

# The Meaning of Sexual Identity in the Twenty-First Century



The Meaning of Sexual Identity  
in the Twenty-First Century

Edited by

Judith S. Kaufman and David A. Powell

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Meaning of Sexual Identity in the Twenty-First Century,  
Edited by Judith S. Kaufman and David A. Powell

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# THE MEANING OF SEXUAL IDENTITY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

JUDITH S. KAUFMAN AND DAVID A. POWELL

“Something happened in the 1990s”; a group of people who were perceived as radical and “unmentionable” were transformed into a group of people who deserved human rights, and if you looked close enough, were “normal,” just like everybody else (John D’Emilio (2002). The radical politics that evolved out of the carnage of AIDS were being submerged in the popular discourse. Gays in the military, gay marriage, Ellen DeGeneres, and *Will and Grace* were part of an assimilationist discourse evident in the popular media. Had a “post-gay era” (Ghaziani, 2011) begun? And if so, how might this impact the meaning of sexual identity and a political movement steeped in identity politics? Ritch Savin-Williams, writing about the “new gay teenager” who refuses and resists sexual labels, responded to a 2004 issue of the *Gay and Lesbian Review* where several senior gay scholars were asked to reflect on what happened during the 90s.

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 (2004), “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 (22). Similarly, novelist Sarah Shulman (2004), 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.” (Savin-Williams, 2005, 194)

Savin-Williams questions whether duping has really occurred and wonders whether “young people with same-sex desires are basically content with modern culture and don’t desire a critical analysis” (p. 194). Similarly, is the national debate on same-sex marriage the last gasp of conservatives who are resisting the “normalization” of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer folk? Are young people with same-sex desires redefining the parameters of sexual identity? Are identity

politics still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are the characteristics of fluidity, ambisexuality, and a reluctance to label sexuality (Entrup & Firestein, 2007) more appropriate for describing young people with same-sex desires? Has the narrative of emancipation replaced the narrative of struggle and success (Cohler and Hammack, 2007) that so defined the literature on LGBTQ youth in the 1980s and 1990s? Is sexual orientation becoming irrelevant (Hattersley, 2004)? These are some of the questions scholars asked at the Fourth Annual LGBT Symposium at Hofstra University in 2010<sup>1</sup>. The intent of the symposium was to open a dialogue relating to the shifting consciousness of queer youth and to explore contemporary understandings of sexual identity.

Amin Ghaziani (2011) cautions that his use of a post-gay era is not intended as verification that such an era has begun. Rather, he is entertaining the possibility that we may be in the midst of a historical transition. The implications of such a transition are complex for a number of reasons. For example, Jeffrey Bennett (2010) in an analysis of the discourse surrounding queer youth identifies two predominant themes. In the first, queer youth are sexually fluid, expanding and multiplying static identities to include labels such as trans, queer, genderqueer, polyamorous, and flexible. This is a utopian vision that is troubling for identity politics. In the second theme, queer youth are characterized as assimilationists who view homosexuality as commonplace and “normal.”

The flaws of identity politics have been well-documented, but the social progress based on that political strategy is undeniable. The question here is, in the 21st century, who really enjoys the benefits gained from a movement based on identity politics? Damien Riggs (2010) suggests that white middle-class queers are the main beneficiaries and to move beyond identity politics means that we will fail to “recognize that identity categories continue to be understood by many people as reflecting something ‘real’ about their experiences” (345). Bennett’s second theme regarding assimilationist discourse is problematic because, much like the utopian theme of sexual fluidity, it fails to acknowledge individual and institutional homophobia.

The studies in this volume, coming out of social science as well as literary and cultural criticism, touch on all of these concerns and demonstrate the breadth and depth of the queries that are currently shaping views in the domain of sexual identity politics. The social science papers open the volume and begin with Ritch Savin-Williams’ studies of two emerging populations, youth with same-sex desire who resist traditional labels for their sexuality and youth who are heterosexual, but label themselves “mostly straight.” Of the latter group, Savin-Williams notes



that mostly straight youth outnumber all other sexual minorities combined (Austin et al., 2004; Saewyc et al., 2009).<sup>2</sup> While Savin-Williams' research may signify a post-gay era and touches on both utopian and assimilationist discourse, he recognizes those teens for whom sexual identity is still very tangible. His purpose is to expand the way we think about youth with same- and opposite-sex desire, and to move beyond a research paradigm that assumes a majority of queer youth are troubled.

The next papers in the volume take up concerns related to homophobia and move from a focus on youth to institutions that are by definition, almost impervious to change. Thomas Balcerski's chapter on the Boy Scouts and the chapter by Nicole Seiben on infusing LGBTQ issues in the high school English curriculum suggest an intransigent homophobia amid cultural shifts around sexual identity. Darla Linville's chapter focuses on youth who are clearly steeped in identity politics, resisting or at least finding spaces amid the compulsory and normative heterosexuality imposed by school. Jennifer de Coste also takes up the cause of those who depend on identity politics to move forward. Thinking about rural youth and adults, de Coste suggests that while we know a great deal about LGBTQ communities in urban settings, the beneficiaries of a movement based on identity politics, there is little research in rural queer communities. Calling for rural queer studies, she wonders what this might look like amid a shifting cultural landscape. Are rural queers struggling with or pushing the boundaries of sexual identity?

The final set of papers in this volume, emerging from literary and cultural criticism, open with Richard Canning's literary investigation of the shift from radical to assimilationist politics that occurred in the 90s. Focusing on literary representations of AIDS, he analyzes what has happened to the literary depiction of AIDS within the GLBTQ community. He targets Hollywood and GLBTQ cultural criticism and academic studies. AIDS activism, he claims, defined queer politics, almost exclusively, during the 1980s and early 1990s. Is the current elision of AIDS within the queer community tied to an assimilationist shift in sexual identity? Thomas Haakenson's paper reflects Bennett's (2010) utopian discourse on sexual fluidity. Haakenson examines the way in which art can destabilize a disciplinary society (Foucault) with fixed categories of sexual identity. Alexandar Mihailovic examines recent changes in Russian terminology and what this might mean for gay life in a nation still struggling to belong to a Western ethos in social and especially queer concerns that may be transitioning away from identity politics. These changes are of particular pertinence given the homophobic atmosphere that threatens to cause problems for the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi.

