Queer youth activism: generational change in the US LGBTQ Movement

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QUEER YOUTH ACTIVISM:
GENERATIONAL CHANGE IN THE US LGBTQ MOVEMENT

by

Megan K. Murphy

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Abstract

The past several decades have witnessed rapid social and cultural change around LGBTQ individuals and sexual politics in the United States. As a result, LGBTQ youth are coming of age in a socio-historical context characterized by increasing normalization and visibility of LGBTQ people and less overt homophobia where LGBTQ individuals live their lives largely beyond the closet. In this dissertation, the unique characteristics of this post-closet movement generation are explored. I identify three core tensions faced by the post-closet generation: navigating restrictive at risk/victim frames, negotiating identities in the context of growing ambivalence about traditional gay/lesbian categories, and carving out activist participation in a mainstream movement that is largely detached from their identities and priorities. I ask how this generation navigates those core tensions and differs from prior movement generations in terms of how they negotiate their sexual and gender identities and engage in activism.

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with forty youth who have engaged in activism around LGBTQ issues. I find post-closet youth are coming out at earlier ages to largely supportive families and are consequently shifting the coming out story to one of less importance. I examine the negotiation of sexual identities and participation in activism at three different college contexts and compare the differences in the collective identities formed in each. I find post-closet youth in all settings are negotiating alternative sexual identities, such as pansexual and queer, that emphasize fluidity and the deconstruction of the traditional gender binary. Contrary to popular conceptions of queer youth as apathetic, I find post-closet youth engaged in numerous activist efforts, in both mainstream venues such as GSAs and more often on the everyday and cultural levels, with visual art and performance-based activism focused on challenging traditional discourses around gender and sexuality.
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Chapter One: Introduction

“A new generation of LGBTQ activists are joining those who have been a part of this movement since the fires of the Stonewall Riots, at the Millennium March on Washington. Those who, in 1979, were a part of the first march on Washington will be standing side-by-side with those who had not yet been born.”

From the Millennium March Platform (cited in Ghaziani 2008: 273)

Introduction

While some movements for social change are successful and meet their desired goals within several months or years of their inception, others, such as the women’s, civil rights, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movements, endure for decades. It is long-term, rights-based identity movements such as these that raise particularly interesting questions concerning how social movements change over time (McAdam 1988; Staggenborg and Taylor 2005; Whittier 1995; Whittier 1997). Specifically, how do movements respond and reconfigure to the entry of new generations of activists that must continually join their ranks to survive over the years (Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart 2000; Reger 2012; Whittier 1995; 1997)? In this project, I examine how recent social-historical changes around sexuality combine to produce a new “post-closet” movement generation within the US LGBTQ movement. I propose several core tensions this potential generation faces in negotiating a collective identity and argue that attention to such dilemmas helps to elaborate a generational model of change in social movements.

In this chapter, I situate a study of generational change in the LGBTQ movement in context. I begin by outlining a statement of the problem, followed by a brief consideration of the project’s sociological significance and important terminology used in the study. I then provide an overview of the dissertation, noting the main theoretical and empirical findings from the review of the literature, the project’s analytical framework, the methodology used, and a brief overview of the results.
**Problem Statement**

The relationship between generations and politics has long interested scholars of social movements. The importance of “generations” first received widespread attention in early accounts of the rise of the New Left and student movements of the 1960s, as interest swelled in explaining the growing “youth rebellion” and emergence of the so-called “Sixties Generation” (Braungart and Braungart 1986; Flacks 1967; Keniston 1968; 1971). Generations have been conceived of and examined in relation to politics in several different ways over the years, ranging from attention to life-course and lineage effects to cohort dynamics (M. Braungart 1984; DeMartini 1985; Schneider 1988). However, little attention has been given to generational dynamics within social movements despite their significant impact on the transformations of movements over time (Ross 1983; Whittier 1995; 1997).

For any long-term movement to endure, new participants must continually enter to replenish and sustain the movement (Whittier 1995). However, as social change occurs over time, movements are faced with what Mannheim first termed the “problem of generations” (1954). Youth coming of age in a changing socio-historical context are likely to develop a unique perception and style of politics that differs from the perception and political outlook of prior cohorts (Mannheim 1954). For long-term social movements, this poses a unique problem: with the addition of each new activist cohort, the potential arises for different co-existing generational outlooks within movements. The problem of generations within movements thus creates the possibility for significant internal movement change, especially in terms of the redefinition of the movement’s collective identity and key strategies (Ross 1983; Whittier 1995; 1997).

Although some scholars have examined the impact of new activist cohorts on changes in organizational structure and collective identity in the civil rights and women’s movements
Reger 2012; Ross 1983; Whittier 1995; 1997), generational changes among cohorts in the LGBTQ rights movement have been largely overlooked. This is especially problematic as the LGBTQ movement is perfectly situated to study generational impacts. The rapid social and cultural changes occurring around issues of sexuality in the recent decades since the movement’s inception are tremendous (Adam 1995; Engel 2001; Epstein 1999; Seidman 2002). Such drastic social change positions the generation of youth coming of age during the contemporary period with a sexual politics that is potentially substantially different from prior generations, making for an exceptional case study of generational dynamics. In recent years, the LGBTQ movement has experienced the entry of this new generation of youth activists, and the impact of this new generation on the gay movement has yet to be systematically studied (Miceli 2005; Savin-Williams 2005a).

