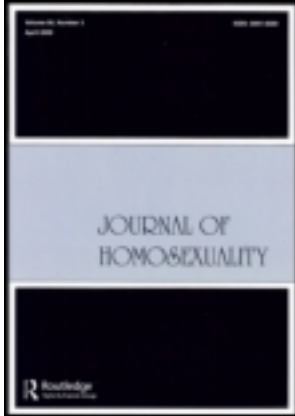


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UK



Journal of Homosexuality

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wjhm20>

Gay Youth and Gay Adults

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Published online: 12 Oct 2008.

To cite this article: Janis S. Bohan PhD , Glenda M. Russell PhD & Suki Montgomery MA (PhD, Nov. 2001) (2003) Gay Youth and Gay Adults, Journal of Homosexuality, 44:1, 15-41, DOI: [10.1300/J082v44n01_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n01_02)

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1300/J082v44n01_02

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Gay Youth and Gay Adults: Bridging the Generation Gap

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ABSTRACT. Recent discussion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) youth has included two emphases: the burgeoning trend toward youth-supportive organizations and focus on risk factors experienced by these youth. In practice, the two are intertwined: the need for youth-supportive endeavors is typically demonstrated by appeals to the risks LGBT youth face. Relatively little attention has been given to relationships between youth and adults in LGBT communities. This article employs data from a long-term qualitative study with LGBT youth, supported by information from numerous other settings to suggest that a failure on the part of both groups fully to comprehend the experience of the other hampers the optimal functioning of everyone involved. In particular, we

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Journal of Homosexuality, Vol. 44(1) 2002
<http://www.haworthpress.com/store/product.asp?sku=J082>
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suggest that the discourse about the dangers faced by LGBT youth, despite its being thoroughly well-intentioned, may actually place these teens at greater risk. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Haworth Document Delivery Service*: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2002 by *The Haworth Press, Inc.* All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Adolescence, at-risk youth, communication, community (LGBT community), generation gap, homosexuality, narrative, suicide, youth

Contemporary discussions concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues increasingly emphasize matters having to do with children and youth; indeed, it can be argued that youth have become pawns in the debate about equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (see, e.g., Herman, 1997; Lipkin, 1999; Martin, 1990; Pharr, 1996; Rofes, 1997; Smolowe, 1996; Woog, 1998). Within LGBT communities, burgeoning efforts by adults are directed toward supporting youth, and LGBT youth themselves are becoming more visible and vocal as they come out at ever-earlier ages, propose and frequently establish gay-straight alliances and other groups in schools, call for and often achieve safe gathering spaces outside of schools, and dare to take a stand in legislatures and courts and other public forums on behalf of their rights to equal treatment and freedom from discrimination.

On the other hand (and perhaps in response to the growing visibility of LGBT and questioning youth and their young heterosexual allies), those who oppose equal rights for LGBTs issue strident pleas to protect children from the “gay agenda.” The schools have become a particular focus for this campaign, with the accusation of insidious gay intrusions into the schools being used to fuel the broader right-wing agenda in education. From this perspective, programs developed on behalf of non-heterosexual youth are seen as efforts to “recruit,” and youth who identify as other than heterosexual are regarded as especially in need of rescue from the supposed threat of LGBT adults.

Through such focus on their lives, LGBT and questioning youth have gained considerable public attention at the same time that the lives of LGBT adults are also the focus of extensive public discourse—consider debates about such issues as gays in the military, gay politicians, gay athletes and entertainers, partnership benefits, and same sex marriages.

Under these circumstances of intense scrutiny and rapid change, relationships between these spotlighted youth and adult members of the community are of critical relevance to our collective well-being; it is crucial at this juncture that we consider carefully the nature and implications of those relationships. The aim of this paper is to explore certain elements of these relationships.

In this discussion, we will draw on several bodies of information, including a growing literature (both professional and lay) dealing with LGBT youth, as well as our own research, consulting, psychotherapy, teaching, and public policy activities. The understandings we have gained from this literature, our work, and especially our extensive discussions with LGBT youth and adults who work with them have combined to suggest a framework for exploring experiences of LGBT youth, one that focuses on relationships between generations. A central thesis of this analysis is the proposal that neither segment of the LGBT community—youth nor adults—has evolved a clear understanding of and communication with the other, and that the absence of such an understanding hamstrings individuals in both age groups as well the community and the movement as a whole.

This last broad statement needs to be qualified with a few caveats. First, we recognize that there is no simple division between or homogeneity within the groups designated as “youth” and “adults.” Some individuals young in age are fully as mature as many older individuals; similarly, many chronological adults are less mature and participatory than are some much younger members of the community. Further, there are vast differences within each group in characteristics such as class, race/ethnicity, religious allegiance, ability status, rural versus urban residency, and so on; these factors can be expected to make a difference in the lives of gay adults and gay youth. However, for the sake of brevity, we will here consider youth and adults as if they were identifiably distinct segments of the LGBT community, and we will sacrifice accuracy about the variations within each group by speaking as if they are more homogeneous than we know them to be.

Second, we are fully aware of the impact upon intergenerational relationships of the long-standing portrayal of LGBT adults as dangerous to youth. Given the pervasive, though false, stereotypes of LGBT adults as molesting children and recruiting youth to the “gay lifestyle,” adults have often hesitated to make themselves available to youth. This stereotype likely emerges from the blanket sexualization of LGBT identity in this society, which leads people to understand all LGBT issues as issues of sexual activity—hence, it is wrongly assumed that interactions be-

tween LGBT adults and youth must have a sexual basis. Certainly some part of the issue we will focus on here—namely the reciprocal lack of accurate appreciation for the experience of the other group—derives from this (culturally imposed) separation. This situation serves to highlight a crucial awareness: the problem lying at the root of the matters we will discuss here is not LGBT identity per se but homophobia and heterosexism and their impact on those who identify as LGBT. There is nothing intrinsic to LGBT identity that precludes worthwhile cross-generational communication, that prevents LGBT adults' acting as mentors to youth, or that interferes with LGBT teens' taking seriously the experiences and insights of adults. Rather, these are phenomena grounded in typical developmental issues, issues that are immensely complicated by the homophobia that leads us to doubt ourselves, one another, and the community as a whole.

