

GAY AND LESBIAN ADOLESCENT PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN URBAN AND RURAL SETTINGS

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Multiple unique barriers impede normative psychological and social development for gay and lesbian adolescents. Research suggests that geographic location plays a significant role in developmental outcomes for gay and lesbian adolescents. Acknowledging the ways in which urban gay and lesbian adolescents differ from their rural counterparts can provide a deeper understanding of the types of social stigmatization these individuals often internalize. This place-based perspective encourages educators, social workers, and policy makers to develop and implement appropriate social support networks and educational programming to best provide for this vulnerable population.

Adolescents must overcome numerous psychological and social obstacles in order to achieve the sense of personal identity that is an indicator of true adulthood (Newman and Newman, 2003). Conflicts in understanding and expressing one's sexual orientation contribute to the difficulties in this progression. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the official catalog of mental and emotional disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Two years later, the American Psychological Association approved a resolution in support of this removal (American Psychological Association, 2004). While it is still unclear how sexual orientation develops, most researchers find that it is not a choice made by the individual, but rather a determined series of genetic, hormonal, and environmental influences upon the person (Frankowski, 2004). Still, a stigma is associated with homosexuality, and that perception pervades contemporary American society (Mallon, 1998; Owens, 1998; Frankowski, 2004).

Robert Owens (1998) demonstrates that gay and lesbian adolescents face distinct challenges in their quest for identity resolution. Societal attitudes

toward gay and lesbian adolescents have a decisive effect on the extent to which these individuals are able to achieve positive developmental outcomes (Newman and Newman, 2003; Frankowski, 2004). Furthermore, research finds that the size of a gay or lesbian adolescent's hometown community influences psychosocial development, and this is particularly true in the United States (D'Augelli and Hart, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1990; Owens, 1998). This article will compare impediments to the maturation process of gay and lesbian adolescents growing up in an urban environment with the impediments faced by their counterparts in rural settings. Analyzing these different geographical influences will allow social work practitioners to more appropriately interact with their gay and lesbian adolescent clients. The analysis may also help to develop an increased understanding of and sensitivity to the geographically related cultural context in which those clients live. As Gerald Mallon notes, "It is the Western culture's belief system that supports the negative myths, stereotypes and misconceptions about gay and lesbian people—not their orientation itself—that is a major life stressor for lesbian, gay, or bisexual people" (1998, p. 124).

SELF-LABELING AND DISCLOSURE

Two distinct concepts are central in gay and lesbian adolescents' considerations of their sexual orientation: self-labeling and disclosure. Self-labeling is the process in which one identifies oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Newman and Newman, 2003). Disclosure is sharing this information with others (Newman and Newman, 2003). Both of these events feature unique challenges and possible risks. Gay and lesbian adolescents frequently describe a sense of "feeling different" from other children in early childhood, often as early as age 4 or 5 (Owens, 1998, p. 16). As Margaret Schneider and Bob Tremble (1985) note, this can lead to a profoundly uncomfortable state of confusion for the adolescent. Owens (1998) observes that, although there is much variation, some individuals already begin to self-label in early adolescence. Self-labeling is often a two-step process in which an adolescent may first accept his or her sexual identity and then proceed to integrate that identity into a sense of self (Owens, 1998, p. 36).

The second concept involves disclosing sexual identity to friends, family, and the community in which the gay or lesbian adolescent lives. Disclosure, often referred to as coming out, can happen as early as adolescence, although it is perceived to be an "inter-active, ongoing" process that gay men and lesbians continue throughout their entire lives (Ryan and Futterman, 1998, p. 11).

RESEARCH AND STATISTICAL DATA

Statistical data on the number of gay and lesbian adolescents in the U.S. are difficult to gather, as many gay and lesbian youth have not yet self-labeled and therefore do not count themselves as homosexual. This also makes it challenging to measure the percentage of gay and lesbian adolescents growing up in urban environments, or to compare such findings with the percentage of their counterparts living in rural areas. For the current enterprise, relevant information from the 2000 Census is limited to statistics concerning households headed by same-sex couples ("2000 census information on gay and lesbian couples," n.d.). However, it should be noted that 16.7 percent of same-sex couples live in rural areas. By contrast, the corresponding figure is 24.5 percent for opposite sex couples in the United States ("2000 census information on same-sex couples," n.d.).