Many contemporary LGBTQ youth come of age in what Seidman has termed “post-closet” social contexts, characterized by increased gay visibility, mainstreaming, and normalization (2002). Post-closet contexts are considerably different from the “Stonewall Era,” where the closet was a central organizing feature (Seidman 2002). This new socio-historical context has significantly altered the political consciousness and generational outlook of gays and lesbians coming of age in contemporary society. Whereas “coming out” was a central struggle in the lives of gay men and lesbians in the past, it is now less of a struggle. Youth coming of age in post-closet settings face a different set of challenges than their predecessors, including being framed in narrow ways, negotiating new sexual identities, and navigating the combination of mainstream gay politics with different strategies that are more fitting to their nascent identities (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Driver 2008; Ghaziani 2011; Miceli 2005; Savin-Williams 2005a; Schindel 2008; Talburt et al. 2004; Weststrate and McLean 2010). In addition, sexual identities
have become more tertiary in post-closet contexts, with many considering sexuality more of a “thread” to their identity rather than constitutive of their “core” identity (Savin-Williams 2005a; Seidman 2002). As a new “movement generation” (Ross 1983), gay and lesbian youth may be armed with a distinct political consciousness that has consequences for the larger movement in terms of the impact of new identities and strategic repertoires, as well as potential intergenerational conflict.

Oftentimes social movements face distinct periods of rapid change. While “social movement transition periods” (Whittier 1995) can be attributed to many possible explanations, ranging from changes in the external environment (Meyer 2004; Tarrow 1998) or the tightening of resources (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978) to changes in internal movement dynamics such as infighting or dissent (Ghaziani 2008), a generational model of movement change remains under-theorized. The impact of cohort replacement and intergenerational dynamics are key internal movement components that are often overlooked, despite their considerable potential impact on movements. Generational processes brought change to the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s (Ross 1983) and to the women’s movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Schneider 1988; Whittier 1995; 1997); it is quite feasible that the post-closet socio-historical contexts emerging in the 1990s have spurred a transition period within the contemporary gay and lesbian movement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how LGBTQ youth emerging from post-closet contexts are constitutive of a new movement generation by documenting their navigations of collective identities, priorities, and strategies that can influence change in the larger movement.
Sociological Significance

The potential contributions of this study to the fields of social movements and sexuality are numerous. Generational dynamics in social movements are undertheorized, despite their impact on collective identities and strategies. Movements such as the LGBTQ rights movement have remained vital and relevant for decades, with multiple generations of participants involved. Recognition of the inevitable shifts that occur due to generational factors will contribute important insight into the dynamics of long-term social movements and help to elaborate a generational model of movement change. In addition to contributing to the social movement field, this study will also lend significant insight into the changing shape of sexuality in post-closet contexts. Contemporary youth are coming of age in a context of rapidly changing social and cultural sexual mores; however, the understanding of the ways in which youth construct their sexual identities remains insufficient. In the context of rapid social change, it is important to note the shifting identities will potentially transform the LGBTQ movement.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this dissertation, I use various terms that require additional specification for the sake of clarity. In this section, I comment briefly on the definitions underlying my use of several key terms.

LGBTQ: There is certainly no dearth of terminology to describe members of the gay and lesbian community and movement (see Armstrong 2002 for a detailed description of the various uses of these terms over time). As often as possible, I use the acronym LGBTQ to describe the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community. While my intention is to use this term as inclusively as possible, it is with the recognition that much of the work done on behalf of the LGBTQ community is often restricted to the first two groups represented in that acronym, with the BTQ communities left marginalized. It should also be noted that I use the terms “LGBTQ,”
“gay and lesbian,” “gay,” and “queer” interchangeably throughout the dissertation simply to break the monotony of using a single term. However, the terms “gay” and “gay and lesbian” are meant to be inclusive of all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer identities, unless otherwise specified. In discussing changes in the identities of sexual minorities over time, I note the significance of social context for understanding the implications of certain terms, showing how specific definitions depend on context. For example, I am careful to point out that “queer” in the 1990s had a very unique definition, which differs in significant ways from prior and subsequent definitions.

Social Movement and Activism: It is also important to qualify what is meant by such terms as the LGBTQ “social movement” and “activism” within that movement. Social movement scholars vary greatly in their definition of what comprises a social movement. Political process and contentious politics approaches continue to place a large emphasis on the role of the state as a necessary target (McAdam et al. 2001; Tilly 2004). However, such an assumption results in too narrow a definition to capture movements that are also oriented toward cultural change, such as the LGBTQ movement. Recent theoretical development in the field recognizes the changing shape of social movements to include more complex and diffuse dynamics than previously considered (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). Therefore, my conception of social movement stems from Armstrong and Bernstein’s multi-institutional politics approach that offers a more inclusive understanding of movements (2008). A social movement is thus comprised of collective actors working to challenge domination not only by targeting the state, but also the multiple institutions and cultural meaning systems that comprise society (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008). For the purposes of this project, I will refer to the US LGBTQ movement
generally, while acknowledging there is vast internal differentiation (Epstein 1999) and a multiplicity of local movements and perspectives within.

I refer to social movement “activism” throughout this dissertation and rely on youth who have “engaged in activism” for my sample of queer youth. For the purposes of this study, I define activism as a wide variety of political and cultural actions aimed at producing social change. In their lengthy discussion on activism in the feminist community, Baumgardner and Richards similarly define activism as everyday acts of defiance (2000: 283). I define activism in such a broad manner for two main reasons. First, I want to capture a variety of social movement activities and involvement. Relying on a broad conception of activism allows for not only capturing the vast experiences of activism, it also allows for the possibility of new cultural repertoires of action to emerge among youth (Taylor et al. 2009). Second, the concept of activism is somewhat contentious in the social movement literature. Throughout much of the literature, activist identities are assumed among social movement participants (for example, see Hunt and Benford 2004). Researchers, such as Bobel, suggest that we miss important elements of activism by assuming that all social movement participants self-identify as “activists” (2007). In her empirical work on participants in the Menstrual Movement, Bobel finds a difference between “doing activism” and “being activist”; although many movement participants engage in various types of activism, fewer self-identify as activists because of the inability to live up to a perceived conception of an activist identity which requires one to “live the issue” and offer complete dedication to the cause (2007). With this in mind, I maintain a broad definition of activism for the purposes of the study’s analytical framework and sample design, making it clear that types of activism can vary greatly and can exist more on an everyday level.
Youth: I use the term “youth” throughout the dissertation to refer broadly to both adolescents and young adults approximately 25 years of age and younger. Although this delineation is relatively arbitrary, it is commonly used by youth organizations as a cutoff point in providing services and I have defined youth in this way to be consistent with those definitions.