These caveats aside, the growing centrality of LGBT youth in contemporary discourse comes at a time when the rapid pace of change fuels profound differences between today's youth and today's adults. The change is broad and deep; consider the following common experiences of today's youth that were unheard of a few decades ago: the tremendous presence of the LGBT community in mainstream discourse, along with political controversies about LGBT issues (who even talked about gay marriage 20 years ago?); the availability for many youth of the Internet, with all its information resources and avenues for contact with others; countless organizations, gatherings, and conferences for and about LGBT youth; and the regular visibility in adolescents' world of LGBT athletes, actors, musicians, and politicians. At the same time, some experiences are remarkably persistent across generations, for example, the presence of homophobia in its personal, social, and institutional forms; residual stereotypes that live on despite their disconfirmation by research; and the pull toward a community of people who share an identity. The confluence of these phenomena—very rapid change in the experience of LGBT adolescence, the cross-generational persistence of homophobia, and the growing focus on LGBT youth—makes it essential that we think carefully about how we relate across generational boundaries, fuzzy though these boundaries may be. In urging a consideration of these issues, we operate from the (very hopeful) assumption that we all have much to learn and that our ability to benefit each other and the movement as a whole requires that we all listen well. Our intent here is to highlight several areas where a clearer understanding of this disrupted pattern of communication has important implications for LGBTs, individually and collectively, and to suggest actions that might

ease the conversation across generations and thereby improve the lot of us all.

It is important to acknowledge that we inevitably speak from our perspective as adult members of the LGBT community; we cannot speak for youth. Much of what we have learned of the issues in this article has come through extensive conversations with youth, both LGBT and their heterosexual allies, and with adults who work with youth. While we hope to represent faithfully the perspectives of youth with whom we have spoken, we are aware that neither we nor they can adequately capture the perspectives of all LGBT youth.

LGBT YOUTH: ONE SIDE OF THE RELATIONAL EQUATION

Let us begin by considering the role of youth in this short-circuited intergenerational communication. We begin with a discussion of teens' place in this relationship for two reasons: First, in a culture that generally devalues teens, it is quite easy to neglect their very real contributions to the interactions that constitute the LGBT community in the broad sense, and we do not want to participate in that culturally sanctioned (and fundamentally ageist) process here. We have been reminded by the teens with whom we have talked that adults are prone to consider adolescents as "the future," disregarding their presence and impact in the present; in so doing, adults risk denying to youth both the agency and the responsibility that are rightfully theirs in these considerations. Second, because it is likely that the primary readers of this article will be adults, we want to close with comments about adults' place in these matters, emphasizing adult responsibilities while yet presenting those against the background of a recognition that youth, too, play an active role in whatever difficulties of communication we might face as a community.

LGBT Identity Magnifies Developmental Tasks

Some of the difficulties in communication we discuss here are, to a degree, to be expected. In this society, both teens and adults (of whatever sexual orientation and identity) are engaged in developmental tasks that might interfere with accurate empathic understanding across generations. Adolescents are commonly immersed in the (culturally prescribed) task of defining themselves apart from adults and are thus more likely to attend to differences between themselves and adults than

to seek out adult affirmation of their worldviews. Adults, for their part, are engrossed in the mastery of social roles that often entail a disdain for the naïveté of youth. In addition, a familiar cultural narrative describes adolescence as intrinsically stressful (for both adults and youth) and miscommunication across generations as nearly inevitable (Johnson, Roberts, & Worrell, 1999). Accurate or not, the expectation that adolescence is a period of turmoil and the relative disregard for the considerable strengths of youth frame cross-generational expectations and communications.

In LGBT communities, the resultant developmentally- and culturally-mediated gulf between the experience of teens and that of adults is heightened by the historical reality of the dramatic speed with which matters pertaining to LGBT life (including the nature of homophobia and heterosexism) have changed in recent decades. LGBT teens coming of age in the era of Ellen Degeneres, Wilson Cruz, Elton John, and Barney Frank, the era of partner benefits and court-sanctioned civil unions may see little similarity between their own experiences and those of adults who came of age in previous far more secretive times. It might be argued—and indeed some of the teens with whom we have talked have suggested—that a “generation” in LGBT life is a matter of a few years rather than a matter of decades. If this is the case, then the process of separation from adults that typically (at least in this society) occurs between youth and adults is magnified several fold for LGBT teens.

The extent and rapidity of this change is noteworthy and evokes a provocative analysis of intergenerational relationships by the noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead. Mead (1970) argued that where social change is extremely fast-paced—as is currently the case, and perhaps especially among LGBTs adults “have no descendants [and] children have no forebears” (p. 76). Her comment points to the gap between the knowledge possessed by adults and that appropriate to a new era in which “there are no adults who know more than the young themselves about what the young are experiencing” (p. 78). To the extent that the remarkable pace of change in LGBT experience accelerates this dramatic social flux, LGBT youth may feel especially at a loss for adults who comprehend life in teens’ own terms.

