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Title

Gay Men's Identity Development in the Twenty-First Century: Continuity and Change, Normalization and Resistance

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2d86z56c>

Journal

Human Development, 61(2)

ISSN

0018-716X

Author

Hammack, Phillip L

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.1159/000486469

Peer reviewed

Gay Men's Identity Development in the Twenty-First Century: Continuity and Change, Normalization and Resistance

Essay Review of *Becoming Who I Am: Young Men on Being Gay*
by Ritch C. Savin-Williams

Phillip L. Hammack

University of California, Santa Cruz, CA, USA

The social context of sexual and gender identity diversity has changed dramatically in the past half-century, with implications for the identity development of sexual and gender identity minorities. This article considers the contemporary identity development of young gay men through a critical analysis of recently published narrative accounts by developmental psychologist Ritch C. Savin-Williams. This analysis suggests that gay men continue to navigate cultural ideologies that privilege heterosexuality, forms of masculinity that denigrate femininity, and relative silence about sex in school and family contexts, even as they construct redemptive narratives that demonstrate psychological resilience. Narratives also reveal new life course possibilities for many gay men, including the privilege to normalize and the ability to challenge categorical notions of male sexuality by identifying as “mostly gay.” A critical analysis questions how these types of narratives position contemporary gay men in relation to the larger movement to recognize and promote sexual and gender identity diversity and to challenge hegemonic ideologies related to gender and sexuality. A life course narrative approach is advocated to best capture the current diversity of gay men's identity development.

Prologue: “...And Then I Became Gay”

“I think I am a h-h-homosexual,” the adolescent boy uttered as he sat across from the middle-aged woman. He did not normally – ever, actually – stutter. He also had never said the word “homosexual” aloud, or at least not in reference to himself. He

was wearing a polo shirt, a baseball cap, and cargo shorts. His voice was already deep at age 17. No one had suspected his secret.

“You’re gay. You realize there’s nothing wrong with that, don’t you? Being gay is completely normal.” The woman rose. The boy stared at her. He had considered but never adopted the term “gay” to describe himself. Dressed completely in white, the woman was angelic. She made her way to her desk. She turned around and looked at the boy. “Do you know any other gay teens?”

“No, I don’t know a single other person like me,” he said, looking at her with a mix of excitement and exasperation.

“Well, we’re going to change that.” She picked up the telephone and began to dial.

The year was 1993. I was a junior in high school and had spiraled into a major depressive episode upon falling in love with my straight best friend. The story feels like a gay cliché, I realize now, but at that time it was an experience I genuinely believed no one shared. There was no Internet, hence no way to connect with other gay teens or to find basic information that would normalize or legitimize my feelings and experiences. Representations of any form of sexual and gender diversity were rare, but gay men had been the subject of considerable cultural conversation throughout my life. Born in 1976, I experienced most of my childhood in the 1980s, at a time when the “Religious Right” had gained considerable momentum in the USA [Herek & Glunt, 1988], and the only thing gay men were known for was dying en masse thanks to AIDS, presumably as punishment for their disgusting existence (or so I had internalized).

What happened in that therapy office 25 years ago was a turning point in my life story. As an adolescent, I had experienced the possibility of gay identity as a deeply contaminating force in my personal narrative and in my imagined life course. If not lonely and shunned by my family of origin, at minimum I would be dead for experiencing the intimacy with other men for which I longed.

I remained in therapy for the rest of high school. My depression abated. I started to attend meetings of a local gay youth group. I came out to almost all of my high school friends. They were accepting. I found my first boyfriend and experienced the intimacy I had long imagined. I gained extraordinary confidence through this process – a confidence that continues in every facet of my life today, as I strive to embody the ideal of radical authenticity to which I was directed as a struggling gay adolescent.

Is this kind of redemptive life story – *my* life story – still relevant for contemporary young gay men? Whereas I inhabited a social ecology that integrated severe stigma with silence and invisibility around sexual and gender identity diversity, men born only a decade later inhabited a radically divergent social context in the USA and many other nations. Men born in the late 1980s could acquire the information I could not as a struggling gay adolescent – information that could assure them they are not alone. And now, thanks to the successes of the marriage equality movement, they can envision a life course more like that of their parents and their peers. Perhaps they might not feel as “different” and lonely as I did as a gay adolescent prior to coming out and immersing myself in a community of like-minded sexual and gender “deviants.”

Reading Sexual Stories: Three Analytic Frames

In this essay, I consider the contemporary experience of young gay men's identity development through a critical engagement with the narratives presented in Ritch C. Savin-Williams' [2016] recent book *Becoming Who I Am: Young Men on Being Gay*. I approached this text through three analytic frames. First, as a social and developmental scientist trained in the life course theoretical tradition [e.g., Elder, 1998], I considered the way in which these men's development was located in social and historical time. For gay, lesbian, queer, and other sexual minorities, historical context matters deeply in the lived experience of human development, for life course possibilities have generally been severely constrained by laws and cultural ideologies that have privileged heterosexuality and denigrated (even criminalized and pathologized) same-sex desire [Hammack, Mayers, & Windell, 2013]. A life course theoretical perspective posits that gay men's development will vary across generations, as social and historical change alters the way in which they interpret and experience their same-sex desire [e.g., Cohler, 2007; Hammack, 2005; Hammack & Cohler, 2009, 2011; Hammack, Frost, Meyer, & Pletta, 2018]. As I engaged with the narratives in Savin-Williams' [2016] text, I considered issues of *continuity* and *change* in gay men's development across generations.

The second analytic frame I brought to my analysis of Savin-Williams' [2016] text is that of narrative psychology. The central premise of narrative psychology is that we make meaning of the social world and our lived experience within it by constructing personal narratives that ascribe a sense of meaning, purpose, and coherence [e.g., Bruner, 1990; Hammack, 2011; McAdams, 2011]. These narratives take the form of life stories that are central to the psychological development of the self and are a core part of personality [McAdams, 2013a]. Social and developmental scientists have increasingly revealed the way in which the form and thematic content of life stories are associated with health and well-being [e.g., Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016]. As I engaged with the narratives in Savin-Williams' [2016] text, I considered the *meaning* interviewees were actively making of their experience and how this meaning appeared to be shaping the form and thematic content of their life stories. Were they interpreting stigma and adversity through a resilient frame in which struggles are seen as opportunities for personal growth [i.e., a *redemptive* narrative; see McAdams, 2013b]? Or did their experiences with sexual stigma result in *contamination* of their life stories and hence thwart possibilities for positive development [McAdams & Bowman, 2001]?

The third analytic frame is a version of *critical hermeneutics* [e.g., Roberge, 2011] in which I fuse one approach to qualitative data analysis with critical social theory. In a seminal article on qualitative inquiry, Josselson [2004] argues that qualitative analysis benefits from the application of both a *hermeneutics of faith* and a *hermeneutics of suspicion*. In brief, when we analyze textual data, such as the personal narratives obtained in interviews, we consider the meaning of the text at its face value (i.e., the precise meaning the interviewee seems to want to convey). Josselson [2004] calls this analytic approach a *hermeneutics of faith*. But qualitative analysis can also consider the meaning of the text *in relation to existing social systems and structures and the larger context of individual development*. She refers to this approach as a *hermeneutics of suspicion* [Josselson, 2004].

A hermeneutics of suspicion recognizes that all forms of language – including the personal narrative – reflect ideology in speech, as human development occurs through a process of internalizing and appropriating (or repudiating) the discourse of a particular “verbal-ideological community” [Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov, 1929/1973; Vygotsky, 1978]. Hence our personal narratives possess meaning not just for ourselves; as they are intelligible to the various communities to which they are positioned, they are also *political* projects that have implications for the endurance of the status quo [Hammack & Toolis, 2015; Plummer, 1995].