Overview of Dissertation

In this dissertation, I begin by discussing the role of generations in social movements. I provide a brief overview of the political generations literature, highlighting the empirical and theoretical work that points to the significance of generational processes and cohort replacement as key explanations of social movement change. I then provide a brief overview of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States over the past 40 years, detailing major shifts in strategy and goals over the years. I describe the changing social construction of sexuality throughout this period as well and the resultant changes in LGBTQ identities over the years. The combination of movement changes and socio-cultural changes around sexuality combine to create a unique “post-closet” social context in which many of today’s generation of youth come of age, characterized by the diminished significance of the closet, increased gay visibility, and normalization. I next review the empirical research on queer youth, highlighting the core tensions faced by this particular generation of youth, including being framed in narrow ways, negotiating new identities, and walking the line between mainstream activism and alternatives.

I follow the review of the literature with a discussion of the major theoretical gaps in generational models of movement change. While the significance of generational factors is a given in any long-term movement, the lack of serious empirical and theoretical attention is remarkable. Given the rapid social and cultural change surrounding sexuality in recent years, the gay and lesbian movement is ripe for generational analysis. Furthermore, additional insight is
needed to properly understand the ways queer youth are navigating new sexual identities and incorporating those identities into activism, as discrepancies plague the limited findings that exist. I then describe the project’s analytical framework, summarizing and outlining the key analytical concepts used in the study. I argue that an elaborated generational model of movement change is needed to better understand how long-term movements change over time and how LGBTQ youth are positioned as a post-closet movement generation poised to influence the direction of the larger gay and lesbian movement. Recognition of a new post-closet movement generation within the LGBTQ movement is key for revealing shifts in the movement’s collective identities. Post-closet youth face unique challenges in negotiating collective identities, with varying negotiations creating different micro-cohorts of activists. Attention to the ways youth navigate collective identity, engage in activism, and comprise varying micro-cohorts allows us to develop a deeper understanding of generational dynamics in movements.

In Chapter Three, I describe the methodology used in the present study. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 40 LGBTQ youth who came of age in post-closet settings and have participated in activism. These interviews allow for an examination of the impact of post-closet settings on contemporary activism in the gay rights movement, as well as contribute to the theoretical debate regarding generational dynamics in social movements. The results of the study are presented in Chapters Four through Six. Chapter Four begins by detailing the three college contexts that emerged in the sample that are significant for comparative purposes, and then lays out the key characteristics of and resources available to the post-closet generation. I find the majority of queer youth in this sample came out rather quickly and without incident to supportive families. A shift appears to be emerging in the coming out story of many youth in the sample from a monumental coming out to one of less significance and, in some
cases, even non-necessity. The numerous resources available to most post-closet youth, including supportive high school environments, GSAs, and on-line resources and communities, assist in easier disclosures to family and friends and allow for more personalized negotiations of sexual and gender identities. Chapter Five focuses on the ways youth are navigating the narrow victim frame by negotiating sexual and gender identities in ways that resist normalized queer youth identities. Chapter Six discusses the empirical results regarding how post-closet youth are constructing collective identities at the three college contexts and engaging in activism in sometimes new and different ways. Chapter Seven concludes the dissertation with a brief discussion of the implications of its findings, limitations, and directions for future research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Generational Change in Social Movements

Introduction

The body of literature documenting explanations of change in long-term social movements is vast. Shifts in major characteristics of movements, such as strategies, tactics, and ideologies, are inevitable as some movements endure for decades amidst changing social, economic, and cultural contexts. In this section, I provide a detailed review of the literature suggesting the potency of generational dynamics in explanations of movement change. With rapid social change comes the formation of new generations with unique worldviews and political outlooks. These new activist cohorts create different collective identities based on the combination of internal movement dynamics and external political climates they face when they are first politicized in a movement (Whittier 1997). Over time, cohort replacement then contributes to movement transition periods, where the movement struggles to define their collective identity (Whittier 1997). I then discuss the rapid social and cultural changes that have occurred over the past several decades with regard to gay politics and culture in the United States, positioning contemporary gay youth as a new movement generation with the potential to influence the future of the gay rights movement.

Any movement that endures for decades is bound to adapt and transform itself over time; otherwise, movements would fail to thrive in ever-shifting socio-political climates. While some studies focus on why certain movements decline over time (e.g., McAdam 1999), a more expansive body of research examines the changes movements make towards sustaining themselves over time. The role of external environments in explaining shifts in social movements is well addressed in the literature. A combined political process and resource mobilization approach developed over the past several decades has produced a substantial body of research
relying heavily on structural and political factors for the explanations surrounding movement transformations (McAdam et al. 2001). Shifts in the political climate and opportunities (Meyer 2004; Tarrow 1998), as well as in resources and mobilizing structures (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978), are well-documented explanations for changes in the shape and direction of movements over time. Additional external factors, such as the influence of other movements (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Meyer and Whittier 1994; Minkoff 1997) also impact movements considerably. While the influence of a movement’s external environment is unequivocal in understanding movement shifts, the role of internal movement factors is less concretized in the literature, especially in relation to generational impact.

Various internal movement dynamics drive innovation and change within movements. This considerable field of research can be categorized into four general areas (although they are not mutually exclusive): ideological, cultural, organizational, and generational shifts. Ideological differences and internal debates concerning the main values and visions of a movement are often catalysts for internal movement change (Armstrong 2002; Ghaziani 2008). For example, the ideological polarization resulting from the 1960s movements led to distinctive changes in the early gay movement, while ideological differences in the early women’s movement created the two competing strands of cultural and liberal feminism (Armstrong 2002). Ghaziani demonstrates that although ideological infighting and dissent are often considered damaging for movements, within the gay rights movement, they have proven generative (2008). Infighting and dissent allow activists opportunities to reflect on the “state of the movement” and engage in conversations that would otherwise not exist, which can lead to changes in strategy and identity (Ghaziani 2008: 5-6).
A vast literature explores cultural explanations of shifts in social movements. For example, framing disputes and internal movement culture shifts can produce changes in strategies and identities (Armstrong 2002; Hunt and Benford 1994; Snow and Benford 2000; Taylor and Whittier 1995). Additionally, changes in a movement’s “emotion culture” can contribute to shifts in key strategies, as seen in the gay movement around the time of the initial AIDS crisis and rise of direct action strategies (Gould 2001; Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2000). Other explanations of movement change focusing on internal factors include organizational models (within a vast literature, see, for example, McCarthy and Zald 1977). For example, empirical studies demonstrate that shifts in organizational leadership contribute significantly to changes in strategy as well as identity deployment (see Armstrong 2002; Whittier 1995).

