

## The Psychological World of the Gay Teenager: Social Change, Narrative, and “Normality”

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**Abstract** This paper examines the application of concepts of normal adolescence pioneered by Offer and colleagues to the study of gay and lesbian youth. Adolescent development among this population demonstrates remarkable historical variability along the lines of generation-cohort, revealing the utility of a life-course approach to the study of normal adolescence. Concepts of normal adolescence appear to shift with changing narratives of identity for sexual minority youth. We contrast two narratives of gay youth identity development that have emerged since the inception of substantive research programs on gay adolescence: (1) the *narrative of struggle and success* that came to dominate the literature in the 1980s and 1990s and (2) the *narrative of emancipation* that has emerged from the work of Savin-Williams and others who argue for a recognition of the diversity of adolescent development for this population. In relating this contrast to

Offer’s seminal contributions to the study of adolescence, we suggest that the most normative feature of human development, particularly during adolescence, is its connection to discourses of identity through the formation of personal narratives that anchor the life course and provide meaning to conceptions of self-development. The example of shifting narratives of gay youth identity development is meant to exemplify this characteristic feature of human development.

**Keywords** Gay youth · Normal adolescence · Sexual minority youth

Who I have sex with doesn’t say much about who I am as a person. I’m just a normal guy who finds other guys very attractive. I’m on the track team, majoring in classics and want to go to law school and make a difference in the world. That’s more about who I am than who I might hook-up with.

—Matthew, a twenty year old college student

Matthew, a student at our university, recently reported that while home over summer vacation he had “come out” to his mother. When asked what he had said in coming out, he reported that in response to her inquiry about when he might introduce her to his girlfriend, he told her that he didn’t have a girlfriend but a boyfriend. However, he hastened to add, that just because he has a boyfriend, that in itself doesn’t mean much about who he is. Matthew notes that many of his friends are uninterested in labels or categories referring to sexual identities. His generation, he maintains, is beyond terms like “gay” or even the reclaimed identity label “queer.” Sometimes he has sex with women, but more often with men. He doesn’t worry very much about the question of his identity, doesn’t see much point in a campus organization for guys like him, and is just a “normal” college student. For

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Matthew, same-sex attraction and intimacy do not diminish his own self-perception of normality.

The concept of “normality” pervades both the popular consciousness and also the social sciences. Since its formal inception, the discipline of psychology has been primarily concerned with regularities and universals of human development and the mental life. Psychologists interested in issues of human development have long proposed “ages and stages” frameworks for understanding processes of development (e.g., Erikson, 1950), as if the ways in which psychological experience are organized possess temporal and geographic stability. Is the “identity crisis” (Erikson, 1968) a “normal” process of adolescent development, or is it restricted to certain cultural and historical contexts? Is adolescence necessarily a time of heightened vulnerability and propensity to personal distress as psychoanalysis has traditionally maintained? Is *sturm* and *drang* inevitable in adolescence, as Hall (1904) originally posited and as later supported by psychoanalysis (e.g., Blos, 1962; Freud, 1937, 1958)? Or, rather, is it simply more likely to occur during adolescence in the Western, industrial and late modern historical context which privileges identity development as a fundamental process of the life course (Arnett, 1999)? Is adolescence itself a “normal” part of the life course, with identifiable biological, psychological, and social milestones, or is it merely a socially constructed interlude between childhood and an ever-delayed adulthood in the context of modernity and late modernity (Arnett, 2000)?

### Normality and sexual orientation: A narrative and life-course approach

A consideration of the development of sexual minority youth highlights the debate regarding normality and personal distress across the years of adolescence and young adulthood. While there is a significant literature describing the mental health problems posed by same-sex orientation (D’Augelli, 2002; Meyer, 2003; Safren and Heimberg, 1999), the notion of an inescapable connection between same-sex sexuality and psychological distress has been called into question in recent scholarship and accounts in the popular media that suggest an adolescence increasingly smooth for youth with same-sex desire (Cloud, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005a,b). A new generation of youth, with the support of a new cultural discourse on sexual identity diversity, appears to enjoy same-sex relationships without recourse to concern that their same-sex desire makes them “abnormal” (Savin-Williams, 2005a,b). In fact, many youth today reject such sexual identity categories as “gay” and “lesbian,” in defiance of social identity labels which would suggest the primacy of sexuality in their personal identities. These youth, like Matthew, claim

that their sexual desire is irrelevant to their personal identity. Do they seek to redefine themselves as “normal” adolescents, having been hijacked as marginalized and deviant for so long? Or are they simply rebelling against the master narrative of “normal” gay adolescence that has evolved in the psychological literature (Plummer, 1995; Russell *et al.*, 2000)?

As we approach the topic of gay youth, we must wrestle with these difficult intellectual questions on normality, sexual orientation, and cohort. In this paper, we suggest that application of a life-course approach helps to clarify many of the issues in the debate regarding normality and abnormality in same-sex desire among youth in contemporary society (Boxer and Cohler, 1989; Boxer *et al.*, 1993; Cohler, *in press*; Cohler and Galatzer-Levy, 2000; Hammack, 2005). Such an approach offers some interpretive clarity to the disparate accounts of identity development for youth with same-sex desire offered by D’Augelli (2002) and Remafedi (1999a, b), who highlight issues of risk and the challenges of adjustment, and Savin-Williams (2005a,b), who portrays these youth as “normal” teens comfortable with their sexual desire and less in need of assuming a gay or lesbian identity label. It is possible that these two conflicting perspectives can be reconciled when recognizing the dramatic social change taking place over the past two decades and the time and place at which seminal studies within each perspective have been carried out. This debate once again shows the advantage of adopting a life-course perspective on issues of normality in the study of sexual minority youth.

