ORIGINAL ARTICLE

More Normal Than Not: A Qualitative Assessment of the Developmental Experiences of Gay Male Youth

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Purpose: **To examine gay youth experiences within the context of normal adolescent development.**

Methods: **Thematic analyses of interviews with 13 self-identified gay male youth, aged 16–22 years, each reporting minimal sexual identity distress, were completed. Interviews focused on: (a) descriptions of developmental changes perceived to occur for *all adolescents*, {b) descriptions of the *participants' developmental experience*, and (c) participants' direct comparisons of their perceptions of gay and nongay developmental experience. Data were analyzed by two investigators who, after initial review of the interview transcripts, developed a unified coding template to permit systematic analysis of the transcripts for recurrent themes.**

Results: **(a) Few (2 of 13) participants reported overall developmental experience markedly different from nongay peers. (b) Peer interaction was seen as the domain most different from that of nongay peers. (c) Open gay self-identification altered, generally positively, all peer interaction. (d) Increased peer interaction enhanced maturity in other domains. (e) Family dynamics were not substantively altered by open gay self-identification. (f) Middle and high school were identified as relatively hostile environments in which to openly identify as gay, affecting the timing and the extent of self-disclosure. (g) Developmental progress showed asynchrony across developmental domains.**

Conclusion: **General developmental dysfunction is not inevitable for gay adolescents, nor is identifiable personal or family pathology directly related to sexual identity.** © *Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2004*

In the past several decades, research involving sexual minority youth has found them to be at disproportionate risk for depression and suicidality, HIV infection, substance use and abuse, violence, harassment and eating disorders [1–12]. Although these data are important in focusing our attention on these unique problems, overgeneralization from risk-based data may limit our understanding of the experiences of sexual minority youth.

There seems a tendency even among professionals to view sexual minority adolescents as homogenous. Little attention has been focused on the general developmental experience of sexual minority adolescents. Sexual minority adolescents are likely to be as developmentally heterogeneous as any other adolescent population. That being so, we might then rightly expect that not all varieties of gay developmental experience will be inevitably associated with the presence of high risk behaviors, deleterious events or negative developmental outcomes.

Much of the research specifically focusing on developmental issues in this population has tended to focus on what is involved in developing a "sexual identity" [13–16]. Additional attention should be

paid to avoiding the assumption that sexual identity formation is so overwhelming a task that this developmental struggle becomes the single maturational focus for these adolescents, subsuming all other developmental tasks and accomplishments.

Sociopolitical shifts in the Western world over the past few decades have resulted in an apparent improvement in the social environment in which sexual minority youth come to developmental maturity. Gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are an increasingly visible element of general youth culture, most notably in popular print and visual media. Increasing numbers of communities have school- and community-based support programs specifically aimed at sexual minority youth [17,18]. Colleges and universities are increasingly likely to have campus-based resources for sexual minority students and include sexual orientation in their campus Equal Opportunity policies [19]. Although society's grip on improvement in social environments may be somewhat tenuous [20], the very fact that sexual minority youth are in evidence at all changes the developmental equation for youth growing up in the current era.

Researchers involved in the population-based studies that have helped to quantify the increased risks to which sexual minority youth may be exposed, have recently cautioned a more balanced approach to the use of the risk data. Voicing concerns that issues of underreporting of numbers and over-reporting of pathology may skew even good population-based data, they warn that overgeneralization and exclusive focus on elements of increased risk in this population has the potential to inadvertently stigmatize all sexual minority adolescents as being "at risk" [21,22].

This qualitative study took as its starting point the position that some gay male adolescents, specifically those who had already taken steps to publicly identify themselves as gay and felt able to describe themselves as "comfortable" with their sexual identity, might view their own developmental experiences as being substantively the same as that of their nongay peers. Additionally, we wanted to glean information about how other developmental processes might be intertwined with the search for sexual identity and whether the particulars of struggling with issues of sexual identity appeared to subsume all other processes or instead constituted just one of many developmental processes operating simultaneously in the lives of young sexual minority men.