As I approached the narrative data in Savin-Williams’ [2016] text, I considered the way in which men’s personal narratives were *positioned* in relation to cultural ideologies of sexuality and gender (e.g., heteronormativity, patriarchy, the gender order). This approach recognizes the link between person and society through the lens of *narrative engagement* – the notion that individuals engage with master narratives or dominant scripts about social categories (e.g., man, woman, gay, straight) and appropriate or repudiate these scripts as they construct their own personal narratives [Hammack & Toolis, 2016, in press]. The study of this process is vital for social and developmental scientists concerned with the course of social change, for the way in which individuals engage with dominant scripts signals the waxing and waning of various cultural ideologies.

To consider the positioning of these men’s narratives in this third analytic frame, I called upon Rubin’s [1984/2011] treatise on the politics of sex. In her iconic essay, Rubin [1984/2011] describes the “charmed circle” of culturally sanctioned and privileged sexuality, which emphasizes heterosexuality, monogamy, procreation, and “vanilla” sex that involves bodies only, no pornography, and individuals of approximately the same age. On the “outer limits” of this circle lies sex that is denigrated as “deviant”: homosexual, nonprocreative, polyamorous, kinky, casual, for money, cross-generational. Warner [1999] later theorized that the politics of sex creates hierarchies of shame with which anyone diverse in their sexual identities, desires, or practices must contend.

This perspective on the politics of sexuality is not simply academic, nor is it relevant only to the experience of individual development. Debate about whether sexual and gender identity minorities should aspire for inclusion into the charmed circle or seek to dismantle it from the outer limits has long characterized the political landscape of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities [e.g., Duberman, 1993; Faderman, 2015; Warner, 1999]. The marriage equality movement aspired for and attained just such an inclusion, which raises the question of how gay men socialized in a context in which same-sex desire (in at least *some* form) may have moved from the outer limits into the charmed circle experience their desires and identities in a new way.

I approached the narratives presented in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book through this final critical frame. I sought to go beyond the face value of their narratives to consider, through a hermeneutics of suspicion, how their narratives were positioned in relation to larger discourses and cultural ideologies related to sex and gender. I considered men’s desires to position themselves either within the charmed circle or on its outer limits as possessing ideological implications for sexual diversity. To the extent gay men aspire to normativity, they reject the radical potential of a queer sexual culture intended to critique normative sexual ethics that produce shame [Warner, 1999]. Hence, whether young gay men position themselves as within the charmed

circle or its outer limits has implications for the endurance of a queer sexual culture that values its cultural position as a critique of sexual domination.

Taken together, these three analytic frames provide me with a lens that is distinct from Savin-Williams [2016] in the reading of gay men's stories. I approached my reading not through the lens of charting a prototypical gay man's development or documenting what Savin-Williams [1998, 2001] calls *differential developmental trajectories*. Rather, I sought to interpret these men's lives through a critical analysis that (a) considered issues of continuity and change in relation to other generations and (b) identified the relationship between personal narratives and the politics of sex more broadly.

A Note on Genre and Data Corpus

It is important to note that Savin-Williams' [2016] book is admittedly *not* a research report or traditional academic monograph, even as aspects of its form mirror his earlier books [e.g., Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005]. Savin-Williams [2016] indicates his intended audience in the preface:

This book shares my accumulated knowledge and perspective with those of you who believe you might be gay, know you're gay, or want to find out what gay teens experience. If you care about gay youth, this book is for you. Perhaps you're a gay man who recalls his own experience as a gay youth. Maybe you're a parent, teacher, clergy member, or health-care provider. You may want to educate yourself or others about gay teens, or you may simply be curious. Unlike my last effort, *The New Gay Teenager* in 2005, which combined a limited number of life stories with scientific data, this book stays closer to the lives of gay teens as they reflect on their development.... (p. vii)

This use of the second person occurs throughout the text, and it is clear that Savin-Williams is motivated to speak less to fellow social and developmental scientists (like me, *you*, and other readers of this journal) and more to the community of young gay men and those who care about them (outside of the academic or scientific community).

Savin-Williams' [2016] book can be classified within the genre of the scholarly trade book, informed by scholarship but written for a largely nonacademic audience. As a senior editor at W.W. Norton (a publishing house particularly committed to this genre) has recently told me, of greatest importance in this genre is to have a compelling narrative that in many ways simplifies the inherent complexity and ambiguity of scientific knowledge. Hence, the reader will at times find somewhat strong, often unqualified claims absent citations. For example, early in the book Savin-Williams [2016] claims, "Indeed, we know that on average you [young gay men] report equal levels of positive mental health as straight boys – and this is a good thing" (pp. 12–13). Savin-Williams [2016] points the reader to some sources for this claim in the notes section at the back of the book, but he fails to acknowledge the numerous studies that have continued to document health and mental health disparities between heterosexual and sexual minority youth [e.g., Bostwick et al., 2014; Marshal et al., 2011; Robinson & Espelage, 2013; for a review, see Russell & Fish, 2016]. Being a critical consumer of all of this research, I felt uncomfortable with the lack of recognition of other evidence or the acknowledgment that the question of psychological "equivalence" versus "distinction" may be unsettled in the larger scientific community. I re-

alized, however, that this genre allows for and perhaps even promotes taking a more unilateral stance on such issues in order to maintain a more singular narrative.

I highlight the issue of genre so that the reader of this essay can understand my analysis as distinct to that provided by Savin-Williams [2016], as our aims and audiences diverge. I took my charge to generate a novel analysis that may speak more to what other social and developmental scientists might take away from the data presented in Savin-Williams' [2016] book. I recognize, however, that this analysis was limited by the data to which I had access (i.e., the narrative data published within the book).

Given that Savin-Williams [2016] develops strong arguments about the experience of contemporary gay men and their development, it is important to address his data corpus. While the arguments he develops are grounded not just in the current data corpus, most of his direct empirical evidence comes from it. He provides detail in an appendix that I will briefly summarize here.

Narratives that comprise the data corpus for the book come from interviews with 40 men who participated in two studies conducted at Savin-Williams' home institution of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Most interviewees were university students at Cornell or other institutions. The remainder had completed their undergraduate careers. The vast majority (over 70% in both studies) identified as White and middle or upper class. Most were raised in urban or suburban areas. Very few came from rural communities. Twenty-seven of the 40 men were interviewed in 2008–2009 (with a mean age of 20 at the time of the interview). The other 13 interviews were conducted in 2012 (with a mean age of almost 22 at the time of the interview). Taking an intersectional lens [Coston & Kimmel, 2012], I concluded that the data corpus comprised interviews from gay men of relative privilege in US society: privileged with regard to race, class, education, and accessibility of LGBTQ resources based on urban and suburban upbringing. I calculated that the majority of men were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s, members of what I and others have dubbed the "Equality Generation" of gay men because they experienced their adolescence at the height of the marriage equality movement [Hammack et al., 2018]. Savin-Williams [2016] acknowledges that these men are "not 'representative' of young gay men in the United States" (p. 301). As I engaged in a critical analysis of the narrative data and Savin-Williams' [2016] interpretation of it, I kept in mind the limitations of this kind of sample in our ability to make claims about a diversity of gay and other same-sex attracted men.

