



# The Gay Generation Gap: Communicating Across the LGBT Generational Divide

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The lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community is sometimes referred to as “family,” the clear implication being that the community provides the sort of support and the safe haven from danger that the biological family might offer its members in other circumstances. The LGBT community is family in another sense: there are generations here, older and younger members of this “family.” The community includes adults and youths whose relationships with one another are framed by differences in age and in historical experience. Little attention has been paid to these cross-generational relationships—other than to point to the homophobic assumption that adults are a risk to youth, an assumption which (however mistaken) has often impeded worthwhile interactions across generations. This issue of *Angles* results from an ongoing exploration of the more complex elements of this generational divide. We suggest a framework for thinking about cross-generational relationships within GLBT communities, relationships that have the potential for enhancing those communities as well as the experiences of adults and youth who comprise them.

## Social Change and Cross-Generation Communication

In her book *Culture and Commitment*, a provocative analysis of inter-generational communications and social change, Margaret Mead offered a model for understanding how relationships between generations shift as broad and rapid cultural change alters the social landscape.<sup>2</sup> Mead was writing at the height of the dramatic social change movements that characterized the 1960s and 1970s; her insights seem equally applicable to the current era in the evolution of LGBT communities. Our aim here is to examine some of the elements that characterize current relationships between LGBT adults and LGBT youths.

We recognize that neither group—“adults” or “youth”—represents a homogeneous collective. In addition to the inevitable individual differences found among members of any group, references to LGBT “generations” may disguise diversity of considerable importance. Demographic variations contribute in convoluted ways to LGBT identity—rural life is very different from urban life for LGBT people; the lives of LGBT people of color differ from those of their white peers; socioeconomic status, level of education, ethnic or national identity, ability status, and many other qualities unavoidably add complexity to the simplistic category of “LGBT identity.”

This discussion calls upon several sources of data. Over the past several years, we have interviewed LGBT youth and adults, as well as their heterosexual supporters, in a wide range of settings. These include a longitudinal study of those involved in the formation of a highly-contested Gay-Straight Alliance in Salt Lake City, Utah several years ago; both youths and the adults in the Denver-Boulder area, where one of us (GR) served as a consultant to an LGBT youth group and to the schools; LGBT high school students in a small town in rural New England; youth and adults from locales across the country, whom we have met at LGBT youth-oriented conferences; and a range of other people whom we have interviewed in the course of our exploration of these issues.<sup>1</sup>

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In addition, there are differences by age within each group. The ten to twelve year-olds who now occasionally appear in coming-out groups (reflecting the declining age of coming out) surely have different experiences than do the 18 to 20 year-olds who might also participate in such groups. Similarly, the rapid pace of change in LGBT experiences may mean that adult LGBT people who are now in their 50s could be viewed as a “grandparent” generation to teens, while those in their 30s, clearly members of the adult community, are likely to have had different experiences and to have forged different views than have either older adults or teens. Although such variations suggest important questions in their own right, limitations of space prevent our pursuing those here. Rather, we hope to raise some general issues that might stimulate further analysis later on; to this end, we will refer to youth and adults as identifiable generational cohorts.

Mead’s model describes cultures in terms of how they deal with change and with intergenerational communications. Briefly, in *post-figurative* cultures, the future is determined by the past. Change is virtually non-existent and youths learn from their elders, because the life that the older generation lives is precisely the life that the younger generation will inherit. In *cofigurative* cultures, change has become a part of the culture’s life, and social systems have evolved to accommodate to it. The future, in *cofigurative* cultures, is determined by the present. Contemporary knowledge, values, and mores shape the life of youth, and youths learn from others in their historical cohort – their age-mates, adults who are in touch with and participate actively in the changing present, and (perhaps especially) the media who serve as conduits of contemporary culture.

Mead’s most thought provoking ideas arise in her portrayal of *prefigurative* cultures, which emerge where change is so rapid, so broad, and so deep that existing cultural systems cannot absorb it. Traditional notions of what is important dissolve—or, at the very least, are severely challenged. Change is so rapid that no one who is currently an adult can know what adult life will be like for those who are currently youth: what knowledge will be important; what values will stand one in good stead; what mores will secure a place of integrity two decades from now—all are questions that no one can answer when everything is in such flux. In this situation, adults can-

not know what youth will need to know. Nor can they understand the experience of today’s youth, because their own frame of reference comes from a cultural milieu that is now a decade or two removed from this profoundly changed time. The future, in short, is determined by the future, by things none of us can know with certainty.