Methods

Approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. Thirteen male participants, aged 16–22 years, were recruited using print advertising, internet *listserv.* postings, and public announcements at sites recognized as resources for communication and information used by sexual minority youth. All participants provided written informed consent, and parents of participants less than 18 years of age provided written permission for participation. All participants were compensated for travel and participation time. To be included, participants had to be willing to (a) identify themselves as "gay" and (b) to endorse the statement, "Being gay currently causes me minimal distress."

The researchers had inquiries about participation in the study only as a result of *listserv.* postings and announcements made to groups about the study. There were no responses to print ads. Most inquiries and initial screening contacts occurred via face-to-face recruitment encounters or via e-mail. Twenty-two subjects made initial inquiries about participation. Contacts leading to screening were made with 19 individuals; 14 met screening criteria. Screening was completed by e-mail or phone before an interview was scheduled and then repeated at the time of the interview. Subjects were excluded if they answered in the negative to any of the screening questions. One subject failed to attend several scheduled interviews.

All subjects were white. One was aged 16 years, two were aged 18 years, one was aged 19 and the remainder, 20–22 years of age. Almost all participants were University students.

In determining whether further recruitment beyond this initial cohort would add substantively to the data, "first pass" analyses were undertaken several times during the data-collection phase of the study. These periodic reviews did not reveal significant numbers of new thematic elements arising after approximately 10–11 interviews were analyzed. No additional participants were recruited after the completion of the 13th interview.

Data were obtained via in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out by the principal investigator during the winter and spring of 2001. Each interview lasted approximately 2 hours and was audio taped. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by an experienced qualitative research transcriptionist and

imported into MaxQDA® [23], a software program designed to assist in the systematic evaluation of text-based qualitative data.

The interview was guided by a template designed to permit the interviewer some degree of freedom to follow interesting leads, but which also required that the same questions be asked in the same sequence of all participants. Each participant was asked to focus sequentially on: (a) descriptions of the developmental changes each perceived to occur for *all adolescents* from early adolescence to late adolescence in the arenas of family interaction, peer interaction (both general and romantic interaction), and school and work experiences; (b) a description of the *participant's own experience* in these three arenas, and finally, (c) each was asked to identify ways in which the developmental experience of gay adolescents was *different from or the same as* that of their nongay peers in each arena. For the purposes of this study, *early adolescence* was described to the participants as being that period of time when most people attend middle school and the first year or two of high school. *Later adolescence* was described as being between the last two years of high school and the time when most adolescents had left high school and were pursuing post-high school educations or working.

After the interview collection phase, the principal investigator (PI) and a co-investigator (CI) completed independent, "second pass" analyses of the interview data, a more formal process than that done periodically during the data-collection phase. When structured using the interview script as a guide, this "second pass" resulted in the development of a unified coding system for use in the "coding" phase of the study.

The PI and CI then coded each interview independently. The independently derived codes generated by each investigator during this phase of the analysis were compared. Disagreements between the two investigators regarding coded segments were resolved through negotiation. Coded segments, now grouped according to the unified coding system, were examined by the PI and the CI for the presence of unifying themes that could be supported by the coded data.

Results

Eight thematic clusters, variously nuanced by the participants, emerged from the data analysis.

Perceptions of Common Adolescent Milestones and Trajectories

The initial portion of these interviews focused on the participants' perceptions of the elements contained in usual or "normal" adolescent development, irrespective of issues of sexual identity. We did not specifically define "normal" for the participants. We instead left it to the participants to demonstrate their perception of "normal development" by reference to what they regarded as common adolescent developmental events and sequences. This initial interview segment was usually the most taxing for participants, perhaps owing to the fact that individual adolescents may have limited information about adolescent populations as a whole, leading to difficulty generalizing beyond their own personal experiences and those of close peers. The following perceptions were identified with great consistency by the participants.