Gay Men's Identities: Twenty-First Century Stories

In *Becoming Who I Am: Young Men on Being Gay*, Savin-Williams [2016] attempts to characterize the lives of young cisgender gay men in a manner that challenges much of the received orthodoxy of developmental science through the voices of individual lives. My analysis highlights five key themes that emerge in the narrative data that reveal both continuity and change compared with prior generations of gay men. In some instances, Savin-Williams [2016] directly identifies these themes. In other cases, they are present but not central to Savin-Williams' [2016] interpretation. I present each theme in turn and provide a critical analysis through the three frames outlined above.

“...*The Gay Kids Are All Right*”: *Struggle and Success in the Stories of Young Gay Men*

“Mom, Dad, I’m gay.”

“*What?* No you’re not. Who told you that?”

I chuckled, thinking about the angel dressed in white in that therapy office. She did in fact tell me I was gay, though I had known I was primarily attracted to boys and men since childhood. She would be proud of me at that moment, I recall thinking.

“I am, and I’m comfortable with it, and any issue you have with it is yours. I’ll be ready to have a relationship with you when you’re ready to accept me for who I am.”

In hindsight, the struggle I experienced as a gay adolescent – admittedly profound and significant enough to result in a major depressive episode – seems like an anomaly in a life story narrative characterized by great social and psychological success. I had this conversation with my parents only about one year after I had stuttered – uncharacteristically – in the therapy office as I uttered the word “homosexual.” I marvel now that I had the confidence to take the “tough love” approach with my parents that ended up being extraordinarily effective. Within a few years, not only were they accepting and supportive of me as gay, they also credited this experience with shifting their entire political orientation toward a more liberal and progressive mindset. By my early twenties, I was a proud and confident gay man, happily partnered with a man I met in college (in a relationship that would end up lasting 16 wonderful years), on the exact career trajectory I had envisioned. My story, it turns out, is probably a common one for young gay men of relative privilege (e.g., White and middle or upper class) and one that unites men of my generation with young gay men today.

A central theme in Savin-Williams’ [2016] text is that young gay men predominantly demonstrate psychological resilience and live lives characterized by positive well-being. As he did in his 2005 book, Savin-Williams [2016] frames this argument in contrast to the mainstream literature on gay adolescence which emphasizes the struggles and suffering of youth. Speaking directly to his intended audience, Savin-Williams [2016] claims:

Today’s gay youths are living the life gay adults could only have dreamed about when they were young – they’re proud, popular, respected, happy, and ordinary. If you are a gay teenager, we know that the number and quality of your friendships, how popular you are in school, your ability to be intimate and connect with your parents, your personality characteristics, your self-esteem, your life satisfaction, and even your life stress rarely differ on average from straight youths. The young men I interviewed confirm this, as their stories will attest. (pp. 11–12)

As the reader can discern, Savin-Williams [2016] makes a strong argument about the predominant experience of contemporary gay youth. I was struck by the force with which he makes this argument, given the limitations of the data corpus as noted above. The men interviewed by Savin-Williams [2016] occupy a place of relative privilege in terms of the intersections of their identities. I wondered what gay men of less privilege would make of this characterization. While Savin-Williams [2016] seems to want to provide an “answer” to young gay youth (“you’re awesome and not that different from straight guys after all”), I was immediately pondering more *questions*: How might men with different configurations of identities (e.g., less educated men, men of color, men in conservative rural areas) experience their same-sex desire?

The men whose stories are represented in Savin-Williams' [2016] book experienced childhood in the 1990s within a cultural and political landscape in which diversity in sexual orientation was increasingly seen as "normal" [e.g., Sullivan, 1995]. The explosion of research on the biological basis of homosexuality likely contributed to shifts in cultural perspectives and rhetoric toward greater acceptance [e.g., Hamer & Copeland, 1994; LeVay, 1996]. These men experienced their adolescence in the 2000s with the thrust of the marriage equality movement which, though it took time, resulted in an enormous civil rights victory for individuals with same-sex desire: the attainment of the legal right to marry throughout the USA [Hammack et al., 2018].

Similar to my own personal narrative, the men in Savin-Williams' [2016] book experienced challenges along the way to acceptance of their same-sex desire and gay identity, but by and large they constructed *redemptive* narratives that demonstrated psychological resilience. They acknowledge challenges in the experience of their desire and in their relations with heterosexual peers and family members, but they make meaning of these experiences within a present-day experience of psychological resilience and achievement of their personal goals. Adrian, a 16-year-old Latino, illustrates:

We didn't ask for this blessing of being attracted to the same sex (and I am going to call it a blessing because that's what it is). Like any other problem one may encounter, it is the fight through that problem from which we learn the most and for that reason, we should feel blessed to have had that learning experience. [Savin-Williams, 2016, pp. 8–9]

Just as I ultimately did, boys like Adrian have reinterpreted the "problem" of their same-sex desire as an opportunity and a privilege. Being gay is not a contaminating force in their life stories but rather a source of strength.

These aspects of the narratives in Savin-Williams' [2016] book resonated strongly with me and seemed highly credible for a potentially sizeable segment of the gay male population (probably those of relative privilege, perhaps living in well-resourced communities with more positive attitudes toward sexual and gender identity diversity). As a result, I found little reason to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion to this aspect of the narrative data or Savin-Williams' [2016] interpretation of it. Savin-Williams [2016] is careful to note that gay youth *do* struggle, and he presents narrative data that illustrate. There are narratives of suicide attempts and struggles with self-acceptance, but the larger point that the contamination of life stories is not inevitable is important and empirically credible, in spite of the fact that most of the literature on LGBT youth emphasizes psychological struggle [Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015].

My critical analysis did, however, come to question the extent to which a strong argument about the relative frequency of resilient narratives in adolescence and young adulthood might speak to gay men of less relative privilege, such as men living in communities hostile to sexual and gender identity diversity. Recognition of the *struggles* of gay youth – just as much an empirical reality as the *successes* of gay youth – provides the impetus for resources in these communities, as well as the impetus for mobilization to work on social justice issues in these communities. Savin-Williams [2016] posits that resilience or success has now "overtaken" struggle in the development of gay youth, and his argument seems to be based on an unrepresentative sample of young gay men. I am not convinced we have sufficient evidence from large and diverse enough samples of youth to make such a claim. Rather, I prefer that we acknowledge, as Savin-Williams [2016] appropriately does, the tremendous "power,

strength, pride, and resilience” (p. 12) of gay youth while also recognizing the lived experience of struggle many youth continue to face, particularly in hostile communities or on the basis of intersectional identities. A recent study of 449 diverse sexual minority males revealed notable evidence of psychological struggle [Burns, Ryan, Garofalo, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2015]. It is entirely conceivable that struggle and success continue to coexist in the lived experience of gay men as a larger social category [Cohler & Hammack, 2007], and it seems challenging from a methodological standpoint to speak of relative frequency.

In addition, it is noteworthy that the US political context has changed dramatically since the time of Savin-Williams’ interviews. The election of Donald J. Trump as President has resulted in an administration explicitly unsupportive of sexual and gender identity diversity [Bialer & McIntosh, 2017]. It remains to be seen how this political context will impact the lives of young sexual and gender identity minorities. A strong argument that downplays struggle would seem to prematurely signal that the era of acceptance has arrived for young gay boys and men.