Although we recognize the importance of acknowledging the great diversity in the manner in which youth living in different regions of the United States or in other societies understand their same-sex desire (e.g., Diamond, 2003a; Diamond and Savin-Williams, 2000; Hammack, 2005; Peplau, 2001; Savin-Williams and Diamond, 2000), we speak broadly of the development of youth with same-sex desire in this paper. We use labels like “gay,” “lesbian,” or “bisexual” out of convention and convenience in referring to all sexual minority youth (see Savin-Williams, 2001b, 2005a; Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003).

In our focus on the concept of normal development among adolescents with same-sex desire, we seek to reconcile divergent accounts of sexual orientation and personal adjustment. We suggest that divergence in conceptual accounts of gay adolescent development emerges from a failure to fully acknowledge the salience of *context*—including cohort, geographic location, and the larger socio-historical context of development—in understanding the relationship between identity and lived experience. In addition, these accounts fail to fully recognize the connection between identity development and *narrative* which provides insight into shifting conceptions of normal adolescence for youth with same-sex desire. The emergence of divergent accounts of gay

adolescence reveals the transitional character of narratives of gay identity in the larger culture, as the “master narrative” of gay identity accommodates shifting social and political circumstance (Plummer, 1995; Russell *et al.*, 2000). Social change such as that inspired by the internet, which has made available accounts by sexual minority youth overcoming obstacles and coping with minority stress, together with personal accounts such as Kirk Read’s (2001), has led to changes in the manner in which sexual minority youth narrate their life stories (Cohler, *in press*; Due, 1995; Gray, 1999; Heron, 1994; Reed, 1997; Windmeyer, 2005).

Beginning with a review of seminal work on issues of normality in adolescence, we review these two competing narratives of adjustment and normality among sexual minority youth. The first narrative, which we term the *narrative of struggle and success*, depicts gay youth as the victims of harassment and internalized homophobia, accompanied by serious mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. But this narrative also suggests success in spite of struggle, revealing the process of gay identity development, realized through social practice in the larger gay and lesbian culture (e.g., Herdt and Boxer, 1996), as a triumphant model of resilience in a heterosexist world. The second narrative, the *narrative of emancipation*, reveals the increasing fluidity in self-labeling among youth with same-sex desire, de-pathologizes the experience of sexual identity development among these youth, emphasizes the manner in which sexual minority youth cope with issues of minority stress (so significant as a factor accounting for personal distress among these youth), and extends the concept of normality as developed by Offer and his colleagues to the study of sexual minority youth.

We suggest that these two narratives reflect particular historical moments in the cultural construction of homosexuality over the post-war period and into the present time (Cohler, *in press*), although we recognize that each of these competing narratives continue to be available as master narratives of gay identity in the contemporary world. Our aim is to make explicit the implications of narrative multiplicity for the identity development of youth with same-sex desire and, in the process, re-envision a conception of normality in adolescent development. We suggest that questions of development and normality cannot be considered independent of both time and place. Rather, the inclusion of contextual considerations that define a life-course approach enhances our knowledge of sameness and variability in human experience, thus presenting a more authentic account of human development across time and place. The emergence of a life-course perspective in the study of human development has provided a means for addressing the interplay of lived experience and socio-historical context, and the intertwining of subjective and shared meanings that shape lives over developmental and historical time.

Grounded in the pioneering work of social theorist Karl Mannheim (1928), the life-course approach (see Dannefer, 1984) may be contrasted both with life-cycle perspectives, which have tended to focus on relatively invariant, age-graded stages or phases, and with life-span perspectives, which have typically not acknowledged the far-ranging impact of “generation units” spanning some number of contiguous birth years (Mannheim, 1928) or cohort-generational factors (Elder, 1995). The life-course perspective maintains that developmental pathways reflect the distinctive social and historical changes experienced by members of particular generations and cannot be understood apart from this social and historical context (Elder, 1995, 1998; Settersten, 1999).

Unfortunately, although the life-course perspective offers conceptual tools for understanding the collective impact of historical change, there has been relatively little study of either inter-cohort or intra-cohort variation in the ways in which socio-historical circumstances are related to particular lives. Life-course research has demonstrated that members of a given cohort react in diverse and often unpredictable ways to social and historical circumstances (George, 1996; Rosenfeld, 1999; Settersten, 1999, 2002; Settersten and Hägestad, 1996). For example, the timing of transitions into and out of expected roles—early, late, or on-time—can influence the ways in which those roles are experienced and can alter the timing of other expectable role entrances and exits. Similarly, individuals react differently to collective misfortune. Further, subgroups of individuals may hold many of the basic values and commitments of their generation-cohort and yet have a somewhat different outlook relative to their larger cohort. Rosenfeld (2003) has referred to such groups as “identity cohorts.”

