

Male Homosexuality: The Adolescent's Perspective

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ABSTRACT. Although homosexual activity is prevalent among US teenagers, adolescent homosexuality per se has been a poorly understood phenomenon. The purpose of this investigation is to describe the meaning and experience of homosexuality from the adolescent's perspective. Twenty-nine male teenagers, self-described as gay (79%) or bisexual (21%), volunteered to participate in a structured interview, the purpose of which was to examine the definition of homosexuality, the acquisition of a gay identity, and the impact of sexuality on family, peers, and community. The youths demonstrated well-established sexual identities by the consistency of their sexual fantasies, interests, and behaviors over time. Homosexuality was more frequently described as a general attraction to men (48%) and an indicator of positive personal attributes (33%) than as an isolated sexual behavior. The subjects reported strong negative attitudes from parents (43%) and friends (41%) toward their sexualities. Discrimination (37%), verbal abuse from peers (55%), and physical assaults (30%) were frequently cited problems. These stressors may place the boys at high risk for physical and psychosocial dysfunction. *Pediatrics* 1987;79:326-330; *adolescence, homosexuality, sexuality.*

During the first half of this decade, the epidemic of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome has focused attention on the subject of adolescent homosexuality. Yet, it remains one of the most complex and controversial issues in pediatrics and adolescent health care.

To date, there is confusion as to whether homosexuality even exists as a well-established sexual preference during adolescence. Early adolescent homosexual experiences have been viewed as an exploration and experimentation with sexuality in a way that is nonthreatening and familiar to the

young person.² Sorenson³ surveyed homosexual behavior in teenagers and found that 17% of male respondents, 16 through 19 years of age, reported such activity. However, on the basis of low levels of homosexual activity during the month prior to the survey, he concluded that homosexuality per se is an adult phenomenon in American society. Yet, another author⁴ has "flatly rejected" the suggestion that homosexuality could be established before late adolescence. In contrast, other sources have estimated that 10% of the adolescent population is primarily homosexual⁵ (B. Baker, *Pediatric News* 1983;17(12):1,34,35).

The controversies surrounding adolescent homosexuality may, in part, be attributed to the lack of investigations directly involving homosexual youths. A recent review of the literature concluded that current knowledge is based on opinions, clinical anecdotes, and studies of gay adults recalling their adolescence.⁶ To our knowledge, there has been only one previous attempt to understand homosexuality from the adolescent's perspective. In 1972, Roesler and Deisher⁷ interviewed 60 boys and men, 16 to 22 years of age, suspected of being homosexual by informants. Among other findings, they concluded that the adolescent's acquisition of a gay identity occurred over a period of time characterized by "extreme emotional turmoil."

The purpose of the present study was to further understand homosexuality from the adolescent's perspective. Specifically, the following questions are raised: What do teenagers mean when they describe themselves as homosexual? What is the process whereby they acquire a gay identity? What is the impact of homosexuality on the various aspects of their lives?

SUBJECTS

Subjects were recruited through advertisements in a local gay news publication, a gay-oriented radio

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program, and a health department clinic. Additional subjects were introduced to the project by previous participants.

The subjects were 29 young men who identified themselves as gay or bisexual. The sample was preponderantly white, middle class, and Christian. Ages ranged from 15 through 19 years with a mean of 18.3 years. Other pertinent demographic variables are presented in Table 1.

All subjects completed a structured interview consisting of forced-choice and open-ended questions regarding demographics, the definition of homosexuality, the process of acquiring a homosexual identity, and the impact of sexual identity on family, peers, and community; additional information regarding intimate relationships, education, employment, and a wide range of medical and psychosocial problems are reported in the companion article.⁸

Measures were taken to safeguard the confidentiality and welfare of subjects. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Subjects arranged an appointment for an interview by calling a designated phone number. A code number was assigned to each subject, and no additional identifying information was requested. Interviews were conducted in the offices of one of two youth-serving agencies. Before the interview, the general intent of the project was explained, and appropriate consent forms were signed. The average interview was one and one-half hours in duration. At the conclusion, participants received a small financial reimbursement. Those who requested or appeared to be in need of medical or mental health services were

given appropriate referrals. All interview data were obtained, recorded, and coded by the investigator. Responses of gay and bisexual subgroups were analyzed by the χ^2 test.

