The New Gay Teenager

RITCH C. SAVIN-WILLIAMS

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Refusing and Resisting Sexual Identity Labels

For an issue in early 2004, the Gay and Lesbian Review, a scholarly journal, asked several senior gay statesmen to reflect on developments during the previous decade. Most sound unhappy with how things are going. Historian Martin Duberman feels compelled to castigate modern gay men and lesbians as wanting to be “just folks,” to simply fit in. Rather, writes Duberman, they should be demanding a radical analysis of contemporary culture. “Where is the Gay Liberation Front of 1970 now that we need it?” he asked. Similarly, novelist Sarah Schulman, a founder of the Lesbian Avengers, bemoans the lack of an activist movement among young people. Youth, she says, are being duped into conformity because they believe the media’s representation of their lives.

But what if no duping has occurred and it’s real? What if young people with same-sex desires are basically content with modern culture and don’t desire a critical analysis? What if the media is reflecting, rather than manipulating, the reality of contemporary teens’ lives? Maybe real changes in society’s politics, laws, and consciousness toward gay people have raised the possibility that sexual orientation is or will soon be irrelevant in all important respects. Writer Michael Hattersley poses these possibilities, and others:
What would it mean to be gay in a world in which the fact that a friend, sibling, aunt, or uncle was gay was about as relevant as her hair color? What are the implications of a world in which GLBT people have become familiar features in the family, the media, literature, and the political scene? Such a scenario would pose a serious challenge to the perpetuation of “gay politics,” to say the least; less clear is what would happen to gay and lesbian literature, art, and popular culture.3

This is what really frightens the gay movement’s senior statesmen. The potential of leading a normal life is not what they want. Their romantic ideal is being transgressive, being the rebel. Hattersley wonders if this attitude is more self-destructive than noble. It can reflect self-hatred, legal difficulties, mental illness, suicide, family rejection, and thwarted love . . . Who can blame a persecuted and threatened people if they live for the day and seek immediate gratification, or burn to make something new, to survive, to thrive on being different? How would we define ourselves if that were no longer necessary?4

In the same special edition, novelist Andrew Holleran also expresses doubts about the overriding significance of being gay. At a dinner with Harvard University students, he wondered, “What was our bond, after all?” Was it appropriate to be segregated at the “gay table?”

Wasn’t it better when a student belongs to the common culture? Could identity politics be a mistake? Just what is there in the space between two gay people who meet today? The same old same old, or something new? So why—the question I asked ten years ago—did we make so much of our homosexuality?5

Today, fewer young people are making so much of their gayness, which is, according to Holleran, “virtually unrecognizable—evapo-
rated, almost, into assimilation and cyberspace.” This he finds to be not a source of celebration, but of resignation. But isn’t this what gay activists have been supposedly working for during the past four decades—to be treated as equals, as individuals, to have our humanity rather than our sexuality valued? If the analysis in the Gay and Lesbian Review is true, we’ve been successful beyond our wildest dreams!

The Cultural Landscape

Debates about whether and how gay people are similar to or different from heterosexuals have gone on for decades. If gay people are different, then is it a good different or a bad different? Are they creative, witty, and intelligent or promiscuous, immoral, and mentally ill? Should they identify loud and proud or blend in? Should they fight for political rights or seek social acceptance?

It has long been argued whether gay people may, on the one hand, have a distinctive life course that reflects a deep sense of their “queerness,” their sense of difference; or, on the other, whether they are basically similar to straight people—that is, whether they look and act like heterosexuals, value marriage and family like heterosexuals, have the same career aspirations, and hold the same mainstream values. A differential developmental trajectories perspective allows that both notions are true and that remarkable diversity characterizes individuals with same-sex desire. They seek to adapt to mainstream culture even as they demand acceptance of their sexuality as normative and as they appreciate the increasingly gay quality of the culture.

This real-world complexity is muted among older commentators. The most vociferous among them take extreme positions. One prime example is the writer and activist Larry Kramer, who rants against accommodating gays who he says are losing themselves in the massive, vanilla-heterosexual culture. In a Rolling Stone article, he argues that a concern about the fate of one’s people should stand at the very center of a gay person’s being. “We are a body of people, a nation of
gays, a huge political group capable of exercising power! . . . We are the straight white man’s slaves.”

As a college student at Yale University, Larry Kramer recalls that he was “a pretty lonely young gay man . . . It has always been my dream that I’d leave what I could to insure that gay kids at Yale today would have a better time than I did.” Naively buying into reports of high gay youth suicide, he reasons that through portrayals of the unique developmental experiences endured by gay youth, their suffering can be alleviated. Gay writers should write about gay people’s lives, and universities should teach gay history. The goal? The development of a new gay culture. This, Kramer believes, is the way to “begin to escape this plague [suicide] that continues to kill off our children one by one.”

Several other older gay writers agree with Kramer. Michelangelo Signorile rails against gay people who embrace political and social conservatism, and he is contemptuous of the “ex-gay,” “too gay,” and “postgay” movements that have “slithered onto the scene.” Those who reject a gay identity are, according to Signorile, conforming to the dominant heterosexual culture in thought, values, looks, lifestyle, and political complacency. Similarly, social critics Michael Bronski and Jeffrey Weeks warn about the perils of blending. Gay sex, they say, is central to being gay, to being different from straights, to forging gay identities.

Nothing could be more foreign to young people today than these senior perspectives. The vast majority of same-sex-attracted teens dismiss these extreme stands. Rather, they simultaneously highlight their commonalities with humanity while challenging, according to D’Emilio, “the dehumanizing stereotypes that weigh heavily on our lives and target us for oppression.” The culture of contemporary teenagers easily incorporates its homoerotic members. It’s more than being gay-friendly. It’s being gay-blind.