The Gifts of Youth

LGBT youth thus approach intergenerational communication with developmentally normative conflicts that are exacerbated by rapid social change. The distance that exists—and the even greater distance that

may be perceived—between the bygone adolescent experience of LGBTs who are today adults and the current experience of today’s LGBT youth yields complex outcomes. On a positive note, teens’ distance from historically earlier times—times which were characterized by less LGBT visibility, more pervasively overt social oppression, and frequent encounters with especially virulent forms of homophobia—may grant youth a degree of distance and thus a perspective not available to many adults. Often, teens can see through the dynamics that have kept adults bound to old social norms precisely because teens have never experienced homophobia in the same form and so may be somewhat less prone to anticipate the oppression that adults experienced in the past (and, therefore, anticipate in the present). At the same time, some aspects of LGBT experience remain rather consistent over time—such as the more subtle forms of homophobia that adults may have learned to disregard—and youth may be able to provide a novel perspective on those experiences by virtue of their position as novices.

Another benefit to teens may paradoxically lie in the very fact of the exclusion from social power that derives from their status as youth in an ageist society. Because they are often not privy to the norms and rules of adult society, teens may enjoy a flexibility of approach not readily accessible to adults who are more seasoned in (and constrained by) the usual patterns of political and social action. Once again, the same might, to a degree, be said for teens of any group, but for LGBT youth the developmentally common dynamic is magnified by the remarkably rapid pace of change in LGBT experience that leaves holes in the usual fabric of social action. Thus, LGBT adolescents, even more than their heterosexual peers, may have opportunities to invoke novel approaches that many adults might not recognize. We have had extensive conversations with a group of students in Salt Lake City, Utah who confronted vocal opposition and intrusive media scrutiny in response to their efforts to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance in their high school (Bohan & Russell, 1999; Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, 2000). In commenting on qualities that had sustained them in the face of the stresses involved, one student told us:

I think another advantage we had to youth leading this was that we didn’t have any set ideas. We didn’t have our set life; we didn’t have a set life pattern. And we are still very malleable, where we could bend to turn this way, turn that way.

The Limits of Youth

On the other hand, the potential for such “outsider” insights and the value of such relatively unconstrained flexibility are tempered by adolescents’ limited ability to call upon adults for guidance in framing their insights and their apparent eagerness to dismiss the experience and wisdom of those who precede them. Among the youth we have interviewed (even those deeply involved in very visible exercises of LGBT politics), we have observed a striking absence of information about the historical background and contemporary breadth of the movement prior to and apart from their own involvement in it. As a result, they do not recognize and are unable to avail themselves of the wisdom embedded in the movement and carried by its adult advocates. This dearth of knowledge is complicated by teens’ tendency to frame adults’ behaviors solely in terms of youths’ own experiences. For example, although their understanding of the limitations imposed by internalized homophobia is sometimes insightful, they may fail to recognize its origin for adult LGBTs in the lingering impact of routine experiences of oppression that were both literally and figuratively life threatening to many LGBTs in earlier times. We do not wish to argue that today’s youth are free from risk (witness, for example, Matthew Shepard’s murder). However, the unchallenged physical, psychological, and economic assaults on LGBT individuals, carried out with regularity and by governmental agencies, that characterized earlier eras are not the regular experience of LGBT teens today. The homophobia and heterosexism that today’s youth face are different, but no less disturbing and potentially damaging. The difference, however, may mean that, without direct knowledge of the particular experiences of adults, teens may have little appreciation for their impact on older LGBT individuals—including for the strengths that those experiences forged. In short, although youth may discern creative and courageous approaches to addressing problems, they may not have the experience or the resources to enact those on their own and may often be too facile in their dismissal of adults’ experiences, insights, and strengths.

With little sense of the history of the movement prior to their involvement, little awareness of its breadth and complexity, and little openness to the experiences of adults, youth may see today’s events as isolated happenings, unique to their own time and experience, disconnected from all that has gone before, and thoroughly their own to confront. In one very striking expression of this dynamic, a teen who was quite active in the formation of the gay/straight alliance at a high school in Salt

Lake City informed us that the sort of discrimination against LGBTs that she was challenging had been going on for hundreds of years, and she decided that it was time for someone to do something about it. She was apparently oblivious to the fact that generations of individuals before her had, in fact, done “something,” and that her own actions (admirable though they clearly were) relied on a long history of others’ sacrificing safety and well-being to bring the community to the place where a high school gay/straight alliance was even feasible. Here, again, the experience of LGBT teens is in many ways similar to that of their heterosexual peers; indeed, many observers have commented on the seeming disconnection between today’s youth and the adults in their lives (Hersch, 1998). And once again, the phenomenon is likely magnified by the speed with which yesterday’s experiences in LGBT life come to feel distant from the experiences of today.

In a parallel form of myopia, the teens we have talked with are, with a few exceptions, quite unaware of any but the most global outlines of other types of oppression, other movements for human rights, and the extreme forms in which oppressions continues to be expressed against other groups. Most of them have not previously experienced personal oppression and are likely to be unaware of the oppression faced by groups other than their own unless it has been explicitly brought to their attention. Given the frequent absence of consciousness about such issues even among LGBT adults (Russell, 2000), it is not surprising that LGBT teens would see their own experience as singular. Hence, they (like many LGBT adults) occasionally fall prey to the (seductive but deceptive) notion that homophobia is the only or the most onerous current form of prejudice. They also seem unaware of the connections among various forms of oppression and of the need for coalition building—though in this lack of awareness, they may not be unlike adult LGBTs (Russell, 2000).

This tendency to see one’s life—both one’s victories and one’s victimization—as singular is often characteristic of people who feel victimized, and thus might be expected of LGBT individuals. Also, in this society, such a sense of singularity, the belief that one is unique and extraordinary is also often attributed to youth and ascribed to “adolescent egocentrism” (Arnett, 1992, 1995; Elkind, 1976, 1985). The phenomenon may be rendered more powerful for LGBT youth by the fact that homophobia (and thus a sense of victimization) is compounded by the exaggerated discrepancy between their own experience of adolescence and that of LGBT adults, which makes the experiences of adults seem exponentially irrelevant. The resultant tendency to disregard the experience

of LGBT adults robs youth of the ability to see the parallels between their own lives and those of LGBT adults and thus deprives them of the knowledge and support that they might gain through that awareness.