These studies continue to examine and question the implications for youth who are pushing the boundaries of sexual identity. Without throwing out labels entirely, without fully discounting a discourse of difference, this volume seeks to open up the dialogue on sexual identity politics by means of a “meta-query” in which what is being studied is not just groups of people, but the actual research methods we use to engage the question of sexual identity and sexual identity politics. At issue is not only a sound sociological description, but, and perhaps more importantly, this volume may also help to lay the foundation for a nuanced discourse that would shape the future – administratively, institutionally, even medically and financially – of our research and the way we talk about our youth.

# THE NEW SEXUAL-MINORITY TEENAGER: FREEDOM FROM TRADITIONAL NOTIONS OF SEXUAL IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

RITCH C. SAVIN-WILLIAMS

The time is right to rethink our notions about sexual identity. What is occurring in the lives of youth, regardless of their sexuality, is a minimization, if not an elimination, of the necessity to label themselves with a culturally defined, simplistic sexual identity. Contemporary same-sex attracted teenagers are pursuing diverse pathways toward understanding and accepting their sexuality. Some are choosing unconventional sexual identities and others are forgoing a sexual identity altogether.

It is not that nonheterosexual youth reject their sexuality or refute its primacy in their lives. Rather, they believe that culturally mandated sexual identity labels do not correspond to the complexity and diversity of their sexual lives. To them, the mere construction of sexual categories reifies the labels across time and place and, most importantly, exaggerates artificial differences between them and their straight friends (Muehlenhard, 2000). Besides, if mainstream heterosexual youth are not required to assume a sexual identity, why should those who are not straight be obligated to adopt one?

Another alternative frequently taken by youth is to expand the list of accessible and tolerable sexual identities beyond conventional labels. Established identity terms such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual have mixed and varied meanings among youth; they do not always easily map onto the sexuality experienced by youth (Savin-Williams, 2005). Because sexual identity is historically and contextually specific, terms come and go with and without universal agreed upon meaning. What was once a sexual invert became a homosexual, who became a gay, who became a queer, and who became man-man or woman-woman loving person today.

These modern-day societal evolutions are also reflected within a life course—even within day-to-day experiences. The trends have been evident during the past decade, especially among young women who have been more likely than young men to feel comfortable with inconsistencies in

their romantic/sexual fantasies, behaviors, and identities. As a result, nonheterosexual women make sense of their erotic desires and behaviors with reference to new notions of sexuality, such as fluid, unlabeled, and bi-curious identifications (Pattatucci & Hammer, 1995; Rothblum, 2000; Rust, 2002). When asked to label their sexuality, young women often prefer to create their own term rather than choose one offered to them by researchers (Hillier et al., 1998), perhaps because of the impact of gender socialization on the life course that encourages women to seek their identity through relationships and to change their identity in response to this variability (Rust, 2002).

Diamond (2008) explored issues within a group of young women, participants in her ongoing longitudinal study. During the first 10 years, two thirds of young women, sometimes multiple times, changed their sexual identity label. Although lesbian and bisexual identities lost the most adherents and heterosexual and unlabeled identities gained the most, what remained relatively unchanged were reports of sexual and romantic attraction. That is, a young woman might change her identity from bisexual to heterosexual without undergoing a comparable change in her attraction to females. This represented not a modification in her sexual orientation but in the identity label she ascribes to her sexuality.

Although these trends have been particularly visible among young women, they have not been absent among young men. Green (1998) speculated that although these young men might threaten both the gay and the straight male establishments, they are the future in a post-sexual identity society. Similarly, Dixit (2001) reported in the *Rolling Stone* that same-sex-attracted college men no longer feel identifying as gay to be a primary aspect of their personal identity. One student suggested, "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." These young adult men knew their same-sex attractions and desires, but they chose not to have their sexuality define them or to be the major decider in their personal identity. Rather than obsessing over their sexuality, they occupied themselves with sports, fraternities, and careers. One observed, "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."

Identity changes were also apparent in the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative study of nearly 20,000 adolescents and young adults. In just over six years from Wave 3 (average age = 22) to Wave 4 (average age = 28), shifts among the five sexual orientation identities occurred for both sexes, especially among young adults with a nonexclusive identity (Appendix). For example,

although the relative proportion of mostly straight men remained constant across time (3.2% to 3.3%), 47% (N = 82) of the Wave 3 mostly straight men identified as straight in Wave 4. However, the mostly straight male group gained 105 straight men in Wave 4 (Savin-Williams, Joyner, & Rieger, 2012).

If a “slavish adherence to a rigid and obviously ill-fitting model of sexuality” has problems (Diamond, 2008, p. 259), then how are we to make sense of these transformations? My answer to this question is based in large part on my training as a developmental psychologist.

### **Differential Developmental Trajectories**

A differential developmental trajectories framework focuses on making sense of the shared and unique developmental experiences, milestones, and trajectories of contemporary youth (Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005). Rather than the ubiquitous coming out models of an earlier era that assumed a sequential, step-like sexual identity progression (e.g., Cass, 1979), I suggested a broadly conceived developmental alternative. To clarify, differential refers to variability inherent within and across sexual domains and individuals; developmental signifies sexual milestones and processes that occur throughout the life course; and trajectories indicate individual, subgroup, and group pathways in sexual development that occur across time. Neither an essentialist nor a social constructionist position is necessary or adequate. A differential developmental trajectories framework assumes an interactive approach to development. The four basic tenets are:

1. Same-sex oriented youth are comparable to all other adolescents in their developmental trajectories. Thus, similar to other youth, regardless of sexuality, same-sex oriented youth are subject to the same biological, psychological, and social influences and dynamics that affect lives. To exclusively focus on the significance of the homoerotic aspects of development runs the danger of neglecting the far more common adolescent experiences of same-sex oriented adolescents. For example, similar to most adolescents, same-sex attracted youth place considerable stock in having and maintaining peer friendships—and they have been quite successful in these efforts (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2008; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Schneider & Witherspoon, 2000; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005).

