

Boy-on-Boy Sexuality

Ritch C. Savin-Williams

Sex between boys is sufficiently stigmatized in our culture as to be essentially ignored, subjected to misunderstanding, and stereotyped. Those who believe that such behavior does not exist frequently embrace antiquated assumptions that children are, or should be, sexless. Others acknowledge that a few boys may have sex with each other, although they dismissively attribute it simply to opportunistic play, rather than to consequential “sex.” To them, same-sex behavior during childhood and early adolescence is negligible for the boys’ future sexuality—and certainly should never be encouraged through open discussion. Others maintain the opposite—that it turns innocent boys away from heterosexuality to a life of promiscuous and dangerous homosexual sex (read: AIDS).

A slightly more enlightened view acknowledges that although some youths secretly participate in these unorthodox relationships for reasons beyond mere amusement, same-sex activities are customarily temporary and experimental. As noted developmental psychologist Eleanor Maccoby observed, although “a substantial number of people experiment with same-sex sexuality at some point in their lives,” only “a small minority settle into a life-long pattern of homosexuality.”¹ If true, then most same-sex encounters between boys are relatively insignificant, transitional encounters that are best disregarded. Absent from this discussion is the perspective that these boy-on-boy activities represent the expression of an enduring same-sex orientation that brings happiness, pleasurable gratification, and identity consolidation—an affirmation of a very important aspect of life.

Although some may deny that boy-on-boy sexual behavior takes place or believe that it is harmful and must be prevented, these views ignore developmental research and are not based on the real life experiences of children and adolescents. For example, one of the best predictors of adult homosexuality is child and adolescent same-sex sexual activity, suggesting its early origins.² Gay and bisexual young men frequently and vividly recall their first same-sex encounter and attribute immense significance to it for their developing identity, sexuality, and intimate relationships.³ Furthermore, child and adolescent same-sex behavior occurs across the spectrum of sexual orientations and, as such, it likely impacts many more youths than those who eventually identify as gay or bisexual. Given the general cultural directive that such behavior should remain stigmatized, boys who engage in same-sex behavior might well be adversely affected by these negative views. This may be particularly true for boys who, in addition to participating in same-sex behavior, experience a preponderance of same-sex attractions and desires.

Boys are led, in this culture, to believe that their homoerotic attractions and longings for sex with other boys will diminish or evaporate once girls become available during adolescence. For some boys with transitional homoerotic desires and behaviors, this may be true, while for many others this sexuality is a central aspect of who they are. Whether these youths identify as gay or whether they engage in sex with other boys, their same-sex attachments are enduring. Parental and cultural proscriptions can shame, delay, or squelch these feelings—but they cannot extinguish them. Internal motivations to satisfy homoerotic desires often far exceed external prohibitions against them.

The exact number of boys who either identify as gay or simply engage in sex with other boys is almost impossible to determine, although it is certainly far more than the 1% to 3% who report they are gay or bisexual on representative, anonymous surveys of junior and senior high school students.⁴ In fact, only a minority of teenage boys with same-sex attractions or fantasies reports that they are gay or bisexual or that they engage in sex with boys.⁵ That males are more likely to experience same-sex attractions than they are to identify as a sexual minority is reflected in a recent national sex survey. Ten percent of all men reported at least one aspect of “adult same-gender sexuality.” Of these men, nearly half found sex with another male appealing or were sexually attracted to males, but had no sexual experience with a male and identified as *heterosexual*. One quarter self-identified as heterosexual, had engaged in sex with a male, and re-

ported no sexual attractions to males. The final quarter of men had a convergence of same-sex desire, behavior, and identity.⁶ Similarly, in a recent study of college students, 5% of men self-identified as gay or bisexual. However, twice as many reported that they are mostly sexually attracted to males, and twice that number—nearly 20%—did not strongly disagree that they had sexual attractions to men.⁷

To fully account for the discrepancies in the domains of a boy's sexuality, far more than a chapter is needed. Nevertheless, using data first reported in my book, "*. . . and then I became gay.*" *Young men's stories*,⁸ my goal here is to broaden an understanding of boys' lives through the narratives of young men who describe not just the who-what-where-when of their first same-sex encounters but also the *meanings* of these initial contacts.

The Study

Eighty-six young men between the ages of 17 and 25 were interviewed for the study. An age ceiling of 25 years was established to minimize the time lag between the experience of developmental events and their recall during the end of adolescence and the beginning of young adulthood. Young men were recruited through announcements in local university classes and flyers posted on campus bulletin boards and relevant public establishments (local bar, bookstore, cafe). Advertisements appeared in local gay newsletters and internet listservs.

Youths were, for the most part, articulate, educated college students who elected to participate in research described as attempting to understand the ways in which young men with same-sex attractions come to recognize their sexual identity during childhood and adolescence. At the time of the interview, 83% identified themselves as gay, 7% as bisexual, 5% as unlabeled, 5% as bi-gay, and 1% as questioning. These youths are not presented as necessarily representative of all youths with same-sex attractions. The sample included 13% Latino, 8% African American, 6% Asian American, and 2% Native American Indian youths. Few youths who were closeted to themselves or to others volunteered for the study. Those with diverse educational, socioeconomic, and geographical backgrounds were also inadequately sampled. As with other interview studies, nonverbally oriented and shy youths were also likely under-represented in the study.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a time and place of the youths' choosing and used a semi-structured interview protocol. Confidentiality was assured and consent for participation was secured. Tape recorders were considered too intrusive for the material requested, so verbatim notes were taken as the youths spoke. Youths were sensitive to this approach, pausing when the interviewer fell behind in note taking. These notes were immediately transcribed. Youths appeared comfortable with these arrangements and were willing to refer friends to the study.