The most obvious consequence of LGBT teens' failure to recognize and be open to adults' experiences is that youth are unable to benefit from the lessons so painfully learned by their predecessors, both among adult LGBTs and elsewhere in movements for civil rights. A very concrete example of the cost of this failure is now being played out in efforts to curtail the spread of HIV/AIDS. Numerous recent studies have documented a return to unsafe sex among men who have sex with men (Herek & Greene, 1995; James & Murphy, 1998). Among the explanations for this phenomenon (which is surely complex and multiply-determined) has been the notion that younger men are likely to see AIDS as an "old man's" disease, a perception made feasible by a lack of communication across age groups. This belief is aggravated, in this era of drug cocktails when (at least in some circles) people do not immediately die of AIDS. Because many young men have seen no peers terminally ill and have lost few (or none) to diseases associated with HIV/AIDS, the experience of having many friends who have died is, in the words of one young gay man, "something I don't identify with at all" (Kirby, 1998, p. 32).

This potentially lethal misunderstanding is further complicated by the fact that so many members of an entire generation of men—most of those who contracted HIV/AIDS in the first 10-15 years of the epidemic—have died (Althey, 2000). There are few adults with the experience to mentor young men through the risks of the epidemic. Perhaps it is this phenomenon we hear echoed in the words of young men who have told us that they see no future for themselves, who report that they literally cannot imagine themselves as middle-aged gay or bisexual men. They see such men nowhere, and simply have no conception of older gay life (see also Zak, 1998). Clearly, this is but one element in a very complex picture, but one that might well be addressed more effectively were teens more in contact with adults in the LGBT community and more attuned to their messages.

In addition to the loss of information and mentoring caused by this intergenerational communication gap, LGBT youth may often have no sense that they are part of something larger than their own experience. They may fail to recognize that they have the momentum and support of generations of activists before them, and that many of their concerns are, in fact, the same as those of earlier generations, even though much has changed. Not recognizing common battles, shared goals, and col-

lective strengths, adolescents may feel trivialized and dismissed when adults move to help. Some youth with whom we have spoken believe that adults are often patronizing and that they fail to see that youth are capable of pursuing many goals on their own. For example, one student leader with whom we spoke was angry that an adult organizer took over control of a massive rally organized on the teens' behalf. The student was certain that she could have conducted the event on her own, despite her lack of previous organizing experience. What youth in such situations may fail to see is that adults' social, emotional, and political resources can often mediate between teen inexperience and a homophobic world, without their efforts diminishing teens' own agency or the importance of their role.

In her analysis of intergenerational communication mentioned above, Mead (1970) argued that as social change becomes extremely rapid, it is crucial for adults to open themselves to the possibilities of learning from youth. At the same time, it is also essential for both adults and youth to recognize that adults continue to play a crucial role in social evolution. While adults cannot teach youth *what* they should value—because change is too rapid for certainty about what values will serve the future well—they can (and indeed must) teach the importance of having values. Youth who dismiss adults as irrelevant to contemporary experience may miss countless opportunities to learn invaluable lessons.

LGBT ADULTS: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RELATIONAL EQUATION

Adults, too, have their part in this conversational rift, a role that is inseparable from the current status of LGBT youth. The heightened visibility of LGBT issues has paradoxical consequences for both youth and adults. On the one hand, greater awareness of the (largely) adult LGBT community enhances the likelihood of teens' identifying as LGBT and also suggests a venue for the exploration of that identity. On the other hand, youth have not always found ready access to resources, mentors, models, or support within the adult LGBT community (Rotello, 1996). Among the many reasons for adults' hesitancy about providing such assistance is the charge of "recruitment" noted above.

In addition—and more relevant to our point here—adults may be unable to comprehend fully the experiences of today's youth, unable to grasp how radically different contemporary experiences of LGBT adolescence are from adults' own. This point is worth emphasizing: It is en-

tirely understandable that, for reasons grounded in social, historical, developmental, and individual realities, adult LGBTs may often fail to comprehend fully the actual experience of today's LGBT youth, and may be prone to the assumption that today's youth encounter the same experience of LGBT adolescence that they themselves did. Yet, in reality, "times are changing," writes a 23-year-old activist who identifies as an adult; "[gay youth] envision a future I wasn't sure existed when I was sixteen" (Tuttle, 2000, p. 7) and young LGBTs regularly express "impressive departures from the conventional wisdom of their elders" (Kirby, 1998, p. 31). Yet, in our work we have heard numerous expressions from adults of a confident perception of cross-generational continuity of experience (a perception not shared by many youth). Perhaps none has been more striking than the comment of a gay man who told a panel of LGBT high school students that he had been a student at their high school many years ago and knew "exactly" what they were experiencing—apparently not considering the profound changes in the experience of LGBT adolescence that have occurred in the interim. It appears that adults may feel that they are being empathic and supportive when, in fact, they may be misunderstanding youth's experiences and imposing upon teens agendas that mirror adults' own development rather than being grounded in that of today's youth.

Adults as Immigrants

One manifestation of adults' penchant for seeing LGBT youth through their own experience can be seen in the assumption that today's youth have the same wishes and goals that adults had as teens. Indeed, many adults express a certain envy of the opportunities and resources available to today's LGBT youth (e.g., Gibbs, 1998). Our conversations with teens indicate that youth are often aware that adult LGBTs sometimes strive to live out their own fantasies through youth, and teens may feel an obligation (often couched as a privilege) to fulfill those dreams on behalf of adults. The risk buried in the apparently benevolent wish that today's teens will have it easier is the possibility that adults' expectations may have a prescriptive impact on youth lives. Teens motivated to enact adults' wishes and to live out adult dreams may submerge their own motivations to the task of tending to adult LGBTs. This dynamic is reminiscent of that seen in children of immigrants, where youth strive to create the life that adults did not have and to provide guidance to the older generation in their assimilation to the new society (Padilla, 1994; Prince, 1985; Rumbaut, 1996).