Adolescence is marked by decreasing levels of involvement with members of one's own family and at the same time, an increased involvement with peers. This shift was generally regarded as essential for further developmental change and appeared to have few negative connotations for these participants:

Changes occur in the structure and qualities of adolescent peer interaction over time. Most of the participants focused here on changing structural elements of peer relationships over time, from indistinct masses of peers in grade school to cliques in middle school and early high school. Individual and small group friendships were seen to be the most common peer-group structures in late high school and college. Participants also often discussed issues of increasing emotional closeness that developed with peers over time.

Adolescence is characterized by increasing levels of independent decision-making. Most of the subjects referred in this case to increasing numbers of decisions made independently of input from family members.

Common socially sanctioned occasions serve as markers of transitions to new levels of maturity and independence. Nearly all of the participants mentioned two such events; changes in curfew times and the acquisition of a driver's license. All participants tied these events to notions of developmental independence from their families.

Few Participants Perceived Their Overall Development to be Markedly Different From That of Their Nongay Peers

All participants perceived gay self-identification as having had some impact on their overall development, but nearly all saw this as being only one of many factors affecting personal development. This influence was seen to operate both before and after these participants openly identified themselves as being gay ("came out"). One of the younger participants, a 16-year-old, indicated that he perceived certain developmental struggles to be similar for all adolescents, with issues of sexual identity adding a slightly different dimension to the process of resolving these issues.

> "...both sides go through the same problems, the same experiences...but it's just a little different-...like this room...at night it's dark and during the daytime it's light, but it's the same room."

Another participant, who reported that he felt that his gay self-identification had little effect on his developmental processes, said,

> "Well, I don't ever think about, just think about being gay. I mean, I just accept that as like I have brown hair...that's something that I never even think about."

Two of the participants felt that their developmental experience had been significantly different from peers as a result of their identifying themselves as gay, even before open gay self-identification. These two participants were demographically similar to the other subjects, but in both cases, these particular participants acknowledged that they had experienced a significant amount of peer discomfort predating their gay self-identification and continued to feel socially awkward. Both felt that identifying as gay continued to impact significantly on their developmental experiences. On the impact of being gay on his personal development, one of these two participants said,

> "I wasn't comfortable with myself...I had this huge weight on my shoulders...there was always this weight, so that definitely impacted my relationships, my well-being, how I act around people...that had a huge impact, you know."

The other said about his peer experiences in general,

> "...it's always been difficult for me to, uh, make friends that I like. You know, to be with people that I like. I'm not the pickiest of persons, but I'm not the

most outgoing person and so, it was always difficult to kind of fit in..."

Peer Interaction Was Seen as the Area Most Consistently Different When Participants Compared Themselves With Their Nongay Peers

Most of the participants explicitly identified peer-interaction as being the area in which they perceived the most consistent difference between themselves and nongay peers. Several participants felt that peer-interactional differences explained some of the developmental variability they did perceived between gay and nongay adolescents. Some participants perceived that these peer interactional differences isolated them from other developmentally important experiences. One participant in particular said,

> "I think I missed out on a lot in high school because I felt like I was always hiding."

Another, focusing on the wariness with which he felt gay adolescents approached peers said,

> "I would say that, um, gay teens are a lot more cautious about who they choose to hang out with and trust probably takes a lot more time to develop than individuals who are straight...in that sense it takes a long time for gay teens. . . . developing trust can take years."

Open Gay Self-identification Had a Perceptible Impact on the Size, Structure and Quality of Both Gay and Nongay Peer Groups

All subjects reported that open gay self-identification resulted in an expansion of peer networks. For most participants, contacts with a sexual minority youth network showed the most expansion. Impacts on peer group networks outside the sexual minority community were more variable, with some participants reporting contracture of nongay peer networks and others reporting minimal changes. Most of the participants reported that whatever peer networks had existed before the participant's coming out continued to exist afterward, though in somewhat altered forms. One of the participants said this about peer networks,

> "...with my guy, straight friends, it's pretty much diminished. I mean like I don't know if that's the reason or not...I still have friends I haven't told because I'm afraid that they wouldn't be my friend anymore."