James Getzlaff, star of the 2003 television reality show Boy Meets Boy, reacts negatively to being tricked by the show’s producers, who
secretly included straight men pretending to be gay among the mix of fifteen men from whom he could choose a date. He says, “The last thing we need is to have anyone think of us as a joke or to make fun of us just for entertainment. We try so hard to put out a positive image as just normal people, looking for the same stuff everyone else is, and that’s what I was hoping for.”

Those responsible for the show contend that they support accommodation goals. Douglas Ross, the executive producer and codirector of Boy Meets Boy, says that he wants his “truly groundbreaking television” show to appeal to a broad audience. “We anticipate a lot of both gay and straight viewers will have their assumptions challenged about what it means to be gay and what it means to be straight.” By exploring the sociology of male stereotypes, Ross says, the show promotes accommodation:

> [W]hat are we to make of these straight men who were willing to pretend they were gay and were comfortable enough with themselves to admit that they don’t embody the perfect macho image of “straight”? It certainly suggests an evolution in the consciousness of some straight men; and it seems to me that the program did have the effect of shattering stereotypes for both gay and straight viewers.

So, too, other recent television shows with a youthful audience ease the separation between gay and straight. Some examples:

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, according to reviewer Art Cohen, is “about straight men seeking the advice of gay men, laughing with them, and wanting to be more like them.”

*The L Word* presents women-loving women as totally enviable. The lesbians portrayed on this show tend to be beautiful, ambitious, modern women who have no work problems, zero percent body fat, blindingly white teeth, and constant sex, living in a glowing and delectable world.
In a recent episode of *South Park*, Butters confesses, “Now you know my terrible secret!” Stan reassures him, “You're gay? I don’t mind you’re gay. That’s okay with me.”

On the television show *Oliver Beene*, actor Taylor Emerson portrays Michael, an eleven-year-old whose interests and mannerisms quite clearly characterize him as a future gay man (confirmed by a flash forward).\(^{19}\)

MTV’s Chicago edition of *Real World* features Aneesa and Chris, two attractive participants who are not straight.\(^{20}\)

On *Boston Public*, bisexual high school senior Jeremy Peters is reported to have had anal sex with another guy.\(^{21}\)

This perspective is readily apparent in many other aspects of young people’s lives, all of which tell of a dramatic cultural shift. In sports, high school honor student and varsity athlete Jason Fasi asks his teammates for signatures in support of forming a Gay-Straight Alliance group at Mission Viejo, California. They sign. No one beats him up, no one shies away from dressing next to him, and no one heckles him.\(^{22}\) Two Ohio high school heterosexual runners wear flashy rainbow socks, symbolic of gay pride, during a state track meet to show support for their two gay teammates.\(^{23}\)

In the movies, two “straight but spunky” girls decide to make their friendship more complete by testing out a lesbian relationship in *Kissing Jessica Stein*.\(^{24}\) Young *Harry Potter* actor Sean Biggerstaff receives a ton of fan mail, not all from girls.\(^{25}\)

A Kaiser Family Foundation and *Seventeen* magazine poll finds that the proportion of thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds who “don’t have any problem” with homosexuality more than triples, to 54 percent, during the 1990s.\(^{26}\) Two Illinois girls are voted the school’s “cutest couple” by their fellow high school seniors.\(^{27}\) Lesbian nineteen-year-old twin sisters, Tegan and Sara Quin, tour North America performing songs from their new musical CD that promote tolerance and acceptance.\(^{28}\)

Perhaps young people didn’t notice that the newest version of the
popular computer game, The Sims, has gay characters.29 Or that the first baby born in the nation’s capital in 2003 has two mothers, Helen Rubin and Joanna Bare.30 This younger generation is amused by the invention of the “metrosexual,” but they’re surprised that a straight urban male with enough feminine affinities and ambiguity in his sexuality to make him attractive to both sexes creates such a stir.31

This shift is reflected in two articles in Rolling Stone magazine. Several years ago a feature article, “To Be Young and Gay,” recounted the growing number of teenagers who were coming out of the closet and were finding peer and family acceptance. The author, David Lipsky, concludes that gay adolescence is being redefined as a time of angst and struggle and as a time of pleasure, acceptance, and limitless possibilities.32 Three years later in the same magazine, author Jay Dixit reports further refinement. Same-sex-attracted students at Kramer’s university no longer feel that “being gay” is a primary aspect of their identity. Gayness has been “backgrounded,” as indicated by the following quotes from Yale students Dixit talked with:

A lot of people don’t feel the need to foreground that part of their identity. Most gay people spend the majority of their time outside of strictly gay situations.

There’s a prevailing attitude of, because I’m gay, it doesn’t mean that’s my life. I’m not a “gay person,” I’m a person who happens to be gay.

It makes it possible to just go about your daily life, rather than having to sit around reminding yourself that you’re gay all the time, fighting for all these causes.33

Rather than obsessing over their sexuality, these young adults are occupied with typical college pursuits, including sports, fraternities, and careers. One student observes that the “new gay Yale dresses, talks, and acts no differently than his straight peers.” The sex scene is
similar to that of straights, with lots of hookups and few long-term romantic relationships. Few assert a gay identity or define themselves in relation to straight culture:

No one really cares or objects to you if you’re gay. In fact, making a big deal about being gay is seen as distasteful. The unwritten rule is, you can do whatever you want as long as you don’t act like you’re part of an embittered minority.

It’s sort of avoiding the “I’m here, I’m queer, and I’m pissed off” attitude, because that just turns everybody else off, especially because it’s so unnecessary . . . many gay students actually shun activism.