### Contemporary LGBT Communities as Prefigurative Culture

Mead’s analysis seems remarkably apt for our current situation. Values are in flux, mores are shifting, and we have no idea just what information and skills will be crucial for today’s children by the time they become adults.<sup>3</sup> Witness such changes as the pervasive role of the Internet in our lives; most of today’s adults did not spend their adolescence with access to Internet capabilities. Notice the ready access to multiple avenues of interpersonal contact—cell phones, instant messaging, email, palm-tops; most adults came of age with few if any of these means of communication. Consider the impact of the Vietnam War on many of today’s adults; most of today’s youth know about that conflict only from history books, if at all. Think about changing attitudes toward women’s place in the world; many of today’s youth have no sense for the unquestioned limitations that women experienced a generation ago.

Add to this situation the further complications introduced by the nature of LGBT identities and communities. In these communities/families, contacts between youths and elders are not an intrinsic element of social systems, as is true in most biological families and in most other communities that face oppression by virtue of their members’ identity (e.g., racial, ethnic, or religious communities). Rather, LGBT interactions tend to be age-segregated (youths cannot go to bars; adults cannot participate in youth coming-out groups). Any contacts across generations must be arranged with the explicit intent of creating cross-generational interaction. This segregation can be magnified by stereotypes each group may hold about the other: older LGBT people often see youth as too radical, and LGBT youth often regard their elders as out of touch.<sup>4</sup> Given that age-related stereotypes appear to be heightened by a lack of interaction,<sup>5</sup> age-segregation within LGBT communities is likely to be self-sustaining. As a result of such dynamics, communication

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### Mead’s Analysis of Relationships Between Generations

Type of Culture	Nature of and response to change	Relationship of past, present, future	Relations between youth and adults
<b>Postfigurative</b>	Change almost non-existent	Future shaped by the past	Youth learn from elders
<b>Cofigurative</b>	Rapid change Culture developing means to incorporate it	Future shaped by the present	Youth learn from agents of the present: peers, media, savvy adults
<b>Prefigurative</b>	Change pervasive & profound Cannot anticipate or incorporate change with existing social systems	Future shaped by the future	Elders must listen to youth as bellwether for future; Adults become consultants; Cooperative learning and problem-solving

across generations is even more difficult in LGBT communities than in mainstream cultures, even in their prefigurative form.

Further compound these phenomena with the particularly dizzying speed of historical change in the experiences of LGBT people.<sup>6</sup> Only 30 years ago the American medical and psychological establishments decided that homosexuality was not a mental illness, and less than 35 years ago the modern “gay rights” movement was inaugurated at Stonewall. Consider what this means to older and to younger generations of LGBT people. Most LGBT people who are now adults can recall feeling that they were “the only one” and fearing complete rejection by their families, friends, and associates should their identity become known. Yet today, in this era of GSAs and Elton John; openly gay politicians and civil unions; debates about same-sex marriage, gay adoption, and gays in the military; and a plethora of websites aimed specifically at LGBT youth, it is hard to imagine many youths who would believe they are alone in their feelings (although, indeed, some youths may not have access to these resources due to geographic, economic, and/or technological isolation—for example, rural youth, those living in poverty, or those lacking sufficient educational resources). Further, growing numbers of youth find their families and friends supportive rather than rejecting.<sup>7</sup> As evidence of the social impact of such changes, consider the fact that no one even talked about same-sex marriage 20 years ago, yet in recent months it has become a key theme in political discussions at both local and national levels.

In addition to these broad cultural changes, LGBT communities have experienced dramatic events that have had differential effects on the lives of different generations. Many of today’s LGBT youth are growing up in a world where HIV/AIDS is a familiar presence, albeit one considerably muted (at least in more affluent communities) by recent pharmacological developments. In contrast, many older LGBT people came out before HIV/AIDS had emerged on the scene, before the messages of fear and the added stigma of disease had altered the place of LGBT people in the society. Many of these people witnessed illness and death of a magnitude unimaginable to younger generations. Indeed, HIV/AIDS is arguably one of the most profound shaping elements of older generations of LGBT people, both men and women. Youths’ relative naiveté about these matters may seem irreverent to adults, just as older LGBT people’s intense feelings about HIV/AIDS and its impacts on the community may seem overblown to youth who were not witness to the worst of the pandemic.