Another said,

> "Oh, after I came out, I noticed that I didn't have as many straight guy friends. I didn't meet as many.

It was just because I hung around with different people."

Those participants with restricted peer networks seemed to have the biggest expansion of peer networks after coming out, although this expansion appeared to be predominantly within networks of other sexual minority youth. One of the participants, who described himself as being very shy and with few friends before his coming out, said,

> "I met a lot of new friends and I liked them much better than the old ones. . .they accept me for who I am. . .the old friends, I couldn't talk about anything. . .my new friends, most of them are gay, you know."

Many of the participants expressed the view that expansion in peer networks after coming out was often related to being able to abandon a process of self-censoring that had pervaded their previous peer interactions. Prior self-censoring had resulted, they felt, in limitations on the numbers of peer interactions they had permitted themselves and restricted their sense of freedom to disclose personal information, even in areas not related to sexual identity. Several participants found the abandonment of such self-censoring to be quite liberating. One participant said,

> "The big difference is with people who know-. . .it's like tremendously. . .free. . .I can say whatever I want. I don't have to filter."

Expanding Peer Interaction Appeared to Incidentally Enhance Developmental Maturity in Other Domains as Well

Participants often reported that improvement in peer relationships, which they felt was directly related to their open gay self-identification, also resulted in incidental improvement in apparently unrelated developmental arenas such as family interactions, school performance and future planning. Although some of this improvement in non-peer-related developmental arenas may be attributable to feeling less guarded in general, the fact that several participants explicitly identified improved peer interaction as a source of this overflow developmental progress suggests that comfort in peer relationships was central to many of the developmental processes in which these adolescents were engaged. Asked what developmental changes had occurred after his coming out, one of the participants said,

> "Oh, my whole life. Where do I begin? Well, I'm out so it's not a secret and everybody knows so I'm

actually able to, you know, be comfortable with who I am."

Although the Majority of Participants Described Varying Levels of Family Stress and/or Dysfunction, They Rarely Pointed to Gay Self-identification as Being the Proximate Cause of Such Stress and/or Dysfunction

Nearly all of these participants reported stress and/or dysfunction that would be regarded as significant by professionals who work with adolescents. Reported stressors ran the gamut from parental death to divorce to parental substance abuse and family financial difficulties. Despite this, participants were generally unwilling to relate family dysfunction, either as a cause or an effect, to their own sexual identity struggles. Several of the participants went to great lengths to avoid such attribution, pointing out that they regarded family stressors to be part and parcel of the normal lives of all adolescents. These participants also frequently pointed out ways in which their families, even if dysfunctional, were able to provide some modicum of support to them surrounding issues of sexual identity. Most reported that they felt their family's responses to sexual identity issues mirrored family responses to other stressors. One 21-year-old participant speaking about how he and his nongay brother viewed their family said,

> ". . .the way we think of our family as dysfunctional doesn't have anything to do with our sexuality. It's more of how we just interact with each other."

One participant, despite the fact that he had described his family as being quite dysfunctional, described the support he received from his family after his coming out this way,

> "It was a test, I guess. It was the first time that we were all able to show how much we cared for each other. It was the first time I've heard out of all of my family that they didn't care, they still loved me."

