

Book Reviews

The New Gay Teenager, by *Ritch Savin-Williams*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. 272 pages, \$21.22 (hardcover), \$15.85 (paperback).

Ritch Savin-Williams has written a book that is about far more than gay adolescents, just as Lisa Diamond's work concerns more than college-age girls. It is a brilliant book that should be read by everyone involved in research and theory of sexual orientation and sexual identity, although ironically, his primary premises—that sexual identity labels are obsolete and same-sex-oriented teens are no more troubled than other teens—are the least credible parts of the book. Savin-Williams's book exposes our current ways of looking at sexual orientation as simplistic and contradictory. He attacks both mainstream and queer theory research alike, and although he can be savage in his critique, he is often right.

Savin-Williams describes the immense problems inherent merely in trying to define *sexual orientation* (*behavior? identity? attractions?*) and notes the highly idiosyncratic ways in which people use identity labels, arguing that these factors make it almost impossible to compare different studies on orientation. He shows that the fluidity of sexual orientation over time, at least for some people, makes defining *orientation* even more difficult. Also, he has a great appreciation for the ways in which history and the passage of time make the phenomena we study a constantly moving target. For example, over several decades, within same-sex-oriented women, the "stone butch" has given way to the "transman" or "boi," and "lesbian-feminists by choice" replaced by "LUGS"—lesbians until graduation. The author points out that definitions of *sexual orientation* used by researchers may actually be considered irrelevant by the people being studied. For example, Savin-Williams asked teens to define *sexual orientation*, and they identified two factors: sexual attraction and romantic desire. They considered least relevant to the definition of *orientation* the following: behavior, identity, and fantasies—the very dimensions most often used by researchers in the field.

According to Savin-Williams, the shakiest of the variables used in sexual orientation research is *identity*. In his view, the "new gay teenager" eschews labels: "Sexual diversity is becoming normalized, and the gay-straight divide is becoming blurred. Straight teens are acting, looking, and becoming gayish, and an expansive array of non-straight teens is becoming visible." (p. 219) Savin-Williams argues that the gay adolescent is disappearing because labels are becoming irrelevant, even "banal."

Savin-Williams provides an insightful history of research on sexual orientation since Stonewall and the ways in which it has interacted with changes in cultural views of homosexuality and the gay political movement. He then narrows his analysis to research on gay adolescence, which has been dominated by queer theorists. Savin-Williams skewers this body of work, convincingly critiquing the methodology and concluding that it focuses too much on the most disadvantaged and mentally unstable of gay teens. He is particularly concerned with findings that portray gay teens as more disturbed and suicidal than nongay adolescents. He believes the results are not representative of the majority of nonstraight teenagers, especially in contemporary times, and calls the prevalent model of the gay teenager a "deficit model," in contrast with his own research that he feels emphasizes the resiliency of these young people.

Savin-Williams offers an alternative model, which he calls a "differential developmental trajectories" framework. His conceptualization is brilliant: It explains many of the seemingly confusing and contradictory findings of sexual orientation research and is the richest and most promising paradigm I have seen to date. It is a model for far more than gay adolescence; it has the capacity to explain many of the variations we see in the expression of sex and gender orientation among all ages, and how that expression changes by culture and time period. The book is worth reading just for the first 90 pages.

The rest of *The New Gay Teenager* focuses on a more detailed look at the author's subjects, from whom he has gathered fascinating interviews. He describes young people whose romantic attractions, sexual attractions, behavior, and fantasies are neither perfectly congruent nor stable over time, and thus for whom the current labels we use—gay, straight, bisexual—don't even begin to describe the richness of their experience. His teens are casual, experimental, changeable, articulate—and not suicidal. Savin-Williams has been criticized for basing his conclusions on a sample of teens at elite, private universities, and one gets a sense reading excerpts of his interviews that these young people are, in fact, exceptional, that they may be the wave of the future more than a representation of the present. I found this part of the book—his insistence on the ultimate "banality" of sexual labels—the weakest. At times Savin-Williams appears to strain to present his subjects in the most positive possible light. For example, the first subject he chooses to exemplify the "liberated" new teen is Abie, who has been mostly sexual with boys but recently involved in an intense, romantic, mostly nonsexual relationship with a girl. Abie refuses to label herself or pin down her sexuality except to say she has always assumed she was straight. But when she has sex with her new girlfriend and then needs massive reassurance that it doesn't "mean anything," it is difficult to maintain an image of Abie as "free." Savin-Williams's new "freedom to not label" sometimes sounds a lot like the old internalized homophobia.

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I asked a young, well-educated male friend with a varied sexual history what he thought of Savin-Williams's premise that contemporary youth do not self-label because it is "irrelevant." He laughed ruefully and stated the following:

In some ways it is easier to be gay now. But just because other people accept it a little more than they used to doesn't mean a gay person really feels okay about it. People in my generation who don't self-label are doing it because they don't want to be gay, period, no matter what they tell an interviewer.

Savin-Williams is probably correct to criticize the doom-and-gloom view of gay teens. However, it is a bit early to declare our society "post-gay," and in *The New Gay Teenager*, Savin-Williams may swing the pendulum a bit too far in the other direction.

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