While each of these areas has proven fruitful in providing insight into major shifts in the strategies and identities of movements, generational models of change remain a promising, yet under-theorized area of analysis. Stemming from a political generations approach, studies based largely on the women’s movement have yielded considerable insight into generational dynamics of movement change (Ross 1983; Whittier 1995; 1997; 2006). I now turn my attention to an overview of the political generations literature and discuss the emergence of generational models of movement change.

**Political Generations**

The impacts of generations, and specifically youth generations, have long intrigued social scientists. In fact, Braungart and Braungart remind us that interest in generational dynamics can be traced to the ancient Greeks, with Plato identifying “generational strife” as a key force for social change and Aristotle attributing political revolutions to conflicts between not only rich and poor but also fathers and sons (1986: 206). With the rise of the New Left and student
movements in the 1960s, scholars became increasingly interested in explaining why this particular generation of youth was politicized in the way that it was. A variety of disciplines, including developmental and cognitive psychology, as well as sociology, began the quest to tease out the roles that generations play in political endeavors. However, generational processes within social movements, especially significant in times of rapid social change, are often overlooked and comprise an inadequately theorized area of social movement theory (Whittier 1995; 1997).

In this section, I begin by providing a brief overview of the relationship between generations and politics in the sociological literature and then examine the ways generations are incorporated into theories of social movement change.

Karl Mannheim’s “The Problem of Generations” is often considered the seminal theoretical account of generations and politics (1954). In this classic statement, Mannheim laid the initial groundwork for a generational explanation of movement participation and for subsequent models seeking to explain how generational processes within movements contribute to change (Ross 1983; Whittier 1995; 1997). Central to Mannheim’s formulation of “generation” is the notion that successive age cohorts experience historical conditions differently than those before them. Shared formative socio-historical experiences during youth shape a generation with a common interpretive framework. Furthermore, the political attitudes and behaviors developed during youth will remain consistent and endure over time (Mannheim 1954).

Since Mannheim’s early statements on generations, many scholars have turned their attention to the concept and its relevance to politics. Generations have been examined in relation to politics in numerous and varied ways. One reason for this varied treatment can be traced to the ambiguity surrounding the concept itself. The concept of age underlying definitions of
generations is problematic because it refers to two separate issues – life-course development and generational difference (Braungart and Braungart 1986). Overall, the concept of generation has been examined in two general ways: (1) life-course politics and (2) generational politics conceptualized in three specific ways: (a) lineage (b) cohort and (c) political generations (Braungart and Braungart 1986). I provide a brief overview of each of these approaches in order to situate the study of generational impact within social movements.

Life-course studies of generations assume a psychological approach to the life-cycle and believe that as people age, they undergo certain changes that are “sequential, irreversible, and for the most part universal” (Braungart and Braungart 1986: 208). Studies in this realm seek to identify common features associated with various life-cycle stages in hopes of shedding light on the larger relationship between age and politics. Politics in youth is a central concern in this approach. Scholars emphasize that youth is a period to establish independence and discover one’s true identity and that cognitive changes during this time set the stage for greater political awareness and heightened critical ability (Braungart and Braungart 1986). Youth is therefore considered an important time for the development of political attitudes and behaviors. Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart note the availability of youth, especially students between the ages of 18-25, for social movements; they say, “They are embedded in friendship networks and the ‘free spaces’ of schools and universities that are characterized by the exchange of ideas, intellectual curiosity, and criticism” (2000: 675). Also, during this time young people are especially likely to be critical of their elders’ opinions about society in general and politics in specific. This has been interpreted to mean that youth have a “predisposition” to generational conflict, rebellion and revolution; youth reject older generations and act out of emotional conflicts in politics (Braungart and Braungart 1986). It follows that empirically we see the young comprising the
majority of social and political revolutions since the 1830s (M. Braungart 1984). Studies of the “Sixties Generation” that were interested in explaining the “source” of movement activism among youth at the time in part drew from such life-course studies of human behavior (M. Braungart 1984; Braungart and Braungart 1986).

Braungart and Braungart (1986) argue that much of the life-course approach to politics, however, ignores the socio-historical context of activism and focuses too heavily on the biopsychological processes at stake at each stage of the life-cycle instead. For example, the authors note: “Student protest in the 1960s against Vietnam is interpreted as largely due to the high energy levels and rebellious nature of youth, neglecting the political and historical issue of the war itself” (Braungart and Braungart 1986: 213). The socio-historical context does play a significant role in the generational politics literature focusing on lineage, cohort and political generations. Studies stemming from a lineage politics perspective examine the impact of generations (in the “kinship” sense) on politics. Using insight from the family socialization literature, emphasis is placed on determining whether parents transmit political attitudes and behaviors to their offspring in ways that problematize findings of life-cycle studies. Empirical evidence suggests this is in fact the case (Flacks 1967; McAdam 1988). For example, Keniston points out that many student activists during the sixties were “red diaper babies” (1968). Contrary to evidence from the life-course perspective, lineage studies find a moderate amount of political agreement between parents and offspring (Braungart and Braungart 1986; DeMartini 1992; McAdam 1988).