Middle School and High School Were Regarded by Many Participants as Being Relatively Hostile Environments in Which to Openly Identify as Gay

Despite the fact that the participants in this study were selected specifically because they were able to identify themselves both as "out" and as "comfortable" with their sexual identity, nearly all of the participants acknowledged that there were some significant hurdles along the way to publicly identifying themselves as gay. Nearly all reported middle

school and high school to be places where they were much more likely to have been harassed or where they had witnessed harassment of others on the basis of sexual identity issues. Most participants felt such overt hostility was most evident in middle school and early high school and less evident by late high school and in post-high school educational and work environments. Perception of both overt and potential hostility, particularly in environments dominated by peers, did seem to impact on the timing and extent of these participants' self-disclosure as gay. Describing his own and other gay youths' middle school experiences, one participant said,

> "I think that they feel like they [gay kids] have to crawl up in themselves just to. . .you know. They're just terrified. I was terrified of coming out because I thought I would be. . .harassed left and right, not by my family, you know, but by peers."

As a result of this perceived peer hostility, most of the participants in this study delayed public self-identification until later in high school or college and approached self-disclosure in a tentative and stepwise pattern. This stepwise disclosure pattern has been previously described for sexual minority adolescents [24]. One of the participants described this process this way,

> ". . .slowly, starting my junior year, slowly, like inch by inch by inch [I came] out to them. 'I'm gay, don't tell anyone. Don't tell anyone blah, blah, blah. . . .' I didn't feel like I needed or was ready for a boyfriend or a relationship. It was enough that I had these people that accepted me for who I was, to a certain point."

Participants' willingness to openly identify as gay despite perceived environmental hostility seemed related in some measure to the degree to which they had integrated themselves into peer networks of some sort, even if such integration was tentative. Those who had made some attempt to established a group of peer friends found that open gay self-identification was easier and the process faster than those with more severely constricted peer networks.

Rates of Developmental Progress Did Not Appear to Uniform Across Various Developmental Domains

It was particularly interesting that issues of sexual identity did not alter the asynchrony that commonly exists among developmental domains for adolescents in general. Although the specifics of developmental asynchrony were variable from participant to participant, asynchrony itself was normative. For example, intellectual accomplishment might surge ahead while family interaction changes lagged behind. One 20-year-old participant, reflecting on what might have happened if he had not yet publicly identified as gay said,

> ". . .on paper my life would have looked fine. . .this G.P.A., these classes taken, this job. . .but I wouldn't have been able to grow as a person."

The experience of the participants in this study supports the notion that sexual identity issues do not become so all consuming for sexual minority youth that they derail all other developmental trajectories.

Discussion

This qualitative study provides some interesting glimpses into the perceptions gay adolescents have of their own developmental experiences and into what they see as "normal development" for adolescents in general.

First and foremost, this study suggests that in many arenas, gay youth may not perceive themselves to be substantively different from their nongay peers. These particular participants consistently and astutely identified general developmental patterns for adolescents that reflect a generally accurate understanding of the normative adolescent developmental processes. Most of the participants in this study saw themselves as replicating many of these patterns.

The experience of these participants also suggests that, although the issue of developing a stable gay sexual identify has wide-ranging impact on the developmental experience of sexual minority youth, this single issue was not so all consuming that it superceded and subsumed all other developmental processes in this particular group of gay adolescents. Although these adolescents paid significant attention to issues surrounding their sexual identity, they attended as well to their developing roles as members of families, schools and peer groups. Significant too is the observation that sexual identity issues, when they did affect developmental progress, did not overwhelm or permanently distort progress in other developmental arenas.

We were interested in the emphasis these participants placed on peer interaction as being most affected by sexual identity issues. Whereas the interview template attempted to focus proportionally on family, school/work and peer interactions, these participants tended to focus on issues of peer inter-

action. Most of the participants reported that before public gay self-identification they felt a sense of isolation from normative peer interaction that resulted from the fear that self-revelation might expose them to social rejection or harassment. A variety of studies looking at the middle school and high school experiences of sexual minority youth would suggest that these fears are not groundless [25,26].