By way of illustration, consider a situation described to us by the youth in Salt Lake City. Adults working to support the members of the gay/straight alliance arranged for an alternative prom so that LGBT students could bring same-sex dates. Interestingly, there were more adults at the dance than teens, raising the question of who really needed this dance. When asked what was the teens' favorite part of that event, one young woman answered that her greatest joy came from seeing her (newly out) lesbian teacher dancing with her partner. Notice: The highlight for this teen lay in seeing adults' dreams fulfilled, not in fulfilling her own. The following year, for any number of reasons, the students took dates of their choice to the regular, school-wide prom.

Gay Youth as "Horror" Filled: The Suffering/Suicidal Narrative

In another variation on this tendency to see teens through the lens of their own earlier experiences, adult LGBTs may assume that today's LGBT youth encounter the same sort of harassment and homophobia that characterized earlier eras, feel alone in their feelings just as many adults themselves did, and have no institutions or individuals who provide support and safety. In a straightforward appeal for adults to identify in precisely this way with youth, a well-known advocate for LGBT issues in schools wrote, "maybe gay adults will remember the horror of their own school years, and, enraged, will fight for these youth" (Jennings, 1997, p. 98).

This perception of LGBT youth as experiencing "horror" in their school years not only speaks to adults' youthful experiences but also is in keeping with a number of reports documenting LGBT teens' reports of harassment, school problems, suicidal ideation, conflict with family and peers, and so forth (e.g., Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1995; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Fergusson, Howard, & Beautris, 1999; Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2000; Hershberger, Polkington, & D'Augelli, 1997; Herrell, Goldberg, True, Ramakrishnan, Eisen, & Tsuang, 1999; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Resnick et al., 1997; Safe Schools Coalition of Washington, 1997; US Department of Health and Human Services, 1989). These studies have been widely criticized on a variety of methodological grounds and it is unclear what they really tell us (Savin-Williams, in press). Still, their results have been widely disseminated and have been the focus of much commentary in both lay and professional discussions regarding LGBT youth.

Beyond the issue of the methodologies and statistical inadequacy of these studies, our specific concern here, born of many hours of conversations with LGBT youth and their allies, is that these reports may, to some (unknown) degree, carry far different meanings than appear on the surface—or than they are intended to convey. Specifically, our concern is that youth who have heard these results and the commentaries that flow from them may be persuaded that these are the sole legitimate depictions of LGBT youth. The outcome of such conviction might be two-fold. First, when teens are asked to report on their experiences, their descriptions (which become the substance of subsequent statistics) might actually document the stories that LGBT teens believe they *should* invoke to describe their lives rather than stories that describe their actual experiences. In research that suggests precisely such a dynamic, Savin-Williams (in press) found that when actual suicide attempts were differentiated from suicidal ideation and when measures of lethality were employed, more than half of the “suicide attempts” among his very diverse sample of LGBT youth were “*false attempts*—ideation rather than concrete acts. Furthermore, many *true attempts* were not life-threatening . . .” (p. 2; italics in original). In Savin-Williams’ words, many reported suicide attempts might be “attempts to communicate the hardships of lives or *to identify with a gay community*” (p. 2, italics added).

Second, and perhaps even more unsettling, the plethora of communications emphasizing these risks may actually convey to LGBT youth a life narrative or script that predisposes them toward suffering—that is, the narratives may have *prescriptive* as well as *descriptive* power. Indeed, the visibility granted such stories of suffering may persuade LGBT teens that an enactment of this suffering, suicidal script constitutes an effective route to the attention and validation we all seek—adolescents perhaps even more than adults. Where this emphasis on suffering reflects not the current reality of LGBT adolescence so much as recollections of previous generations’ own “horror,” adults’ residual fears and pain may be acting to magnify the (very real) difficulties of LGBT teens. Because LGBT youth learn the potential stories for their lives from adults, they may embrace such suffering as accurate predictions/descriptions of their probable lives. This could explain, for example, Savin-Williams’ (2001) finding that LGBT youth expect their coming out to their families to be a confrontation fraught with conflict, disruption, even abuse and banishment—this despite the fact that such painful encounters occurred for only a small segment of the sexual minority youth he studied.

We first became alert to the possibility that such painful narratives might be prescriptive as well as descriptive as we talked with the teens in Salt Lake City. Their conversations were laced with casual, passing references to the difficulties of LGBT life—homelessness, dropping out, family conflict and rejection, harassment, depression, AIDS, substance abuse—offered almost as asides, as if such events were so common as to be normative. Comments about these risk factors were introduced so unreflectively, in fact, that the phrases “committing suicide” and “attempting suicide” were used interchangeably.

As we searched for the roots of this apparent easy familiarity with what we have come to call the “suffering/suicidal script,” we observed that public discourse about LGBT identity is rife with such portrayals. News stories about LGBT adolescence, which routinely lead with dramatic headlines, focus almost exclusively on such risk factors as harassment, dropping out, homelessness, pregnancy, and suicide. Illustratively, an article in the newspaper of a major eastern US city began, “If you’re a gay teenager, the odds are stacked against you. Just consider these findings from the latest federal survey available . . .” (Kirk, 1995). What follows are statistics about suicide, harassment, and dropping out. We have collected news articles reflecting a similar tone and focus from cities as varied and dispersed as Los Angeles, California and Akron, Ohio; Albany, New York and Charlotte, North Carolina. Major newsmagazines and electronic media, including public radio and public television, have run stories of a similar bent (e.g., *The Akron Beacon Journal*, 1998; *The Albany Times Union*, 2000; *Boston Globe*, 2001; *The Charlotte Observer*, 1999; *Denver Post*, 2001; *The Los Angeles Times*, 1999; *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 1997; *Newsweek*, 2000; *People*, 1998; *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2001; *Seventeen*, 1999).