This is going to sound really terrible, but in order to improve their sex lives on campus, people actually try to avoid being labeled as activists. People who are out on the front lines are almost viewed as unpopular in a certain way. I’m not going to use the word stigma, because that’s too harsh—but there is a sense of that.34

Perhaps these “new gay” or “postgay” students would agree with novelist Armistead Maupin, author of the *Tales of the City* series, who believes that “the only way to lift the stigma of homosexuality is to be matter-of-fact about it.” His stories are for everyone and about everyone, regardless of sexual status. Some characters are gay and others aren’t. The goal is to normalize the existence of same-sex-attracted people. When asked why he writes about heterosexuals in San Francisco, Maupin refutes the notion that he is “shunning my identity. I want to be myself in the world at large, and that’s a far more radical act than confining yourself to a single audience.” He claims not to be a gay writer, but a writer who is gay.35

Contemporary same-sex-attracted teens essentially agree with the Yalies and Maupin, and not with Kramer and Signorile. Writer bell
hooks reminds us, however, of the difficulties faced by marginalized group members if they disagree with the “official position” of their group, such as Kramer and Signorile represent. Is there room for dissent? Although older gay adults may feel pressure to conform to group norms, and this may result in self-censorship and fear that their “minority dissent” will undermine group solidarity, younger people shrug off such pressure. Let the old, professional gays be eccentric, outrageous, and radical, think these members of the younger generation. The oldsters have already lost. Young people have little interest in subverting American civilization. It’s the humanity of individuals with same-sex attractions that has won the hearts and minds of middle America.36 Besides, young people never joined up to be members of a marginalized gay group in the first place.

Why Haven’t Teens Signed Up?

What has caused this radical generational shift—from “gay and proud” to “adolescent and proud”? How prevalent is the transformation? What is the difference between same-sex-oriented adolescents who question and identify from those who don’t—or between heterosexual adolescents who question and identify as straight from those who don’t? What are the factors that determine this? Is it personal experiences? Strength of libido? Does gender matter? How about cohort? How may we best understand the extent to which this indifference to being gay is a healthy outcome? Should teens be encouraged to identify as gay?

I’d like to answer these questions, but I can’t. From the information we do have, the information presented in this book, I do know several things. First, adolescents, regardless of sexual orientation, vary in the degree to which sexuality is a core component of their identity. But what makes an individual's sexuality more or less central is baffling. Perhaps it is the degree to which an adolescent feels sexually distinct from the mainstream. A butch girl might centralize a sexual identity because she has encountered unbearable teasing for
her supposed lesbianism. Or perhaps the strength of an adolescent’s sex drive determines the significance of sexuality for personal identity. An early or particularly significant erotic experience or infatuation might influence the potency of sexual identity. Perhaps it depends on whether the adolescent lives in a home or a community or a time in which sexuality is robust and omnipresent. Maybe the young person has a lesbian aunt or a gay uncle, or other siblings have identified as gay, or friends have come out, and that has influenced the person’s degree of gay identity.

Second, adolescents with same-sex desire are not the only ones to question their sexuality, to explore what their sexuality means for their identity. Nor do all adolescents question their sexuality or seek to establish a sexual identity. Sexual orientation per se is not a factor, except to the degree that the individual and the society at large choose to make it one—and this has often been the case, for obvious reasons, given the assumption of universal heterosexuality. Moreover, when we talk only with those for whom sexuality is an important and influential aspect of who they are, those who are doing least well with their sexuality, we won’t wind up with an accurate picture. Of course these individuals would make much of their sexual identity.

Third, though it is true that an individual’s “unorthodox” sexuality may, for reasons alluded to above, result in that person’s focusing more on sexual identity than a heterosexual person might, it does not necessarily follow that the full extent of a person’s behaviors, perceptions, cognitions, and social interactions is influenced by that sexuality. *Maybe* young gay men as a group are more drawn than straight men to occupations such as interior decorator and flight attendant and are less interested in occupations such as auto mechanics and athletics. *Maybe* young gay women are more drawn to carpentry and auto mechanics and are less interested in becoming a beauty consultant or fashion model than their straight sisters. The fact is, relatively few same-sex-attracted adolescents actually pursue (or avoid) these occupations.37 Sexuality can be an important factor in determining career choice, but only for a few. Physical and mental assets, person-
ality, family pressure, and social opportunities are of far greater significance in career choice—for adolescents of all sexual persuasions.

Fourth, despite the speculations of some clinicians, the idea that it is healthy for an adolescent to identify with a sexuality has not been proved. Clinicians are fond of assuming that not adopting a label is unhealthy, that it may be an indication of possible psychological problems. An individual's reluctance to embrace a sexual identity, they say, suggests that the person is in denial, afraid to confront his or her sexual reality. Yet how do we square this view with the overwhelming evidence—produced by these same clinicians—of alarmingly high levels of depression, substance abuse, dangerous sexual activities, and suicidality among those young people who self-identify as gay? Is it possible that self-identifying gay youth are more unhealthy than nonidentified same-sex-attracted young adults?

I believe this is entirely possible. Some gay teens come out “loud and proud” as an act of self-affirmation, and some nonidentified same-sex-attracted young people are in hiding for self-destructive reasons. But it is also true that some declare their sexuality as a cry for help from horrific circumstances and that others are psychologically healthy because they have bases for self-definition other than sexuality that are more developmentally appropriate.

Is it possible that our advice to same-sex-attracted young people has been wrong, and that perhaps we should be encouraging them not to identify as gay? Right-wing politicians and ministers advocate this position—but they want more. They want adolescents to give up their same-sex sexuality. In this they are naive, because giving up one’s sexuality is impossible to do.