A life-course approach to the study of sexual identity development is particularly useful, as the connection between socio-historical context and sexuality is highly significant for matters of self-understanding and identity formation through the shaping of discourse (Foucault, 1978). The generational distinction in experiences of gay men and lesbians (Cohler, *in press*; Cohler and Hammack, 2006; Parks, 1999) reveals the ways in which identity development is linked to cultural and historical context, particularly for individuals with same-sex desire. The language of self-definition—from “fairy” to “homosexual” to “gay” and “queer”—changes with an ever-shifting field of cultural discourse, and these changes are apparent in the differential identity construction along the lines of generation. The application of a life-course approach therefore reveals those elements of gay identity development that are historically contingent through the examination of multiple cohorts with sensitivity to larger issues of history and cultural discourse (see Hammack, 2005). A life-course model also naturally calls into question the notion of a static conception of normality, suggesting instead that perhaps the

most normative feature of human development is its contextual positioning (e.g., Elder, 1999).

### The emergence of a narrative of normal development

The move toward studies of *normality* and normal psychological development can be viewed as a reaction to the particular narrative of development as derived from abnormality common in theoretical approaches like psychoanalysis. As Offer and Sabshin (1996, 1984, 1991) and Vaillant (2003) observed, we know much more about psychological *illness* than about mental *health* because of this historical reliance in studies of psychological development. Beginning in the 1960's, Grinker and his colleagues sought to empirically examine the development of "well-adjusted" young men to contribute to a new conception of adolescent development based on evidence rather than informal observation (Grinker, 1963; Grinker *et al.*, 1962; Grinker and Werble, 1974). With an emphasis on a multidisciplinary systems approach to the study of mental health (Grinker, 1963), this longitudinal study of 65 men studied over a 15-year period sought to examine the development of "healthy conformists" or "homoclitics" (Grinker, 1963, p 116)—individuals who follow a "common rule" (Offer and Offer, 1975). The results of this study suggested that development proceeds with stability and continuity and the absence of significant psychological distress. Absent was a clearly identifiable identity "crisis" in adolescence or young adulthood.

Focusing more directly on adolescence, Offer began a longitudinal study extending Grinker's perspective and focusing particularly on the psychological development of 73 boys in a homogeneous suburban community from early adolescence to young adulthood (Offer, 1969; Offer and Offer, 1975; Offer *et al.*, 1981, 2004). Integration of the concept of normality was meant to invoke a paradigm shift in approaches to human development by deriving principles of an expected life course from the study of individuals without psychological distress (Offer and Sabshin, 1966, 1984), as well as a new approach to mental illness itself (Offer and Sabshin, 1991).

While concepts of normality across the adolescent epoch pioneered by Offer and his colleagues adopted an ahistorical view (e.g., Elmen and Offer, 1993), they charted features of expected adolescent development and, in the process, changed the discourse on the psychology of adolescence. A major qualification of the classic "storm and stress" perspective was made necessary (and undertaken most concisely by Arnett [1999]) in part from the findings of these longitudinal studies that only about one-fifth of adolescents demonstrate significant psychological distress (Elmen and Offer, 1993; Offer and Offer, 1975). Using a systems approach, they suggested three characteristic routes through adolescence: continuous growth (23% of the group), surgent

growth (35% of the group), and tumultuous growth (21% of the group). Tracking these youth into their forties, continuity in adjustment over time is the most marked characteristic of this group (Offer *et al.*, 2004). At the time of the mid-life follow-up study, differences in the men earlier portrayed in one of the three routes through adolescence had largely disappeared. However, men at mid-life characterized during adolescence as in the continuous growth group reported the most positive experiences in adulthood.

This study of normal adolescent development carried out by Offer and his colleagues provided a much-needed alternative narrative of adolescent development that was grounded in the empirical reality of a systematic, longitudinal inquiry rather than anecdotal case-reports emphasizing the difficulties of adolescent adjustment. The introduction of a narrative of normal adolescence—a story of "usual" and expected adjustment rather than of the extreme situations of adjustment difficulties provided by psychiatric perspectives on adolescence—changed our understanding of adolescent psychological development. In addition, a focus on normal development led to additional study of non-clinical samples that contextualized earlier clinical findings.

In the battle between any two narratives, one necessarily attempts to unseat the other by claiming its exact opposite. The reality often lies somewhere in a moderate middle ground that creates the epistemological space for a multiplicity of narrative possibilities, as multiplicity is perhaps the hallmark of a postmodern, globalized historical context (Gergen, 2001). The debate about normal adolescence, though initially characterized by polarity, has come to be viewed with greater experiential diversity through Arnett's (1999) framework. Storm and stress has come to be viewed not as inevitable but more likely to occur in adolescence than at other points in the life course (Arnett, 1999). This notion of normative storm and stress rejects the idea of universal major crises and is based instead on systematic studies of increased conflict (see Laursen *et al.*, 1998), mood fluctuations and disruptions (Larson and Richards, 1994), and risk behavior (Arnett, 1992) that appear more characteristic of adolescence than other life-course moments (Arnett, 1999).

What the original narrative of normality of course omits is a sense of historical perspective. Since the pioneering studies of Offer and colleagues, we have come to more fully appreciate the ways in which human development is historically contingent and connected to membership in a generation-cohort (Elder, 1998). Adolescence as a life-course moment is intimately connected to the historical context of development, particularly with regard to identity formation (Erikson, 1959, 1968). If it is during adolescence that the personal narrative that constructs the identity of an individual (Cohler, 1982) obtains its ideological setting (McAdams, 2001), then it is during adolescence that the individual comes to internalize the discourse of identity available in a particular

cultural context (Hammack, 2005). Understanding the ways in which sexual minority youth develop their identities in any kind of normative sense requires recognition of the social, historical, and cultural context of the life course (Boxer and Cohler, 1989; Boxer *et al.*, 1993).