The youth we have talked with are quite aware of these depictions of their lives. In the words of one teen, “we’re involved with the problems people talk about in surveys.” Such representations of LGBT life—and particularly those that portray LGBT teens in such painful terms—are not only prominent in the mainstream media; they are also the lynchpin of a great deal of gay-supportive literature, often designed to call attention to the plight of LGBTs as a means of gaining support for LGBT-related programs (see also Ghent, 1999). Just a sampling of such literature will convey its flavor:

- Of 25 “important reasons” to make a contribution, the first reason cited in a national LGBT organization’s request is to make schools safe for youth (Lambda Legal Defense Education Fund, undated).

- The front page of a flyer for a national organization focusing on LGBT issues in schools quotes a lesbian and a gay high school student as they recite the stories of physical assaults by their peers. The accompanying text reads, “Consider the statistics . . .” and lists statistics regarding school-related risk factors (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network, 1996). The cover of another flyer from the same organization is a collage of presumed descriptors of LGBT youth: “lonely, homo, fag, ashamed, dyke, scared, queer, lezzie” (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Teachers Network, undated).
- A fund-seeking letter from a major national political organization begins, “Every year in America, thousands of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people are verbally harassed, beaten, raped, and murdered solely because of their sexual orientation!” (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1998).
- The Director of Development for the Lesbian and Gay Center in a major city wrote that by using Matthew Shepard’s murder in fund raising appeals, “we have not only created change but also inspired many of those who misunderstood or even hated us” (McMullin, 1998, p. 11).
- An essay appearing in a major LGBT magazine and intended to encourage adults to listen to youth begins with the provocative words, “The torture of our youth continues” (Osborne, 1994, p. 80).

There is little doubt that such appeals are stirring and that they serve the desired purpose. We have encountered testimonies to their impact in a wide range of settings. We are familiar with an official responsible for a major branch of city government in a generally progressive western city, who declares that it was the statistics about LGBT youth suicide that compelled her to act on behalf of the LGBT community. A college professor we know who regularly deals with issues of sexual diversity supports the use of statistics of this sort in educational settings—even while acknowledging their potential impact on LGBT teens—because of a belief they are valuable in changing the minds of some otherwise resistant people; this educator seems unaware of the apparent willingness to trade consideration for LGBT youth in favor of a focus on the attitudes of heterosexual people. The first openly LGBT senator in Massachusetts came out after years of secrecy because she “saw the statistic that almost 33% of gay and lesbian teens have attempted suicide, and that was the triggering event” (Brune, 2000, p. 14). A news story entitled “School boards: Ensure safety of all kids” reports that “. . . armed with horrifying statistics, parents, teachers, lawyers and students are

forcing school boards to address the long-neglected problem of anti-gay harassment” (Price, 2000).

It is crucial to recognize that, despite their effectiveness, these publications and media productions reach not only the intended audience—namely adults (both heterosexual and LGBT) being sought out as supporters for worthy causes. The stories that portray LGBT teens’ lives as hopelessly painful are also heard and seen by LGBT youth. Our concern is that this suffering/suicidal narrative, designed though it is to draw attention to the genuinely stark reality of homophobia’s impact, also conveys to LGBT teens that their lives are unavoidably fraught with danger and sorrow and that it is their inescapable lot to experience (any or all of) the “descriptors” contained in these portrayals: school failure; truancy; substance abuse; rejection by family, friends, and religious community; homelessness; illness and death (especially with AIDS); verbal and physical harassment; isolation; depression; suicide. Indeed, we have heard LGBT youth express just the normalizing, prescriptive, or self-fulfilling quality we suggest. Discussing how normative are stories of suffering, one teen reported to us:

We have all of our little tally numbers. We wear our stripes on our sleeves and our wrists, so to speak. Everybody has how many times they committed suicide; everybody has how many drugs they’ve done; everybody has their tearful recovery story.

Describing the degree to which she sometimes felt that her own identity turned on such stories, a young lesbian told us, “I feel like a loser because I never committed suicide, I never did drugs, I just read approximately twelve science fiction books in a week.”

Since beginning to reflect on this topic, we have heard these messages from and discussed them with teens across the country. Some youth have referred to suicide and substance abuse as normative; others have told us that they do not feel qualified to participate in youth panels because their stories are not dramatic and painful; those who do have positive stories report that often no one is interested in their comments, and questions are consistently addressed to those with more dramatic tales; other teens “sometimes feel guilty because [their own coming out] was so painless” (Patrick, 2000). A frequent theme is that people are interested (only) in tragic tales; no one cares to hear stories of self-acceptance and support from others. This phenomenon may reflect, in part, a contemporary preoccupation with (even glorification of) victimization in the culture at large (Lamb, 1996). As regards LGBT youth

specifically, our concern is that, by focusing almost exclusively on negative stories and on the risk factors that are so compellingly distressing, we may actually be contributing to the difficulties LGBT teens face. We may, indeed, be participating in telling them that their lives will necessarily be painful and pointless.

A “Transformative” Alternative Narrative

This is not to say that we should ignore the difficulties encountered by LGBT teens. These youth are, in fact, at risk for significant stresses, both because they live in a culture that portrays adolescence as inherently troublesome (Johnson, Roberts, & Worrell, 1999) and because they participate in an identity vilified by the dominant institutions of their society. We must attend to that fact and provide whatever resources we can for their journey. However, we must not do this at the expense of recognizing the other side of their lives and of LGBT identity—namely the expansive, celebratory, transformative potential that their lives and this identity carry. This potential is the subject of the second narrative to which we have been introduced by and subsequently discussed with LGBT youth.