Another approach of scholars studying generational politics is to explore the impact of age cohorts. Simply defined, a cohort is a group of people born in the same time interval. Studies examine the political trajectories of particular cohorts who experienced dramatic historical
events such as war, economic depression, and rapid cultural change. Braungart and Braungart summarize the situation as follows: “When society changes rapidly and cohorts come of age under different conditions, the members of each cohort year are likely to develop their own perception and style of politics which, if substantially different from the experiences of others, may provoke generational conflict.” (1986: 215).

When an age cohort is directed toward influencing change it is considered a “political generation.” Studies utilizing a political generations approach recognize that shared cohort membership can result in the development of an age-group consciousness that is at odds with other age groups in society; cohorts that then mobilize as an active force for political change become political generations (Braungart and Braungart 1986). Political generations form as a result of a combination of historical circumstances and mobilization forces (R. Braungart 1984; Tilly 1978). Esler summarizes the situation as follows: “The institutional structures and social mores of a society, the trends and traumatic events of that slice of history might combine to produce a social generation that is sociologically “real” and as important as social class or ethnic group” (1984: 100). Esler develops the concept of “collective mentality,” or the autonomous root-level structures of thought and feeling present in a generation, to describe the consciousness of a political generation (1984). The Baby Boom Generation, for example, possessed such a collective mentality with their sense of “generational potency coupled with an unbridled optimism” which contributed to making them prime candidates for collective political action (McAdam 1988: 17). Generations can be broken down further into smaller generational units, or “members of a generation who work up their common experiences in a similar ideological or attitudinally distinctive way” (Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart 2000: 673). For example, the civil rights movement was initiated by a generation unit that was highly influenced by World War II.
While these models offer insight into the generational dynamics of political and social movement participation, as well as intergenerational conflict and accord in general society (R. Braungart 1984), they lack explicit attention to the role generations play within movements. Limited theoretical and empirical work exists on the impact of generational dynamics within social movements; however, the existing evidence does suggest that generations play a critical role in directing change within movements (Klatch 1999; Ross 1983; Schneider 1988; Whittier 1995; 1997; 2006). I now turn to a detailed description of the literature emerging from the political generations field that demonstrates the significance of generational change within social movements.

Generational Change within Social Movements

Generational dynamics are especially relevant in long-term movements. When movements persist for decades amidst changing socio-historical contexts, incoming cohorts of activists possess different worldviews than their predecessors. Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart emphasize the significance of generational factors for any large-scale, long-term movement (2000), and Schneider notes that, “[social movements] with depth in analysis and breadth in potential constituents, are necessarily constituted of members who differ in age, historical generation, and movement generation” (Schneider 1988: 9, emphasis mine). A “movement generation” is defined by Ross as a cohort within a movement that has a sense of common identity or “esprit de corps” that is a potential carrier of change for social movements (1983). Generations within movements can contribute to internal movement conflicts, changes in the types of tactics and organizational forms of a movement, and shifts in identities, strategies, and ideologies (Ross 1983; Schneider 1988; Whittier 1995; 1997). Empirically, such generational impacts have been documented most notably in the women’s movement (Reger 2012; Schneider
1988; Whittier 1995; 1997; 2006), and more marginally in the New Left (Klatch 1999) and civil rights (Ross 1983) movements. In this section, I review the theoretical and empirical research on generational dynamics within social movements before moving on to a discussion of the social and cultural changes that have occurred in gay identities and the subsequent shifts in the gay movement over the past several decades.

Whittier offers the most detailed model of generational impacts on social movements to date (1995; 1997; 2006). In her analyses of continuity and change in the women’s movement, she provides insight into how generational dynamics function in long-term movements. She proposes three main generational processes that contribute to explaining continuity and change in movements: (1) the collective identity of an activist cohort remains consistent over time; (2) cohorts construct different collective identities based on the external contexts and internal conditions of the movement at the time they enter; and (3) cohort replacement contributes to change in movements (Whittier 1995; 1997). Attention to these three processes reveals insight into how movements shift and respond to incoming cohorts of new activists over time.

The first process Whittier describes helps to explain the stability and continuity that occur over time within movements. The “collective identity” of a given cohort, or distinct group definition and perspective on the world and on social movements, will remain stable and consistent over time (Whittier 2006). However, as new cohorts enter long-term movements, the shifts in external and internal contexts will contribute to the formation of different collective identities. It is these new identities and eventual cohort replacement that contribute to noticeable transformations in social movements.

Whittier argues that the construction of collective identity is dependent on the combination of two factors: the external contexts surrounding a movement and the internal
movement dynamics at the time of entry (1995; 1997). In her study of the women’s movement in Columbus, OH, she describes the shifts in these two areas that contributed to the development of distinct political generations within the movement and subsequent changes in collective identities. Whittier uses the concept of political generation to conceptualize this “intersection of internal identities and processes with external opportunities and culture” (Whittier 2006: 46). As conditions change both inside and outside the movement, individuals who are politicized at the same time and place form new political generations with shared collective identities (Klatch 1999; Whittier 1995; 1997; 2006).

Whittier points to the three distinct political generations that are evident in the women’s movement. Over the years, the women’s movement has been popularly conceived of and analyzed in terms of these political generations, which are generally referred to as “waves” of the movement. The first wave describes the period preceding women’s suffrage and continuing until the late 1960s and stemmed itself from two distinct generations of activists (Freeman 1999). The second wave refers to the peak of feminist activism that arose from the late 1960s through the 1970s, also labeled the “younger branch” of feminism, or at various times “grassroots,” “radical,” “cultural,” or “lesbian” feminisms (Whittier 2006). The third wave, although less of a “peak” of activity than the prior waves, is evidenced by the “new generation” of feminist groups and actions that emerged in the 1990s who were critical of second wave feminism (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005: 49). Each wave of participants constructed its own enduring collective identity, depending on the movement context and external mobilizing conditions when they entered the movement, and constructed its own version of feminism (Whittier 1997).