In spite of my critique of the force of Savin-Williams’ [2016] argument, it seems credible to me that many young gay men today, as in my generation and prior generations [e.g., de Vries, 2015; Halkitis, 2014], have the capacity to construct redemptive life stories in which they make positive meaning of struggles associated with their same-sex desire or gay identity. Resilience in the face of adversity characterizes the lived experience of many LGBTQ people [e.g., Kwon, 2013; Meyer, 2010; Russell, 2005; Wilson et al., 2016], and we do justice to the documentation of gay men’s lives when we recognize this phenomenon as social and developmental scientists. In short, the documentation of resilience is just as important as the documentation of struggle for both our science and our communication of it to young gay men and the general public, but I and other social and developmental scientists would likely be uncomfortable with the force with which Savin-Williams [2016] wants to emphasize psychological success *over* struggle.

“...I Knew It Was Something That I Wasn’t Supposed to Talk About...”:
Navigating Heterosexism and Masculinity

“You’re going to make a woman so happy one day. And you and she will make the family so proud. I know it.”

I could feel the knots in my stomach tighten upon hearing this sentiment, expressed in one form or another, throughout my childhood. Having recognized my same-sex attraction at an early age, I suspected throughout my childhood and early adolescence that, in fact, I would not make my family proud but only bring them shame and disgrace at the unimaginable: having a same-sex, rather than different-sex, partner.

Like most same-sex-attracted children and youth, I was saturated in heterosexuality. I had parents who identified as different binary genders. The youngest in a family of four, I had observed all of my older siblings express attraction to members of a different binary gender than themselves. I never saw a single instance – *not one* – of two men drawn to each other.

I was aware of this *sense of difference* from others at an early age, and it was especially influential among my peer group of other boys. As I engaged in classes,

sports, and unstructured play throughout childhood, I recall thinking, and worrying, “Am I like the other boys?” In a patriarchal society, where most of the people in positions of authority (outside the immediate setting of the home and perhaps the elementary school classroom) were men, I wondered whether this sense of difference would place me in a position of diminished authority or privilege among other boys and men. In hindsight, I wondered (and worried) about the implications of my same-sex attraction for my own power and status in society.

As I considered the narratives in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book, I realized that aspects of this experience seemed to endure for same-sex-attracted men born a generation after me. A second key theme that emerged from my analysis of Savin-Williams’ [2016] text was that heterosexism and “hegemonic” or “compulsive” versions of masculinity that denigrate femininity endure for contemporary gay youth, and they must navigate these cultural ideologies in the process of their identity development. These ideologies are in many ways intrinsically linked. Heterosexism is the cultural ideology that privileges heterosexuality [e.g., Langdrige, 2018; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2016]. It is apparent in assumptions that individuals will invariably be attracted to the “opposite” sex (in an increasingly contested binary framework of sex and gender) and that part of being a “man” is being sexually and romantically attracted to women. Heterosexual desire is positioned decidedly within Rubin’s [1984/2011] “charmed circle” of sex and power; same-sex desire has been historically positioned on its “outer limits.” Hegemonic or compulsive versions of masculinity are those that emphasize dominance and aggression, historically directed toward women [e.g., Connell, 1987, 2005; Pascoe, 2007]. These are certainly not the only forms of masculinity that exist, yet because they support a heteropatriarchal social structure they have a long and pervasive history. Newer, more inclusive forms of masculinity now proliferate and compete with hegemonic forms as men of all sexual orientations develop [e.g., Anderson, 2009, 2012; McCormack & Anderson, 2010, 2014].

Because they lack a strong desire for sexual or romantic relations with women, gay men violate a principal component of dominant or hegemonic forms of masculinity that seek to dominate women and denigrate femininity within a larger power structure of gender relations [Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005]. In the course of their development, gay men must wrestle with the extent to which this key distinction from heterosexual men undermines their own experience of gender privilege and creates psychological distress as a consequence. In other words, gay men must internally navigate the way in which their relative privilege as men is thwarted and how they might redeem their power through their own gender expression.

I note that this theme is *not* a finding that Savin-Williams [2016] emphasizes, yet I found evidence of it throughout the text. In describing their first sexual memories to Savin-Williams, these young men typically recounted a realization that they should not share these memories with anyone. Savin-Williams [2016] states, “Apparently by middle childhood most boys absorb the cultural message about appropriate and inappropriate feelings and experience” (p. 36). Lenny, one of Savin-Williams’ interviewees, recounted feeling “scared” upon having a sexual dream involving the actor Leonardo DiCaprio: “...I was scared because I didn’t know anyone that was gay. ...And it was just general discourse then for people to make fun of gay people. ...So it was just something I didn’t talk about” (p. 39).

I was struck by how similar Lenny’s narrative seemed to my own as a struggling gay adolescent. Like Lenny, I had internalized at an early age the notion that hetero-

sexuality represented the “norm” for boys. *Membership in the category “boy” and the sense of masculinity would be contaminated by attraction to other boys or men.* And as I (and probably Lenny) learned at a young age, *masculinity confers cultural power in a patriarchal society.* In this frame, for cisgender boys of any sexual orientation, nothing could be worse than being seen in childhood or adolescence as “un-masculine.”

Two studies conducted in high schools in the 2000s reveal the diverse versions of masculinity to which young men such as those Savin-Williams [2016] interviewed were likely exposed. Based on fieldwork in a California high school conducted in the early 2000s, Pascoe [2007] argued for the endurance of a *compulsive* form of masculinity reproduced through rituals and interactions and through the proliferation of a “fag discourse” in which boys who fail to conform to a masculine standard are denigrated [Pascoe, 2005, 2007]. *What is really denigrated here is not homosexuality per se but rather femininity.* Through compulsive masculinity and the “fag discourse,” patriarchal masculinity is conceived as the center of cultural power – just as in society at large, so too in high school.

By contrast, McCormack’s [2012] study of high schools in the UK provides a counterexample in being gay-friendly and offering a more inclusive culture around masculinity. Conducted in three high schools from 2008 to 2009, McCormack [2012] provides evidence that homophobia is on the decline among adolescents and that it is generally viewed among young people as problematic. He finds the pervasiveness of a new, more inclusive form of masculinity that does not see the denigration of the feminine as central. While forms of heterosexism persist, femininity is far more accepted and sometimes celebrated.

What version of masculinity do the young men in Savin-Williams’ [2016] text seem to have engaged with in the course of their development? Most experienced their childhood in the 1990s and adolescence in the 2000s. I found the narrative accounts Savin-Williams [2016] presents to reveal an engagement with discourses of compulsive masculinity and heterosexism more akin to that documented by Pascoe [2005, 2007] than the more inclusive form that appears to be emerging in some contexts [McCormack, 2012]. Jonathan recalled feeling “ashamed” at the age of 9 upon undressing a GI Joe doll and “just kind of looking at it” (pp. 42–43). He knew an interest in the bodies of men (even as dolls) represented a serious taboo. In the first grade, Jake routinely arranged for sex play with a fourth-grade boy, as they strategically got bathroom passes at the same time. “I knew it was something that I wasn’t supposed to talk about...” (p. 52), he narrated to Savin-Williams [2016]. *Boys are not supposed to be sexually attracted to or aroused by other boys.* Such is the message of cultural heterosexism and compulsive masculinity.

The denigration of the feminine takes more troubling turns in the narrative accounts of these young gay men when women’s bodies are described with revulsion or women seem to serve instrumental ends for boys that are related to status and the desire to prove one’s masculinity. “Just don’t find vaginas appealing. They gross me out” (p. 128), says one boy. “Because a vagina is really repulsive, I’m not sexually attracted to any girl...” (p. 128), says another. I could not help, as a gay man in my forties with extensive experience with diverse circles of cisgender gay men, thinking of the misogynistic discourse I have often heard among some communities of gay men. I have always interpreted this discomfort with the feminine as a symptom of internalized homophobia and patriarchal masculinity. I was disappointed to hear it echoed among men of this younger generation.