Many of the teens with whom we have talked recognize the possibility for exploration and creativity in their lives and eagerly welcome the promise of this rather than the suffering script as guidance for their lives. Indeed, these teens are often keenly aware of the transformations they have already enacted. For example, the proliferation of gay/straight alliances and other youth-initiated activities across the country demonstrates the efficacy that many teens express in coping with their world. In a dramatic example of this sense of power in their own lives, the teens in Salt Lake City were able to sustain their gay/straight alliance (meeting after hours in their high school) even in the face of a school board decision to cancel all school clubs—and even as all other clubs did, in fact, disband. The remarkable persistence of these students is surely not embodied in the suffering script.

The inclusion of heterosexual members in the name and the membership of such groups is itself a transformative act, because it challenges the fundamental notion that LGBT and heterosexual people are intrinsically incompatible. Each time an organization defines itself as including members of all sexual orientations, it challenges the dichotomizing rhetoric of the society, which divides rather than juxtaposes LGBT and straight. Indeed, we have speculated whether the media tendency to refer to these groups as “gay clubs” (rather than gay-straight clubs) is an

attempt to reinscribe that division; we have occasionally observed the same tendency among LGBTs ourselves and among some of our supporters. Finally, as yet another indication of these teens' ability to transcend the usual scripts for their lives, the youth we have talked with are often extremely adept at drawing support from among their peers (LGBT and straight), as well as finding allies among adults (LGBT and straight). This ability speaks volumes about the resilience and resourcefulness of these youth, and belies the universality of the suffering script for LGBT teens' lives (see Bohan & Russell, 1999, in press; Russell & Bohan, 1998, in press; Russell, Bohan, & Lilly, 2000).

A recent issue of *The Advocate* (2001), a national gay and lesbian magazine, suggests both a growing recognition of this transformative style and also its rapid evolution in LGBT communities. Lead articles in this issue point out that many LGBT youth are "challenging expectations" (p. 3); they are "not only coming out younger every year, [but] also leading openly gay dating lives with a panache that would surprise gay people only 10 years their senior" (Barnett, 2001, p. 36). In our own work, we have spoken with LGBT teens whose thriving assumes countless unexpected and often refreshing forms. Some choose to deconstruct the usual categories of sexual/gender identity because those feel too constraining to their sense of themselves; some employ humor to disarm their detractors and to ameliorate the impact of homophobic slurs; many tutor one another through the process of recognizing and overcoming their own internalized homophobia; some are aware that their very lack of experience grants them a freedom and latitude not available to adults more entrenched in existing systems. Many have spoken of the sense of efficacy they earned through active involvement in challenging the status quo. One teen commented on the possibility of actually effecting social change: "I've learned the system isn't the big brick wall that it seems . . . It's actually really accessible." Another student commented about how remarkable it seemed to her that even teens could have an impact: "I was 17, not even a legal voter, and I was part of something that really affected a lot of people."

Adults Learning from Youth

As noted above, Mead (1970) suggested that, in periods of rapid change the traditional portrayal of adults as teachers and youth as apprentices must shift; it becomes incumbent on adults to be open to learning about the new world from those who inhabit that world—namely youth. Just as immigrant parents can learn about their adopted culture

through the youth who live at its heart, so can adult LGBTs learn about the new order of LGBT culture from LGBT youth and their allies. One means to this end is for adults to suspend sole reliance on their own experience and instead recognize the transformative potential residing in the perspectives of youth. To do less is to diminish the value of adolescents' unique knowledge and experience, which are derived from a new era and a changed context. To do less is not only to lose the value of a different perspective and also (if unintentionally) patronize and trivialize youth. But there is more. Beyond the loss of significant perspective, there are serious consequences to adults' penchant for seeing today's LGBT youth as mere reflections of their own younger years.

In brief, intending to protect LGBT youth, to champion their cause against a homophobic world, and to see to it that youth have opportunities they themselves did not have, adults may do more than simply misrepresent teens' experience. By focusing so intently on the difficulties of (their own and by extension, presumably today's teens) LGBT adolescence, adults may propagate a self-defeating script that contributes to the very pain they strive to diminish for LGBT youth.

The Pervasive Impact of Homophobia and Heterosexism

In all of this, it is essential that we keep in mind that homophobia and heterosexism and our attempts to deal with those are responsible for the difficulties that we outline here. LGBT teens are not intrinsically at greater risk; it is simply that the usual developmental stresses are magnified by a homophobic and heterosexist society, and adults' ability to intervene and assist is correspondingly diminished by the homophobia that they must also manage. Were it not important to solicit support for our efforts at social change and legal equality, action necessitated by homophobia and heterosexism, the community would not be in a position to invoke tragic and compelling stories to convince the world of our need. Were we not all struggling with our own internalized homophobia, learned early and well in a pervasive heterosexist atmosphere, we would find less need to convince ourselves and others of our individual and collective worth. Adults would be less hidden and more vocal, and could provide more accessible models and mentors for youth; youth would feel freer to explore the transformative potential of their lives and less pressured to live according to expectations for an unattainable perfection that would prove the worth of LGBT identity.

***LISTENING ACROSS THE AGES:
BRIDGING THE GAP***

The reality is, however, that we must act even in the face of homophobia and heterosexism. Our task is to do what we can to enrich our lives within this context and to work for social change over the long run. One direction for such action may lie in the recognition of the impoverished pattern of communication between LGBT youth and LGBT adults represents. In their failure to welcome the wisdom of adults, youth miss opportunities for knowledge and support that could sustain them in the present and encourage their efforts toward change in the future. By failing to listen carefully to the actual experience of LGBT youth, adults risk (mis)using youth for adults' ends—either by reveling in the successes of youth, claiming those as means to fulfill the dreams adults carry from their own adolescence; by ignoring teens' creative potential and thereby denying them the agency to live their own, very different lives; or by using adolescents' vulnerability as a tool to seek support for the broader movement, without attending to the possible costs to youth of such activities.