As millions of teens are demonstrating, it’s possible not to identify oneself sexually and still embrace one’s sexuality. The inclination to shun “being gay” can be an adaptive strategy for emotional survival during hostile times and in dangerous environments. Or not identifying can be indicative of a self-loving and wise adolescent. Or perhaps the motivation to self-identify or not has little to do with one’s
mental health. Gay identity can be indicative of both good and bad mental health.

In these matters, teens with same-sex desire might well mimic heterosexual teens. The fact is, it’s a completely individual matter. For Alex, it’s his core; sexual identity defines his personal identity. Alex lives in Chicago’s Boys Town, is majoring in gay studies with the intent of becoming an attorney who adjudicates same-sex discrimination cases, and writes angry letters to the national gay magazine *The Advocate* because their cover features hot straight actors. By attending the Chicago-based youth group Horizons, Alex discovered as a fifteen-year-old “what I needed for myself, that there were other gay people and that gay was not just a phase and that there were older role models.” Gay Pride marches, radio interviews, statements to the press—Alex describes himself as a “professional faggot. I’m as queer as they get and proud of it.”

In contrast to Alex, Jen tells me that her sexual identity is simply one facet of her core identity and that it has little to do with other aspects of her life. She occasionally attends a meeting of her high school’s Gay-Straight Alliance to demonstrate her support for sexual diversity. Only within the last year has she revisited her sexuality.

Just recently I’ve put some attention to it. Haven’t before because school was occupying my time. Just not enough time because I have a boyfriend. This past summer he was out of the country and I had lots of time and one day I noticed I had undiagnosed strong feelings—I was crying all the time.

This hasn’t been easy because I was the first person lots of people told. As a straight ally, I went to Pride Festivals several times, wore supportive ally buttons, but did not attribute anything to myself.

Jen is considering double-dating Lisa with two gay male friends at her high school prom. She prefers not to be so out, however, if it would injure her college applications.
Thomas’s sexual identity went unrecognized until he was in college. Then he developed a chaotic, passionate relationship with his roommate.

I wanted desperately to be straight, and the label implied some level of commitment. I dated females and realized that I was attracted to females and so I thought of myself as straight. I sort of let all of this go for awhile and then in the early months of my sophomore year I realized that my feelings for guys must mean something, and it must mean that I’m bisexual. Or maybe what I was, was just sexual.

I’ve lived with it as if it were a part of me but not that it was real important . . . I don’t want to go out and just have sex, but I want to find emotional attractiveness with males like I have with females. Now I know that I prefer males, though I’m probably more bi than most gays.\textsuperscript{42}

At the time of the interview, Thomas told me he is engaged and that he plans to marry a woman because it offers what he most wants—an emotional, intimate relationship.

For Sheena, sexual identity is not what she’s into—although she loves questioning and thinking about her sexual attractions. When asked she’ll say, “I guess I’m heterosexual with lesbian tendencies!” She continues,

If given the right situation and if given a chance, I’d definitely try it, the physical part that is. Friendships with women are so intense, co-dependent-like. I recognized this last week. Always before I had looked the other way, but now I’m willing to consider.

This year has really opened me up, sexually speaking. My best friend came out to me as heterosexual with lesbian tendencies. We were at a party and wasted and she wanted me to French kiss her on the mouth so I did and it was so soft. Sober she’d never do it, but I would. I definitely need my quality girl-time!
So what does this mean? I’m equally attracted to males and females. If, like, I come into a room, I see both the beautiful guys and girls. So I guess I’m 50/50. I see particular qualities in women and this attracts me. I’d love to spend the rest of my life with my best friend. I look at girls the way I look at boys. It’s not fair that I can’t find boys like her!43

Sheena admits that these issues are interesting, but she finds that they usually fade to insignificance next to more relevant concerns in her life.

Any idea that adolescent same-sex sexuality is all the same, or that it has predetermined developmental trajectories and consequences, is belied by the life narratives of contemporary teenagers. Their sexuality is but one facet of an interactive system that makes up their lives.44 Any presumption that teens have identical developmental pathways because they share a same-sex sexuality or that their sexuality is equally important to various teens’ sense of self is not only implausible, it is a gross misrepresentation of their lives. The notion of there being a single gay identity or lifestyle is, in short, absurd, especially to adolescents.

To overcome our prevailing misperceptions, we must demystify sexuality and see it as a valid developmental topic, not a clinical risk factor. Sexual development should be seen as a legitimate, growth-promoting, and core aspect of what it means to be an adolescent.45 At the same time, we must understand that the extent to which sexuality defines identity spans from all-important (it is what I am) to a mere biological fact.

Refusing a Label

A recent survey of a Massachusetts high school revealed that over 11 percent of the students ascribed to themselves at least one aspect of homoeroticism. Seldom, however, did they report having sex with someone of the same gender or identifying as gay. Fewer than 3 per-
cent were willing to assume a gay or bisexual label. In a California high school, 6 percent reported that they “know that I am homosexual or bisexual” and an additional 13 percent said that they frequently or sometimes wonder if they are homosexual.

Naming sexuality as a means to stamp a personal and positive understanding to a life narrative is a relatively recent development. Identifying as gay first became prevalent among those who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. As Gil Herdt and Andy Boxer put it, people who gave themselves such an identification signified “living with their desires, not in hiding and alienation, but out in the public, in the light of social day—leading to adaptation and greater creative fulfillment than they could have imagined at the beginning of the process.”

