearheaded by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network to establish Gay-Straight Alliances in high schools across the country and to pressure school boards to adopt and enforce anti-discrimination and anti-harassment

policies. The latter enterprise has been given impetus by several recent lawsuits that have held school administrators responsible for failing to protect students from harassment on the basis of sexual orientation.

These and other initiatives may prove significant in easing the transition of glbtq adolescents into adulthood.

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