Although questions about sexual development ranged from first memories of feeling different to the consolidation of a sexual identity, of interest for this chapter is one significant aspect of the developmental process—first sexual experience with another male. Sex was defined as genital contact on the part of one or both partners. To increase the probability of eliciting true memories, youths were encouraged at appropriate moments during the narratives to relate *specific* memories of their first same-sex experience and to anchor them in concurrent life events. Typical probes included: How old were both of you? Who was this person to you? Where did you meet? Who initiated the interaction and why? Where did this occur? What happened, sexually? How did you feel afterwards? How did this affect your sexual identity? Were there further contacts? For the most part, youths remembered exact markers and these details enhance their stories' credibility.

Context of the First Sexual Experience

At the time of the interview, slightly over half of the 86 young men had had sex with both a male and a female. Of those with at least one sexual experience, 84% first had sex with a boy. Six of the young men reported that they were "complete" virgins—no genital contact with a male or female—and two had had sex with a female but not a male. The average age of first sex with a boy was 14.3 years, considerably before first sex with a girl at age 15.7 years.

Of the developmental milestones assessed, none varied as widely as the age of first same-sex sexual experience. It could be as early as age 5 or as late as after 25—if the virgins in the study eventually have sex. Of the 86 young men, 54 (63%) had their first sexual experience during boyhood—before high school graduation. It is these 54 boys who are the focus of this chapter.

Age

Forty-three percent of the 54 youths had a prepubertal sexual experience with another male. The others reported first sexual contact during junior (30%) or senior (28%) high school. The average age of the first male partner was 14.2 years, slightly more than 2 years older than the interviewee was at the time of the experience. However, eliminating the five oldest partners resulted in an average age of first partner that was just slightly above that of the interviewee at the time of the encounter. In 76% of cases, youths had first sex with a peer within 2 years of their age. In 6 of the 54 pairings the boy was older than his first partner, although in no situation was he more than 2 years older. Of the 13 dyads in which more than 2 years separated the partners, 6 dyads were more than 5 years apart in age. A pubertal difference likely characterized three dyads.

One such pairing was 11-year-old David and his 15-year-old friend, Akiva, a friend of a friend. They first saw each other at Hebrew school and were immediately attracted to each other. The younger of two boys raised in a family that relocated from country to country because of his father's occupation, David had been called a "fag" since age 5. By age 9, he watched the men rather than the women in XXX movies, by 11 he bought male pornography "for" his female friends, by 12 he routinely had sex with other boys at his gym, and by 13 he came out to his parents. His first sexual experience was with Akiva.

He sort of initiated the whole thing. At the present time Akiva has no clue of what he is but he certainly is very flamboyant. He came over with my friend to swim in our pool and in the process of changing clothes I noticed that he kept looking at me. My friend then left to go home and we were left alone. We were in my room and he said that he didn't know how to masturbate and so he asked me to show him, so I did him. He added if I would do a blowjob. I didn't give that to him but, of course, I wished I did afterwards. Neither of us really came and I was fully dressed the whole time.

The largest age difference was one pairing in which more than 30 years separated the two. A college junior at the time of the interview, Josh described his background as an "urban cafeteria Catholic." Josh's parents supported three children with blue-collar jobs in maintenance and transportation. Fascinated at age 11 by an advertisement for an all-male theatre

cast, wrestling magazines, and televised football games, Josh identified as bisexual just before high school graduation and disclosed this information to a best friend during his college freshman year, and to his parents a year later. But during adolescence he struggled with the meaning of his same-sex attractions before he concluded it was “time” for him to have sex if he were truly going to be gay.

Fifteen years old and he was 45. Oral sex. I met him at a gay theater. I came out thinking, finally I did it! I did it! I guess this is what is supposed to happen. I was nervous but I had a fake ID to get in. Looking back it made me feel really cheap. I didn't like it because of the circumstances. Not dirty, but it made it difficult to accept the whole gay thing until I fell in love in college.

I've always liked older men and younger women. My first lover in college was 23. Probably the best kisser in my whole life! I can't tell you I'm disgusted with old men. I find them hot—well, maybe not over 45. He looked much younger in the dim lights of the theater!

Josh now identifies as gay and is involved in a long-distance relationship with a 30-year-old man he met while visiting his parents over the Christmas holidays.

The Partner

The first sexual partner was usually (70%) a friend—most often a best friend—from the neighborhood or school with whom the boy interacted on a daily basis. The first partner could also be a complete stranger (15%) or a family member (15%). No one had his first sexual experience with someone he was currently dating.

Two 9-year-olds playing truth-or-dare after practicing for their class Christmas play typify the common pattern of a friend being the first partner. “He kept showing me more and more of himself until he was finally naked. He finally said he dared me to touch him and I said ‘don't be a faggot,’ but I eventually did. I wished I had done more! Eventually I did because we did this every chance we got during the next 2 years.”