Although some young people today might also get these advantages from identifying as gay, perhaps especially if they live in secluded, conservative regions of the country, many others object to self-labeling. Some find their sexuality to be more fluid than that permitted by constructed models of sexual identity. Some have notions of what a gay person looks like, acts like, and believes—and it’s not them. They cannot or do not want to attribute these features to themselves. Some are philosophically opposed to the idea of placing their sexuality into “identity boxes.” To them, the mere creation of sexual categories reifies the labels across time and place and exaggerates differences that don’t exist. Some young people give themselves an uncommon or unrecognized label (e.g., two-spirit) or one that encompasses multiple identities (e.g., bi-lesbian). Many simply find the labels an annoyance. One young woman told me:

I felt there just was no need for labels, so I didn’t tell anyone. But when I was in tenth [grade] I got interested in this other girl and we were in a romantic relationship. Then I began to define myself differently, more definitely, that it was more real. I just thought labeling was silly, but then people began to ask me for a label. To calm them I said bisexual.
I had wanted to be friends with this girl and then I became more and more interested and then a crush developed. This did not change my self-concept . . . What I wanted to say was that I simply was just in a relationship with a woman. People asked because most of my friends were involved in the gay community and most of my friends were lesbian or gay.51

In her work with young people, Beatrice Green observes adolescents who engage in same-sex behavior and yet “refuse the politics of sexual identity, arguing that these are the issues of the older generation. They claim the right to love and have sex with whomever and in any way they want.” She refers to them as the “new Act Up generation” and speculates that although they might threaten both the gay and the straight establishment, “they may be the future in a post-identity politics society.”52 I agree.

These young people are repudiating the appropriateness and artificiality of dichotomous definitions of sexual identity as they challenge cultural definitions of gay lives. Gay and straight categories may have been fine for their parents, but not for them. Youth culture is permeated by nuance, especially with regard to sexuality. Sexual behavior and sexual orientation flow within various gender expressions and changing definitions of what is gay, bisexual, and straight. If pushed, they might agree to vague terms such as “queer” or “not straight.” Their preference is to not call themselves, or their futures, anything at all. They refuse to label themselves because they wish to separate sexual desire from the friction of politics. One person who was interviewed for a popular article on the “polymorphous normal” asserted that sexuality is not about politics but about pleasure and happiness. Another eschewed identity categories because “my experience is continuous. It’s not compartmentalized into poetry and sexuality and rational thought. We confuse the map with the territory.”53

Some of these young people have been called “queer,” defined by anthropologist Melinda Kanner as individuals intent on “destabiliz-
ing conventional categories, subverting the identities derived from and normalized by heteropatriarchy. Queerness defies binary and fixed categories such as homo-/heterosexual, female/male, even lesbian/gay. Queerness, in both social performance and in lived identities, interrupts both convention and expectations. Most teens, however, do not think of themselves as queer or appreciate the word. They simply reject the potentially life-altering repercussions of such a label.

Their rejection of label designations is motivated by many things—for philosophical reasons, because the labels seem irrelevant and uncharacteristic, in an attempt to avoid homophobia, or because the label is simply felt to be inaccurate. Some may believe that their current attraction or relationship is a “special” one, an aberration that implies little about them or their sexuality. Others fear the consequences of being gay and so remain unlabeled and closeted, perhaps coming out later in their lives. We know little about these nonidentified teens, but we know they exist.

In a 2001 interview, actor and filmmaker Jason Gould was asked about being gay, coming out, and disclosing his sexuality to his famous parents, Barbra Streisand and Elliott Gould. Jason, who recalled having his first “gay impulse” at age eight, says that he has not come out as gay because he has never said to himself, “Oh, I’m gay.” He denies living a closeted life or being ashamed of who he is. “I’m pretty comfortable with my sexuality,” he says, adding,

You know, the more I understand my own sexuality the more I . . . I mean I don’t mind being called gay, because I’m certainly attracted to men. But I also think that it’s limiting. I think that within the gay community—and as a member of the gay community—it’s limiting for us to stereotype ourselves. Attraction is more complex than the terms gay, straight, and bisexual. And I hope that eventually people will evolve into accepting a broader understanding of attraction.
Gould’s refusal to declare a sexual identity is apparently not a function of internalized homophobia or self-hatred or fear. He has declared his sexuality—he is attracted to men; he simply finds the term “gay” an inadequate descriptor of his sexuality.

Jason Gould is not alone. Comedian Rosie O’Donnell doesn’t appreciate the adjective “gay” permanently attached to her name. Being attracted to other women, she says, was never a “big deal for me.”

Sophia of MTV’s Road Rules downplays her sexuality: “It’s not a big deal to me because I don’t make it a big deal . . . It’s just part of who I am.”

The balkanization of sexuality, according to one writer, is especially prevalent among artists, students, cultural explorers, and young women. They prefer an alternative, self-generated identity label or no label at all rather than those typically offered in research investigations. Two of these groups, young women and cultural explorers, in particular have not been well served by standard sexual taxonomies.