As the text develops and Savin-Williams comes to his conclusion, “Being Young and Gay in America,” the investment in a version of masculinity that denigrates femininity and other stereotypic notions of gay identity becomes apparent. Savin-Williams [2016] acknowledges “What most distressed [young gay men] were *flamboyant gays*, *queer gays*, and *sex-crazed gays*” (p. 263, italics in original). I interpreted this distress as a consequence of internalizing a version of sexual identity that denigrated the feminine (“flamboyant” gays = feminine gays), the transgressive or radical (“queer” gays = those who aggressively challenge normativity), and the sexually liberated (“sex-crazed” gays = those who reject society’s sex negativity and ideologies of monogamy). The version of gay identity with which these men seemed most comfortable was a very version I saw among elite, mostly White, urban-dwelling cisgender gay men who fail to acknowledge their relative privilege and ally themselves more with historic centers of patriarchal power. Increasingly, these men are referred to as “homonormative” in a discursive attempt to signal their appropriation of normativity [see Robinson, 2016] against the interests of the larger queer community [Warner, 1999], even if reflecting a desire to live “ordinary” lives [Brown, 2012].

Engaging with these narratives on the other side of a personal journey from having internalized normativity as an adolescent and young adult to having now, in middle age, embraced a radical resistance of it, I saw these narratives as contaminated by cultural ideologies of gender and sexuality constructed by those in power (namely, heterosexual cisgender White men). The young men in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book are troubled by manifestations of gender nonconformity. They largely lack a critical frame on gender and sexuality, which I assume (based on my own recently completed fieldwork in California high schools) is rooted in their relative position of privilege in the larger queer community as cisgender men. Unlike transgender and gender-nonconforming peers, these men had the *privilege to normalize* and distance themselves from the rest of the queer community. This experience, I realized as I reflected back to the therapy room 25 years ago, was new to this generation.

“My Sexuality Is a Part of Me and Not My Defining Self”: The Allure (and Privilege) of Normalization

When I went to the gay youth group for the first time at age 17, I was driven by a few of my straight high school friends. In appearance and attitude, these boys closely resembled me. They were White and gender-conforming in presentation and identity. The only real difference between us – which seemed significant at the time – was that they were attracted to girls, and I was attracted to them. When I walked into my first group meeting, I was immediately struck by the diversity in the room. There were feminine boys, masculine girls, plenty of non-White boys and girls, individuals whose gender I could not immediately identify. I recall having two, somewhat competing sentiments. First, *I really am alone*. Where are all the boys who look and act like me? Second, *this is beautiful*.

I quickly became integrated into my local community of queer teens and spent far less time with my straight, White, cisgender peers. I embraced the diversity of radical queerness, even as I sometimes felt myself on the periphery of it from my place of relative privilege on account of race, class, and gender identity and presentation. In those days before the Internet, too young to get into gay bars, we would gather at

the local park in the center of the “gayborhood.” We spent countless hours in the (now shuttered) local gay bookstore, which piqued my interest in queer history (in addition to print pornography). I became enculturated into the larger queer community. We called each other “family,” which seemed radical to me at the time. I learned about the history and rituals of this community – *my* community. I disengaged from mainstream heterosexual society as much as I could. It felt safe and wise. It enhanced my sense of psychological security and, in hindsight, probably served as a protective factor from the possibly contaminating influence of stigma and minority stress [Meyer, 2003]. I could be my authentic self because everyone was queer here. *There was no real norm to aspire to*, just radical diversity. I felt great about myself. And I was far from alone. Herdt and Boxer [1996] describe this process of enculturation of gay youth through community-based organizations and community rituals at this historical moment (the late 1980s to early 1990s). *This was the process of “becoming gay,”* of learning and embracing an alternative cultural identity and its accompanying community. For me, it was liberating and extremely fulfilling.

The young men whose interviews comprise the data corpus for Savin-Williams’ [2016] book experienced their adolescence in the 2000s, about a decade after me and at a time when the discourse on homosexuality was centered on marriage equality [Hammack et al., 2018]. During my adolescence, being gay was incredibly stigmatizing and discrediting and largely associated with disease and death (i.e., AIDS). By contrast, the adolescence of these young men occurred at a time in which being gay was increasingly accepted as a legitimate minority identity, worthy of recognition and equal rights. As a political aim, marriage equality sought inclusion in a heteropatriarchal institution [Rich, 1980]. Whereas I experienced my understanding of gay identity as a minority status apart from heteronormativity, these young men now experienced the allure of normativity *and the actual possibility* of its attainment.

My colleagues and I have dubbed gay men born in the 1990s the “Equality Generation” precisely because the dominant cultural discourse about homosexuality in their early development was grounded in equality [Hammack et al., 2018]. This equality discourse was part of a “normalizing” discourse that was dominant in the larger gay/queer community in the 1990s, as activists, scholars, and cultural critics debated the relative merits of assimilation [e.g., Sullivan, 1995; Warner, 1999]. Beyond discourse, though, gay men of this generation also experienced their childhood and adolescence with an entirely different means of social interaction and connection than members of prior generations. The Internet, social media, and networking/hookup apps had become central forms of cultural communication in the course of their development [e.g., Harper, Bruce, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009]. These young men did not need to pick up the phone to locate a gay youth group, as my therapist had done for me. They could simply open their phones or go to websites to find one another.

The implications of this cultural shift are enormous. On the one hand, access to information and to one another was now easy and swift. On the other, *one could now develop entirely apart from the material reality of a queer community*, with its elders and mentors, its bookstores and cruising spots, its routines and rituals. Even more important, one could now develop without immersion into the *radical diversity* of queer communities.

The narratives of young gay men in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book reveal the consequences of this lack of engagement with a larger queer community mainly through the ways they repudiate a stereotypic version of gay male identity as contaminated by

femininity, psychological suffering, radicalism, and hypersexuality. I have already discussed these men's denigration of the feminine and its likely connection to their engagement with hegemonic masculinity, as well as their understandable desire to construct redemptive life stories that confer positive meaning to their sexual minority status. Here I will focus on the repudiation of more "politicized" and "sexualized" versions of gay identity in their narratives in the quest for these young men to position themselves *within* the charmed circle of a normative sexual culture.

The young gay men in Savin-Williams' [2016] book seek to position themselves as "normal" not just in terms of gender presentation and psychological well-being, but also apart from the radicalism of the "gay queer." As Savin-Williams [2016] describes, "...Many would never be caught dead at gay political rallies or meetings, with one exception – the initial reception, which was attended by hundreds angling for a chance to meet the new gays on campus" (p. 272). The explicit antipoliticism of the men Savin-Williams [2016] interviewed is not new to this generation. In fact, it speaks to a dynamic tension within the larger queer movement that has been present from the start. While the Mattachine Society argued for assimilation into mainstream society and for an ethic of "respectability" in the 1950s and 1960s, groups like the Gay Liberation Front, the Gay Activists Alliance, and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries pressed for a more radical stance toward gender and sexuality in the 1970s, with the aim to dismantle normative institutions more broadly [Duberman, 1993; Faderman, 2015; Warner, 1999]. That many White, cisgender gay men have long been generally aligned with the former, more conservative approach is hardly surprising: they are closer to the power center of White patriarchy.