Steven, a graduate student in engineering, also had first sex with a best friend 10 years earlier. Not out about his sexuality to his immediate or extended family, Steven was raised an only child in an upper-middle-class white, Protestant home on the West Coast. Aware of his attractions to boys

since the fourth grade, Steven's first sexual experience several years later proved quite rewarding.

We were both 13 and he was my best friend. We were sitting on my bed reading comic books and I started playing with his foot and he reciprocated. Neither of us came the first time, but he did the second. I masturbated to orgasm right after, however. So, just playing around having fun but there was some sense that what we were doing we were not supposed to do, but it was just so much fun. We did it a couple of more times that summer and from then on once or twice a year, and the last time that we did it we were seniors in high school. He is now married.

Finding romantic relationships during his conservative, private undergraduate college years proved unsuccessful. Now, Steven wants to be "monogamously married to a man in a suit and tie and with a Labrador retriever."

The initial partner could also be someone a youth had not met prior to their sexual activities. In these cases, he was often older than the youth. Josh's experience at the gay theater is one such example. These strangers were discovered in the neighborhood or at a gay organization, club, support group, or bar. Other meeting places included a shopping mall, bathroom, theater, church youth group, school club, summer camp, and athletic locker room.

Against the wishes of his father, Curt attended a music camp for gifted African American youths. Long regarded by his father as insufficiently masculine, Curt had always known that he was "interested in sex with boys." Recognizing his bisexuality prior to his first sexual experience, Curt was out to his mother, who once labeled someone with same-sex attractions as "a very horrible sick person who was perverted, a child molester, subhuman," but not to his father, who embraced similar views.

I guess actually my first time was when I was 15 and at music camp. I'm not sure what this other guy is even today and he writes to me and said that he's had no sex at all since that time, but I think he must be leaning towards the gay side. Both of us were very curious. There was a hetero porn magazine that had been passed around from room to room and finally we had it. I think that maybe my gaydar was working even then because I somehow felt that he would be open to suggestion. So I suggested that we masturbate together. He didn't really want to but I did and he watched. The next night we

did it together, both of us masturbating separately. Then by the third night we began to fondle each other and then we had oral sex, which we did for the next 3 weeks, every night.

At the time of the interview, Curt was involved in a lingering, ill-defined romance with a fellow college freshman. After 3 months they ended their romantic relationship but have maintained the friendship and periodic sexual relations.

First-time sex partners could also be family members, usually a cousin but occasionally a brother. Two 6-year-old cousins were playing doctor

with hard-ons and we took every chance to feel each other. Started basically petting each other, fondling each other's genitals. I was fascinated by the event. He initiated and I just went along. I had no idea about how he felt about the situation. I really didn't think it had any significance because we were just playing.

Growing up in south Florida, Catholic, and the only male child, Jose became aware very early that his attractions were directed toward males. For many years he assumed that it was just a phase but "this homosexual thing just wouldn't end!" He never dated girls and always felt different from his peers. Sex with his cousin Tony was one of his fondest childhood memories.

I know that I was playing doctor at age 8 with my male cousin Tony, who was then 10. We made minor attempts at mimicking intercourse and I know that one time my mother caught us and said that it was wrong, but she didn't seem to get real angry. By age 13 we were still doing it.

Later, in my house and my parents were gone at the time, we'd go out to the swimming pool and masturbate ourselves in the same room. I suggested at one point that we do something else and he agreed, so we tried out oral sex. We both came when we manually did each other.

It was not until his senior year in college that Jose self-identified as gay. He still has not come out to his mother, although she frequently asks probing and suspicious questions about his "male friends."

After initial sexual activities, most boys remained friends (72%), with half of the strangers becoming either friends or romantic partners. Most

first-time same-sex encounters were experienced as positive, perhaps in large part because most were with best friends and were chosen rather than forced activities.

Motivations for the First Sexual Experience

Recollecting the reason for engaging in their first sexual experience proved challenging for many of the young men. They remembered that at the time their “excuse” was that they were having sex *primarily* because of curiosity or experimentation. However, many also recalled that they were more “into it” than their partner, and this greater enjoyment made it difficult to deny that they were participating out of lust or desire for sexual pleasure. Indeed, these two—curiosity and lust—inspired nearly 90% of all first sexual contacts. Only a few boys reported that their first sexual experience was motivated by a perceived obligation to their partner. Conspicuously absent were motives attributed to love or the alleviation of their virginity status.

Growing up Brazilian, Julio knew from an early age that neither his culture nor his Catholicism approved of his sexuality. Currently a high school senior, Julio first came out to his best friend in tenth grade. “I told him that I have fantasies about other men. I was very indirect initially but as we talked over the next couple of days I finally told him that I’m gay and he said that was fine with him.” Julio is out to both parents, who are okay with it as long as “I love God and God loves me.” Julio traced his first awareness of his same-sex sexuality to the sixth grade. Initially he was simply curious about his friends’ activities, but he also noted that he had a “strange fascination” and a “compulsion” to participate in their games.