**YOUNG WOMEN AND FLUIDITY**

Inflexible, distinct boundaries rarely apply to young women’s sexuality. A young woman’s most enjoyable sexual fantasies might be of other women while her most enjoyable sex is with men—or vice versa. Young women are more likely than young men to incorporate partners of both sexes in their behavior and fantasies. When shown explicit sex films, lesbians and heterosexual women do not differ in their subjective and genital arousal to either male-female or female-female sex scenes, and the highest arousal for both groups of women is to heterosexual sex scenes. In their research, Meredith Chivers and her colleagues suggest that women, regardless of sexual orientation, have a “nonspecific” pattern of sexual arousal. That is, although heterosexual college women might say that they prefer heterosexual over female-female and male-male erotica, their actual genital arousal to sex scenes indicates no significant preference of
male-female over female-female scenes. They prefer and become more aroused by female-female than male-male sex scenes. By contrast, gay and heterosexual men show a strong preferred-sex (“categorical”) pattern. Gay men are more aroused by male-male than male-female scenes, and heterosexual men are more aroused by male-female scenes, although heterosexual men react most strongly to female-female erotica. Perhaps as a result, women are less apt to be stigmatized for engaging in same-sex behavior.63

In eighth grade Stephanie and Lolita were best friends. Stephanie recalled that

Lolita would sleep over a lot and one night she was talking about her boyfriend Juan and talking about sex. I was pretending to know more than I did. We had been very affectionate, like most girlfriends. I asked her how he kissed her, and so she kissed me like her Juan did. This was quite a shocker. From then on we kissed a lot when we got together, and began touching and caressing. To make it “okay,” one of us would be the boy. Was penetration with our fingers but never oral sex. She’s straight as far as I know.

Never talked about it. I can’t tell what Lolita is, but I was the only girl she did anything with. We never said we were lesbians. I kind of knew that it was not right, but it felt okay. Mom caught us in bed and this was a big uproar. We had gotten together every day after school for six to seven months but Mom made that more difficult.

Stephanie’s attitude was that her experience with her friend was just a kid experience. Lots of peers were having sex, only with guys, so having sex was not unusual.64

Once a young woman recognizes that she’s not totally straight, there is little guarantee that she’ll declare herself to be lesbian or bisexual. In an attempt to identify “authentic” lesbians, researchers have
traditionally relied on what they believe has worked for identifying gay young men: the achievement of developmental milestones. But, as we have seen, such models won’t distinguish lesbians who maintain their lesbian identity over time from those who don’t. It is more informative to examine patterns of attraction and behavior.65

Over the course of eight years, nearly two thirds of the young women Lisa Diamond interviewed changed identity labels at least once, often because “sexual identity categories failed to represent the vast diversity of sexual and romantic feelings they were capable of experiencing for female and male partners under different circumstances.”66 Some of these women expressed their ambivalence by viewing their sexuality as fluid. Love depends on the person, they told her, not the gender of the person.

Those women Diamond studied who relinquished their lesbian or bisexual identity for a heterosexual or an unlabeled status had similar developmental histories. What differed was their interpretation of their sexual experiences. The women who would not be labeled described their sexuality as fluid and expressed uncertainty about their future sex lives. Those who changed to a heterosexual label had lower levels of same-sex attractions and behavior throughout the study than did the other women. A heterosexual identification was, for them, a viable solution to the “problem” of their nonexclusive attractions and behavior.

Relinquishing a sexual identity label, however, did not mean that these women relinquished their same-sex sexuality. Their same-sex attractions and behavior were real, not a phase. All maintained that they might identify as lesbian or bisexual in the future. Diamond noted that

[These findings are consistent with the notion that identity relinquishment does not represent a fundamental change in sexual orientation itself, but rather a change in how women interpret and act upon their sexual orientation . . . Nonexclusivity
and plasticity in women’s attractions and behaviors potentiate multiple transitions in identification and behavior over the life course.67

In short, attempts to fit an adolescent girl’s “complex, highly contextualized experiences of same-sex and other-sex sexuality into cookie-cutter molds of ‘gay,’ ‘straight,’ and (only recently) ‘bisexual’” are doomed to failure.68 The exception of these young women to follow sexual identity models of identity progression simply reflects the complexity of their lives.

CULTURAL EXPLORERS AND ALIEN NOTIONS

A similar disconnect between orthodoxy and life histories is evident for young people in non-U.S. cultures and subcultures within the United States. In reviewing the cross-cultural evidence, Fernando Luiz Cardoso and Dennis Werner conclude, “People vary tremendously in their same-sex behaviors, in their sexual desires, and in the ways they define themselves. Cultures also differ widely in the ways they define and treat these relationships and the people who engage in them.”69 Western definitions of sexuality are viewed as exceedingly rigid. For example, as one writer notes, in some communities “same-sex relationships are defined between individuals and may involve sexuality, eroticism, and very intensive friendships and emotions. Men can therefore hold hands in public or sleep naked in the same bed together.” One Iranian remarks that in his culture labels for sexuality are relatively rare.70

It is not difficult to find cross-cultural examples of a homoerotic life that are not identified as such. One has been referred to as “Mediterranean homosexuality.” In a culture with this type of sexuality, according to Íñaki Tofiño, a gay activist in Catalonia, there is a “large zone of liberty for homoerotic activity between males, but no such thing as a ‘homosexual identity’ as such.” The sexes are often separated during adolescence and young adulthood; homoerotic friend-
ships, alliances, and physical contact are not uncommon. A person’s identity (for both men and women) is not usually defined by what one does sexually or who one falls in love with. To do so would be to deny the more legitimate cultural prescriptions for identification based on religion, region, or ethnicity. To “come out as gay” makes little sense in such a culture. To attach a gay persona “in every situation is an alien notion” and can often be problematic when sex is not part of the public discourse.  

Tofiño argues that Western notions of a public or private gay identity that one carries from one situation to the next are not necessary for large-scale cultural changes to take place. For example, in Spain few identify as gay; yet sexual orientation is a category that enjoys broad protections in that country’s Penal Code, which acknowledges same-sex couples and provides gays with protection against hate crimes.

An example within the United States of how a gay identity has been subverted is described in a recent New York Times Magazine article. Author Benoit Denizet-Lewis explores the world of African American young adult men who have sex and romantic relationships with men and who are forging an “exuberant new identity” based not on their sexuality but their skin color and culture.