### Divergent narratives of gay youth identity development

The concept of narrative focuses on the process by which we come to create meaning in life through the construction of a life story (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; Gergen and Gergen, 1983; McAdams, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1988). If language mediates experience (Wertsch, 1991), and if discourse serves to frame a culture's conception of sexuality (Foucault, 1978), then personal narrative specifies the language of self which constructs an identity and informs subsequent thought, feeling, and behavior. In this way, beginning with adolescence and first awareness of futurity and of a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future, the personal narrative provides a sense of coherence for lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Cohler, 1982; McAdams, 1997).

For gay youth in contemporary society, there are two competing narratives of gay identity that they must negotiate: the *narrative of struggle and success* and the *narrative of emancipation*. These seemingly divergent narratives, coexisting in the current discursive frame to which youth possess access through a variety of media sources, in fact reflect the tension of a shifting historical context for sexual identity. Today's gay youth are confronted with both of these narratives simultaneously, and their identities are naturally influenced by both.

#### The narrative of struggle and success

As the development of gay and lesbian youth—as a distinct population—emerged as a legitimate social science “problem” in the 1980s, it is hardly surprising that the focus of this early work was on the struggles of youth. After all, it was in the consulting rooms, emergency rooms, and school counselor's office that the impetus for systematic research on gay youth emerged. The need for systematic inquiry was rooted in a *service* need: more youth with same-sex desire were presenting with problems. It was an era long before *Will and Grace* or *Queer as Folk*, and the depiction of gay and lesbian characters in mainstream media was sparse. Quite difficult to conceive, it was an era before the internet. It was a time in which youth lacked access to any narrative of gay identity beyond simply the perceived inevitability of AIDS or a promiscuous lifestyle as a vagrant. Despite its proliferation since World War II in urban America (D'Emilio, 1983;

Sadownick, 1996), and the attention drawn from the Stonewall Inn riots and the social movement for gay civil rights (Clendinen and Nagourney, 1999), gay culture remained remarkably inaccessible to youth outside of large urban centers.

Early attempts to chart the nature of normal adolescence for gay and lesbian youth focused on the need to manage stigma while coming to adopt a gay social identity (e.g., Hetrick and Martin, 1987; Martin and Hetrick, 1988). As the basis for a “spoiled” identity (Goffman, 1963)—an identity that “discredits” an individual in relation to an existing structure of social norms—homosexual desire and behavior necessarily create the context for a unique form of stigma management. This narrative of gay adolescent development was founded largely on youth volunteering for study recruited from support groups, which led to a one-sided view of gay youth as psychologically vulnerable. Further, many of these studies were conducted during the 1980s and 1990s, a time following the emergence of the gay rights movement when this new-found youth activism identified with this time of social change led to social viability which, in turn, exposed these newly “out” or socially visible youth to particular anti-gay prejudice reflected in peer victimization and antigay violence (e.g., Hershberger and D'Augelli, 1995; Hunter, 1990; Rivers and D'Augelli, 2001; Ryan and Rivers, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1994).

Stigma enhancing minority-group stress (Meyer, 2003) often led to suicidal ideation and behavior (D'Augelli *et al.*, 2001; Garofalo *et al.*, 1999; Halpert, 2002; McDaniel *et al.*, 2001; Remafedi *et al.*, 1998), eating disorders (French *et al.*, 1996), substance abuse (Huba *et al.*, 2000; Orenstein, 2001), and general mental health problems (e.g., D'Augelli and Hershberger, 1993; D'Augelli, 2002). These studies empirically supported a narrative of struggle with stigma management, depicting the challenge of positive development within a heterosexist society.

The basis for this narrative—that the causes of struggle among gay youth are *normative* and connected to the inherent challenges of the recognition and acceptance of a “spoiled” identity (Goffman, 1963; Hetrick and Martin, 1987; Martin and Hetrick, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1989)—suggests possibilities for positive development with environmental changes (Safren and Heimberg, 1999), the assistance of professional support structures (e.g., Coleman and Remafedi, 1989; Dombrowski *et al.*, 1995), and a community context for shared rituals through organized youth groups (Herdt and Boxer, 1996). The reproduction of this narrative continues in today's literature, with reports of gay youth still struggling with feelings of victimization (Bontempo and D'Augelli, 2002; Peters, 2003; Rivers and D'Augelli, 2001; Smith, 1998), feelings of difference and alienation (Flowers and Buston, 2001; Sullivan and Wodarski, 2002), suicidal ideation and behavior (Berman *et al.*, 2006;

Remafedi, 2002; Russell and Joyner, 2001), and general mental health problems (D'Augelli, 2002).

In a seminal review and model of gay identity development, Meyer (2003) argues that *minority stress* represents the central mechanism increasing the likelihood of compromised mental health for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (cf. Hammack, 2003, for a discussion of urban African-American youth). The extent to which the individual is able to manage the inherent stress and prejudice of a minority social identity determines positive development. In this way, Meyer's overarching framework for interpreting the mental health literature on lesbians and gay men represents the best summary of the narrative of struggle and success. But what are the implications of a shifting discourse on sexual identity in the larger culture on the perception of minority stress? As levels of heterosexism decrease with greater understandings of sexual diversity (in part provided by studies of gay youth and their struggles), narratives of sexual identity development for gay youth must accommodate a changing discursive context for human development in which same-sex desire need not presage a particular identity such as "gay."