The bunch of us who were about the same age and I heard several of the guys were sort of really into showing off their bodies. I found out about this, so on a campout I made sure that we sort of always ran around naked, and it was a particular boy. We had regular sexual contact and this is before puberty. It would involve some fondling and kissing, and it would never go to orgasm. I knew I loved it but I had no name for it, and this is sort of how I got to know all about sex education.

Not unlike many boys, 11-year-old Jack assumed that what he and his friend Sam were doing was similar to what most boys do to have fun. His liberal parents always affirmed sex, teaching him about sexual matters

throughout his childhood. They did not, however, talk about sex between boys. Realizing that he enjoyed their “experiment” more than Sam did, Jack concluded that his motives might have a distinct basis. Soon after these sexual activities ended during adolescence, Jack came out first to himself and then to the girl he was dating.

I know that he did not like it as much as I did. This one time that we got most active, neither one of us came. It was just that we did it for fun and neither one of us was particularly upset with it. We both knew that we still liked girls and we just assumed that all boys liked to do what we were doing. We sort of believed that what we were doing only existed in our minds. Kind of strange in a way because last week I was in this boy’s wedding and I sort of felt like saying to everyone, “I remember when we did it; I had him first!”

A variety of boyhood sexual activities emerged from these child and early adolescent sex-play activities with friends and cousins that were motivated by curiosity and the desire to have fun, to experiment with their bodies, and to satisfy erotic desires.

Activities of the First Sexual Experience

The youth in the study perceived that the premiere sexual contact was usually initiated by the partner (50%) or was mutually initiated (20%). Orgasms were optional, achieved in one-third of initial sexual experiences. The low rate was due in large part to the prepubertal status of many youths and to the somewhat awkward or nervous circumstances of many sexual encounters. Sex with a first partner was occasionally a singular event but most often was an act repeated many times over several years. The initial contact frequently occurred in the home of one of the partners.

The most common sexual activities were mutual fondling (35%) and masturbation (35%). Oral sex (20%) was a distant third. Kissing was rare (2%), as was anal sex (9%). One youth noted that as 12-year-olds, he and his best friend did everything, but, “only sex. No kissing. He didn’t want kissing.” He and several other youths stated that kissing was too intimate, too indicative of the meaning that gay sex might have. Mouth-to-penis contact with your best friend was just having fun, but mouth-to-mouth contact stepped across a boundary into new territory—implying an identity or a lifestyle. At the time, Julio accepted without question the limita-

tions imposed by his friends surrounding what constituted acceptable behavior.

Another game we played was truth-or-dare. In one situation one of the dares was to become naked and we began touching each other, acting out heterosexual scenes, mutual masturbation, posing, and modeling. One boy said that there could be no sucking or fucking and so we didn't.

It was just one of those things that we kids did. Sometimes we did contests of how fast one could reach orgasm and also how much. At the time I couldn't orgasm to ejaculation but there was this one guy who was 1 year older who was very well developed and he taught us all about it. This is how I found out about liquid orgasm.

Later, Julio realized that to have done what they did during games of truth or dare would have implied greater meaning. "As long as this was as far as it went then we couldn't be gay. Gays did things with orifices."

In the evolution of a relationship that began when both boys were 11-year-olds, Jack and his friend Sam's first sexual encounter did not include oral sex. Oral sex did, however, eventually become a central aspect of their sexual activities.

We sort of spent time sleeping over at each other's houses and on this one occasion we slept in tents in his backyard. We were talking about girls, as we usually do, and then at some point we began to play strip poker and we would take flashlights and look at each other, very discreetly at first. That then evolved to we would lie on top of each other and read sort of racy kinds of things to each other. This is all, of course, heterosexual stuff. Then the next step was that we began to sort of rub together, you know, sort of rub each other's back while on top of each other naked. We never kissed.

At some point we didn't know what else to do and we had heard from other boys about sucking. We didn't know exactly what was supposed to happen or what we were supposed to do, but we did have a rule that we agreed that neither one of us would pee in the other's mouth.

Two early adolescents experimented in their private school, attempting "anal sex but it wasn't successful because we didn't know how." A pair of 13-year-olds explored each other's bodies very closely after a Boy Scout

meeting. "We did it twice in his room in his house, oral and anal. It was a good feeling."

Evaluation of the First Sexual Experience

In retrospect, the maiden journey was evaluated as "good" or "great" by 44 of the 54 youths, primarily because it fulfilled curiosity and lustful desires. When the sex was evaluated negatively, it was not due to the age or status of the partner or to the particular sexual behavior that occurred, but to the possible *meaning* of the sexual behavior. However, few youths expressed worry about the possibility of acquiring HIV.

When he was 16 years old, one youth reportedly experienced ecstasy after his first sexual experience. "I remember being nervous. Couldn't stop shaking, excited, but scared to death. Odd sensation feeling someone else. Never thought what it would be like. Took me by surprise. I was aware of my attractions before this but never acted on them." Although "everyone was doing it," several youths remembered that they were more "into" it than were their male partners. "I remember that I really enjoyed it. . . . This was before either one of us could even ejaculate and I remember that he kept on pulling on my penis and that it hurt. I told him it hurt but I wanted him to continue." Sometimes the partner wanted to curtail the sexual activities, much to the disconcertment of the interviewed youth. "Then when we got home he lost interest because he didn't want to do it anymore but I did. It was clearly more than just an experiment for me." Recognizing the precariousness of his sexual relations, Julio understood that he "couldn't show I liked it too much because then it would stop."