Similarly, now-older LGBT people were present for the second wave of feminism, with all its complex impacts on society in general and on women in particular. Feminism influenced the nature of the emerging gay rights movement, framed the experience of many lesbians and bisexual women, and challenged the very notion of identity grounded in gender. LGBT youth undoubtedly experience the products of the feminist revolution, but few are familiar with its parameters and none was present to experience first-hand its life changing effects on a society deeply entrenched in traditional (and foundationally misogynist) assumptions.

These striking changes point to the value of recent analyses of the concept of generations.<sup>8</sup> This work suggests that it is more useful to conceptualize generations as products of dramatic socio-cultural events than as segmented age groupings. In this view, a generation may span only a few years when those years are characterized by dramatic changes that have profound impacts on the identities of those who experience those events—particularly youth in the throes of identity consolidation. This seems very fitting for our understanding of contemporary LGBT generations, where events that were regarded as astonishing a decade or less ago are now frequent if not commonplace. The lives of those coming to LGBT identities in the shadow of such shifts are significantly different from the lives of those whose identity was formed earlier, different enough that they might easily be regarded as distinct generations.

As one indication of these changes in perspective, in our discussions with youth and adults, we (along with many others) have observed striking differences between how today’s youth and previous generations understand and enact sexual orientation identity.

Among the youth we have interviewed we found a considerable contingent who eschew traditional, dichotomous understandings that recognize two exclusive and exhaustive categories of sexual orientation identity: heterosexual and homosexual/gay/lesbian. Many

of the youth we have interviewed, as well as those whose stories appear in research and in first-person anthologies, easily claim a bisexual or pansexual identity. Many others view their sexuality as more fluid—some students have referred to this position as a “spectrum”—with partner choices defined not by the sex of the other individual but by gender-free qualities, with identity flexible over time and a product of conscious choice, and with a sense that sexuality is not a crucial dimension of identity. This view contrasts sharply with that of many adults, for whom the very terms “lesbian” and “gay” represent hard-won acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their identities, for whom bisexuality reflects an inability to come to terms with one’s true identity, and for whom sexual orientation is perceived (and experienced) as fixed, unchosen, and core to identity. Where it occurs (and it is not, of course, universal), such a radical divergence in perspectives renders conversation and understanding across generations difficult, indeed.

If we apply Mead’s analysis to this situation, it would appear that LGBT communities are experiencing a magnified prefigurative cultural shift: the prefigurative condition created simply by virtue of our being members of a rapidly changing society is geometrically expanded by the rapid shifts within our own LGBT communities. If this is the case, then everything that Mead had to say about prefigurative cultures is compounded by our circumstance and applies with dividends to LGBT communities.

### Communication in Prefigurative Culture

In prefigurative societies, Mead argued, youths and elders must forge new patterns of communication. Elders cannot know the answers, but they can convey the importance of seeking answers. They cannot know what values will serve one well, but they can encourage the careful articulation of one’s values. Youth, on the

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other hand, become the bellwether for the community's future. They are on the front edge of change, unhindered by ties to the past. They are more likely to envision a future that is radically different, where new questions are central and old answers no longer relevant--not wrong, although adults may feel judged; just irrelevant. Yet, youth lack the resources and the wisdom of life experience to find and enact answers on their own. In this circumstance, adults must be prepared to follow the lead of youth, to learn from youth; youth must be prepared to rely on the mentoring of adults and on their experience with solving problems, if not on their access to ultimate answers.

### The Nature of the LGBT Generational Divide

Mead's analysis has been very useful to us as we have worked to understand the nature of the generational split often noted in the LGBT community.<sup>9</sup> The data we have gathered indicate that much of the apparent communication gap between LGBT youth and their adult counterparts stems, as Mead would suggest, from misunderstandings across a generational divide that is created by developmental, social, and historical variables and widened by the rapid pace of change in LGBT life. The radical discrepancy between the life of today's LGBT youths and that of their elders when they were young, the pervasive age-segregation within LGBT communities, the extreme speed of change that renders today's certainties tomorrow's irrelevancies, and the very common and very understandable (at least in our society)<sup>10</sup> tendency for each generation to dismiss the other's perspective—these things combine to make it difficult for us to listen across the generational gulf. Both youths and adults contribute to the divide, and both can contribute to its dissolution.