According to one recent U.S. survey, 4.5 percent of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 18 reported primary sexual attractions to persons of the same sex (Remafedi et al., 1992). Among all adolescents in this survey, 2.5 percent self-labeled as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Remafedi et al., 1992). While the size of the gay and lesbian adolescent population is difficult to determine, it is important to recognize that gay and lesbian adolescents exist in every possible geographic location within the U.S. and elsewhere ("2000 census information on gay and lesbian couples," n.d.; Owens, 1998). It is also important to note that the needs of gay and lesbian adolescents vary, but some individual needs are associated with the specific context, rural or urban, in which an adolescent lives. (Hindle, 1994; Beard and Hissam, 2002).

COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY GAY AND LESBIAN ADOLESCENTS

Much of the research on the multiple challenges facing gay and lesbian adolescents has not been delineated by geographical background. In order to demonstrate that urban and rural gay and lesbian adolescents have contrasting perspectives, it is necessary to consider some of the common problems that complicate the struggle of identifying one's sexual orientation. Declarations of sexual identity are individual and internal, but they are also group-based and external, taking place in a political and social context (Chan, 1997). Previous research finds that the self-identification process can lead gay and lesbian adolescents in the U.S. to experience depression, turn to drugs and alcohol, and attempt suicide, all at higher rates than their heterosexual peers (Owens, 1998; D'Augelli, 2002; Frankowski, 2004). Disclosure of one's gay or lesbian

identity to friends, family, or the community creates its own difficulties; the “stigmatization of gender nonconformity” (Frankowski, 2004, p. 1829) can lead to increased levels of stress, violence, running away from home, dropping out of school, and suicidal ideation (Beard and Hissam, 2002; Frankowski, 2004). These problems have been researched across many sociodemographic variables in the U.S., including hometown community size, and are seen as primary complications for gay and lesbian adolescents regardless of geographic location (Savin-Williams, 1990; Beard and Hissam, 2002).

CHALLENGES IN URBAN SETTINGS

Gay and lesbian adolescents who come of age in urban environments face distinct and significant challenges in their self-identity process. The most visible focal points of gay life in the United States are the urban districts where gay men and lesbians congregate—the gay ghettos (LeVay and Nonas, 1995; Owens, 1998). Caitlin Ryan and Donna Futterman (1998) state that as many as 26 percent of all lesbian and gay adolescents report having to leave home as a result of familial conflicts related to their sexual orientation. Many of these adolescents reestablish their lives in an urban setting. For example, homeless shelters in Los Angeles estimate that 25 percent of adolescents living on the street self-identify as lesbian or gay, and that number jumps to 40 percent in Seattle (Kipke et al., 1995). Research does not reveal whether these individuals come to the cities from urban or rural environments, but the urbanization process, including acculturation and adaptation to the norms of residing in a city, contributes to the maturation of the gay or lesbian individual throughout many stages of adolescent development (Owens, 1998).

Stigmatization and feelings of worthlessness are found to be as prevalent in gay and lesbian adolescent city-dwellers as they are among gay and lesbian adolescents in other areas of the country (Savin-Williams, 1990; Owens, 1998). In a study of urban gay and lesbian adolescents by Emery Hetrick and A. Damien Martin (1987), 80 percent of the individuals reported a sense of severe social isolation. Paul Hindle (1994) observes that even though cities often provide specific gathering places for gays and lesbians, they are still targeted as a minority group, held in low esteem by other segments of society, treated differently, and, sometimes, persecuted. The concentration in a particular area of a majority opinion that includes antigay rhetoric can add to the strain felt by gay and lesbian adolescents, as they are still often viewed as “the other” within the confines of a metropolitan area (Hindle, 1994, p. 8).