2. Same-sex oriented youth are dissimilar in their developmental trajectories from other youth who are oriented toward the other sex. The underlying mechanisms for these differences are likely rooted in both biological and socialization processes. For example, Wilson and Rahman (2005) suggested that neuropsychological differences between the sexes create in same-sex oriented individuals a brain that is organized in a sex-atypical manner. That is, the hypothalamus, limbic system, and neurotransmitters, as well as higher neurological centers, may explain cross-sex shifts in behavior, personality, and cognitions among same-sex oriented men and women. So, too, sexual prejudice and cultural heterosexist assumptions generate a climate that conveys to same-sex oriented youth that if they are intent on becoming gay or lesbian, then they need to act like one by displaying gender-atypical behavior, temperament, interests, and pathologies.
3. Same-sex oriented youth vary among themselves in their developmental trajectories in accordance with ways in which other-sex oriented teens vary among themselves. The influences of sex, religion, ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and cohort, among many other variables, result in distinctive trajectories. Thus, girls, regardless of their sexual orientation, have the biology and socialization of other girls. Whether these similarities overcome or interact with the biology and socialization of being a sexual minority is worthy of investigation. Same-sex desire is not a monolith but is characterized by enormous within-group variations with dissimilar developmental trajectories and outcomes.
4. A same-sex oriented youth follow her or his own unique and individualistic developmental trajectory, unlike any other individual who has ever lived. This tenet is most easily recognized and endorsed by clinicians. Given the profound diversity inherent in individual lives, group mean differences and similarities may have little relevance when applied to a specific individual.

Although most investigations of sexual-minority youth during the past 40 years have ignored the first, third, and fourth tenets in pursuit of the second, I remain impressed by the number of domains in which the “no sexual orientation difference” conclusion is ubiquitous, even mundane. These have ranged from the onset of puberty (same age as others of their sex) to mental health outcomes (similar levels of suicidality, depression, self-esteem) (Savin-Williams, 2005). My primary research goal has been

to demonstrate that irrespective of sexual orientation, same-sex oriented adolescents are first and foremost adolescents. This basic developmental fact is increasingly apparent among the last several cohorts of youth who frequently acknowledge that sexual orientation has made little fundamental difference in their lives, except in the sex of their sexual and romantic attractions and partners. To youth, sexuality is but one facet of an interactive system that comprises their personal identity. Any presumption that teenagers necessarily have more in common with others of their sexual orientation than they have with peers in general is unrealistic and implausible. Thus, to understand the development of same-sex-oriented teenagers, we must first apply what we know about teenagers in general in terms of their developmental concerns, assets, and liabilities—and then determine what is unique to youth that is related to their same-sex sexuality.

Regardless of our role as a parent, physical or mental health provider, or researcher, we must remain open to new perspectives and findings. Here my intent is to advance this goal with a discussion about the resistance same-sex attracted youth have with sexual identity labels and, paradoxically, to convey the emergence of the newest sexual designation—the mostly straight.

## Unlabeled Same-Sex Oriented Youth

Youth who rebuff traditional sexual labels are becoming increasingly visible and vocal in workshops I have conducted during the past decade. When asked to write on a note card how they describe or identify their sexuality, not uncommonly there is resistance to the initial request. One young woman wrote, “I like what I like regardless of what’s down their pants. If someone’s attractive, they’re attractive. The end. No identity.” In a similar blunt manner, a young man wrote, “I don’t desire to identify my sexuality. I just am me. Get over it.”

When they do “follow directions,” they respond with descriptions about their sexuality that might appear unrecognizable to some. Here is a sampling. First, the young men:

- Faggot!! The best! Sexy, hot, beautiful, intimate.
- I’m a bit confused about gender, a lot really. I also connect with women, emotionally much more easily than I do men. This presents a significant obstacle in terms of partners. My life would be a lot different in terms of sex/relationships if I were at all aroused by women, but I’m not (to my considerable chagrin, I might add). You might say I live by the (very true!) adage “a good man is hard to find.”

- Sexual attraction only to males, but have had social, emotional infatuations on females as well, mostly before sex drive began. Now feeling more asexual; don't desire relationship or sex, know that I'd still prefer men over women but can't see myself in relationship/sexual relations with either sex.
- In the past, I was straight. Now, I love who I love.

The young women are, as might be anticipated, far more complicated. Other than descriptive terms that were new to me, including "squiggly," "swayfull," "wobbly," "hot dayum," "hawt," "homoflexible," "pseudo-bisexual," "tri-sexual," and "tarantula," were the following:

- I like who I like even though I tend to be more attracted to women....but I don't really care about gender basically. I can acknowledge the difference between the genders, but it doesn't quite matter. I just (coincidentally) have liked girls more than guys.
- If a girl comes my way who is something special, I will consider it and be open to heteroflexibility. Still, it won't be a sexual attraction (straight with asexual openness).
- Queer, fluid. I feel a connection and attraction to women that is absent with men however I realize that I cannot account for every person I will meet in my life time or challenges I may go through and I'm open to the idea of having sex or emotional/romantic intimacy with a man or genderqueer individual. I kissed a girl and I liked it.
- "Sir" in reference to self or "gentleman." Pansexual/Bisexual male in a woman's body. I fall in love with men more easily than women; but I identify, internally, more as male than female. Question your assumptions.
- I like who I like, though more attracted to women, but don't really care about gender. I just (coincidentally) have liked girls more than guys.
- I'm odd. I have no preference. I've been called a gender blender, gender fluid...I have no gender. I am a person and everyone else are people. I see people for who they are, not on their gender, of if they're a hot man or woman.