### Youths' Role in the Divide

#### *The Insights of "Newcomers"*

The place of teens in this generational gap is complex. On the one hand, their role as "newcomers" to LGBT life sometimes grants them an advantaged perspective.<sup>11</sup> Less familiar with—and therefore, perhaps, less burdened by—the stresses and fears of earlier times, youth are often able to recognize patterns about which many adults have ceased to be reflexive. For instance, the teens we have interviewed showed uncommon awareness of their own and others' internalized homophobia, and were able to deal with it in a fashion that some older people, longer hampered by it, might not easily achieve. One student in Salt Lake City likened adults' encumbrance by internalized homonegativity to the training of elephants. A chain placed around the ankle of an infant elephant serves to restrain its movement, teaching it early on that escape is impossible. The beast grows so accustomed to being confined that it stops straining against the chain, even though its growing size and strength would now be adequate to free it. In the end, a tiny thread would be sufficient to hold the adult elephant.

Similarly, youth may be able to conceive of unusual approaches to problem-solving or creative ideas for organizing precisely because they do not have experience with the "tried and true" ways of their elders. In the words of one teen in Salt Lake City, *"I think another advantage we had to youth leading this was that we didn't have any set ideas. We didn't have our set life; we didn't have a set life pattern. And we are still very malleable, where we could bend to turn this way, turn that way."*

### *The Missing Foundations*

On the other hand, such ingenuity may be of little use without the resources and skills to enact the ideas it generates. Unfortunately, even as we have found youth eager and clever in their approaches to many issues, we have also found them occasionally resistant to input from adults. Indeed, perhaps because of their failure to recognize the wisdom of their elders and the legacy of past efforts in LGBT communities, they are prone to seeing their own experience as unique and disconnected from that of others, and they sometimes regard others' experience as correspondingly irrelevant. In a particularly striking example of this dynamic, one teen leader in Salt Lake City told us that she decided to establish a gay-straight alliance in her school because discrimination against LGBT people had been going on for hundreds of years, and it was time for someone to do something about it. She was apparently unaware that activists had, for decades, been doing "something," and that her own actions (admirable as they clearly were) relied on a long history of others' work, without which a high school gay/straight alliance would not even be imaginable. With youth perceiving the situation from this standpoint, adults' attempts to be of assistance or to provide guidance may be taken by youth as intrusive, dismissive, and condescending.

In the absence of significant interaction with LGBT adults, youth are prone to rely on stereotypes of adult LGBT people.<sup>12</sup> Given the very pejorative stereotypes that youth typically encounter,<sup>13</sup> such reliance creates a further impasse to positive relations with LGBT adults. In their attention to the differences between their own experiences and those of older LGBT people, youth may disregard the similarities between their own circumstances and those of earlier generations of LGBT people—in particular the persistence of homophobia and heterosexism—and fail to recognize the value of elders' experiences in youths' framing their own lives. One researcher, for example, offered the following as representative of older gay men's perception of youths' attitudes toward them: "They don't want anything to do with us. They think we're old relics that ought to be stored away."<sup>14</sup>

### Youth and the Gap

- By virtue of growing up in so different a time, youth may often provide a fresh perspective
- Youth may be less bound by established approaches to problem solving
- Youth often lack relevant experience and access to useful resources
- Youth may lack historical perspective on LGBT issues
- Youth often see their own experience as singular and unique
- Youth may perceive adults' efforts as intrusive, condescending, or irrelevant
- Youth may believe that their knowing crucial questions in this prefigurative time amounts to their being able to resolve those questions

## Adults' Role in the Divide

Adults also play a role in creating and sustaining this generational divide. They may feel that they fully understand the lives and the needs of LGBT teens when in fact they are seeing those lives through the prism of their own youth. Their personal experiences of youth, shared by numerous other adult LGBT people, constitute "common memories" that take on a life of their own, establishing persistent beliefs about the nature of reality<sup>15</sup>—more specifically, about the nature of LGBT youth. We witnessed a striking example of this when a gay man, after listening to a panel of LGBT youth, informed those present that he had attended the same high school in his own youth, and he knew exactly what these teens were experiencing. His comment disregarded the reality that, on many dimensions, the differences between adults' own experiences and youths' present lives are vast, and adults' seeing today's youths through their own youthful lens may distort the image badly. Mead said it well: "As long as adults think that they, like the parents and teachers of old, need only to become introspective [in order] to understand the youth before them, communication is impossible" (p. 77).