Although sex was perceived as great, fear of negative reprisals occasionally punctured the magical aura, causing some boys to feel guilt, shame, and anxiety. Early adolescents appeared particularly prone to guilt, prompting some formerly nonreligious youths to seek forgiveness from God. One junior high school boy wanted to join a neighborhood friendship group but first had to pass a ritual about which he was ambivalent. "The older guys built a fort and membership was we had to masturbate in front of them. I dropped my pants and came in a couple of strokes. They clapped, gave me a card, and taught me the motto. I should have felt great but I was extremely guilty about it after it happened. I prayed all night, confessed the next morning, and went to mass. I wasn't really religious before that."

Jose also recalled experiencing shame, which he termed his "Catholic guilt." Throughout the many years of sex with his cousin, Jose's adolescent

enthusiasm was tempered by the knowledge that not all Catholics perceived his activities as morally acceptable.

I felt guilty that I had done something wrong and I felt that we should go to confession. I know that I felt guilty because I would take these very long showers and I would brush my teeth. I knew that he and I were doing it for different reasons, him because it was sort of physical and sexual and me for different reasons. It meant more. I sensed something was wrong but once again I just told myself that it was just a phase. This is actually my mother's cousin. I still thought of myself as straight at this time.

Other youths, often as children, expressed a fear of getting caught and being punished by parents. One youth was part of a neighborhood gang that found sex a fun way to pass the hot summer days. Sex was not wrong, unless one was caught.

We would put towels over the windows and then we would take our clothes off. We would masturbate each other as sort of play and we would get erections. I certainly remember having a lot of interest in this activity but I also remember that I didn't want to get caught with this kind of fun and play.

On the whole, however, a boy's first sexual experience was recalled as a "beautiful awakening," "ecstatic," and a "culmination of my sexual desires." When sex was characterized as an unpleasant experience, youths believed it was due to outside forces (parents, religion) condemning boy-on-boy sex. Childhood fears of getting caught merged into adolescent reservations about the consequences or *meaning* of the sexual behavior.

Meaning of the First Sexual Experience

Sexual activities were often experienced and interpreted in diverse ways depending on when they occurred during the life course.

CHILDHOOD

First sex prior to puberty typically incorporated same-age buddies or cousins and involved genital fondling and mutual masturbation. Youths were usually enthralled by these sexual encounters, committed to continuing them as long as possible, and convinced that sex had little significance beyond that of a whimsical, frolicking diversion. On reflection, the young

men believed that childhood sex did not make them gay; it was simply an experiment or a desire for personal pleasure. The sexual orientation of the first partner was a matter of some speculation, with many doubting that he was totally straight.

Adrian's sexual history reflected several of these characteristics. Raised in a small Georgia town with three older siblings and his mother's parents, Adrian described his mother as a "very Donna Reed type" and his father as "I have no idea what he does, but he prepares market reports." Once he disclosed to his best friend, she "jumped up and down and hugged me." His siblings and parents were less thrilled, turning "red [mother], white [father], and blue [brother]." Adrian's first sexual experience was with his fifth-grade cousin. They "whacked off together in the same room under the sheets, but we didn't touch each other." At the time, it bore no meaning other than "Southern comfort." Adrian noted that they "fooled around" because it was "something that was fun and just something that we did, but this wasn't gay."

Few of these prepubertal boys understood the concept of "gayness" as an identity or a lifetime commitment. It would be several years, sometimes many years, before the boys associated early sex with adult sexual identity. However, despite the equation of first sex with physical pleasure, most boys were also aware that their sexual activities were "wrong" or "bad." This they knew because if parents discovered their activities, they would be punished.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE

The onset of puberty motivated boys to physically and mentally explore what they desired but had not acted upon. Although childhood sexual activity was often frivolous, except when it elicited fears of exposure and punishment, and was seldom interpreted as "homosexual," early adolescents with their developing cognitive abilities began to link sexual attractions with cultural definitions of sexual identities. This in turn created concern or worry about the *meaning* of their first sexual encounter. Several youths understood the connection between their desires and activities, identified as a sexual minority, and shared this information with others. Many more, however, did not.

During early adolescence, more "serious" forms of sexual behavior emerged, including anal activity. The partner was still primarily a friend, orgasms were more common, and sexual experiences were sought to satisfy lustful desires. In addition to increasing pleasure, orgasms could also

generate guilt and shame, attenuating the resiliency of psychological defenses intended to deny or suppress the meaning of sexual activities. Although *being* gay was a burdensome reality against which they fought, the recognition that they were more “into it” than were their partners suggested to them that their *behavior* might be gay, with potent subsequent inferences for their identity and peer standing. Clearly, sex was more than a capricious, random event for many of these early adolescents.

The usual defense of an early adolescent to protect himself from understanding the implications of his first same-sex activity was to deny that it meant anything. One pair maintained their heterosexuality by saying to each other, “If you were a woman I would do this to you. Then we’d try to put it up the other’s butt or suck on the other’s nipple.” Another defense was to intellectually minimize the act. After sex with his 12-year-old best friend, one youth recalled, “At the time I washed over it as much as I could, to make little of it as much as I could. At the time I avoided seeing it as being gay. It didn’t have anything to do with myself being gay.” Gradually, these and other defenses began to crumble.