I am not implying that traditional lesbian, gay, and bisexual labels have disappeared or are meaningless to youth. Indeed, a substantial number of youth continue to use these terms in a descriptive sense—perhaps to refer to the nature of their sexual orientation or political affiliation. However, among today's cohort, many simply want to convey: Don't reduce me to one of your sexual labels. I am more than my sexuality. Youth describe their sexuality in complex and often nontraditional terms, frequently combining notions of gender with sexuality (e.g., pansexual, transdyke, pomosexual).



In one workshop, a young woman wrote that she is, “Pansexual I like gender blenders, the mixtures, the people that look like both boys and girls. Then it’s a ‘special surprise inside’ when you discover them in a sexual situation.” Another girl differentiated an even greater deviation from the norm, the “pomosexual.” To her, pansexual assumes that there are more than two genders. Pomosexual (post-modern sexual) is choosing not to fit in a box. It is fluidity, a non-label, idiosyncratic, revolutionary—and it is theirs.

## **Mostly Straight Youth**

Also striking has been a contemporary trend for youth, once thought to be heterosexual, to reject that label as descriptive of their sexuality. Rather, they modify their substantial heterosexuality to include a slight degree of homosexuality, whether in their personal experience of sexual attraction, fantasy, behavior, or romance. The term mostly straight might appear to be a paradox, a contradiction of terms. Indeed, it flaunts the cultural standard bearer of heterosexual normalcy. They are neither exclusively heterosexual nor substantially bisexual but reside in the interstices of sexual labels (see review in Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013).

Mostly heterosexuality is experienced as a subjectively relevant and meaningful identity that authentically reflects a youth’s assessment of her or his sexuality. In a qualitative study of 30 New England youth (ages 15 to 21 years), youth explicitly noted that any measure that did not provide an option to be straight without being exclusively straight failed to reflect their self-experience (Austin, Conron, Patel, & Freedner, 2007). An 18-year old girl identified as mostly straight because “I sort of like that it doesn’t just have a completely or just a bisexual, but it has in between...there isn’t always that black and white picture.” A boy in the same study explained, “I’m basically attracted to girls, but I’ve felt like kind of attracted to guys before, but not to like some great extent... I’ve never felt I was attracted enough to a guy to like go out with them or something like that or like having a relationship with a guy” (Austin et al., 2007, p. 60).

Confirming these observations, in the workshops noted earlier, many youth reported terms that resonated with the mostly straight characterization. Some of those who acknowledged that they lean toward being straight wanted to qualify their heterosexuality with a touch of same-sex sexuality. Young women wrote the following:

- Straightish, borderline asexual, ally, open to intersex and F2M but technically only physically attracted to “male” gender, though I think women are more aesthetic and fun to make out with.
- I think I’m straight but I find myself attracted to certain girls. Sexually curious.
- Straight (but not narrow!) but prefer not to use labels.
- Straight but attracted to men that are somewhat effeminate. I have a gay man living in my head. Aspiring drag queer. Ally, all accepting of people’s lifestyle choices. Sexual deviant.

Young men continued with their version:

- Straight but not blind (can tell when a guy is good looking). Searching for the asexual perfection.
- I am straight to the present. I can be attracted to girls, and I have had relationships with only girls but maybe I haven’t met the right guy yet. Right now, I am straight, but open to possibilities, depending on what happens next.
- In the past, I was straight. Now, I love who I love.
- I guess I’m straight but curious because maybe I haven’t met the right guy yet. Right now, straight, but open to possibilities.

What is the basis for this self-assessment? This is a difficult question to answer because we exclude them in our research, omit them from our analyses, combine them with heterosexuals or with bisexuals, or delete them altogether because of our uncertainty about what to do with them. That is, we disbelieve their experienced sexuality. Thompson and Morgan (2008) argued that mostly straight identified women were not on their way to becoming something else; that is, they were not “bisexuals in disguise” or “progressive heterosexuals” but occupied a behaviorally unique space in terms of their sexual attraction, behavior, and identity.

It is also a difficult question to answer because mostly heterosexuality is not simple. Mostly straight young men and women ascribe to themselves multiple sexual components, and to varying degrees. Most appear secure in their heterosexuality and yet remain aware of their own potential to experience far more—sexual attraction, sexual desire, and, perhaps, romantic attraction for others of their biological sex. This slight same-sex sexuality was rooted in the proportion of attraction one teenage girl specified (85% straight with only minor attraction to women) and, for another, how often she thought about women and men. In addition to differences in amount and strength, some mostly straight youth report a difference in the quality of their attraction to same-sex versus other-sex partners. Typically, they are sexually attracted to same-sex partners or

(would) engage in sexual activities with them but have no desire or interest to become romantically involved. For example, a young woman said, “I’ll do sexual acts with a woman, but I’m not interested in women romantically” (Thompson & Morgan, 2008, p. 19).

This young woman responded to open-ended questions regarding her sexual identity development in a convenience sample of 350 Northern California college women (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Among the 79 women who chose mostly straight, the majority of narratives contained clear commitment and certainty regarding identity, although a few were less certain with their nonexclusive attraction. One young woman explained, “I came to realize that I wasn’t comfortable being ‘bi’ and haven’t really decided what exactly I am” (p. 19). Past, present, and expected future experimentation with same-sex desire and behavior was also common in these women’s narratives and virtually all reported having undergone a process of sexual exploration.