As the study of gay youth emerged as a legitimate social science concern, an examination of the mental health of these young people became a priority in developmental study. However, providing a label or category for these sexual minority youth led to the construction of a stereotyped narrative focusing on personal distress as a necessary consequence of same-sex desire. In much the same way that gay identity development sacrificed its cultural and historical dynamism in the original stage-based models of Cass (1979) and Troiden (1979), what became vital to the social scientists who pioneered the early systematic study of gay youth was documentation of concerns and developmental experiences that were, of course, historically situated. Despite early calls for serious consideration of historical concerns such as cohort membership (e.g., Boxer and Cohler, 1989) and the "promise," rather than the "problem," of gay youth (Savin-Williams, 1989), the narrative of gay youth development that emerged was a relatively ahistorical one which emphasized the negative consequences of gay identity for psychological development. In addition, in constructing a relatively monolithic narrative of gay youth development, early work suggested the homogeneity of gay youth through the cultivation of a master narrative. Youth with same-sex desire who might not fit into this narrative subsequently had yet another obstacle to overcome in their identity development (see Herdt, 1989).

This narrative of struggle permeated discourses in popular culture as well, with token representations of the suffering gay teen in films such as *Pump Up the Volume*. For youth with same-sex desire, the trajectory of identity development was beholden to a heterosexist society (Jung and Smith, 1993). But the narrative was not constrained by the

inevitability of struggle. In fact, it contained within it *success through struggle* in notions of the attainment of identity "commitment" (Troiden, 1989) and "synthesis" (Cass, 1979) through the unique process of "coming out" to both oneself and to a supportive community of gay peers (Coleman, 1982; Herdt and Boxer, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1989). Coming out became so fundamental to the process of gay identity development that it came to represent a major "rite of passage" in the gay and lesbian life course (Herdt, 1989, 1992; Herdt and Boxer, 1996). The primary task of the gay adolescent, in this narrative, is to overcome the inherent struggles of a spoiled identity, to transcend the inevitable internalization of heterosexism and homophobia, and to reclaim gay identity as a positive index of relational and sexual being. It is only through the process of coming out—acknowledging and accepting same-sex desire as congruent with other aspects of the self—that acceptance into gay culture occurs, and with this new cultural frame of reference, a new set of symbolic meanings, rituals, and social interactions distinct from a heterosexist normative culture.

There can be little doubt that this narrative of gay youth development was pivotal in reconstructing the gay and lesbian life course as enabling a positive developmental trajectory. The success portion of this narrative revealed that, despite the inevitable struggle for identity in the context of stigma and rejection, gay youth could come together to create a positive community as a "minority" culture within a larger hegemonic context. Suffering was not interminable but confined to a developmental moment: the transition to full identity synthesis through the reconciliation of inner desire and outer rejection during adolescence. This narrative, though emphasizing suffering (perhaps to give voice to a previously silenced group), is ultimately an empowering one. Where it becomes problematic, though, is precisely its reification of a developmental trajectory interwoven with and dependent upon a larger discourse on homosexuality in the dominant culture.

Perhaps not anticipating the rapidity of discursive shifts on matters of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, in the larger culture, this narrative fails to capture the normal development of gay youth in a changing historical context—a context in which gay life is less stigmatized and more readily accepted as a legitimate social identity category, despite the endurance of heterosexism. The current context of cultural discourse is one in which gay marriage, for example, is more than a possibility; it is now a reality in Massachusetts. The current cultural discourse has witnessed the decriminalization of homosexual behavior in one of the most socially conservative states, with the Supreme Court decision in the *Lawrence v. Texas* case. Shifts in larger cultural narratives of sexuality and sexual identity have expanded the possibilities and enlarged the context within which sexual minority youth anticipate their own future and rewrite

their present life-story. These social changes have mandated a shift away from a narrative of gay youth as a time of struggle leading to success in overcoming anti-gay prejudice to a narrative more consonant with lived experience within families, schools, and communities accepting of sexual minority youth.

#### The narrative of emancipation

A narrative of emancipation emphasizes the multiplicity of identity development among gay youth and restores notions of both agency and a life-course framework to gay identity development (Elder, 1999). This narrative shift is rooted in the success of intellectual movements such as poststructuralism and postmodernism which have called into question notions of essentialized normality in human development (see Eliason, 1996). In the realm of practice, the shift is rooted in empirical realities of a changing life course for individuals with same-sex desire.

In the same way that the study of normal adolescent development by Offer and his colleagues forced a revision of the traditional storm and stress narrative of adolescence, the emerging narrative of emancipation reveals the ways in which gay youth have experienced their life stories largely in the absence of anti-gay prejudice and conflict regarding their sexual orientation. In an early review, Savin-Williams (1989) argued that researchers had focused too much on the problems of gay adolescents rather than their capacity for significant resilience—a debate that reflected a larger discourse in psychology on the study of human weakness over strength, risk over resilience (see Elder and Conger, 2000). The study of resilience among gay youth (e.g., Anderson, 1998) was overshadowed by a nearly exclusive focus on the narrative of minority youth engaged in struggle for personal safety and self-regard. This phenomenon in research on gay and lesbian adolescence was, for Savin-Williams (1989), part of the larger “clinicalization” of adolescence (p 212) that framed a major epistemological debate in developmental psychology.