The story of contemporary young, cisgender gay men being largely critical of the "gay queer" and preferring to be instrumental in their participation in queer culture (i.e., exploiting queer spaces and rituals in order to satisfy their own *individual* sexual and social needs) is thus not new. What may perhaps be new, however, is the extent to which those men who crave normativity and reject the radical potential of queer identity and politics can actually achieve their personal projects. Now they can get married, live in the suburbs, use reproductive technology to produce biologically related offspring, and participate almost fully in normativity. I challenge the extent to which Savin-Williams [2016] interprets this phenomenon as either "new" or "good" for men of this generation, for to the extent that more and more young gay men invest in normativity and reject the radical potential of queerness to challenge mainstream ideologies, they exclude themselves from the very community that has created normativity as a viable option. In other words, the explicit antipolitical, anti-queer stance of most of Savin-Williams' [2016] interviewees is closely linked to their relative privilege, but in entering the charmed circle they may be abandoning other queer folk for whom rights and recognition remain elusive (e.g., transgender and gender-nonconforming people, queer and trans people of color). By rejecting queer culture in favor of normativity, they may thwart the potential for solidarity with other gender and sexual minorities. This move may not only harm the larger queer community, but also cisgender gay men themselves, who may become isolated or marginalized within queer spaces.

A final key source of repudiation in the quest for normativity among Savin-Williams' [2016] interviewees is young gay men's rejection of the "slutty stereotype" of a hypersexual gay male identity. Savin-Williams [2016] asserts that "the perception of gays as *sex maniacs* who crave hookups with anonymous others" actually "drew wrath" among his interviewees (p. 273, italics in original). The emotional reaction that the

interviewees had to this stereotype of gay male identity is telling. I hear in this reaction a deep concern with the *impression* of gay men as a social category [presumably to a heteronormative standard that has historically privileged compulsory monogamy; Emens, 2004] and less of an interest in how the more “open” sexual culture gay men have historically constructed may actually enhance one’s sexual and relational life. Gay men have, in fact, been at the forefront of innovations in intimacy that appear to create considerable meaning in their ability to forge alternative systems of kinship as a response to the historic exclusion of queer people from normative institutions such as marriage [e.g., Nardi, 1999; Stacey, 2005]. The alternative kin networks gay men and lesbians constructed in the 1980s and 1990s were vital to their ability to deal with widespread stigma and the AIDS epidemic [e.g., Nardi, 1999; Weston, 1991]. In the reaction of “wrath” among these young men I do not just hear resistance to some denigrating stereotype but rather a lack of appreciation for such examples of social creativity – in short, an internalization of denigrating stereotypes about the radical sexual and relational culture of gay men. Through the lens of a hermeneutics of suspicion, I hear a desire to position oneself within the charmed circle of “respectable” sex and to reject the perceived contamination of the outer limits.

On the one hand my reading of these men’s narratives might have led me to conclude that internalized homophobia or heterosexism creates this rejection of a naïve stereotype of gay identity. But I suspect the root of this psychological reaction lies perhaps equally in a lack of engagement with the larger queer community, itself the product of the contemporary *privilege* cisgender gay men have to assimilate and aspire toward normativity. Simply put, *these young men lack a complex and realistic understanding of the positive distinctiveness of gay male culture and the diversity of queer identities and communities*, and their impulse is to retreat to the charmed circle of sexual normativity. Admittedly, Savin-Williams’ [2016] reading occurs through a hermeneutics of faith and thus is chiefly concerned with the meaning participants seek to convey, not the underlying implications of their narratives for broader cultural ideologies that would move (some) gay men from the outer limits into the charmed circle.

“Sheep” and “Goats” No More? Challenging a Binary Conception of Male Sexuality

In their landmark volume that challenged the received orthodoxy on human sexuality, Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin [1948/2003] famously claimed:

Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black nor all things white. It is a fundamental of taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeonholes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behavior the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex.... (p. 897)

Known for their view of sexual orientation as a *continuum* rather than a *categorical* phenomenon, Kinsey et al. argued that a categorical view of male sexuality failed to accurately describe the reality of men’s sexual desire. Over half a century later, we are at last beginning to fully acknowledge this view.

Challenges to the idea of a binary sexual identity for men have come primarily from recent studies of straight-identified men who acknowledge same-sex desire and engage in same-sex behavior [e.g., Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018; Silva, 2017; Ward, 2015], including a considerable amount of research conducted by Savin-Williams and his colleagues [e.g., Savin-Williams, 2017, 2018; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013]. An increasing body of evidence reveals the extent to which categorical notions of male sexuality fail to capture the empirical reality of men's sexual desire as fluid and far more complex than a simple binary taxonomy would suggest [see also Savin-Williams, 2014].

Over two thirds of the way through his book, Savin-Williams [2016] reveals that *half* his interviewees actually did not identify as *totally* gay but rather as *mostly* gay. He highlights a diversity of reasons these men claim to identify as such, including a politically informed critique of binary sexuality, a desire to conform to one's ethnic culture of origin by eventually pursuing heterosexual marriage, a claim that one is *emotionally* attracted to women if only minimally sexually attracted, and an unwillingness to "close the heterosexual door." Interestingly, none of these men narrate a strong sexual attraction toward women, which, through my lens of suspicion, also makes me question whether their repudiation of a binary identity is really more rooted in internalized homophobia and/or lack of engagement in gay male subcultures [cf. McCormack & Savin-Williams, in press]. Are they preferring to not identify as "totally" gay because of the loss of power such labeling is presumed to bring (e.g., contamination by femininity and other stereotypic correlates of gay identity)? Applying a hermeneutics of faith, these men appear to be challenging the false dichotomy of gay-straight and, like many of their straight peers, constructing a new, more fluid form of sexuality. Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion, these men may be avoiding the assumption of a gay identity for reasons (probably beyond their conscious awareness) rooted in their engagement with heteronormativity. A recent study identified the rationales men provide for identifying as nonexclusive in their gay identity (e.g., "mostly gay"), finding evidence of sexual, romantic, intellectual, and internalized homophobia as motivators [McCormack & Savin-Williams, in press]. Regardless of underlying motives or rationales, there is evidence that "mostly gay" and "mostly straight" are now discursive markers of identity in a way once unavailable to men [see also Savin-Williams, 2017].

In spite of the lens of suspicion I brought to these narratives, I agree with Savin-Williams' [2016] general point that the categorical conception of male sexuality is currently under assault from men who cluster everywhere along the continuum of sexual orientation [see also Savin-Williams, 2017]. And this assault is certainly "new" in the sense that adolescent boys of all sexual orientations will now have greater freedom in the identity development process to self-label in ways that fully match their sexual and romantic desire. The task of social and developmental scientists who chart contemporary sexual identity development is to understand the meaning adolescents make as they navigate the labeling process. I hope that, as we document this developmental process for a new generation, we approach the narratives of young people with lenses of both faith and suspicion as they engage with discourses and cultural ideologies of gender and sexuality that have a history and a relationship to dominant ideas (and ideals).

“The Slutty Stereotypes Are True”: Silence and Stigma in the Sexual Lives of Young Gay Men

A pervasive theme throughout the narratives in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book is *sex negativity*, rooted chiefly in the *conspiracy of silence* around sex that these young men seem to experience everywhere in their development – at home, school, everywhere except perhaps their computers. Savin-Williams [2016] is clear: “Most of the youths that I talked to told me that the sex education they received was of limited help or useless” (p. 94). Where do young gay boys go, then? *Internet porn*.