Perhaps because of these internal conflicts about whether sex had implications beyond mere physiological arousal, more so than at any other age, first sexual experiences at early adolescence were evaluated as less positive. For example, the first encounter of the two 13-year-old Boy Scouts who became aware of each other’s proclivities while peeing side-by-side after a meeting, was passionate and included oral and anal sex. The “good feeling” was diminished, however, by another concern. “Even then, the first time, I began to worry about what this meant. I knew what gay was and I couldn’t be that.”

By contrast, two early adolescents reported that the initial sexual encounter helped them *affirm* a gay identity or to disclose this fact to others. One boy realized that “by doing it with him I was saying goodbye forever to being straight, sort of a rite of passage. I was very nervous but I knew it was the right thing.” For other youths, this clarity was achieved as same-sex experiences accumulated over time. After 2 years of sex with his 12-year-old neighborhood friend, a young man recalled, “This didn’t make me gay because I already was, but it did make my sexual identity more concrete.”

Interpretations of differences in meaning that distinguished boys who experienced sex with another boy during prepuberty from those who experienced it during early adolescence were also evident over time within

individuals. For example, by early adolescence, Adrian was regularly “whacking off” in the basement with his best friend, Paul. Whereas in childhood his behavior had little meaning, by early adolescence its significance was becoming increasingly apparent.

Paul and me talked a lot and then we whacked off in our separate beds. We did this at first in the dark but then we began shining flashlights on each other’s dicks. On the third time, we put our hands on each other and we tossed each other off. This felt much better than when I did it by myself. We then went to blowjobs and this continued for about 2 years, every couple of weeks.

We wanted to consider it as just experimenting, but I know we had our doubts. We both decided that no, this did not mean that we were gay. We were just exploring. I don’t think either of us really believed this. He is now very closeted but I think he is gay. Later we would have phone sex.

Julio, as well, appreciated shortly after pubertal onset that sex with friends and his intense interest in male-male sexual activities meant something about a gay identity.

I knew that this was on the path that I wanted and I knew that I was on it. I knew that others could sort of experience what I was and I knew that other people would think of it as being disgusting. I knew also that I always wanted to do more than other guys wanted to do except, of course, for this one guy.

Yet, Julio was also conflicted, similar to other early adolescents. He “was comfortable with my gay feelings but I didn’t want to take on the identity. I didn’t want to be a transvestite or a male prostitute because that was my image of what a gay person was. I didn’t want to be a woman.”

Puberty intensified the *possibilities of eroticism* by fashioning meaning to nascent sexual feelings present since childhood. The physical and emotional pleasure of desired sexual encounters could be exhilarating and reassuring, providing substance and understanding to that which was previously murky, or it could be noxious and threatening, reminding a boy of societal censure of his same-sex attractions. This duality, the onset of puberty crystallizing both exciting and frightening erotic possibilities, brought into sharp relief the nature of a boy’s sexual desires. Relatively few, however, were inspired by their first boy-on-boy sex to proclaim, ei-

ther privately to themselves or publicly to friends and family, their sexual identity. Perhaps with additional peer and family support and considerably less cultural negativity toward sexual minorities, the outcome would have been different.

ADOLESCENCE

For those who first engaged in same-sex sexual activities during high school, several striking characteristics were apparent. First, sex partners were less likely to be presumed heterosexual friends and family members and more likely to be strangers and gay friends. They often met in chance encounters in public places, thus increasing the likelihood of having only a single contact. Instigation of the sexual contact and orgasms were now more likely to be shared by both partners.

By adolescence proper, sexual contact increasingly implied to youths that their behavior had meaning for their sexual identity. It was less that high school students feared getting caught (childhood) or felt guilt or shame about their sexual activities (early adolescence). Rather, it confirmed that which they could not imagine during childhood, were terrified of and suppressed during early adolescence, and would come to accept during late adolescence and young adulthood. When superimposed upon known prohibitions against homoerotic desires, most adolescents recognized that their behavior was gay, although some held out a dwindling hope that sex with another boy did not necessarily mean that *they* as individuals were gay. After his initial sexual encounter with another male, one teen became emotionally upset because "This meant I was gay and thus I would become a fit target for all those gay jokes." Rather than being upset by this sexual revelation, another youth was relieved because "speculation and confusion" about his sexual inclinations had ended. He referred to his first sex as a "rite of passage by which I gained clarity about what was previously an abstraction." He had now been initiated into "gay life." For three youths, the significance of initial sexual experiences was heightened when they recognized romantic longings. Once this occurred, the implications of same-sex attractions became overwhelmingly poignant—an underlying gay predisposition.

Clarity, confirmation, and initiation into a gay life were enhanced if the first sexual experience occurred outside a youth's friendship network. In these more anonymous settings, a teen could test his sexuality, not among friends who might turn on him or not appreciate his struggles, but with a safe stranger within the context of a one-time act. If it did not work out,

then he could always return to his former life without friends or family knowing about his experiment. The first partner's older age also served this purpose—someone more experienced and certain of his sexuality might better provide the acid test for a youth's uncertain gay sexuality. One such youth noted, "It was a really wonderful experience because he was so patient and gentle. I discovered it really was a confirmation, a solidification of who I am."

