

The New Gay Teenager

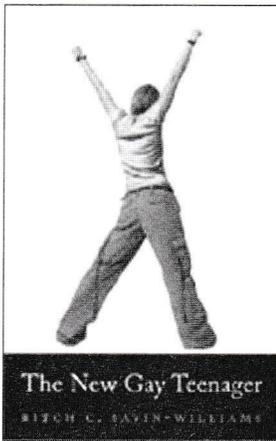
Gay Cornell University Professor Ritch Savin-Williams argues that teenagers are rejecting binary gender categories in their pursuit of more satisfying sexual relationships. And, he's encouraged by the trend.

Reviewed by Frank York

Writing in *The New Gay Teenager*, Professor Rich Savin-Williams presents the premise of his book on the first page of his preface. He observes: "Gay people have historically too readily accepted the inevitability and desirability of divisions based on sexual categories. It's not that same-sex attractions are disappearing—indeed, they appear to be on the upswing as young people more freely share with each other their same-sex feelings.

They're not embarrassed by gayness, don't consider it deviant, and see it all around them—on television, in movies, in songs, in cultural icons, among their friends."

Savin-Williams is encouraged by this trend and looks forward to the day when terms like "gay" become irrelevant in public discourse. He notes that more and more teens are becoming pansexual in their outlook—and the line between what was once considered "gay" and "straight" is becoming blurred.



The "New Gay Teenager" will be a person who can be attracted to both girls and boys and have sexual relationships with both sexes without guilt. The "New Gay Teenager," then is basically a pansexual or bisexual who rejects all gender categories.

Help From The Media

Savin-Williams asks, what has resulted in this "dramatic generational shift" between the old generation of gays who maintained that sexual orientation is fixed and unchangeable, versus the new teen who views gender categories as unimportant? "Probably the media," says Savin-Williams. He notes: "The success of the entertainment industry in presenting and hence normalizing same-sex desire has had an incalculable impact on the ability of adolescents to understand their own emerging sexual desires." (p. 18).

Another change agent, says the professor, is the public school system. He credits Los Angeles Public School teacher Virginia Uribe and her Project 10 Program as the pioneer of this effort to normalize homosexuality among teens. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), says Savin-Williams, is following in Uribe's footsteps. He notes that GLSEN-sponsored Gay Straight Alliance clubs have proliferated on high school campuses.

Gay-Affirming Researchers Invented The Gay Teen

Professor Savin-Williams says in Chapter 2 that gay or pro-gay researchers "invented" the gay teen. "Gay adolescence came to be what we researchers wanted it to be—what we were," says the author. (p. 23). He criticizes many of the early studies done on gay teenagers because of the problems involved in correctly defining who is gay and who isn't. "Most biological and social scientists assume a categorical sexual orientation, allowing them to contrast heterosexuals with homosexuals. The category of bisexual is often ignored altogether or folded into the gay group. Bisexuals are said to be confused, in a state of transition, not yet having decided just what they are." (p. 30).

Savin-Williams says researchers define sexual identity in a limited fashion and force teens to choose between limited options. "What about young people who identify themselves using a sexual label not provided, such as two-spirit, polysexual, or ambisexual? What about those who span multiple identities, the bi-lesbian or the gay-curious heterosexual?" asks the author. (p. 35)

Determining who's gay and who isn't, is a difficult task, says the professor. It depends on how researchers define the population: by attraction, behavior, or identity.

Savin-Williams presents the results of his own study of same-sex teenagers and draws the following conclusions:

Assuming sexual orientation is determined prior to puberty, "It is safe to conclude that at least 15 percent and maybe as high as 20 percent of all adolescents have some degree of a same-sex orientation." "Less than half of these individuals are exclusively or near exclusively same-sex oriented." "Teens with some degree of a same-sex orientation far outnumber the 3-4 percent who embrace a gay or bisexual identity or the 3 percent who report same-sex activities." (p. 44).

Research Incorrectly Focused On Troubled Gay Teens To Gain Grant Money

Savin-Williams believes that the early studies of gay teens focused on the psychological problems faced by a non-representative sampling of same-sex identified youth. "Being gay, young, and *troubled* had thus been intrinsically, even purposefully linked. The linkage made grant proposals and justifications for increased educational and mental-health services an easier sell," said the author.

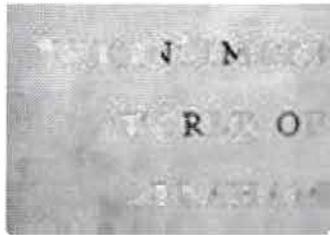
The professor observes that much of the research published during the 70s and 80s was not peer-reviewed. Its study samples, he says, were flawed: "... all early gay-youth investigations were based on flawed research designs and included small or biased samples of those who sought the services of mental-health or social-support agencies. In defense of these earlier researchers, they have been so pleased to have access to any gay teens that any slippage in standards for methodological rigor seemed relatively inconsequential ..." (p. 57)

Savin-Williams says the "investigators who published these negative findings knew what they were doing. They were aware of their sample limitations, that they had recruited those disproportionately at risk for negative health outcomes and risk behaviors. Yet few attempted to correct this portrait of the suffering gay adolescent." (p. 68) Their goal was to follow the money in getting grants to conduct their research.

Savin-Williams urges researchers to stop focusing on the suffering gay teen and begin promoting the view that gay teens are healthy and fully functioning individuals. He says: "Same-sex attracted teenagers are, in general, indistinguishable from other teens neurologically, anatomically, and chemically." (p. 85)

Early Same-Sex Attractions: "A Great Delight"

In his interviews with gay-identified teens, Savin-Williams says that "early same-sex attractions for many teenagers are sources of great delight, fond remembrance, and lifetime reverberations; they may even be these individuals' most tender and pleasurable childhood memories." (p. 131) Savin-Williams believes that childhood sexual experiences can be positive for children developing homosexuality.



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