Three major essays on gay youth in the late 1980s were essentially of one voice in calling for the foundation of a research program on gay youth that would recognize heterogeneity of developmental processes along the lines of cohort, culture, and other contextual factors (Boxer and Cohler, 1989; Herdt, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1989). In fact, Savin-Williams and his colleagues have over the years demonstrated the significant heterogeneity that exists in gay and lesbian development, particularly along the lines of gender (e.g., Diamond, 1998, 2000, 2003b; Diamond and Savin-Williams, 2000; Savin-Williams and Diamond, 2000), ethnic identity (e.g., Dubé and Savin-Williams, 1999), and cohort (Dubé, 2000). Yet the narrative of struggle and success achieved remarkable status as the knowledge base for gay and lesbian adolescent development.

At the core of Savin-Williams’ (2001a,b) initial critique of the narrative of struggle and success was concern with issues of methodology and, in particular, sampling in the series of studies that supported it. Focusing on the study of youth who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, rather than youth with same-sex desire who both had and had not assumed a *gay identity*, Savin-Williams maintained that there was a spurious connection between sexual orientation and compromised mental health (Savin-Williams, 2001a, b). Examining the differences in suicidal ideation between these two populations—adolescents who self-identified as gay and adolescents who did not but reported same-sex desire—Savin-Williams (2001b) found that the two groups reported differential levels of preoccupation with the idea of suicide in response to awareness of same-sex desire. He concluded that previous studies of gay youth had failed to capture the diversity of developmental trajectories that exist for youth with same-sex desire. In a study that extended this work, Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) compared two samples of youth with same-sex desire: those who attempt suicide and those who do not. They discovered that sexual orientation itself was not a significant predictor of suicidality in and of itself and suggested that only a minority of youth with same-sex desire considered suicide.

Savin-Williams’ key argument in his critique of the literature on same-sex desire and suicidal ideation is that the overall population of gay youth is significantly underrepresented. These studies, he argues, were based largely on the study of youth attending support groups—only a subsample of the larger population of youth with same-sex desire. These youth report higher levels of suicide concern and stressful life events than youth surveyed using other recruiting strategies such as the internet (Savin-Williams and Ream, 2003). Savin-Williams (2001b) also questioned the manner in which suicidality has been defined in studies of the mental health of sexual minority youth. At least some prior study has relied upon self-reports in which ideation and attempt have been conflated and in which life-threatening and non life-threatening attempts have been grouped together.

Findings reported by Savin-Williams and Ream (2003) support Diamond’s (2003a) critique of the study of gay youth in which she argues that the sampling of gay youth in support groups creates an emphasis on the problems of sexual minority youth. As a consequence, previous research on sexual minority youth overlooks within-group variation (Diamond, 2003a). Savin-Williams’ argument that youth with same-sex desire represent a far more heterogeneous population than previous studies would suggest is supported not only by his research with gay and lesbian adolescents and young adults who comprise a non-clinical sample (e.g., Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005a), but also by the independent work of Carragher and Rivers (2002), whose research examines non-identified gay and bisexual male youth.

The emerging narrative of emancipation, though, is tied not only to a dissatisfaction with the science of normal gay adolescence previously undertaken. Rather, it is linked to shifts in the larger culture, particularly for youth growing up in more affluent and sophisticated urban and suburban communities who, emboldened by positive internet accounts and the media, assume leadership in establishing gay-straight alliances in schools and feel empowered to live a diverse sexual lifeway outside the boundaries of a conventional taxonomy (Hostetler and Herdt, 1998).

The unconditional promulgation of the narrative of emancipation, however, obscures its foundational premise of differential developmental trajectories. Recognizing Diamond's (2003a) acknowledgment of intra-cohort variability, we argue that these divergent narratives of gay adolescence exist simultaneously and serve to increase the variability in gay youth development. While many youth traverse a "post-gay" cultural context, as Savin-Williams (2005a) argues, others continue to struggle with the stigma and rejection of their families and communities—a phenomenon that reflects, in part, the increasing ideological polarization of contemporary American society. The psychological struggles of gay youth are far from a concern of the past, as minority stress continues to contribute to mental health and adjustment challenges (D'Augelli, 2002; Meyer, 2003). For many youth, a narrative of struggle and success continues to provide the best discursive frame for their own life stories. In this way, we argue that the narrative of emancipation has not *supplanted* but rather *supplemented* the narrative of struggle and success, creating greater heterogeneity in the developmental trajectories of youth with same-sex desire.

A new narrative of gay identity founded upon a narrative of emancipation rather than struggle and the management of a stigmatized identity reflects the changing sociohistorical context for life-course development of gay men and lesbians (Hammack, 2005). Unlike the 1980s and 1990s—the developmental context of youth surveyed in the mass corpus of literature that has shaped the narrative of struggle and success—the current era is characterized by a proliferation of positive gay and lesbian representation in the media (Brown, 2002). In addition, new representations of sexuality have called into question the very polarity of the distinction between "gay" and "straight" (Stein, 1999), suggesting greater fluidity to sexual desire. Youth aware of same-sex desire now have access to an entire community of peers online (Addison and Comstock, 1998; Cohler, *in press*; McKenna and Baergh, 1998), and it is in the proliferation of new modes of interaction that a multiplicity of narratives can flourish and inform youth who are actively constructing their own personal narratives (see Linné, 2003). The conflict between narratives of gay adolescence, then, is reconcilable when assuming a life-course approach: divergence in developmental accounts

can be linked to contextual factors such as geography and cohort.