### *Living through Youth*

Indeed, LGBT adults recognize many of these differences, and often express envy for the resources and opportunities available to today's youth; their expressions of enthusiasm often reveal a palpable longing for a richness of youth that they were denied. The teens we have interviewed are often aware that LGBT adults sometimes strive to live out their own fantasies through youths, and teens may feel an obligation (often couched as a privilege) to fulfill those dreams on behalf of adults rather than defining and enacting their own wishes for their own lives. This dynamic is similar to that sometimes found in children of immigrants,<sup>16</sup> where youth strive to create the life that their elders did not have and to provide guidance to the older generation in their assimilation to the new society.

As an illustration, one group of students told us about their adult supporters arranging an alternative prom on the teens' behalf, so that they could bring same-sex dates. When we asked the teens to

talk about their favorite part of that event, one young woman answered that her greatest joy came from seeing her newly out lesbian teacher dancing with her partner. Notice that the highlight for this teen lay in seeing adults' dreams fulfilled, not in fulfilling her own. In a slight variation on the same theme, a recent online posting from a very active LGBT community program included an announcement for a "Queer Prom." The event, intended for LGBT youth, was billed as "The Night You Never Had."<sup>17</sup> The target audience was clearly adults and not youth.

### *Presuming the "Horrors" of LGBT Youth*

In another variation on adults' tendency to see teens through the lens of their own earlier experiences, LGBT adults may assume that today's LGBT youths encounter the same sort of harassment and homophobia that characterized earlier eras, feel isolated in their feelings just as many adults themselves did, and face the same dearth of support systems. This presumption ignores the many changes in the experiences of LGBT youth and in the resources available to them, including the notable changes discussed above. The understanding of contemporary LGBT youth as fraught with difficulties and devoid of resources is reinforced by studies documenting LGBT teens' reports of harassment, school problems, suicidal ideation, conflict with family and peers, and so forth.<sup>18</sup> Also, public discourse about LGBT life is rife with such portrayals, including literature distributed by LGBT and LGBT-supportive groups whose promotional materials include language such as this: "Every year in America, thousands of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people are verbally harassed, beaten, raped, and murdered solely because of their sexual orientation."<sup>19</sup>

However, the emphasis on experiences of suffering and isolation to the exclusion of elements of joy in LGBT life fails to recognize that many (perhaps most) LGBT teens and their adult counterparts are doing quite well and some are thriving.<sup>20</sup> The expansive elements of LGBT experience are totally submerged in rhetoric that dwells on misery, and youth have no opportunity to witness the very positive aspects of adult LGBT life. Where this emphasis on suffering reflects not the current reality of many LGBT adolescents so much as recollections of previous generations' own "horror," in the language of one adult activist,<sup>21</sup> LGBT adults' residual fears and pain may be acting to magnify the real difficulties of LGBT teens.

### *Privileging Suffering*

The youth we have talked with are familiar with these depictions of their lives as risk-filled and painful. In the words of one teen, "*we're involved with the problems people talk about in surveys.*" Indeed, as we consider communications between LGBT adults and youth, we must keep in mind that these messages reach not only the intended audience—namely adults whose support is crucial to our efforts. The stories that portray LGBT teens' lives as hopelessly painful also reach LGBT youth. A very real risk exists that LGBT youths may conclude that these are the only legitimate stories for their own lives. As one young lesbian told us, "*I feel like a loser because I never committed suicide, I never did drugs, I just read approximately twelve science fiction books in a week.*" Some teens have told us that they do not feel qualified to participate in LGBT youth panels because their stories are not dramatic and painful; those who do participate despite their positive stories tell us that there is little interest in their stories, and questions are consistently addressed to those with more dramatic experiences.