However, urban gay and lesbian adolescents have greater access than their

rural counterparts to community-based resources. Simon LeVay and Elisabeth Nonas (1995) find that gay and lesbian community centers in many cities provide a secure space outside of the endangering environment of these adolescents' daily lives. Such centers provide adolescents with opportunities to develop feelings of self-worth and to establish a group identity that would be hard to acquire otherwise (LeVay and Nonas, 1995). There are also a number of city public school programs designed to attend to the needs of gay and lesbian youth. These provide counseling, foster integration of these adolescents into the school and the community, and include differences in sexual orientation when addressing values of diversity within educational programming (Savin-Williams, 1990). Whole school systems are currently being developed in urban areas to educate only gay and lesbian adolescents who are having trouble in school due to issues with personal sexual orientation. The Harvey Milk High School in New York City and the Eagle Center in Los Angeles are two examples of these sorts of successful schooling programs (Owens, 1998). Owens (1998) notes that, in spite of these resources, only a small minority of gay and lesbian adolescents takes advantage of them. Participation is deterred by lack of information, misinformation, fear, and social pressure (Owens, 1998, pp. 145-60).

CHALLENGES IN RURAL SETTINGS

In identifying and presenting their sexual orientation, rural gay and lesbian adolescents face different challenges than their urban counterparts. Walter Boulden (2001) states that living in and, specifically, being raised in a rural community shapes how a person views life. Feelings of being different, internalized homophobia, negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian behaviors, and family and community censorship contribute to increased depression among rural gay and lesbian adolescents (Beard and Hissam, 2002). Discrimination against gays and lesbians and external homophobia are often pieces of the accepted social fabric in many rural communities (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli, 2002). Gay men and lesbians from rural areas report high levels of social and geographic isolation (McCarthy, 2000; Beard and Hissam, 2002). Will Fellows (1996) also sees rigid gender roles, ethnic homogeneity, suspicion of the unfamiliar, racism, religious conservatism, sexual prudishness, and limited access to information as conditions that greatly affect gay and lesbian adolescents (p. ix). Fellows (1996) notes that while none of these qualities is unique to rural settings, they all operate in a "distinctive synergy" within these environments and have a lasting impact (p. ix).

The opportunity for gay and lesbian adolescents to join social groups or activities is restricted due to a lack of a cohesive gay community in rural areas (Boulden, 2001; D'Augelli, 2002). Developing a group identity is also limited in rural areas due to a "lack of access to information, to a public meeting space, and to connections with other [gays and] lesbians" (McCarthy, 2000, p. 75). Linda McCarthy (2000) finds it critical for sexual minorities to have an opportunity to feel connected with a small group of friends and acquaintances. This enables gay and lesbian adolescents to "create, transform, maintain, and reproduce" their identities and communities (Beard and Hissam, 2002).

THE IMPACT ON PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Beard and Hissam (2002) find that gay and lesbian adolescents have a more complex psychosocial developmental process than heterosexuals. In fact, Mallon argues that gay and lesbian adolescents often go through completely different developmental processes in regards to individuation and identity formation (Mallon, 1998, p. 126). Furthermore, in contrast to heterosexual adolescents, gay and lesbian adolescents may not experience the same degrees of resolution of the conflicts in Erik Erikson's stages of development (Beard and Hissam, 2002). These variations in development can negatively affect a gay or lesbian individual's ability to adjust to peer culture, experience intimacy, and self-accept. They can also produce increased feelings of vulnerability and insecurity (D'Augelli and Hart, 1987).

Hetrick and Martin (1987) note that, in addition to coping with the usual developmental processes of adolescence, the primary developmental task of the gay or lesbian adolescent is to adjust to a socially stigmatized role. Such stigma causes stress in the individual, and that stress can impede the development of coping strategies (Mallon 1998, p. 126). Prejudice against gay and lesbian sexual orientation also may have consequences that manifest themselves in decreased ego development, levels of anxiety, and overall feelings of distress (Beard and Hissam, 2002).