Rejecting a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate, many black men have settled on a new identity, with its own vocabulary and customs and its own name: Down Low . . . [T]he creation of an organized, underground subculture largely made up of black men who otherwise live straight lives is a phenomenon of the last decade . . . Most DL men identify themselves not as gay or bisexual but first and foremost as black. To them, as to many blacks, that equates to being inherently masculine.

A DL identity signifies a virulent rejection of a gay identity associated with “drag queens or sissies.” One eighteen-year-old whom Denizet-Lewis spoke with clearly wants this separation. “Gays are
the faggots who dress, talk and act like girls,” he said. “That’s not me.” These men acknowledge the sexuality in their lives, but being DL is not perceived as merely another sexual identity label. It is about “being who you are, but keeping your business to yourself.” It is a selection of ethnic affinity over sexuality and masculinity over femininity.

The majority of young people of both sexes with same-sex desire resist and refuse to identify as gay. We know little about them because they usually opt out of research, educational programs, and support groups. Their desire is not to stand out “like a semen stain on a blue dress,” but to be as boring as the next person, to buy an SUV and to fade into the fabric of American life.

Ordinary Jane, Ordinary Joe

In the previous chapter I discussed the nascent movement underway to change our preoccupation with deficit models to one that acknowledges the resiliency of gay teens. Although I generally applaud this change—a resiliency script is certainly preferable to a suicidal one—I believe it too is ultimately flawed, for it simply substitutes one universal, overwrought characterization for another. The reality is that both at-risk and resilient gay teens are minor players among the symphony of the same-sex attracted. Most are no more or less resilient or healthy than their straight friends. Most remain, well, ordinary as they negotiate routine and uneventful lives.

An alternative perspective, one I believe is closer to the truth, is to recognize not only the positive features of being “different from the norm” but also the ordinariness of most young people with same-sex desire. Resistance to this notion is stiff, perhaps less from popular culture than from the world of scholarship and academia, which is blinded to the existence of the ordinary because of the biases inherent in typical survey questions. As the previous chapters have made clear, not all adolescents who experience same-sex desire identify as gay or
engage in same-sex activities. Not all adolescents who identify as gay have a same-sex orientation or engage in same-sex behavior. Not all adolescents who have sex with their own gender identify as gay or have same-sex attractions. Scholarship that neglects these facts seldom finds “hidden” populations who have one or two of these features but not all three. Or who have all three, but to varying degrees.

If the “nongay majority with homosexual feelings” group of adolescents could be found, what might be discovered is not their exceptionality but their normal adolescent concerns. Lisa Diamond notes that adolescents with same-sex desires ruminate far more about “love and romance than about suicide, hate crimes, or homelessness, and they currently have nowhere to turn with their concerns.” Love does not discriminate based on sexual orientation or the object of one’s infatuation. Consider the following quotes—first, from Catherine Deneuve:

But to be in love with a man or a woman, it’s the same thing; it has to do with giving and listening and being very open to someone, so it does not make much difference.

And next, from Dennis Quaid:

We’re attracted to whomever we’re attracted to. We can’t help loving the people we love, and we can’t help being attracted to what we’re attracted to.

One needn’t identify as gay or engage in same-sex behavior to fall in love with another girl or boy. Indeed, most same-sex lovers do not claim a gay identity. The most accurate, albeit not breathtaking, conclusion is that sexual orientation dictates some of the essence of what it means to be alive, but not everything.

Thus, to understand same-sex-oriented teens we must first understand adolescence in general. Too frequently our investigations ig-
nore the vast theoretical and empirical literature on adolescence in favor of methodologically flawed gay research. Conversely, rarely is it suggested that scholarship on gay youth can add to a general understanding of adolescent development.

Consider John Gottman and his colleagues’ recent research on same-sex relationships. Placing their investigation within the larger context of research on couples generally, the team found the following:

1. Similar to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples’ expressions of contempt, disgust, and defensiveness are associated with a decrease in relationship satisfaction; humor and affection, to high relationship satisfaction.
2. In situations of conflict, same-sex couples are less belligerent, domineering, and tense and display greater concern with equity, humor, affection, and joy than heterosexual couples. Whereas heterosexual couples often display detachment in times of conflict, same-sex couples become more emotionally and mentally involved and engaged.
3. Within the relationship, lesbians are more likely than gay males to overtly display their affection for each other (emotional expressiveness); gay males are more likely to verbally validate each other. These differences are consistent with sex differences among heterosexuals.

In speculating about these differences, Gottman and his team note that same-sex couples are more likely to value equality and to be more positive toward each other. The inherent status differential between men and women in heterosexual relationships, which “breeds hostility, particularly from women, who tend to have less power than men, and who also typically bring up most of the relationship issues,” is largely absent in same-sex couples. According to the authors, “Because there are fewer barriers to leaving homosexual compared to
heterosexual relationships, homosexual couples may be more careful in the way they accept influence from one another. Thus, we suggest that the process variables by which they resolve conflicts may be the very glue that keeps these relationships stable. In other words, same-sex couples have something to teach heterosexual couples about respect, equity, and stability.

These dual responsibilities of research on same-sex-attracted young people—rooting research hypotheses and interpretations within the larger context of adolescent development and translating results in terms of how they extend knowledge about adolescence in general—are routinely ignored. It is as if no one has ever conducted research on school achievement, peer harassment, self-esteem, romantic relationships, or family relations prior to our particular investigation of these issues with gay youth.