Whittier’s studies describe in detail the period of transition in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a time when third wave feminists began emerging in the movement (1995; 1997; 2006).
Women coming of age during this time had drastically different experiences than those who came of age in prior decades due in large part to new cultural norms surrounding gender and gender inequality (Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Whittier 2006). Largely a result of the successes of second wave feminism, women now had very different perspectives about the types of problems and their solutions (Whittier 2006). As a result, third wave feminists “redefined priorities and reconceptualized the meaning of feminism” (Whittier 1995: 4). The internal movement context at the time was heavily influenced by the emergence of anti-identity politics of the nineties (such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation) and, thus, third wave feminists connected gender issues more concretely to issues of race, class and sexuality. In addition, the external context for many third wavers consisted of a more hospitable political climate, with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. The development of a new generational collective identity among third wave feminists, therefore, prompted major shifts in organizational goals and strategies, ideological interpretations, and movement culture, with a central focus on intersectionality and the rise of more playful militant tactics (Whittier 1995; 2006).

Over time, cohort replacement contributes to substantial change in movements. Whittier describes “movement transition periods” that occur as new cohorts of activists enter and struggle to define the movement’s collective identity (1995). The third wave generation of activists entering the movement under unique socio-historical contexts resulted in a change of course for the women’s movement. Whittier notes, “As feminist organizations and the women’s movement community grew larger and more established, new recruits took initial feminist demands for granted and emphasized new issues” (1995: 253). The changes that occurred reflect both shifts in external conditions as well as the effects of “an intergenerational redefinition” of feminist collective identity (Whittier 1997: 775, emphasis mine). As older cohorts lost political influence,
the organizations they founded decline and were replaced with the organizations and efforts of new cohorts (Whittier 1997). However, such decline rarely happens rapidly and completely, as second wave feminism continues alongside third wave generations today. According to Whittier, the *co-existence* of multiple political generations enables the movement to be dynamic and progressively move forward, with subsequent movement change being extremely important to survival over time (2006).

The existence of multiple co-existing generations of activists has been recognized in the LGBTQ movement as well (Bohan et al. 2002; Cohler and Hammack 2006; Floyd and Bakeman 2006; Herdt and Boxer 1993; Parks 1999; Russell and Bohan 2005) and acknowledgement of their significance is apparent in most historical accounts of the gay movement. However, studies exploring the impact of generations on activism explicitly are lacking and no studies yet address the current generation of post-closet youth for their role in an ever-changing movement. Studies focusing on cohort differences in the gay movement stem largely from psychological life course perspectives seeking to elaborate on the importance of culture and history in determining identity development. In their study, *Children of Horizons*, Herdt and Boxer rely on Elder’s (1974) concept of historical age cohort (a defining group of persons whose coming of age occurred within particular sociohistorical conditions) for defining cohorts in the gay movement (1996: 8). The authors determine the following cohorts of participants: Cohort 1 (1910)–coming of age prior to WWI, characterized by hidden or discreet same-sex behavior, and lacked gay/homosexual labels due to the social categories not existing at the time; Cohort 2 (1940)–coming of age during WWII, characterized by the closet and secrecy, new opportunities to meet others because of war, but culture of secrecy and suspicion brought on by Cold War era; Cohort 3 (1969)–coming of age with the radicalism and politicization of sexuality associated with
Stonewall and gay liberation, coming out of closet key (disdain for closeted homosexuals of prior cohorts); Cohort 4 (1983)–coming of age during the AIDS epidemic, fear of AIDS, but expectations to live one’s life openly (Herdt and Boxer 1996). Parks similarly demonstrates the significance of generation for sexual identity development and behavior among lesbians (1999). In a similar classification, she compares the “pre-Stonewall,” “gay liberation,” and “gay rights” generations and finds key differences in the age of self-awareness, first sexual contact, disclosure and differences in labeling across generations (Parks 1999). Additionally, Cohler and Hammack examine the life story narratives of three prominent gay men to show how identity development is culturally and historically bound, with generational differences substantially altering one’s life course (2006). Other studies explore communication barriers that exist between different generations (Bohan et al. 2002; Russell and Bohan 2006). While the importance of different generations is presumed throughout these studies, they do not detail the ways in which generational differences (as a result of shifting internal and external contexts, detailed in the following section titled, *LGBTQ Movement and Youth*) impact activism and contribute to movement change; the focus instead is limited to shifting sexual identities and behavior differences.

Conflict that occurs between generations is also responsible for a certain amount of movement change (Ghaziani 2008; Ross 1983). While not an explicit focus of his study of dissent and infighting in the gay rights movement, Ghaziani suggests that generational conflict can be generative of new ideas and directions (2008). Similarly, Whittier notes the conflicts that occur between second and third wave feminists, with second wave feminists tending to ignore the contributions and existence of third wave feminists, and third wavers wrongly assuming that their predecessors failed to engage the topics such as race and sexuality (2006). Despite such
conflicts, Whittier points to the substantial mutual influence between the generations (2006). Reger, for example, claims that in long-term, multigenerational movements such as the feminist movement, the conflict between generations speaks to the success of earlier generations: “the second wave feminist generation has shaped the society and the discourse, giving young women something to build upon and reject (2012: 193). She argues that when contemporary feminists fail to understand aspects of second wave feminism, such as what the coat hanger symbolizes, it speaks to the successes of second wave feminism and the resultant changes to culture (Reger 2012).

Not all conflict directly results in movement transformation. In an early study of generational change in social movements, Gusfield demonstrates the consequences of age-group conflict on organizational stability in the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) (1957). Building on Mannheim’s concept of political generations, Gusfield examines the different “political and social styles and modes of thought” that resulted from generational differences during the Temperance movement (1957: 323). In the pre-prohibition period the WCTU functioned as part of a general reform movement with humanitarian aims; abstinence from alcohol was viewed as the solution to the problems of poverty. After the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, however, younger members set themselves apart from older members by lessening their emphasis on the controversial prohibition issue. Despite generational conflicts about the direction of WCTU, Gusfield shows how organizational structure can inhibit change through the “existence of tenure and succession traditions” (1957: 327). Thus, he finds that older generations were less willing to change tactics and past policy than newer generations. Gusfield demonstrates empirically how certain movements are able to resist generational change for a period. Although long-term organizations such as the WCTU contained a great deal of
generational conflict, shifts in tactics and policies were kept at bay for decades because of its organizational structure (Gusfield 1957). The impact of generational conflict, therefore, depends heavily on the context and extent of the conflict, with movements able to stave off change from new generations for a period of time.