In summary, these qualitative data suggest that for many mostly straight youth, their chosen sexual identifier is a subjectively meaningful and legitimate label that accurately reflects their experience of being in between categories. Other mostly straight youth continue the process of undergoing sexual identity exploration and thus the presence of confusion regarding sexuality is not uncommon.

## **Varieties of Mostly Straight Youth**

Clearly, all mostly straight youth are not the same, or derive that identity from the same sources. Speculating about the possibilities, four varieties occur to me, though there are likely more.

### ***1. Political Attraction***

A mostly straight youth may simply be a post-feminist, progressive individual who refuses to be restricted to archaic straight-and-narrow identity and gender boxes. The heterosexual label and the gender norms feel reductionistic, constraining, an outdated and unnecessary burden imposed by heterosexist societal standards. Youth may revel in their ability to withstand (nay, “Bring it on!”) social scrutiny of their sexuality or they may profess little care about what others think of their sexuality. Indeed, they may even leave such matters ambiguous or encourage others to question their sexuality as they refuse to deny that they are gay, or to affirm that they are straight.

Progressive mostly straight youth crave living on the political forefront, aligning with their gay brothers and lesbian sisters. They challenge homophobic laws, customs, and assumptions; raise money for AIDS victims in Africa; march in gay pride parades as an ally; and, sometimes, to the annoyance of friends, relentlessly encourage all lesbians and gays to come out, be proud, get married, and adopt children. As one mostly straight young man I interviewed told me, “It’s just wrong, stupid to go against someone because of their sexual orientation.”

## ***2. Physical Attraction***

Mostly straight youth may readily acknowledge that they find others of their same sex physically attractive. It is this realization that is the basis for self-questioning whether they are totally straight. They know that exclusively straights do not typically find same-sex others attractive—or at least to admit to it. Yet, at school, the gym, and the neighborhood they notice that other women and men are buff, visually appealing, and pleasurable to be around. They make special efforts to be near others of their sex because of their beauty, athleticism, or feminine/masculine aura.

Mostly straight youth may have difficulty acknowledging this attraction to themselves or to others. Yet, they cannot deny the joy of touching them and being touched by same-sex others, whether in culturally acceptable contexts (e.g., hugs-and-kisses greetings, sport pats) or otherwise. Subscriptions to health magazines, slaves to fashion and hairstyles, and joining same-sex dominated school clubs may be giveaways.

Whether the attraction is based in an admiration of physical beauty, a sexual turn-on, or romantic feelings may be convoluted and not easily decipherable. Are they actually turned on sexually to same-sex others or just desirous of their bodies? When asked about the probability of future same-sex sexual activities, mostly straight youth might reply, “If the person is attractive enough... You just never know.”

## ***3. Sexual Attraction***

Mostly straight youth may be individuals who, when given the choice, will almost always elect to sexually be with others of the other sex, their primary source of sexual fantasies. However, they may also attribute 5% to 10% of their sexual attraction to their own sex. They may kiss/make out with a same-sex other but never have actual sex with such a person, but they might not necessarily rule it out. As long as both partners realize the goal is sexual pleasure without strings attached or an expression of

friendship, then the sex does not mean what it does with the other sex. Given the right circumstances with the right individual or under the right conditions, anything is possible. What those circumstances are or who the right girl/guy might be is not always clear. The sex would be interesting and satisfy a curiosity, but unlikely to happen. It's not so appealing as to cross a threshold. For these mostly straight youth, it is possible "to do homosexual things but not be homosexual."

#### ***4. Romantic Attraction***

Mostly straight youth may have minimal sexual attraction for others of their biological sex but experience or can imagine experiencing an emotionally deep, intimate relationship with such a person. They may be a romantic who cuddles with a best friend, spends a lot of time with special same-sex friends, and desires lifetime connections with their buddies or girls. Sex with this person is not loathsome; it is just not the primary focus. Rather, mostly straight youth are more enthralled to experience deep, crush-like infatuations with same-sex others that motivate a mostly straight self-definition.

For these youth, elementary, middle, and high school same-sex crushes, buddies, and infatuations are not atypical. Perhaps they connect through band, at the bus stop, during family gatherings, or in sport competition. They willingly and eagerly hug and perhaps even cuddle while watching a movie and eating popcorn, especially if they are on "the same wave length." Their relationship may be difficult to describe to friends, but others can see it by the time the two spend together, the secrets they share, and the knowing glances, nods, and code words. Perhaps it is a partnership, a best buds, or a true sister/brother for life.

#### ***Conclusion: Will the Real Mostly Straight Please Step Forward?***

Given these four possibilities, it is unlikely that there is only one type of a mostly straight youth. Perhaps it is simply an individual who, unlike exclusively heterosexuals, is not adverse to same-sex sexual or romantic feelings, encounters, or relationships. As they recognize and reveal their sexual breadth, mostly straights might assist others to understand previously unrecognized feelings and a range of sexual and romantic possibilities. Although we can only speculate regarding how many straight youth there are if they were given the option of selecting this on surveys, there may be many who are clamoring to "come out" of their heterosexual straightjacket.

## **Increasing Visibility and Acceptance of Sexual Diversity**

Youth who refuse to identify as a sexual label or who use an uncommon label to signify their sexuality are increasing in number from those sexual-minority and sexual-majority youth who use traditional sexual compartments. How these youth differ from previous generations of youth is unknown. In part this may be because these youth tend to opt out of research, educational programs, and support groups targeted for lesbian/gay/bisexual youth. They may also feel unwelcomed, disinvited from such places because they experience their sexuality as more fluid, more complex than most sexual labels tolerate. As such, sexual identity boxes are artificial, a balkanization of sexuality into unyielding, discrete boundaries that fail to capture the full extent of their sexuality. “Heterosexuality” is too narrow, too prescribed. “Lesbian” sounds too clinical. “Bisexual” emphasizes the sexual. “Gay” has assumed meanings other than sexuality (e.g., weird, sketchy). “Queer” is way too political. Although these youth threaten both the gay and the straight establishments, they might well be the future in a post-sexual identity society (Green, 1998; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Why these developments now? This is difficult to assess given the scholarship available. One possible answer is that the trend is not new but has been present but overlooked for some time. Researchers may have previously over-estimated the prevalence and importance of a sexual identity label among sexual-minority youth because they only included in their research designs, by definition, youth who identified with a sexual identity. If they did not, then they did not qualify for the study or were unrecruited. Or, if a youth went online to complete the survey, she or he had to check a pre-determined identity box or else were eliminated and could not claim the offered lottery prize. Excluded were youth who had no such identification or for whom their sexuality was a minor aspect of their personal identity.