Given these shortcomings, there should be little wonder that gay teens are believed to experience meaningfully different life trajectories from heterosexual teens. To Middle America, gay teens are arrogant aliens from another culture, at the margins of society with multiple body piercings, purple hair, and pointedly non-Abercrombie and Fitch clothing; to gay adults, they are supposed to be the next generation of political activists who will fight for gay rights and against heterosexism, racism, sexism, and classism.

These young people, however, are neither our enlightened heirs nor our prodigal descendants. Sexual diversity is becoming normalized, and the gay-straight divide is becoming blurred. Straight teens are acting, looking, and becoming gayish, and an expansive array of nonstraight teens is becoming visible. These young people are more apt to say things like “Why won’t my parents let me go to the concert?” and “If I take chemistry, how will that affect my grade point average?” than “I’m gay, I’m gay, oh my, what am I going to do?”

This is not to deny that some are ridiculed because of their gender expression. Or that they cannot openly date those they love most because same-sex dating in high school is still difficult for most. Or that
they feel they must keep something of themselves secret from their parents and friends. But same-sex-attracted teenagers are not the only young people facing these kinds of problems. Disabled kids, above- and below-average-intelligence kids, unattractive kids, overweight kids, and ethnic-minority kids are also ridiculed. Many teens from these groups do not date the person they desire because they feel that the desired person is “unreachable.” Many have profound secrets they do not tell their parents or friends, such as those relating to pregnancy, substance use, nontraditional sexual longings, and psychic beliefs. So why should the life experiences of same-sex-attracted teens only be of such singular significance that they are seen as being unable to cope with their problems and incapable of leading happy, productive lives?

We see gay adults as being able to lead happy, healthy, and productive lives; they are said not to differ from heterosexuals in psychological adjustment.81 We could also see young people this way. Same-sex-attracted young people want to join and become involved in the heterosexual world of their fellow teenagers. A previous generation established “gay proms”—first in Detroit and later in Los Angeles—as a means to build support, pride, and social change. Nowadays, the inclination is to have same-sex couples attend regular high school proms. This is the far greater revolution. It normalizes same-sex sexuality in a way that was not possible when only separate gay proms welcomed same-sex couples.82

Nothing I have stated in this book justifies neglect of gay young people who suffer and entertain thoughts of suicide because of their sexuality. I am willing to believe that this reality might have been more characteristic of earlier generations than it is today. But whatever motivation might prompt us to sensationalize the fate of gay teens or represent them as heroic survivors, it’s not scientifically valid now, and it was not scientifically valid in years past.

Both the national and the gay press misrepresent most gay teens and deliver a risky message to those wondering if they might be gay.
Consider the following headlines from various publications over the past several years:

Dying to Be a Boy Scout?
Suicidal Tendencies: Is Anguish over Sexual Orientation Causing Gay and Lesbian Teens to Kill Themselves?
Gay Youths’ Deadly Despair
Robbie’s Story: How a Fragile 14-Year-Old Boy Was Crushed in His Struggle to Accept Being Gay
“I Couldn’t Have Saved Him the Rest of His Life”
Bad Days for Gay Teenagers
The Hidden Plague

Scholarship must rise above such “doom and gloom” caricature and present the larger context of teenagers’ lives.

Why is there such profound resistance to the normalization of same-sex-attracted young people? Why is the focus on the outliers rather than the majority? Here are four (bad) reasons:

1. Because the positive and healthy lives of typical contemporary gay teenagers contradict the tumultuous and painful adolescence of gay scholars and policy makers.
2. Because well-adjusted gay teens present problems for those applying for problem-focused research grants and for the need, as one critic put it, to “manufacture victims for the psychology industry.”
3. Because otherwise today's teens would not fully appreciate what researchers, educators, mental health professionals, and activists did for them to allow them to live their lives without fear. How can this “gift” be thrown away so cavalierly?
4. Because today’s young people are harbingers of a time in which sexual identity will have no importance, thus thrusting past research into the garbage heap of antiquated science,
making it nothing more than a curiosity for historians and anthropologists.

New gay teenagers disdain sexual categories, and they believe, as Michael Bronski writes, “that some of ‘us’ have more in common with some of ‘them’ than we have with each other . . . Within all of these identities are some who are as mainstream as can be, and some who march to their own drummer.”85 It might be wise to listen to their voices and appreciate the reasons they reject the notion of being identified by their sexuality. Led by contemporary young women who are trading in the labels “lesbian” and “bisexual” for descriptors that better reflect their reality, new gay teens are simply trying to live within the flux of adolescence.86 Their lives, as Jeffrey Weeks observes, provide “continuous possibilities for invention and re-invention, open processes through which change can happen.”87 Some assimilate, and some accommodate. Some embrace gayness, and some refuse it. It’s just that the old categories of gay and lesbian don’t fit anymore.88

Banality

The fact is, the lives of most same-sex-attracted teenagers are not exceptional either in their pathology or their resiliency. Rather, they are ordinary. Gay adolescents have the same developmental concerns, assets, and liabilities as heterosexual adolescents. This un noteworthy banality might well be their greatest asset. It suggests that they are in the forefront of what can be called a postgay era, in which same-sex-attracted individuals can pursue diverse personal and political goals, whether they be a desire to blend into mainstream society or a fight to radically restructure modern discourse about sexuality.

It is my fervent hope that what is being achieved in the real world can be achieved in scholarship. I hope to see the elimination of same-sex sexuality as a defining characteristic of adolescents in my lifetime.
If it can be relegated to insignificance, the lives of millions of teens will be dramatically improved.

I give the final word to “Andrew James,” a college student who concluded his essay “In Search of Ordinary Joes” with a simple goal: “Raising the profile of banal homosexuals . . . It’s not going to be fabulous, it’s not going to be cutting edge, but I think it’s got to be the next wave of the gay movement.”