RESULTS

Definition of Homosexuality

As shown in Table 2, subjects were asked to define their sexualities. In summary, given the choice of "gay, bisexual, or heterosexual," 23 (79%) participants identified themselves as gay and six (21%) as bisexual. When additional response options such as "mostly homosexual" or "mostly heterosexual" were offered, all but one gay subject

TABLE 1. Sample Demographics

Demographic Variable	No. (N = 29)	%
Race		
White	26	90
Black	3	10
Religion		
Protestant	11	38
Catholic	7	24
Jewish	2	7
Atheist/agnostic	8	28
Other	1	3
Geographic distribution		
Urban	23	80
Suburban	3	10
Rural	3	10
Residence		
Parents' home	10	34
Other	19	66
Employed	20	69
Financially dependent on parents	15	52

TABLE 2. Sexual Preference of Homosexual and Bisexual Subjects

	Homosexual Subjects (n = 23)		Bisexual Subjects (n = 6)		P Value
	No.	%	No.	%	
Sexuality descriptor					
"100% homosexual"	12	52	0	0	.0001
"Mostly homosexual"	10	44	1	17	
"Bisexual"	1	4	5	83	
Past heterosexual experiences	12	52	3	50	NS
Past homosexual experiences	22	96	6	100	NS
Object of sexual fantasies					
Men	21	92	1	17	.0005
Women	0	0	0	0	
Both	1	4	4	66	
Neither	1	4	1	17	
Heterosexual interest rating					
Low	21	91	1	17	.0069
Intermediate	2	9	3	50	
High	0	0	2	33	
Homosexual interest rating					
Low	0	0	1	20	.0001
Intermediate	3	16	2	40	
High	16	84	2	40	

continued to describe themselves as “mostly” or “100% gay”; bisexual respondents selected the “bisexual” description. Gay and bisexual subgroups differed in sexual fantasies and in their subjective ratings of heterosexual and homosexual interest. Whereas the majority of bisexual individuals fantasized about and endorsed sexual interest in both men and women, most gay-identified subjects focused exclusively on men. The differences were statistically significant ($P < .05$). In contrast, the actual sexual behaviors of gay and bisexual subjects were similar. Of the total sample, all but one gay-identified subject had previous homosexual experiences, and approximately half of both gay and bisexual subjects reported previous heterosexual experiences.

All subjects were asked to discuss the meaning that they ascribed to homosexuality or “being gay.” Although five of 29 (17%) viewed homosexuality strictly as a sexual preference, six of 29 (21%) defined it as a more general “attraction to men”; eight of 29 (28%) specifically mentioned an “emotional” as well as a physical attraction. The remaining ten of 29 (34%) described homosexuality with positive attributes such as being more “self-accepting,” “open,” “individual,” or “strong.”

Acquiring a Homosexual Identity

Eight subjects (31%, $n = 26$) recalled an attraction to men during childhood (≤ 6 years of age). The remaining 18 (69%) became aware of these feelings in early to midadolescence (ages 11 to 16 years). Early attractions typically were directed toward friends or acquaintances, celebrities or magazine models, or strangers. As reflected in one subject’s response, these memories are often vague and impressionistic.

My first memory of being attracted to men was a dream I had when I was 6 or 7. I was in a bathtub with a man in the middle of the forest. I remember this was a happy dream for me, and I dreamt it over and over again for years.

For 27 subjects, the mean age at the time of gay

or bisexual self-identification was 14 years. Two others believed that they “always knew” they were gay. On average, 4.3 years had elapsed between the time of self-identification and participation in the study. Subjects’ responses to the question, “How did you come to realize that you are gay (or bisexual)?” are given in Table 3. Although some respondents came to this realization after sexual experiences with men or women, most did so because of persistent feelings or attractions.