## Adults and the Gap

- Adults often have greater experience and access to resources
- Adults may be more familiar with historical roots of the community
- Adults may over-identify with youth, failing to see the distinctiveness of youths' experiences
- Adults may try to live out their own youthful dreams through youth, assuming youth want or need what they wished for as youth
- Adults may try to master their own youthful experiences by directing youth in managing theirs
- Based on their own adolescent experiences, adults may focus on suffering and isolation, missing the changed contexts of today's youth
- In efforts to call attention to the problems generated by homophobia, adults may disregard the joyous elements of their own and youths' lives
- Adults may dismiss youths' ability to identify relevant issues with clarity by virtue of youths' status in this prefigurative time

This is not to say that the adult community should attend only to the joys and ignore the difficulties of LGBT lives. The research underlying the public discussion of these matters is of tremendous importance in its calling to our collective attention the potential risks of LGBT youths' lives. Homophobia and heterosexism are, in fact, rampant, and LGBT youth are, in fact, at risk for significant stresses, both because of our cultural rendition of adolescence as stressful and because their identity is devalued by their society. Of course we must recognize these difficulties and provide every possible support. However, we must not do this at the expense of ignoring the positive aspects of our own and their lives. To emphasize only the "horrors" of youth, particularly when we are recalling our own youth more than we are observing theirs, is to do youth a serious disservice.

### **The Needed Shift: Prefigurative Communication**

In the situations noted above, adults have often let their own needs, experiences, and perceptions dominate their understandings of LGBT youth. The result is communication that fails. Adults are speaking not to real teens in real time, but to shadows of their own difficult youth and their own fantasies about the ideal LGBT adolescence. When adults carry their own issues into their work with teens, the result is a fragmented community comprised of youth tending to adults and adults living through youth. Authentic communication is not possible in this circumstance.

As noted above, Mead suggested that in prefigurative cultures the traditional portrayal of adults as teachers and youth as pupils must shift; adults must be receptive to learning about the new world from those who inhabit that world—namely youth. Just as immigrant parents can learn about their adopted culture through the youth who are immersed in it, LGBT adults might learn about new LGBT cultures from youth.

One means to this end is for adults to cease assuming that their own experience is an adequate grounding for shaping LGBT communities. Instead, we should acknowledge the contributions possible from youth who have the benefit of a novel perspective, and to seek out their counsel in our organizing activities. We might also seek out information about youths' lives from their own perspective and include that perspective in our educational and outreach efforts. In addition to open discussions with youths, other sources for such insights might include the variety of first-person accounts now available in print and online. Youth, for their part, would do well to familiarize themselves with the history and the breadth of LGBT communities in order to take full advantage of the wisdom that they can glean from others' experiences.

Adults and youth alike need to recognize that each enjoys absolutely distinctive experiences by virtue of their generational locations; at the same time, both share certain experiences by virtue of identifying with a group that is systematically devalued throughout society. Both also share this remarkable historical context and the accompanying need to adapt to rapidly changing social realities.<sup>23</sup> Because adults continue to hold most of the power and most of the resources within cross-generational communities, it is especially incumbent on them to heed Mead's urging that both perspectives be carefully heard and honored. It also requires a willingness on the part of LGBT adults to work together with youth and with members of other oppressed groups in forging alliances that will sustain collective efforts toward equal rights for all people.

### **The Tasks Ahead**

The creation of a conversational bridge between adult and adolescent segments of LGBT communities will require the efforts of all who work within and between such communities. We must be alert for opportunities to incorporate youth into ongoing adult activities and adults into youth endeavors. At the same time, we need to recognize that the distinctive experiences of each generation also warrant attention, and that age-specific interactions are valuable, as well. Only when we really know each other as co-participants in this thrilling moment of social change, each with a novel and valuable perspective, each needing the respect of the other, and each willing to give up the need to be singularly correct—only then can we talk across the divide.

Below are some ideas for how we might facilitate this sort of communication within LGBT communities. The list is suggestive rather than exhaustive. The specific form that interventions might take will depend greatly on the groups involved, and our intent here is simply to provide ideas whose expansion might lead to approaches most appropriate for particular settings. Exploring these and other options in genuinely collegial conversations that include youths and adults will be a good beginning to the task ahead.