Brian visited one of the nation's gay meccas with the expressed intent of fortifying his same-sex sexuality and initiating himself into gay life. Raised the oldest of three children on a Northwest ranch, Brian's parents were officials of their tribal nation. Without the strictures of Western religion to hinder him, Brian most feared disappointing his Native American Indian elders. Desiring closeness with other boys since age 5 and realizing at 14 that his homoerotic feelings were not transitory, Brian tested whether his fantasies for boys would remain gratifying when expressed behaviorally.

The first sexual occasion occurred when I went to San Francisco. This was when I was 15 years old. I was still very closeted. I saw advertised a gay film festival. And so I went with the purpose of trying to find other gay people. There was this one guy who was my age, so I went over to him and initiated a conversation. We went back to his place and we did mutual masturbation. This over the summer of my sophomore year in high school. He was also 15. He had been adopted by a lesbian couple, so he was very out. I felt that I could do it because it would be very anonymous and away from my home. We still actually have contact with each other. It felt very good. Later some guilt would set in. But he showed me the gay discos and the gay clubs.

Another youth used sex with a man to clarify his bisexuality. He dated several girls during high school and had sex with all of them. However, he was at a loss about what to do with his "homosexual tendencies." Finding no trusted and understanding male sex partners at his suburban high school, he searched an alternative newspaper in a nearby city to discover the hang-outs of gay men. After having anonymous sex, he concluded, "I knew I wasn't as sexually attracted to females as I wanted to be, but I loved being with them. And I knew how they made me feel, but they didn't make me feel what I wanted to feel when I was having sex with this guy."

Youths who initiated sex during their high school years were least likely to claim that these sexual activities had "no effect" on their sexuality. By

this age, most knew what gay was and that sex with another male was one clear indication of being gay. Perhaps as well, by adolescence the sexual desires of most boys were so strong and so clearly oriented toward other boys that the meaning of their attractions could no longer be ignored. After sex, relatively few teens continued to profess heterosexuality. The purpose of the first sexual experience was thus less to engage in fun (childhood), lust (early adolescence), or romance (more of a young adult goal), but to clarify their sexuality, sometimes within the context of the anonymity of a singular, discrete event.

Effects of the First Sexual Experience on Sexual Orientation

Almost without exception, the young men reported that their initial sexual encounter did not make them gay. Over 70% evaluated the effect of boy-on-boy sex on their *sexual orientation* as “none.” After recalling his first sexual experience, one young man explained, “This had no real impact on my sexual identity [orientation] because whatever caused me to be the way I am happened before this time.” The other youths believed that their first time suggested to them that they might be, but did not *make* them, gay or bisexual. The awareness that they were not to blame for their sexual orientation often helped youths to come out earlier than those who believed that they were “damaged” by their behavior.

Only one youth, Wai, entertained the possibility that his initial sexual experience made him gay. Born in Hong Kong and raised with an older sister until he left home for a private school in Chicago, Wai recalled that shortly after pubertal onset, “I began to explore the whole issue of my sexuality. I was trying to make myself like girls but it just wouldn’t work. I didn’t go out on any dates [with girls] even though I kept thinking I ought to.” Two months before the interview, Wai first disclosed to a friend. His first sexual experience 5 years earlier had turned his life around.

We were 14, classmates, and we were talking on the phone and the conversation just sort of led to sex. I finally initiated the sex talk and just said why don’t we do it and he agreed very readily. So, I went to his house and I was very shy. I didn’t take off any of my clothes. He on the other hand came to the door naked. We hugged and kissed and felt each other. There was no orgasm the first time but he did teach me later how to masturbate.

I liked the feeling and I wanted to do it again and he said okay as soon as possible. Maybe this was the experience that made me gay. Maybe if the first person had been a female I would be straight today. Maybe I just wanted sex and because the first one was with a guy, this made me gay. It's what I thought then and sometimes I still think that now. It's not a problem because I like being gay and in the next life I'd like to be gay again.

Born of lust or disinterest, carefully orchestrated or a chance encounter, life altering or forgettable, the first sexual act was typically perceived as having no effect on a youth's sexual orientation. Rather, it constituted his sex education, helped him disclose his homosexuality to others, or corroborated that which he knew or suspected about his sexuality.

Discussion

Far too little is known or appreciated about the first sexual activities of boys with other boys. I believe suppression of public discourse and research on boy-on-boy sexuality is detrimental to the lives of boys of all sexualities. One example of how collective proscriptions against same-sex sexuality affect more than sexual-minority youths is the observation that most boys who are called "faggot" or "gay" are not truly gay in their sexual orientation, yet they suffer from societal damaging judgments and stereotypes of homosexuality. One such group may be boys for whom same-sex sexual encounters are experimental or opportunistic with seemingly little meaning or predictive power about their sexual orientation or sexual identity. Although heterosexual, they may be shamed by their behavior and made to feel inadequate, immoral, or inferior. The resulting psychic pain may turn to anger, the expression of which may be directed toward those they perceive as the truly "guilty" ones—boys who are most feminine in their behavior, personality, and interests. If they can reveal the *true villains*—the real "faggots"—then perhaps they can sufficiently divert the "heat" from themselves.