The Experience of Homosexuality

Eighteen (62%) of the subjects had revealed their sexual orientations to their mothers, and two others believed their mothers knew, although the issue had not been openly discussed. Fewer subjects (10/29, 34%) believed that their fathers were informed. Only five had personally discussed sexual orientation with their fathers; five others explained that their mothers had informed their spouses.

The process of parental notification was typically painful for all parties involved. As one 19-year-old man described it:

Mom told me my father cried when she told him. I find it hard to believe. I’m not close to him. He felt I’m this way because I’m weak. We’ve only talked about it once—and he told me to get out of the house. I left, but I came back ‘cause I couldn’t make it on my own.

Of the total sample, only 21% (6/29) of mothers and 10% (3/29) of fathers responded or were expected to respond supportively. Almost twice as many mothers (10/29) and five times as many fathers (14/29) were believed to be entirely negative. The remaining parents were believed to be ambivalent, vacillating between acceptance and disapproval.

All but two subjects (93%) had revealed their sexual orientations to friends. Ninety percent (26/29) reported having at least one gay friend. However, 12 of 29 (41%) had lost at least one friend because of the issue of homosexuality. Ten of the 19 subjects (53%) who lived outside their families’ homes voiced concerns about potential negative

TABLE 3. Precipitants for Homosexual or Bisexual Self-Identification

Precipitant	Homosexual Subjects ($n = 23$)		Bisexual Subjects ($n = 6$)		Total Subjects ($n = 29$)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Persistent attraction to men	11	47	0	0	11	38
Persistent attraction to both men and women	0	0	4	66	4	14
Absent attraction to women	2	9	0	0	2	7
Sexual experiences with men	5	22	0	0	5	17
Sexual experiences with women	2	9	0	0	2	7
Identification with gay community	2	9	1	17	3	10
Miscellaneous or no response	1	4	1	17	2	7

reactions from roommates, including fear of physical reprisals in half the cases. Ten subjects (37%, $n = 27$) believed they had already been discriminated against in education, employment, or housing; eight (30%, $n = 27$) were victims of physical assaults, the so-called "gay bashings." Half of the assaults occurred on school property. In addition, 55% (16/29) reported regular verbal abuse from classmates. In contrast to problems in school, only one of 17 employed subjects reported sexuality-related difficulties in the work setting.

Adjustment to Sexual Orientation

In response to a question regarding the dynamics that predispose to homosexuality, 15 of 29 (52%) subjects implicated negative familial and environmental influences in early childhood. Others mentioned genetic influences, personal choice, and "it just is." No subjects discussed positive emotional or physical experiences as predisposing factors. Comparing themselves to male peers, half the subjects (15/29, 52%) viewed themselves as "less masculine" and only four as "more masculine." Thirty-four percent (10/29) believed that religious beliefs had affected their own attitudes toward homosexuality; seven of these described a loss of self-esteem or inner conflict as a consequence of perceived religious condemnation. Although all subjects were able to identify disadvantages attached to homosexuality, nine of 29 (31%) were unable to describe any advantages. Discrimination and the need to hide a homosexual identity were the most frequently cited problems. Eighty-one percent (22/27) of respondents believed that their sexual orientations would impact on their future lives. Half of these (11/22) envisioned specific negative consequences, whereas the remaining half spoke of general uncertainty about the future (3/22), positive impacts (2/22), both positive and negative consequences (2/22), and miscellaneous other implications (4/22).

In contrast to the above data, other responses suggested a higher degree of self-acceptance and personal satisfaction. Comparing heterosexual and homosexual life-styles, only 11 of 29 (38%) subjects acknowledged any differences beyond sexual orientation; eight of these (73%) attributed more positive qualities to gays such as self-awareness, strength, and understanding. Given the choice of making any changes in their sexualities, 15 of 29 (52%) refused any changes, expressing satisfaction with the status quo; four of 29 (14%) hoped for a steady male partner; and six of 29 (21%) wished to be heterosexual.