All of these difficulties stem from a reciprocal inability to create and nurture intergenerational dialogues that would allow for greater sensitivity to the distinctive position held by each group. Adults and youth alike need to recognize that each is party to absolutely distinctive experiences by virtue of their generational location(s); at the same time, both share certain experiences by virtue of identifying with a group that is systematically devalued throughout society. Adults and youth would all benefit from adults' understanding the experiences of LGBT youth as uniquely their own rather than as a shadow of adults' experiences. Adolescents and adults would all benefit from youth's recognizing the substantial value of the experiences and perspectives granted by adults' longer presence in this struggle. As Tory Osborn, a prominent (adult) activist wrote, "Lesbian and gay youth need all the optimism and empowerment we can give them. In turn, they offer us an extraordinary opportunity . . . The established gay and lesbian movement can link arms with this exciting youth movement" (Osborne, 1994, p. 80). LGBT youth have expressed similar sentiments; in the words of one queer youth activist, sailor j (2001):

Young queer people need the support of older queer people. However, sometimes older people with good intentions can't seem to get past the fact that another queer person is young (compared to

themselves), and they make assumptions about the needs and feelings of the younger person. That's ageism . . . It is extremely harmful to us to have judgments and divisions within the movement, especially when they are based on something as nebulous and arbitrary as age . . . What do young people need from "adult" activists? . . . Above all, we need to be seen as activists on equal ground. We need to be listened to. Judgments that people make about our needs and points of view are best deconstructed through communication. One youth should not be asked to stand for all young people, just as one adult can't stand for all adults. [Youth] should never be tokenized or ignored as part of a group. Essentially, youth are people and need to be seen as equals. The divisions based on age within the movement are absurd. Whether we are in high school, in college, not in school at all, or working folks, we all have an important role. (p. 1)

Sailor j's words parallel the sentiments of the adult activist quoted above, and challenge us to bridge the intergenerational gap by listening attentively to both sides of the conversation. The precise forms of our endeavors will depend, of course, on the particular context in which they are undertaken—who are the youth involved; who are the adults; what are the needs of the particular community; what historical baggage needs to be unpacked for progress to occur; what shared dreams and goals can buttress joint effort; what material, social, and emotional resources are available and where can allies be found? These are among the questions that must be addressed in order for collective actions to be tailored to the context and thereby succeed in addressing the needs of all segments of the community.

Because adults continue to hold most of the power and most of the resources within cross-generational communities, it is especially incumbent on them to heed Mead's urging that both perspectives be carefully heard and honored. Indeed, adults are in a position to enhance both their own lives as LGBT people and the present and future experiences of youth who identify as LGBT. To capitalize on the unique context provided by this moment in time, adults need first to address their own internalization of the devaluation to which they have been exposed, so that they can live fulfilling lives without a sense that they are somehow unworthy or beholden to others for those lives. In order to accompany youth toward a similarly self-affirming stance, adults will need to grieve the passing of their own idealized youth with all its freedom and promise. And they need to grieve—and let go—of the difficulties that they

experienced as LGBT youth. Only when LGBT adults can live their own lives fully, as individuals and as members of LGBT communities, will they be in a position to foster adolescents' growth toward their own full lives. As long as adults fail to do this personal work, they risk using youth to meet their own residual needs.

We have seen manifestations of adults' unfinished work in a variety of forms. For example, adults' who are vigilant about the public persona of "the LGBT community" for fear that it might reflect badly on them may often regard teens' actions (especially those of highly visible teens) as reflecting on the entire community—including adults themselves. Students have shared with us conversations in which adult LGBTs directed them to avoid any self-presentation that (in the adults' view) might damage the image of the community. They report having received instructions about their dress, their language, their relationships, even their level of self-disclosure in public settings. In other situations, adults may focus so intently on what they did not have as teens (that today's LGBT teens enjoy) that they fail to celebrate what they do have as adults—as well as the transformations wrought in their lives by their own adolescent struggles. Alternatively, adults' expectation that youth will want just what they wanted may result in their enacting changes that serve adults (or would have when adults were teens) but that fail to address the current needs of today's teens. When adults' carry their own issues into their work with teens, the result is a proliferation of teens tending to adults and adults living through teens, with both being unable to celebrate their own (distinctive and yet connected) lives in the transformative manner that non-mainstream identity, in its best incarnations, allows.

The creation of a conversational bridge between adult and adolescent segments of LGBT communities will require the efforts of all who work within and between such communities. It will require a constant vigilance to opportunities to incorporate—not simply to append, but actively to integrate—youth into on-going adult activities and adults into youth endeavors. This is not to say that purely intra-generational activities and alliances should be avoided; each group also requires opportunities to share those experiences that are distinctive to their own age cohort. Rather, a multifaceted approach seems warranted, one that provides both age-specific and cross-generational connections. As a hypothetical model, we might invoke the social arrangement of the Amazons, a society of women warriors whose leadership consisted of two old women and two young women, reflecting their belief that people from very different stations have important perspectives to offer the community as a whole. Maybe they were onto something.

NOTE

1. We are grateful for the assistance of David Lilly, whose participation in qualitative analyses of some of these data was instrumental in helping us forge the ideas raised here; and Jason Mihalko, whose thoughtful reading of an earlier version of this manuscript raised important points that contributed significantly to the final paper.

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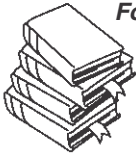
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