For other boys, however, same-sex desires and behaviors represent a central core of who they are. Some of these individuals will eventually identify as gay, bisexual, or a sexual minority, and participate in gay culture. To negate or misinterpret their feelings and needs can create unnecessary pain and shame that hinder their development of a vibrant, authentic sense of self. Similar to all youths, boys with same-sex attractions re-

quire affirmation that they are acceptable to family and friends. If they fear that their same-sex attractions may preclude them from this acceptance, they may become the boys who, despite childhood and adolescent same-sex behavior, decide that they *cannot be gay* and thus elect to blend into the fabric of American culture as heterosexual young men, with a secret. Little is known about how their lives are changed by their sexual experiences. Perhaps they are “liberals” who sublimate their homoeroticism by working for social justice for sexual minorities; or, perhaps, they are the violent victimizers of gay people, those most threatened and thus homophobic and recalcitrant for maintaining the oppression of sexual minorities. In either case, their inability or unwillingness to connect their sexual and intimate selves likely extracts a great sacrifice. Yes, they appear “normal,” but in the process they lose an essential aspect of who they are.

To the extent that alternatives to heterosexuality are misrepresented, myths flourish, stigma abounds, and those who by their very nature are sexually unconventional are condemned. Few individuals concerned with the well-being of youths would advocate that being thus marginalized, especially during the vulnerable years of childhood and adolescence, is desirable. When oppression is unavoidable, survival is greatly enhanced by considerable personal and social support to counter normalization pressures. Although increased cultural visibility has recently been afforded to many aspects of sexual minorities’ lives that offset these damaging stereotypes, normalize nonheterosexuality, and provide resources and support, we have been strikingly silent about the particulars of one aspect of their lives—their sexuality. The exception to this silence about boy-on-boy sexuality is the risk it represents for sexual diseases. We sometimes forget, however, that the very behaviors that can result in HIV infection can also lead to love, happiness, fulfillment, and identity integration and consolidation. These, too, deserve our attention. Whether same-sex behavior is a harbinger of curiosity, lust, sexual identity, or intimacy, we should seek to understand and appreciate it among our young.

NOTES

1. Page 191 in Maccoby’s 1998 book, *The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press). No empirical support is given to substantiate either how many people experiment with same-sex sexuality or, of these cases, how many reflect a temporary versus a permanent sexual orientation.

2. The earliest research that found this strong relationship is A. P. Bell, M. S. Weinberg & S. K. Hammersmith, 1981, *Sexual preference: Its development in men and women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

3. For one example, see J. Hart (Ed.), 1995, *My first time: Gay men describe their first same-sex experience* (Los Angeles: Alyson). However, these accounts often fall short because they are presented as narratives without comment, context, or analysis.

4. For a detailed examination of issues pertaining to the definition of the population of sexual minorities, see R. C. Savin-Williams, 2001, A critique of research on sexual-minority youths, *Journal of Adolescence*, 24, 15–23.

5. In Minnesota, 1.5% of boys identified their sexual orientation as gay or bisexual. However, three times that number reported same-sex attractions; only 5.1% of all students with homosexual attractions said that they are predominantly homosexual. Of the 1.6% of boys who engaged in same-sex behavior, slightly more than one-quarter described themselves as homosexual or bisexual; of the 2.2% who reported same-sex fantasies, less than one third described themselves as homosexual (G. Remafedi, M. Resnick, R. Blum & L. Harris, 1992, Demography of sexual orientation in adolescents, *Pediatrics*, 89, 714–721). In Massachusetts, 1.7% of boys identified themselves as gay or bisexual (R. Garofalo, R. C. Wolf, S. Kessel, J. Palfrey & R. H. DuRant, 1998, The association between health risk behaviors and sexual orientation among a school-based sample of adolescents, *Pediatrics*, 101, 895–902). In Vermont, 1.3% of boys reported a same-sex experience (R. H. DuRant, D. P. Krowchuk & S. H. Sinal, 1998, Victimization, use of violence, and drug use at school among male adolescents who engage in same-sex sexual behavior, *Journal of Pediatrics*, 132, 113–118).

6. Laumann and colleagues reported that 2.8% of men self-labeled as homosexual or bisexual, 4.5% found sex with another man appealing, and 6.2% were at least somewhat sexually attracted to men. Overall, 7.7% of the men reported same-gender sexual desire, 9.1% have had sex with another man since puberty, and 10.1% reported either same-sex desire or behavior (E. O. Laumann, J. H. Gagnon, R. T. Michael & S. Michaels, 1994, *The social organization of sexuality: Sexual practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

7. R. A. Lippa, 2000, Gender-related traits in gay men, lesbian women, and heterosexual men and women: The virtual identity of homosexual-heterosexual diagnosticity and gender diagnosticity. *Journal of Personality*, 68, 899–926.

8. Chapter 4, First Gay Sex, in which the data are presented according to the age when the first same-sex encounter occurred (1998, New York: Routledge). Valsin DuMontier interviewed one-third of the youths.