Reports by Eliason (1996) and Savin-Williams (2005a,b), together with our own experience teaching and counseling undergraduates and working at a youth drop-in center, all reveal the shifting narrative context for gay and lesbian identity development. Savin-Williams (2005a,b) presents a portrait of a new generation of youth with same-sex desire—one actively resisting the traditional gay identity narrative of struggle and success and creating their own, new narrative of sexual identity in which same-sex desire no longer presumes a particular sexual "identity" such as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The story of Matthew that introduced this paper is one of a number of personal narratives we have heard recently in a number of settings with today's "gay" youth. Departing from the confines of an elite university campus and engaging with youth at an inner-city community drop-in center in Chicago, we have found that the stories are remarkably similar. The desire to rescript a narrative of gay identity through *emancipation* from its perceived boundaries transcends gender, social class, and ethnicity.

While we view the emergence of a narrative of emancipation as in part connected to the influence of the queer theory movement on a new generation, we also view it with skepticism for the ways in which it encourages youth with same-sex desire to dismiss their distinctiveness from the larger culture. The narrative of emancipation suggests that same-sex desire need not be the primary index of identity, the anchor of the personal narrative. Rather, individuals with same-sex desire can lead lives very similar to heterosexuals: they need not be promiscuous, get AIDS, and live in a ghetto; they can even get married. Thus, while the new narrative to which gay youth are exposed is indeed emancipatory in its rejection of the relatively monolithic, homogenizing narrative of struggle and success that dominated the discourse on gay youth in the 1980s and 1990s, it is also dangerously assimilative (Warner, 1999) and fails to account for the diverse experiences of sexual minority youth who may wish to retain a unique sexual lifeway (Hostetler and Herdt, 1998).

The question of the *effect* of this new narrative and its own form of hegemony is a subject for more extensive consideration. Our concern is more with the *relationship* between these two narratives of gay identity and their implications for a conception of "normal" adolescence for youth aware of same-sex desire. What the narrative of struggle and success, though incredibly useful for more than one generation of individuals with same-sex desire, failed to consider was the rapidity of social change in narrative possibilities, particularly with regard to sexuality. Epistemologically, it also failed to adequately consider the impact of shifting discourses about the constructed nature of sexuality, which proliferated beyond the queer theory movement in the academy. We view this confluence of factors, this emergence of a new



discourse on sexuality and its manifestation in a new narrative of gay identity, as connected to the historical forces of late modernity.

### The life course of gay youth: Revisiting a proposal

A comparison of the basis of these conflicting narratives of gay youth reveals one of the central problems of research on the development of sexual orientation: the question of *time and place*. As we consider the divergence in these narratives, we return to the problem of generation-cohort and its salience in human development generally, and for gay youth in particular. In so doing, we revisit the “immodest” proposal set forth by Boxer and Cohler (1989) and recently reinvigorated by Hammack (2005) in his life-course paradigm of sexual identity development.

The narrative divergence on gay youth identity fails to adequately consider a life-course perspective on human development, which in part reduces the debate to a competition of narratives. In one of the seminal early review papers on gay youth, Boxer and Cohler (1989) observed that:

All existing studies of gay and lesbian youth (and of gay and lesbian adults as well). . .portray slices of experience at one point in time, rather than their construction or development across time . . . . The newly expanding visibility of gay and lesbian youth strongly suggests that the time has come to reassess certain key developmental concepts, including the “coming out” process itself, as well as the generalized concepts of “gay” and “lesbian” identity . . . . These concepts now appear, ironically, to have a static and an ahistorical timelessness that will ultimately render them meaningless unless such factors as historical time, social structure and the individual’s position in the life course are taken into account. (pp 324–325)

Over 15 years later, there remains very limited recognition of the significance of a life-course perspective in the study of sexual identity either in youth or adulthood. Not only are time and place significant to the study of sexual orientation in general, they are perhaps the *defining* and therefore most useful features of an integrative paradigm for understanding sexual orientation development (Hammack, 2005). The ways in which the gay and lesbian life course has been profoundly altered by historical events, such as World War II, the Stonewall Inn riots, and AIDS, are central empirical realities for scholars of gay and lesbian development (Cohler, *in press*; Cohler and Hammack, 2006). Beyond transformations in developmental milestones (like “coming out” to self and others), historical change fundamentally alters the narrative conditions of identity formation by affecting broader discourses on sexuality and identity.

One of the pioneering studies of gay youth that incorporated a life-course approach was Herdt and Boxer’s (1996)

study of teens at the Horizons drop-in center in Chicago. At the time they were studying these youth (the late 1980s and early 1990s), the scourge of AIDS continued to haunt the gay community. The highly effective antiretroviral therapies which have transformed HIV from a lethal to a more manageable, chronic illness had yet to emerge. Youth in the group knew other youth who had tested positive for HIV, and youth advisors spent much time discussing this public health issue with the group, together with issues of stigma management and both school and community anti-gay prejudice. Youth typically attended the center furtively. Crossing the threshold into the agency meant for them that they were adopting a gay identity and acknowledging their sexual interest in others of their own sex. More importantly, though, they were stepping into a particular culture, with a particular set of rituals and symbolic meanings (Herdt and Boxer, 1996). In interpreting the experiences of youth in cultural and developmental context, Herdt and Boxer revealed the ways in which individuals come to imbue their desires with collective meaning in the construction of a gay identity, realized in and through social practice (Holland *et al.*, 1998).