Evidence for this was apparent two decades ago in a statewide survey of Massachusetts’s high school students. Just over 2% identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Garofalo et al., 1998) and, yet, in another study of Massachusetts’s youth, over 11% ascribed to themselves same-sex attraction, fantasy, or behavior (Orenstein, 2001). Whether the 2% was representative, especially in terms of reported mental health problems, of the 11% is difficult to know—but highly unlikely, as subsequent research has shown (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Another possible explanation for these recent trends among youth is the real and ongoing changes in modern consciousness about sexual pluralities. Doig (2007, p. 49) noted that during the past several decades

homosexuality has gone “from being largely invisible to shockingly visible to fairly pedestrian.” Indications of these widespread changes in the contemporary landscape are plentiful and all point to the same conclusion: attitudes toward homosexuality continue to be increasingly more progressive among younger cohorts. *The Washington Post* reported at least a 20-point generation gap between Millennials (ages 18 to 29 years) and seniors (65 and over) on every public policy measured in surveys concerning rights for gay and lesbian people (Nolan, 2011)—and this held for young religious evangelicals as well. For example, 63% of Millennials were supportive of marriage equality, which was considerably higher than the 52% of Generation X, the 41% of Baby Boomers, and the 33% of the Silent Generation (Pew Forum, 2012). The percent of Millennials who reported that homosexuality is “acceptable” was 62%; among their parents’ generation, it was 46% (Evans & Salazar, 2007). Indeed, homosexuality is so visible and accepted by Millennials that their estimate of the proportion of the American population that is gay or lesbian is 29.9%—higher than any other age group (Morales, 2011). These data led one reporter to conclude that what was previously unthinkable [gay men and lesbians serving openly in the military, marrying, and adopting children] just two decades ago is today so commonplace that “the youngest generation wonders what all the fuss was about” (Baker, 2012).

This shift can be attributable to a large degree to the increasing number of youth who personally know someone who is not straight—such as a best friend or family member. Those who befriend a sexual-minority person tend to have more positive attitudes toward them (Morrison & Bearden, 2007), though cause and effect are difficult to determine.

In addition, the increased visibility of sexual diversity in youth culture may also play a role in this move toward progressive attitudes among contemporary cohorts. There are now over 4,000 Gay/Straight Alliances in U.S. secondary schools (glsen.org, 2012). These are student run, school sanctioned clubs whose goal it is to improve the social and interpersonal climate for students regardless of sexuality or gender expression. Another contributor is the proliferation of portrayals of same-sex desire in youth-oriented online and offline worlds, including in domains previously thought to be immune to nonheterosexuality (e.g., boxing, soccer, hockey, rap music, the South, Congress; see Savin-Williams, 2005, for other examples). Youth culture easily incorporates its non-straight members. It is not just being gay-friendly; it is being gay-blind.

As same-sex sexuality becomes more visible, more prominent in the lives of more youth, a distinctive sexual identity adds little of significance to a personal identity. It signifies little, so either a youth adopts a new one

or rejects the notion altogether. After all, similar to their straight peers, they look and act the same and share music videos, fashion, online games, and social networks. They have the same diversity of artistic preferences, career aspirations, attitudes toward mainstream values, and levels of mental health.

## Conclusion

These two paradigms—not identifying or identifying unconventionally—represent radical solutions to the sexual identity conundrum, the traditional, categorical boxes that youth refuse to own up to. Given that categorical sexual identity labels can be easily understood and, at least during a particular historic period and cultural context, psychologically comforting and politically convenient, why will not contemporary youth conform? Our task is to listen to these voices as youth reveal what sexuality means to them. These voices come not from a minority but a majority of those who claim not to be exclusively heterosexual.

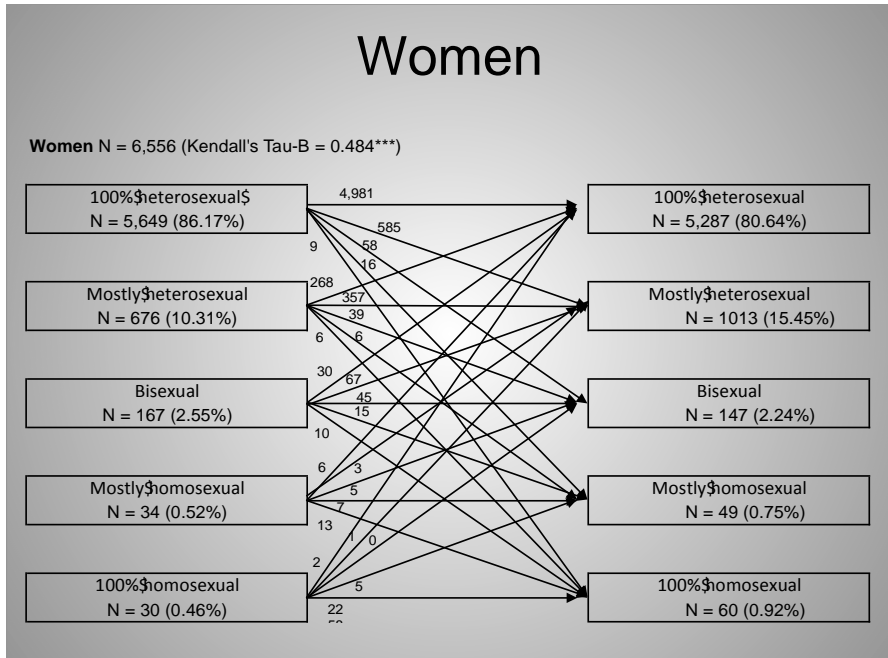
We must recognize that sexuality is but one facet of an interactive system that comprises a youth's personal identity, and this is true regardless of sexual orientation. Whether contemporary cohorts of same-sex oriented youth are mirroring other-sex oriented youth in their sexual identity development is difficult to assess at this point because of the dearth of comparable research on straight sexual identity and the limitations of research on sexual minorities. However, any presumption that a teenager has more in common with others of her or his sexual orientation than with peers in general simply because of that orientation is questionable and implausible. The most accurate conclusion that can be drawn is that sexual orientation dictates some (but not all) of the essence of a personal identity, and that this contribution varies across individuals and across developmental time. A critical aspect of this understanding is the recognition that sexual diversity is becoming normalized among current cohorts of youth.