### **Fostering Communication Across LGBT Generations**

- It is important to find a variety of forums for providing youth with information about LGBT history—and about movements for equal rights in general.
- LGBT communities should arrange opportunities for youth to interact with LGBT adults who are leading a variety of happy, productive lives. Relationships that extend over time are most valuable in changing stereotypes and cementing meaningful relationships.<sup>24</sup>
- Adults who are responsible for organizing events in LGBT communities should develop means for spotlighting LGBT teens who are doing well, leading happy and productive—and not necessarily exceptional—lives.
- Youth panels, which are frequently used in educational and community forums, should be explicitly constituted to include youth whose coming out stories, family lives, school experiences, peer relations, and so forth are positive and affirming, as well as those who have struggled.
- Advertising and fund-raising materials should be constructed to stress the invigorating as well as the risky realities of LGBT lives, teen and adult alike. LGBT pride is grounded in a belief that our lives are good, not simply that we are collectively oppressed.
- LGBT communities must avoid exploiting the vulnerability of youth, taking seriously the potential costs of our uses of youth. Where stories of risks to LGBT youth are employed, such as in efforts to gain support for adult agendas, it is crucial to consider the impact of such narratives on youth themselves as well as the likelihood that the appeal will generate the desired political and social support or financial gain.
- We all need to create opportunities for recognizing and exploring the connections among various forms of oppression, thereby fostering the creation of a vision that sees the work of any of us—whether age cohort or identity group—as just one element in the larger pattern of social change.

- A number of youth-oriented initiatives in recent years have highlighted the need for LGBT communities to attend to “youth empowerment.” Many have developed tools to assist in that process.<sup>25</sup> Employing their assistance will not only improve our work but also enact the prefigurative communication we are seeking.

The ability of LGBT adult communities to address the needs of LGBT youth without exploiting their vulnerability depends on a willingness to listen to and honor their stories and to support them in their efforts to resist homophobic narratives and create vibrant

lives. It also requires a willingness on the part of LGBT adults to work together with youth and with members of other oppressed groups in forging alliances that will sustain collective efforts toward equal rights for all people. Similarly, the ability of LGBT youth to profit from the experiences of those who have preceded them in the LGBT rights movement requires their willingness to recognize the common threads that unite us and to value the differences as well as the similarities among cohorts distinguished by age or history. Phrased this way, the struggle relies on a straightforward appeal to the justice of a broad human rights movement. Such an agenda is a worthy one to be shared across generations. ■