Positive developmental benefits of peer relationships have repeatedly been demonstrated in adolescents in general [27,28]. Negative impacts of impairment in peer interactions have to some extent been demonstrated in other adolescent populations [29,30] Less attention has been paid to sexual minority adolescents whose experience suggests that peer interaction should perhaps be thought of as a lynchpin in the complex architecture of adolescent development. Several participants sensed that exclusion from peer interaction, whether through self-imposed censorship or grounded in realistic assessment, had a deleterious effect on their developmental progress in that it isolated them from peer-appropriate experiences. Most felt that the coming out process expanded their social world and permitted a correction in developmental course.

These findings suggest that as much attention should be paid by clinicians when assessing sexual minority adolescents to peer relationships and peer networks as is traditionally paid to family interaction and school performance. From the perspective of politicosocial advocacy for these adolescents, educational and political officials should be supported in efforts to provide school environments that are free of both overt and covert harassment, with the understanding that ensuring safety in the context of peer interaction, regardless of sexual identity, is essential to normative adolescent development.

Waldner and Magruder demonstrated that gay and lesbian adolescents' perceptions regarding pre-existing family stress and available coping resources had an impact on the timing of "coming out" within the family unit [31]. Savin-Williams, in a recent review, notes that familial responses to disclosure about sexual orientation by adolescents are quite variable [32]. The findings in this study suggest that these admonitions warrant our attention. These particular participants were reluctant to blame their families for developmental difficulties related to issues of sexual identify, despite reporting complex and problematic family structures and interactions. Many eagerly reported not only family dysfunction but also the concomitant support and compassion exhibited by their families. Information from the

participants in this study suggests that sexual minority status is not necessarily a causal element in family dysfunction, but is instead only an additional, albeit sometimes major, stressor for families who are dysfunctional for reasons completely unrelated to an adolescent's sexual identity struggles. This important distinction underscores the necessity for practitioners working with sexual minority adolescents to assess not only current familial patterns of response to stressful information and events, but also previous response patterns. This information should be particularly useful to clinicians as they prepare adolescents for anticipated family responses to publicly disclosing their sexual identities. It may also be useful to some sexual minority adolescents to see that their sexual identity struggles are not the proximate cause of family dysfunction.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This qualitative study is not intended to provide generalizable information about the developmental experiences of all sexual minority adolescents. It is intended instead to provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of the targeted study population as regards questions of developmental processes.

Sexual minority women, whose experience could be expected to be different from that of men, were excluded to reduce the potential confounding effect of gender. Sexual minority youth acknowledging overt distress with their sexual identity were excluded, as the intent of this study was thought best served by purposive sampling. Their experiences might be substantially different from the experiences of the study population. The area of the country from which the participants in this study were recruited is quite homogeneous in terms of race, ethnicity and culture of origin. Efforts to recruit a more racially and culturally diverse cohort would be useful in future studies of this type.

The participants in this study identified peer interaction as an essential element in their developmental process. Our understanding of adolescent sexual minority peer networks, how they are constructed and maintained both before and after an adolescent identifies as a sexual minority person, is fairly limited. A detailed assessment of the processes involved in creating, maintaining and remodeling various iterations of peer networks by sexual minority adolescents and those networks' impact on development in this subpopulation would be useful.

Conclusion

The observations drawn from the participants in this study should assist clinicians in developing a more complete and realistic picture of the rich and complicated histories of individual sexual minority adolescents. Although not free from the negative impact of responses to homosexuality by individuals or communities, not all sexual minority youth perceive themselves to be distressed or defenseless. Developmental asynchrony similar to that seen in all adolescents, rather than global developmental dysfunction, is the likely norm for sexual minority youth, and the developmental experiences of these adolescents can best be understood by exploration of a variety of developmental arenas simultaneously. Study findings of particular significance for the assessment of the sexual minority adolescent include the participants' observations that (a) meaningful peer interactions were important to the safe navigation of other developmental pathways, and (b) that their particular families established patterns of support and dysfunction long before issues related to sexual identity struggles had the opportunity to shape those patterns. These observations should assist clinicians as they search for balanced approaches to sexual minority adolescents, many of whom increasingly see themselves as part of the adolescent mainstream; that is, more normal than not.

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