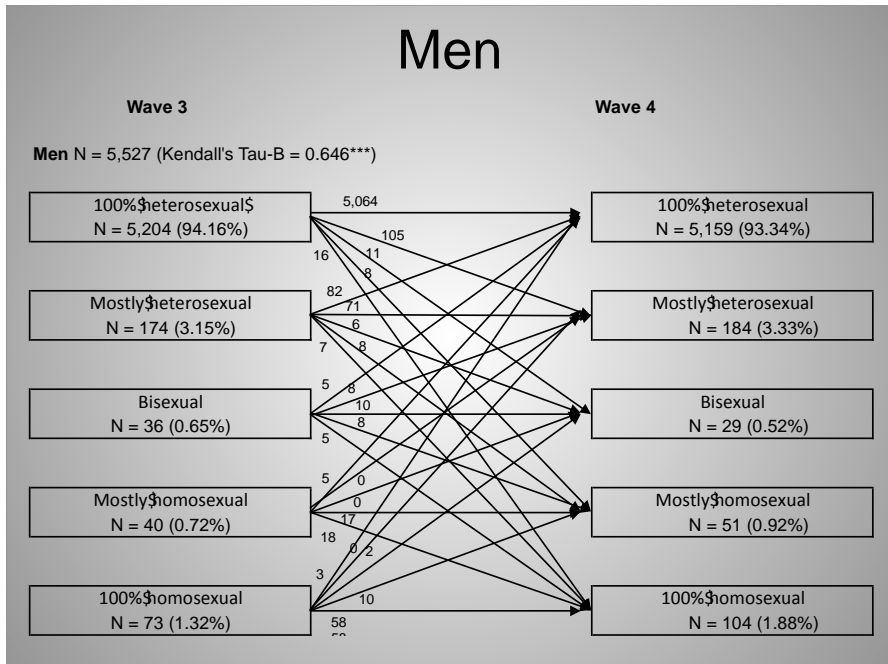
Thus, unparalleled in history, youth have the luxury to explore these issues within their own lives and those of their friends. For many adolescents, the old sexual identity categories just do not fit so well anymore. I see this as good news because it enhances personal freedom and the normalization of homoeroticism among all teenagers.



## Appendix

Transitions among women and men in sexual orientation identity from Wave 3 to Wave 4 from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Savin-Williams et al., 2012).





# CLOSETED IN THE BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA: TESTING THE EPISTEMIC LIMITS OF THE CLOSET AMONG OUTSIDERS WITHIN

THOMAS BALCERSKI

In *Boy Scouts of America vs. Dale* (2000), the United States Supreme Court decided that the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) possessed the right to exclude “homosexual” members from its adult ranks. The case has been widely commented upon in the popular press and in academic journals.<sup>1</sup> Since the *Dale* decision, more high profile cases of youth and adult Scout leaders being denied membership due to their sexual orientation, including Jennifer Tyrrell, the lesbian den mother; Ryan Andresen, the gay teenager who was denied the rank of Eagle Scout; and Greg Bourke, the gay Scoutmaster and father of a Boy Scout, have reinforced the organization’s commitment to its discriminatory policy. Despite the efforts of numerous volunteer groups, the signatures of millions of petitioning Americans, and President Barack Obama’s admonition to the contrary, the BSA has consistently reaffirmed its right to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation in its membership standards.<sup>2</sup>

While the *Dale* decision sustained the BSA’s power to exclude adults from membership on the basis of sexual orientation, in reality, the organization has largely been unable to prevent queer men and women from serving as volunteers. By staying in or returning inside the closet, countless thousands of queer men and women have served, and continue to do so, in the BSA.<sup>3</sup> The collective stories of queer Scout adult leaders, including James Dale, Tim Curran, and the men interviewed as part of this study, reveal that queer sexuality and Scouting have long been intertwined. My findings suggest that although the closet provides the safest space for queer adult Scout leaders who wish to participate in the program, it simultaneously limits the potential of substantive changes to the organization’s discriminatory membership policy by those who are most affected by it.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

How can we conceptualize the position of queer adult Scout leaders in the BSA? Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins offers the concept of “outsiders within,” which she applied originally to African American women working in the academy. Collins finds academic outsiders within “bring...ways of knowing back into the research process” and urges intellectuals to “trust their own personal and cultural biographies as significant sources of knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> The personal as research interest is not empirically interesting to the dominant group, and unsurprisingly, women of color have had their voices silenced in the academy. In a similar fashion, queer men have had their voices quelled in the BSA. While there are obvious differences among queer adult Scout leaders and African American women in the academy, both groups have suffered discrimination as members of minority groups. I will test the case of queer adult Scout leaders as “outsiders within” in this essay, suggesting that the concept provides a useful heuristic to understand how queer men not only survive, but thrive, within an officially homophobic organization.