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES FOR URBAN GAY AND LESBIAN ADOLESCENTS

Urban gay and lesbian adolescents have particular difficulties in achieving certain developmental milestones. African-American and Hispanic gay and lesbian adolescents live predominately in urban environments (Owens, 1998). Because they experience a double minority status, these individuals often

encounter developmental complications (Owens, 1998, p. 169). These adolescents often have trouble acclimating to a society in which modeling behavior and tolerant attitudes are not observed in their racial and ethnic minority groups. Resulting consequences for the individual may include negative self-image, internalized homophobia, and social role confusion (Owens, 1998). Owens (1998) suggests that internal and external racist attitudes continue to be prominent issues within urban gay and lesbian communities. Adolescents who experience difficulties integrating their racial or ethnic identities into their self-concept may face internal developmental obstacles (Chan, 1997). Gay and lesbian adolescents fear that disclosure of sexual orientation may lead to isolation and lack of support from their ethnic-minority community (Owens, 1998, p. 169). Furthermore, many ethnic-minority gay and lesbian adolescents feel they are "expected to assimilate into a white gay culture" (Owens, 1998, p. 169). LeVay and Nonas (1995) indicate that these cultural barriers may restrict the full identity development of ethnic-minority gay and lesbian adolescents (p. 151).

As Owens (1998) also points out, the threat of AIDS has become another impediment for many urban gay and lesbian adolescents attempting to achieve a positive sexual identity. Urban gay and lesbian adolescents, and supposedly street-smart runaways, engage in high-risk behaviors with very little, if any, protection. Casual, anonymous sexual contact may be perceived to address needs for acceptance, closeness, support, and physical intimacy. These needs become particularly pressing during the adolescent developmental process (Mallon, 1998, p. 135). Prostitution by sexual-minority youths is also rampant in urban areas. One survey in New York City reports that nearly 25 percent of gay and bisexual youths have bartered sex for drugs or money at some point (Rotheram-Borus et al., 1994). While these problems are not strictly confined to urban areas, they highlight a collective tendency towards self-destructive behavior, which subsequently obstructs normative psychosocial development (Owens, 1998, p. 119).

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES FOR RURAL GAY AND LESBIAN ADOLESCENTS

Beard and Hissam (2002) assert that rural gay and lesbian adolescents differ from their urban counterparts in the ways they negotiate the conflicts associated with the developmental process. Due to cultural stigmatization, gays and lesbians in rural areas often experience a delayed response to personal resolution of struggles with self-identity, role confusion, intimacy, and social

isolation (Beard and Hissam, 2002). This delay does not allow them to form positive self-identities and create healthy intimate relationships at appropriate times in the stages of development. The postponement of these normative processes may result in an identity-related “developmental moratorium” for the individual (Professor Sadhna Diwan, personal communication, November 15, 2004).

McCarthy (2000) demonstrates that the development of positive gay and lesbian identity is correlated with opportunities often not found easily in rural settings. Such opportunities include information, social support, and interpersonal connections with other gay men and lesbians. Social group identity formation could be hindered if gay and lesbian adolescents lack these types of resources. Additionally, lesbians often turn to other lesbians for emotional support with personal problems (D’Augelli and Hart, 1987). Beard and Hissam (2002) conclude that the same is essentially also true for gay men. Without these social support systems firmly in place, gay and lesbian adolescents in rural areas may find it difficult to proceed through the developmental milestones necessary to achieve adulthood (Beard and Hissam, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Despite society’s increasing awareness of the diversity of sexual orientations, gay and lesbian adolescents continue to face negative attitudes from many within their communities, regardless of the specific geographic location. Gay and lesbian adolescents struggle to develop under the stress of societal stigmatization that often leads to social, emotional and cognitive isolation (Mallon, 1998, p. 143). By moving beyond the stereotypes and mythology that surround homosexuality, creating social support networks, increasing educational programming, and reaching those individuals outside the usual geographic perimeters of the gay and lesbian community, gay and lesbian adolescents are provided an appropriate opportunity for healthy psychological and social development on their journey towards adulthood. ■

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