DISCUSSION

Adolescent homosexuality is a highly complex,

controversial, and emotionally charged subject. Despite widespread interest in the health of the gay community, the issues facing the youngest and, possibly, most vulnerable members of that community have not been adequately investigated. Adolescents' experiences with homosexuality may differ from adults' because of factors related to age, life experience, emotional and financial dependence, and the unique developmental tasks of adolescence. This study represents the first attempt to understand the meaning and experience of homosexuality exclusively from the perspective of male teenagers. Although the sample may not represent the concerns of gay and bisexual youths from other cultures, races, and socioeconomic strata, our intent is to highlight a number of general issues that may impact on the care of homosexually oriented teenagers.

The first step in understanding adolescent homosexuality is to acknowledge that it exists. Since the work of Kinsey et al⁹ in the 1940s, it has been well recognized that homosexual activity is prevalent among American men, and only a fraction of men who engage in such activity are predominantly homosexual. Although adolescence may be prime time for experimental or exploratory homosexual behavior, the data presented here do not support the blanket assumption that adolescent homosexuality is a passing phase on the road to adult heterosexuality.

This study demonstrates that homosexuality is a well-established sexual preference for certain adolescents. Spitzer¹⁰ has defined homosexuality as "a persistent pattern of homosexual arousal, but also a persistent pattern of absent or weak heterosexual arousal." Clearly, the gay-identified subjects in this study meet that criteria. For these individuals, sexual fantasies, subjective reporting of heterosexual and homosexual interests, and sexual behaviors are congruent and consistent with their homosexual identity. Their sexual identities seem to be stable over time, because an average of 4.3 years had elapsed between sexual identity labeling and participation in the study. No evidence was found that adolescents describe themselves as gay either casually or arbitrarily.

Our data indicate that the acquisition of a homosexual identity is a long process that begins with an initial recognition of homosexual feelings. Typically, these attractions are first noted in the period between early childhood and puberty. This observation is consistent with the findings of Saghir et al¹¹ that the majority of adult gay men have homosexual attachments or experiences by 15 years of age. It is the persistence of these attractions and/or their validation through sexual experimentation

with men or women that result in gay or bisexual self-identification. The mean age at that time is 14 years, identical with the age identified by Roesler and Deisher⁷ in their interviews with homosexually oriented adolescents and young adults.

For gay adolescents, homosexuality means more than sexual experiences with persons of the same gender. For the majority, it implies a more general attraction and affinity to other men; for some others, it is regarded as an indicator of positive qualities such as self-awareness and personal strength. Bisexual and homosexual subjects in our sample were not distinguishable on the basis of previous heterosexual and homosexual experiences, but the differences in their fantasies and the intensity of their attraction to men and women were significantly different. Whereas homosexual and bisexual individuals both reported attractions and sexual activity involving men, bisexual individuals reported an additional interest in women. Having identified their homosexual feelings, many adolescents share this information, or "come-out," to others. Select friends were more frequently informed than parents; mothers were more often notified than fathers. This sequence may reflect the adolescent's attempt to choose an empathetic audience. Despite these efforts, half of the subjects had lost friends and most had received negative or ambivalent responses from parents. Moreover, most subjects reported some form of verbal abuse, religious condemnation, physical brutality, discrimination, or rejection because of their sexual identities.

The adolescent's progression from recognizing homosexual feelings to "coming-out" parallels the adult stages of acquiring a homosexual identity as described by Troiden.¹¹ This investigator found that coming-out was followed by a final stage of

"acceptance" during which subjects were accepting of their homosexuality, unwilling to change it, and striving to develop intimate relationships. Many of our teenaged subjects had not yet achieved this level of acceptance. They viewed the future with trepidation or were experiencing a loss of self-esteem, masculinity, or spiritual worth. Future longitudinal studies will help clarify whether these feelings persist through adulthood. Because adolescence is a critical period in identity formation, we speculate that the young gay persons' adverse experiences may complicate and, possibly, impair their psychosocial development. Understanding the meaning and experience of homosexuality from the adolescents' perspective is a first step in promoting their physical and emotional health.

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