The young men Savin-Williams [2016] interviewed learned about sex with men mainly from Internet porn. As I reflected, I realized that I too had learned about gay sex primarily through pornography. But the reality of my pornographic universe would be unrecognizable to today’s youth, primarily for its medium (print or VHS tape) and its lack of diversity. When I was young, pornography was difficult to acquire, as it generally required an embarrassing in-person purchase that communicated to the cashier everything that aroused you. And in the 1990s, pornography consisted mainly of extremely manicured, “clean-cut” models engaged in highly produced and choreographed (in hindsight, totally inauthentic) scenes with terrible music and forced dialogue. Lack of condom use (i.e., “bareback” sex) was not an option even conceivable to me as a gay adolescent, and condoms were ubiquitous in the porn of the 1980s and 1990s.

By the time the men Savin-Williams [2016] interviewed were adolescents, the culture of pornography and gay male sex had changed radically. Bareback sex had become increasingly common, with HIV no longer a death sentence and new prevention strategies reducing concern about HIV transmission [see Mowlabocus, Harbottle, & Witzel, 2013]. The heavily produced studio porn had been overtaken by both amateur and “documentary-style” porn that tended to more authentically represent the reality of sex – no music, no forced dialogue, men who looked “real” rather than like they had just stepped out of a body-waxing parlor. From my vantage point, gay male pornography had gotten considerably more diverse – there was now something for everyone, and the range of the gay male aesthetic and erotic had dramatically expanded.

The narratives in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book generally suggest that Internet porn served a useful function in these men’s lives: promoting a positive view of diverse forms of sex among men, reducing shame and guilt, normalizing same-sex desire [see also McCormack & Wignall, 2017]. Given their positive engagement with gay male pornography, I was somewhat surprised to hear fewer accounts of what I have seen among men of this generation as a more liberated sexual culture, especially in the era of pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV, which has now reduced anxiety substantially for gay men [Hammack et al., 2018]. But my sources of data on this phenomenon are more recent than Savin-Williams’ [2016] interviews, which were collected from 2008 to 2012. Pre-exposure prophylaxis was only approved by the FDA in 2012 and strongly recommended for all sexually active gay men by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2014.

I left Savin-Williams’ [2016] book realizing that, even in just this short span of time since his latest interviews (2012) and today (2018), gay male sexual culture had perhaps radically changed. Like all narratives, those collected by Savin-Williams [2016] provide just a snapshot in time for the history of the individual and the group.

Personal narratives provide a momentary window into the course of a culture by revealing the circulating discourses appropriated at one point in time to provide a sense of meaning and coherence [Hammack, 2008, 2011; Hammack & Toolis, 2016]. In the narratives of these men, I heard ambivalence about the new gay male sexual culture, far more diverse and “liberated” than the sexual culture in which I initially “came out.” On the one hand, porn had helped them to see their desires – no matter how “deviant” – as within the range of “normal” sexual desire. On the other, they sought to distance themselves from the very hypersexuality likely depicted in those representations of sex between men.

A hermeneutics of suspicion led me to interpret the sex negativity in many of these men’s narratives, coupled with the direct repudiation of the “gay slut” many explicitly make in their interviews, as largely uncritical of the sexual and gender ideologies that caused them so much anxiety as young, same-sex attracted men. When they denigrate the radical sexual expression of other gay men, positioning themselves as not *that* type of gay guy, they participate in the reproduction of a sexual ideology more aligned with heteronormativity and its commitment to compulsory monogamy – an ideology that has historically oppressed many groups, including women and sexual minorities [Emens, 2004; Rich, 1980]. In the narratives of young men in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book, I see evidence of close engagement with the unique sexual culture gay men have created, but I also see an investment in a form of normativity that denigrates more “radical” forms of sexual expression. If we apply only a hermeneutics of faith, we miss an opportunity to link the personal narratives of these men with the cultural ideologies that constrain them.

Conclusion: Diversity and Polyphony in the Narratives of Young Gay Men

I came out to myself and others starting at age 17, initially experiencing psychological distress but fairly quickly coming to a place of confidence in my sexual desire and identity. By senior year of college, I was in a serious relationship with another guy. The two of us were “out and proud” among our larger social group of almost all straight guys. One of the guys in this group, “Dan,” had always struck me and my boyfriend as gay. One of our straight friends had actually found gay porn on Dan’s computer. Our group of friends was so accepting of us, we all reasoned that, when confronted with this discovery, Dan would come out and be embraced by us all. He did not, though. He recoiled in shame when confronted about the porn. He made up an elaborate story about how it ended up there.

Dan remained in the closet for years after college, calling me one day on the phone about five years after graduation to share the “big news” that he was gay. I and all my friends were baffled at why he had waited so long. Dan provided an important lesson to me as a young gay guy: everyone has their own process of sexual identity development, and you never know when, how, or why some people come out at different times than others. Simply put, sexual identity development assumes diverse trajectories, and individuals engage with multiple, sometimes competing discourses in the course of development. While I appropriated the archetypal redemptive, “struggle and success” [Cohler & Hammack, 2007] narrative of gay identity at age 17, Dan did so many years later. Many of the men in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book – born about a decade after me and Dan – seemed to call upon other discourses, such as the

“postgay” discourse that no longer problematizes same-sex desire and frames one’s sexual identity as less central [e.g., McCormack, Wignall, & Anderson, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2005; Weeks, 2007]. And there are other voices less well represented in Savin-Williams’ [2016] data corpus: namely, young men appropriating explicit anti-normative sexual identities, such as queer, kinky, polyamorous, asexual, aromantic, and other emerging sexual identities and subcultures.

The theme of diversity and polyphony in the lived experience of young gay men warrants new empirical attention, particularly at a time when understandings of gender and sexuality are changing rapidly. How do young men attracted primarily or mostly to the same binary gender engage with competing versions of masculinity as they construct their own gender and sexual identities? What labels possess meaning and salience to them, and why? To what communities do they orient themselves? What are their life goals and aspirations? Following Bakhtin’s [1981] contention that our narratives are “populated ... with the intentions of others” (p. 294), how do the personal narratives of young gay men embody “polyphony” in their appropriation of diverse discourses about gender and sexuality [Cohler & Hammack, 2009]?

It was curious to me that Savin-Williams, who has devoted considerable effort to challenge the notion of “gay adolescents” as a kind of “species” whose experience could be uniformly described as tragic [Savin-Williams, 2005], seemed in this volume to be reifying a version of gay male identity that did not fully reflect the diversity of young men’s experience. Motivated as he was to produce a work of value and utility to young gay men and those who care about them, he seemed to me to create an incomplete portrait of gay male identity in the twenty-first century.

In his 1998 book, in relation to which the 2016 book reads in many ways like a “sequel,” Savin-Williams states the theme of the book as “the multiplicity or heterogeneity in the developmental trajectories of gay and bisexual youths” (p. xii). He goes on to say, “the youths I interviewed lived both ordinary and intricate lives; as similar and dissimilar as their heterosexual peers; and, ultimately, as diverse as we would expect them to be” (p. xii). The narrative data he presents in his 1998 book do justice to this claim, highlighting points of distinction in the course of young gay lives (e.g., navigating masculinity and feelings of “difference,” coming to label oneself and disclose one’s sexual minority status to others) but also how development fails to conform to a monolithic standard. Here was a theoretical approach (“differential developmental trajectories”) and a wealth of data to support its utility to the understanding of diversity in sexual identity development.