In categorizing queer adult Scout leaders as outsiders within, I will also draw upon my own experience in and out of the closet while a member of the BSA. My Scouting experience has overall been very positive; yet, I appreciate well the problematic aspects of the BSA and how outsiders, especially academics, have perceived the organization.<sup>6</sup> I was not surprised to read an article by the literary scholar and educator David Wallace, who rejects wholesale all that the BSA represents:

I’m gay. I’m offended and hurt by the Boy Scouts’ attempt to exclude homosexuality from morality at a national level and at thousands of local sites. I’m surprise that some of my colleagues...can hold up the “good” that the Boy Scouts do when I and thousands of men and women like me are barred from participating in that “good” (should we be so inclined) simply because of our sexual orientation.<sup>7</sup>

I readily understand Wallace’s position, but I respectfully disagree with both the logic and content of his claims. The stated purpose of the BSA is to develop “character, citizenship, and fitness” among the young men and women who comprise the program. The adults’ involvement should be secondary at best. Any argument focused on the self-righteous indignation of *adults*, at best, misses the larger problem with the BSA’s position, and at worst, runs counterproductive to changing the organization’s homophobic policies.

If we follow Wallace’s argument, the “good,” or utility, of the BSA is outweighed by the national organization’s policy excluding queer members. What of the queer youth, some closeted and some not, in the

BSA, to say nothing to the straight youth who have only the example of homophobia to follow? Does Wallace propose to ignore them? In another part of his article, Wallace tells of struggling to fight an administrative decision that excluded self-identified queer students from attending LGBT Alliance meetings. He astutely notes that there might be many more queer students in the classroom, as “statistically speaking, there are at least one or two other students in the program and perhaps as many as four or five who are not yet out.”<sup>8</sup> Abandoning closeted queer youth in any capacity, and especially in the nation’s largest organization for youth, does not seem a solution by Wallace’s own logic.

What about the BSA makes it important enough to fight for change? This is a challenging question, for there are many other aspects that I would like to improve in the culture of the BSA, especially with respect to the prevailing notions and practices of a hegemonic, heterosexist masculinity. In his wonderful ethnographic study, Jay Mechling provides, a useful summation of the value of Scouting. “At its best,” Mechling concludes, “a Boy Scout troop can operate as a mediating structure [a term he borrows from Alexis de Tocqueville and later critics] in which the boys and men together experience and work through all of the tensions, dilemmas, and contradictions between autonomy and social order.”<sup>9</sup> I understand that this “working through of tensions” between autonomy and social order does not reflect the experience of some former Scouts. However, if I may be allowed to rely not only on my own cultural biography, but those of dozens of others queer youth and adults whom I have met and come to know through Scouting, the joys of “working through” provide endless motivation for those who spend countless hours each week in the “Movement.”

The case studies that follow highlight the methodological challenge of drawing upon “personal and cultural biographies” to create a productive space where personal knowledge is valued. Using the examples drawn from queer adult Scout leaders, I argue along the formulations of Patricia Hill Collins and Sandra Harding that queer adult Scout leaders follow the pattern of “outsiders within.”<sup>10</sup> Class and biological sex are constant (my subjects are largely middle-class), but my subjects differ in age and race. I concentrate on adult men only—the experience of queer youth in Scouting also deserves consideration and had been taken up in part by the activist groups Scouting for All and Scouts for Equality.<sup>11</sup> I know of no study that looks at queer women in Boy Scouting, though an anthology of essays from lesbian Girl Scouts leaders has recently been published.<sup>12</sup>

In the first case study, I look at the stories of James Dale and Tim Curran, two well-known examples of queer adult Scout leaders excluded

from the organization on account of their sexual orientation. Their stories are perhaps the most well-documented, because of the extensive legal battles that followed their removal from the program. In the next two sections, I examine the case of two current adult Scout leaders who remain closeted to their troops and councils, though who are out in other aspects of their lives. In the final case study, I tell the story of my best friend within the Boy Scouts, whose emerging sense of queer self-identification and coming out caused his ultimate removal from the program, and meditate further on my own involvement in Scouting. While I employ pseudonyms and change some details to protect my subjects, I tell their stories as faithfully as possible.

### **James Dale and Tim Curran: Out (and Proud) Scouts**

James Dale may be the most famous former queer adult Scout leader, but Tim Curran was the first to make national headlines. Curran, who is a white, middle-class man from suburban California, was an outstanding Boy Scout. He was a member of Troop 37 of the Mt. Diablo Council of Oakland, California for four years, from 1975 through 1979. An Eagle Scout, Curran remained quite memorable to his former senior patrol leader: "In my seven years as a Scout, I never met a boy who conformed more to the Norman Rockwell image of clean-cut, good-natured service to others than Tim did."<sup>13</sup> Curran also participated in his troop's Leadership Development Program, joined the Order of the Arrow, and attended the National Jamboree in 1977. The appellate brief filed in California superior court reveals the great "good" that Tim Curran found in the Boy Scouts: "[he] enjoyed the recreational and educational activities offered by Scouting, prized the prestige of being a Boy Scout, and greatly valued the skills it taught, particularly the practical training he received in journalism (which ultimately became his career) in programs offered during his troop meetings, the National Jamboree he attended in 1977, and another national BSA conference he attended in 1979."

Curran's removal from Scouting stemmed from an unwanted outing. Openly out to members of his troop, he was nevertheless asked to become an assistant scoutmaster, a position he held on a part-time basis for about a year after entering college. Mount Diablo Council subsequently denied Curran membership, when the Oakland *Tribune* featured him in an article about the homosexual youth movement and included a photograph of him escorting a male date to his high school prom.<sup>14</sup> Mount Diablo Council refused to allow Curran to remain an adult Scout leader or to attend the National Jamboree because—and only because—it had learned that Curran