## Notes

- 1 For more detailed discussions of this research project, see Bohan, J. S., & Russell, G. M. (1999). Support networks for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. In S. N. Davis, M. Crawford, & J. Sebrechts (Eds.), *Coming into her own: Educational success in girls and women* (pp. 279-294). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Bohan, J. S., Russell, G. M., & Montgomery, S. (in press). Gay youth and gay adults: Bridging the generation gap. *Journal of Homosexuality*; Russell, G. M., & Bohan, J. S. (2001, Spring). Describing/prescribing risk: Queer youth and self-fulfilling prophecies. *In the Family*, 21-22; Russell, G. M., Bohan, J. S., & Lilly, D. (2000). Queer youth: Old stories, new stories. In S. L. Jones (Ed.), *A sea of stories: The shaping power of narrative in gay and lesbian cultures* (pp. 69-92). New York: Haworth;
- 2 Mead, M. (1970). *Culture and commitment*. New York: Doubleday
- 3 See Crocket, L. J., & Silbereisen, R. K. (2000). *Negotiating adolescence in times of social change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- 4 Hajek, C., & Giles, H. (2002). The old man out: An intergroup analysis of intergenerational communication among gay men. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 698-714.
- 5 Pecchioni, L. L., & Croghan, J. M. (2002). Young adults' stereotypes of older adults with their grandparents as the targets. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 715-730.
- 6 See Bull, C. (Ed.), *Witness to revolution: The Advocate reports on gay and lesbian politics, 1967-1999*. Boston: Alyson; Katz, J. N. (1992), *Gay American history: Lesbians and gay men in the U.S.A.* New York: Meridian; Miller, N. (1995). *Out of the past: Gay and lesbian history from 1869 to the present*. New York: Random House.
- 7 See, e.g., Savin-Williams, R. (2001). *Mom, Dad, I'm gay: How families negotiate coming out*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; Woog, D. (2003, August). Gay youth revolution. *The Advocate*, p. 11.
- 8 Rogler, L. H. (2002). Historical generations: The case of the great depression and World War II. *American Psychologist*, 57, 1013-1023.
- 9 See Due, L. (1995). *Joining the tribe*. New York: Doubleday; *The Advocate: The National Gay and Lesbian Newsmagazine* (2001, April 10).
- 10 See, e.g., Hersch, P. (1998). *A tribe apart*. New York: Fawcett Columbine; Pecchioni, L. L., & Croghan, J. M. (2002). Young adults' stereotypes of older adults with their grandparents as the targets. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 715-730. Johnson, N. G., Roberts, M. C., & Worrell, J. P. (1999). *Beyond appearance: A new look at adolescent girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- 11 The notion that groups who stand outside the mainstream have a valuable perspective by virtue of their marginality has been argued in other contexts, as well. See, for example, Dubois, W. E. B. (1996). *The souls of Black folk*, 2nd ed. New York: Penguin; Hartsock, N. C. M. (1998). *The feminist standpoint revisited and other essays*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- 12 Pecchioni, L. L., & Croghan, J. M. (2002). *Ibid.*
- 13 Hajek, C., & Giles, H. (2002). *Ibid.*
- 14 Berger, R. M. (1996). *Gay and gray* (2nd ed.). New York: Harrington Park.
- 15 Rogler, L. H. (2002). *Ibid.*
- 16 For discussions of this dynamic in the families of immigrants see Rogler, L. H. (2002). *Ibid.*; Rumbaut, R. G., & Portes, A. (Eds.). (2001). *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 17 Basic Rights Oregon. (2000, September 19). BRUpdate@yahoogroups.com
- 18 Such reports are now legion, as is increasingly sophisticated methodologically. See, for example, Bochenek, M., & Brown, A. W. (2001). *Hatred in the hallways: Violence and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students in U.S. schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch. Retrieved August 22, 2004 from [www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/toc.htm](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/toc.htm); Faulkner, A. H., & Cranston, K. (1998). Correlates of same-sex sexual behavior in a random sample of Massachusetts high school students. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88, 262-266; Fergusson, D. M., Howard, H. J., & Beautris, A. L. (1999). Is sexual orientation related to mental health problems and suicidality in young people? *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 56, 867-874; Perotti, J., & Westermark, K. (2001). *When the drama club isn't enough*. Boston: Beacon; Remafedi, G., French, S., Story, M., Resnick, M. D., & Blum, R. (1998). The relationship between suicide risk and sexual orientation: Results from a population-based study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 88(1), 57-60; Russell, S. T., & Jaysen, K. (2001). Adolescent sexual orientation and suicide risk: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 91, 1276-1281. For a recent summary of findings by GLSEN, go to their "State of the States 2004" report at [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org). Questions about the usefulness and the validity of this research persist; see, e.g., Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). Suicide attempts among sexual minority youths: Population and measurement issues. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 69, 983-991.
- 19 This language is taken from a funding appeal sent by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (1998), but it is just one of many such appeals that we received during a brief period when we were thinking and writing about this issue.
- 20 A website devoted to first-person accounts of LGBT youths' lives, gathered in interviews with hundreds of youth across the country, documents many such stories of happy and productive LGBT youth. See <http://younggayamerica.com>
- 21 Jennings, K. (1997, Oct. 14). School of hard knocks. *The Advocate*, pp. 97-98. We don't intend to single out this particular individual or this particular depiction of LGBT adolescence; it is but one example of a whole genre of such portrayals.
- 22 Rogler (2002). *Ibid.*
- 23 Pecchioni & Croghan (2002). *Ibid.*
- 24 Hajek, C., & Giles, H. (2002). *Ibid.*
- 25 For examples of the work of such groups, see the websites of Boston Alliance of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth ([www.bagly.org](http://www.bagly.org)), Pride Zone ([www.pridezone.org](http://www.pridezone.org)), True Colors ([www.ourtruecolors.org](http://www.ourtruecolors.org)), and Youth on Board ([www.youthonboard.org](http://www.youthonboard.org)).

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