By 2005, in *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams had struck a new tone: “... Now at last I can hope that contemporary teenagers are bringing the sexual identity era to a close” (p. ix). “... My lifetime professional dream – that homosexuality will be eliminated as a defining characteristic of adolescents, a way of cutting and isolating, of separating and discriminating – is within reach” (pp. ix–x). He goes on to argue (and to celebrate), throughout the book, that we live in a “postgay” society, where one’s deviation from heterosexuality can now be considered unremarkable. This volume is compelling and provocative, and there is much to appreciate in the argument Savin-Williams [2005] develops. He is rigorous in his critical engagement with the dominant literature on gay adolescence. I find myself (then and now) sharing many of his critiques. And he continues to acknowledge that differential trajectories indeed characterize the course of young gay lives. But aspects of his teleological account of the course of how young people are (and will) engage with sexual identities now read

as unreflective of the diverse trajectories same-sex-attracted people have actually taken in the twenty-first century.

The “postgay” perspective celebrates an era in which diversity in sexual attraction and identity results in a decline in meaning and significance of gay identity [Savin-Williams, 2005]. There is a strong assimilationist strand to this perspective. The goal, consistent with the marriage equality movement, which sought inclusion into the existing heteropatriarchal institution of marriage, is the attainment of normativity and the movement of homosexuality from Rubin’s [1984/2011] “outer limits” into the “charmed circle.” To be sure, this social and cultural shift has indeed occurred, with a version of same-sex relations now generally accepted into the “charmed circle” of “proper” sex. And with this shift, it is reasonable to expect that young gay men will now be able to – like their straight peers – appropriate a life course narrative that includes once impossible milestones such as marriage and even child rearing. There is plenty of evidence in Savin-Williams’ [2016] text that many young gay men are orienting their narratives precisely in this direction. Yet, I question whether we do justice to the diversity of contemporary gay men’s lives by promoting this narrative as *the* archetypal gay male narrative of today, which Savin-Williams [2016] seems to want to do. I thought about the voices of the many men I have encountered, both in my personal and professional life, who are clearly situated along the “outer limits,” defiantly rejecting normativity and engaging in extraordinary social creativity as they construct new identities and sexual subcultures [e.g., Hennen, 2008; Wignall & McCormack, 2017].

As social and developmental scientists, we always bring our own hopes, aspirations, and positions to our inquiry. We are motivated by a desire to not just *describe* an empirical reality but also to promote a more optimal context for human development. And so our own identities and life narratives always play a pivotal role in our own production of knowledge. For this reason, I have shared my personal narrative throughout this essay so that readers understand the lens I bring to the analysis of young gay men’s lives today.

Beyond the distinct hermeneutic lens I brought to the narratives presented in Savin-Williams’ [2016] text, I also brought a distinct personal narrative with both similar and different hopes and aspirations than Savin-Williams [2016]. Savin-Williams [2016] and I both want to see the decreased likelihood of psychological suffering for diverse youth. We both want to document stories of resilience and positive adaptation among same-sex-attracted youth. We both long for a society in which same-sex attraction is seen as fully “normal” so that one need not experience such a profound sense of “difference” early in life. Separated by several decades, a vast geographic distance, and surely much in the way of life experience as gay men, we share a commitment to the well-being of future generations of gay men.

Where Savin-Williams and I diverge is perhaps our personal political stance with regard to sexual and gender identity diversity. I do identify as a “gay queer” and align myself with a version of gay identity that is committed to dismantling the oppressive cultural ideologies that I view as a source of suffering for anyone who is diverse in gender and sexuality – sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, binarism, monogamism, kinkphobia, to name some of the most dominant. I believe that all of these ideologies can be traced to the prescriptive press of normativity: different-sex attraction, binary gender identity, monogamy and “vanilla” sex, gender conformity. Since the invention of heterosexuality and its accompanying cultural ideology [Katz, 2007], queer people

have existed in the “outer limits” of the sex hierarchy – a place that may as a child or adolescent, lacking any encounter with the beauty and possibility of queer communities, appear deeply dangerous but as an adult can be incredibly enriching. From the outer limits, we challenge the pernicious ideologies of sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, binarism, patriarchy, monogamism, racism, and myriad other forms of normativity. From the outer limits, we construct queer versions of masculinity that reveal considerable creativity and provide a sense of meaning and purpose apart from normativity [e.g., Hennen, 2008]. Whereas I think Savin-Williams ultimately sees the outer limits as a historic burden for gay youth from which they are escaping (thankfully, in his view), I see this position as an extraordinary privilege. In creating a strong sense of community and solidarity with other gender and sexual deviants, we offer one possible exit from the potential contamination of heterosexism and gender conformity which can activate minority stress [Meyer, 2003]. And so I, unlike Savin-Williams, would much prefer young gay men to reject the allure of the charmed circle and to join me and my queer kin in the outer limits, critiquing through lived transgression.

It seems important to also note that the process of narrative engagement is a *developmental* one likely to proceed along *differential trajectories*, as Savin-Williams himself has long argued [e.g., Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000]. Retrospective narrative accounts of the lived experience of development are always constructed for a present moment [Boxer & Cohler, 1989]. How young gay men negotiate their position within the “charmed circle” or its “outer limits” ought not to be framed as static but rather as dynamic and in need of empirical interrogation through prospective, longitudinal methods. The way in which gay men think about social structure (e.g., their own position of relative privilege) and cultural ideologies (e.g., heterosexism, hegemonic masculinity) is likely to change over time. In adolescence and young adulthood (the age of those interviewed in Savin-Williams’ [2016] book), the desire to conform to a normative standard may be greater than in midlife, a point at which gay men would have likely had greater exposure to diverse communities.

The reality is that we know very little about the *development* of men who assume diverse sexual identity labels precisely because we have not conducted studies that can directly address questions of development. I propose that we use rigorous methods to interrogate both the effects of *birth cohort* and *development*, documenting the way in which gay men of distinct generations converge and diverge in terms of lived experience [see Hammack et al., 2018; McCormack, Anderson, & Adams, 2014]. Given the extent to which binary conceptions of male sexuality are increasingly challenged, this project ought not to focus just on men who identify as “gay” but rather men of varying sexual identities (including “straight” and “mostly straight”), for men of all sexual identities must negotiate cultural ideologies of heterosexuality and masculinity in the course of their development.

My suggestion, then, is to take an empirical approach to the study of gay men’s lives that is attentive to social change and development across the life course and intentional in the inclusion of diverse voices. I remain unsure of the relative merits of the genre of Savin-Williams’ [2016] book, for it seems to only partially capture the complexity and diversity of young gay men’s lives today. And to the extent that it reifies gay male identity in the mold of a particular form more allied with the quest for normativity than radical critique of gender and sexual ideologies, the book may

do a disservice to those in its intended audience who do not conform to this particular narrative.

The study of gay men's identities in the twenty-first century will benefit from an inductive lens through which we document the diversity of lived experience and engagement with competing narratives about sexuality and gender. That gay men will surely appropriate both "normative" and "queer" master narratives, thereby aligning themselves either within the "charmed circle" or its "outer limits," seems axiomatic and not a matter for which we can easily produce statements of relative frequency, given the challenges of sampling "hidden" populations such as sexual and gender minorities [e.g., Meyer & Wilson, 2009]. The task I suggest is one in which diverse groups of young men – from the cities to the suburbs, exurbs and farms, from the video bars to the leather bars, bears and otters, twinkles and geeks, poz and neg – share their stories so that we may understand and appreciate the diverse ways in which young men negotiate sexuality and gender in a rapidly shifting cultural context.

Acknowledgments

Preparation of this article was supported by a William T. Grant Foundation Scholar Award and a Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. I thank Mark McCormack, Stephen Russell, and Elliot Cohen for extensive feedback on a draft of the article.

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