The original context of Herdt and Boxer’s (1996) seminal study, only a little over a decade later, bears little resemblance to the youth center today, with which we have both been affiliated. Whereas the cohort who participated in this study came of age in the midst of AIDS and engaged primarily with the narrative of struggle and success, the youth of Horizons today were born into a post-AIDS era (Cohler and Hammack, 2006) in which the limits of a monolithic narrative of gay identity have been well-identified. The identities of the youth who now attend the center, predominantly low-income urban minorities, are characterized by failure to adhere to the narrative of struggle and success. They are proponents of a narrative of emancipation in which “gay” does not adequately describe their sexual lives. Though they generally prefer to be unlabeled, labels like “down low” and “queer” better reflect the extent to which they desire an identity unbounded by a particular narrative constructed largely for a white middle class or a previous generation. Nonetheless, struggle and success remain as powerful tropes in their stories, and many do go on to identify with mainstream gay or lesbian culture. In this way, both narratives are accessible to youth today as they construct their own personal narratives of identity.

Over two decades after *Children of Horizons*, another generation of gay youth views AIDS with some mystical quality as the crisis of another time. The narrative of emancipation calls for the “normalization” of the gay and lesbian life course, in which concerns such as finding a good relationship and a satisfying job possess more primacy than the drama of “coming out.” As we have suggested, this normalization suggests a kind of assimilation to a heterosexual life course. But the complete narrative of emancipation

calls into question the nature of identity itself and the symbolic ways in which we index meaning to the self. It is the expansion of discourse in and through the internet, among other forms of mediated social contact, that has fundamentally transformed the narrative possibilities for gay youth (Cohler, *in press*). It is no longer necessary to attend a youth group, as the youth of Horizons did, in order to realize social support from others or to find outlets for sexual desire. The internet has enabled a proliferation of discourse communities for youth with same-sex desire.

We view the life-course paradigm through the lens of narrative approaches in the social sciences. As such, we argue that the process of forming a personal narrative of self that will anchor the life course with meaning is a fundamental task of human development (Cohler, 1982). The divergence of narrative possibilities revealed in our analysis of attempts to chart normal gay adolescence serves to demonstrate the utility of our argument, while simultaneously identifying the need for a life-course integrative approach in studying gay youth (Hammack, 2005).

The intellectual debate over these two opposing narratives of normal gay adolescence reflects not only changing historical contexts for gay and lesbian identity development. It also reveals the marked intra-cohort variability that is often obscured in developmental frameworks (Settersten, 1999, 2002). Sears' (1991) work on gay youth in the conservative South of the United States reveals this kind of variability when contrasted with Herdt and Boxer (1996). A life-course approach acknowledges the possibility of multiplicity in human development, whether that multiplicity emerges between or within cohorts. In this way, it is a useful paradigm for considerations of normal adolescence in the context of late modernity, an historical context characterized most prominently by multiplicity and all of its threats to self-unity and coherence (McAdams, 1997).

### **Conclusion: The problem of normal adolescence and the life course in late modernity**

The divergent narratives of gay youth identity that have emerged in the past three decades reveal the essential problem of the study of normal processes in human development: *history matters* (Elder, 1998). Life course theory, with its focus on the historical positioning of lives, has been particularly useful in our work with gay youth because it allows us to always view their personal narratives through an historic lens. The distinction between the narrative of struggle and success and the narrative of emancipation is first and foremost an *historic* one: our society and its discourse on homosexuality have changed rapidly since the 1980s. To deny that these changes would not profoundly alter the identity formation processes of youth would be tantamount

to rejecting the basic axiom of cohort specificity in human development.

To be sure, what the contrast between the two narratives of gay adolescence reveals about normal adolescence is its acute connection to the larger discourse of a society. The most “normal” feature of adolescence was highlighted by Erikson (1958, 1968) when he argued that it was the task of youth to identify with some ideology, and in this identification to either reproduce or resist a particular social order. We would argue that the mechanism by which individuals engage with ideologies lies in the construction of a personal narrative of identity, and it is this process that defines normal adolescence.

Thus as we approach the study of the normal gay adolescent, it is the process of *narrative engagement*, and not necessarily its outcome in the form of assumption of a *specific* narrative, that characterizes development. Beyond the treatment of gay youth as a “separate species” (Savin-Williams, 2005b), though, we view this process as the normal defining feature of adolescence more generally as portrayed in the work of Dan Offer and his colleagues (Elmen and Offer, 1993; Offer and Offer, 1975). It becomes more pronounced in the case of gay youth only because of the place of homosexuality in relation to the dominant culture: youth with same-sex desire “hypercognize” sexual desire in relation to other emotions because of its perceived “deviance.”

As we consider the life course in late modernity, with its shifting economic realities and expansive discursive frame owing to technological advances and globalization, the concept of narrative provides a useful heuristic anchor. Despite the ways in which late modernity has called into question the “grand narratives” of the Enlightenment and of modernity, narratives endure as epistemologies because it is through narrative that meaning is constructed (Bruner, 1987, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988), and it is the study of meaning that provides the greatest insight into human cognition and behavior. As identity becomes an increasingly relevant construct with which to understand human development in the context of globalization and late modernity (Arnett, 2002), the ways in which its development in and through narrative specify the unity and purpose of an individual life (McAdams, 1997), and with that the possibilities of a culture, is the task of a new science of normal human development. The narrative shift in gay youth identity development provides a window into the necessity and relevance of such an approach.

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