Another study seeking to explore the internal impacts of generations is Ross’ examination of the civil rights movement during 1965-1966 (1983). In this study, Ross explores the impact of primary group ties and generational difference within Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the New Left. He finds that when a new movement generation fails to be integrated into pre-existing circles of intimacy, as in the case of SDS, it will form cliques and circles of their own, contributing to organizational change (1983). Alternatively, the potential for change is lessened when new members are sufficiently integrated into the older generation’s primary group ties. Although the study was somewhat limited in the scope of generational analysis, Ross concludes that when generational differences emerge in a movement, organizational changes are not only dependent on the extent of those differences, but also the ability of older generations to incorporate new cohorts (1983). The lack of older generations to incorporate new members creates a generation gap that must be navigated within the movement.

Discussions of “generation gaps” are common in analyses of movements with multiple generations of activists (Bohan et al. 2002; Herdt and Boxer 1996; Russell and Bohan 2005; Whittier 2006). Within the gay movement, Herdt and Boxer note that the older cohorts have had little to no contact with the gay and lesbian youth of Cohort 4 (1996). The authors point to Margaret Mead’s concept of a generation gap to describe a strong political and social disjunction between the past and present, which they believe is reflected in the disjuncture between youth (in the nineties) and older gay adults. The authors point to the fear of stereotypes that portray
homosexuals as preying upon youth as the primary reason for the distance, which is similar to other studies explaining the gap between gay adults and youth (Bohan et al. 2002; Russell and Bohan 2005). Whittier, however, offers an alternative definition of a generation gap as it pertains to cohorts of activists within a movement (1997; 2006). She notes that a generation gap will emerge in a movement when there is a period of time when a new cohort does not enter a movement’s organizations (Whittier 1997; 2006). She writes, “Because few activists joined grassroots feminist organizations during the early and mid-1980s, the changes in collective identity were not continuous but had a gap of several years; consequently, earlier and later entrants had fewer overlapping networks and relationships” (Whittier 2006: 58). The generation gap between the two generations of feminists exacerbated the conflicts they would have over new issues embraced by third wave feminists, such as transgender issues and anti-identity politics (Whittier 2006).

Despite recognizing the conflicts that emerge between different feminist generations, Whittier is careful to not lump the diverse and multifaceted activism of each generation into one cohesive unit (1995; 1997). She argues that asserting the “Second” or “Third Wave” of feminism, a common occurrence, fails to recognize the many differences that exist within political generations (Whittier 1995:17). Whittier continues, “Popular views of generations as characterized by a collective spirit or zeitgeist (such as ‘the Sixties generation’ or ‘Generation X’) gloss over subtle variations within political generations” (1995: 17, emphasis in original). Political generations within social movements are not homogenous; Whittier argues that there are “more finely graduated groups” or “clusters of participants who enter a social movement within a year or two of each other and are shaped by distinct transformative experiences that differ because of the subtle shifts in the political context” (1997: 762). These “micro-cohorts” may
form as often as every one or two years during periods of rapid movement change (usually
during movement peaks). Micro-cohorts within political generations share a basic common
perspective that unites them and distinguishes them from other political generations.

In her analysis of the women’s movement, Whittier identifies four different micro-
cohorts specific to radical feminism in Columbus in the 1970s, with subtle differences in
collective identity and key concerns (1995). A different micro-cohort could be identified as
entering the movement every few years during the period of 1969–1979, characterized by the
different second wave movement phases of emergence, growth, heyday, and decline (see
Whittier 1995 for an elaboration of the four micro-cohorts). Each micro-cohort emphasized
slightly different issues and held different opinions in movement disputes. Over time, the micro-
cohorts gradually shifted the movement, as each “adapted existing structures and strategies to
changing external obstacles, took advantage of new resources as they became available, and
made do as resources and political access shrunk” (Whittier 1995: 253).

The concept of “micro-cohort” allows for multiple and diverse experiences that are fixed
together in an overarching political generation. Some view Whittier’s (1995; 1997) notion of
micro-cohorts as a corrective to an overly simplistic characterization of the feminist movement
(Naples 2005; Reger and Story 2005). It allows for the recognition of the subtle differences that
exist in the collective identities of feminists within a shared political generation and reveals
important internal movement dynamics (Whittier 1997: 769). Additional research has used the
concept of micro-cohort to elaborate on differences within political generations (Johnston and
Aaerlaid-Tart 2000; Reger and Story 2005). Reger and Story, for example, demonstrate the ways
in which different micro-cohorts are formed within third wave feminism (2005). The authors
show how The Vagina Monologues, as an event of contemporary feminism, can shape different
micro-cohorts of activists in substantially dissimilar ways, depending on community context (2005). Two empirical cases of students producing The Vagina Monologues on college campuses are presented. In one setting, characterized by a dearth of feminist activism, the play spurred the creation of an empowered feminist community; in the other, characterized by a more entrenched feminist community, the play was met with ambivalence and criticism (Reger and Story 2005). Depending on the specific community context, the production of the play spurred the creation of two very different micro-cohorts of activists.

Reger’s study on contemporary feminism in three communities across the country offers an important contribution to the generational study of the women’s movement and further demonstrates the significance of micro-cohorts within movements (2012). In the face of claims that feminism is “dead” and that society has entered a “post-feminist” age, Reger instead shows how contemporary feminism is alive and well; however, she notes that, “unless you look, the communities are largely invisible” (2012: 187). Reger “looked” at three communities across the country and found three different types of feminism (focused, submerged, and linked queer feminisms) that were very much dependent on the local contexts in which they were situated. She further shows how the contemporary generation of feminists is shaped by current socio-cultural contexts, but also by previous, co-existing political generations. In recognizing the overlap that exists between generations, and rejecting a “wave metaphor,” she argues that the more complex relationships between activist generations can be revealed (Reger 2012).

Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart also use the micro-cohort concept to delineate generational influence in the Estonian National Movement from 1940 to 1991 (2000). Utilizing the concept in a slightly different sense, the authors point to the activist groups within four larger political generations that shaped the movement in significant ways (Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart 2000:
The authors note a “strong generational imprint” on the movement’s abeyance periods and mobilization trajectory and document the ways that different micro-cohorts used master frames and adapted to shifting political contexts to keep the movement alive over time (Johnston and Aaerlaid-Tart 2000: 672). Understanding the subtle differences in collective identity that exist within larger political generations enables analyses of long-term movements to reveal a more complex network of internal shifts and adaptations to changing political and historical contexts.

Intergenerational dynamics within social movements are key to understanding how movements transform over time. Understanding how collective identities of political generations shift in response to both internal and external contexts and how the creation of new activist cohorts is key to analyzing change in movements over time. Despite the advances made toward developing a generational model of analyzing change in movements, there remains much work to be done. Popular media continue to misinterpret the differences that emerge in new activist generations as representative of the end of a movement (Schneider 1988). While it is now more widely accepted and documented that feminism remains alive and well and we have not entered a “post-feminist” phase (see Reger 2012), popular conceptions of a new generation of “apathetic gay youth” are threatening to obscure the work being done by this new generation of young activists. I turn now to a consideration of the major cultural shifts in sexuality and the gay movement that situate the current generation of queer youth perfectly for generational analysis. In addition, I summarize the existing empirical literature on queer youth.

**LGBTQ Movement and Youth**

*Introduction*

Although there is compelling evidence suggesting an important role of generations in shaping social movements over time and the influence of generational differences have been acknowledged, no empirical research systematically examines the role generations play in the
US gay rights movement. This omission is problematic, as shifts in gay life and politics over the past several decades have positioned youth as a new generation with the potential to be a powerful force in shaping the movement. In this section, I discuss the major shifts that have occurred in gay and lesbian politics and culture and describe the unique socio-historical context in which queer youth come out today. I then summarize the empirical research on queer youth activism before turning to a discussion of gaps in the literature.

Shifts in US LGBTQ Politics and Culture, 1969–Present

The Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 is often considered the inception of the modern gay rights movement in the United States. In the almost fifty years since Stonewall, however, the movement for gay rights has undergone several considerable shifts. The movement’s broad-based, revolutionary roots of the late 1960s–early 1970s has yielded over time to an increasingly narrow and mainstream rights-based approach that endures today. In addition, shifts in LGBTQ politics were paralleled by dramatic transformations in the cultural status of LGBTQ individuals. Ever-evolving social constructions of sexuality and LGBTQ identities, accompanied by increasing normalization, incorporation, and social tolerance, have fashioned a cultural status of LGBTQ people that is invariably different from past decades. The combination of these political and cultural changes positions today’s LGBTQ youth in unique “post-closet” socio-political contexts that have consequences for how they participate in the LGBTQ movement. Specifically, youth activists face a different set of challenges than their predecessors; coming of age in post-closet contexts produces several core tensions youth must negotiate. It is the navigation of these tensions that make LGBTQ youth activists especially poised for considerable generational impact within the movement. I now turn to a brief overview of the specific political and cultural shifts that, combined, have led to the creation of the current “post-closet” era.
While organizing for gay rights began long before the late 1960s/early 1970s (the 1950s homophile movement is a well known example of early gay organizing; see D’Emilio 1983 and Esterberg 1994 for accounts of sexual politics prior to Stonewall), the onset of gay liberation via the Stonewall Riots in 1969 marked the emergence of a modern gay rights movement. The social context of the late 1960s, especially with its increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex and personal freedoms, was a time ripe for the emergence of radical challenges to gay and lesbian oppression (Seidman 1997). Militant activists, armed with their experiences in the social movements of the 1960s, such as the New Left, student movements, civil rights, and the emerging women’s movement, organized for revolutionary change to sexuality, gender roles, and social oppression in general.

Throughout the early 1970s, several organizations, such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), emerged and engaged in confrontational, direct-action campaigns through “zaps” (i.e., actions aimed at disrupting the normal, everyday routines of their opponents through interrupting meetings, holding sit-ins, garnering media attention, etc.) (Epstein 1999). Most notable among early liberation efforts was the successful campaign to remove homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental illnesses in 1973. However, liberationists sought to challenge wider societal conceptions of gender and sexuality through an emphasis on consciousness-raising and coming out; as D’Emilio and Freedman points out, gay liberationists reveled in the discomfort they provoked in others via their public disruptions of traditional gender and sexual norms (1998).

However, problematic rifts and differences occurred early in the gay liberation movement, especially along gender lines. Gay liberation groups were composed largely of males from the beginning and tended to ignore the dual oppression women faced as lesbians and
women. Concurrently, lesbians found their place in the burgeoning women’s movement tenuous, as early feminist groups dismissed lesbian concerns as a “lavender menace” threatening the character of the women’s movement (Engel 2001). Many women abandoned organizations such as GLF when they became increasingly frustrated with the internal sexism and unequal treatment of women (Rimmerman 2008). Throughout the mid- to late-1970s, an autonomous lesbian-feminist movement and culture emerged, offering an integrated analysis of sexual and gender oppression and the building of distinct communities (Taylor and Whittier 1992). Lesbian feminism, as distinct from gay liberation, took a slightly different trajectory as it became more integrated into a larger feminist community and movement. A vibrant women’s community emerged from lesbian feminism, with institutions such as women’s bookstores, festivals, and conferences existing well into the late-1970s (Stein 1997; Taylor and Rupp 1993; Taylor and Whittier 1992). A short-lived, yet highly influential, lesbian-separatist movement emerged as well, as women further identified the connections between sexism and the institution of heterosexuality (see “Woman-identified Woman,” published by Radicalesbians in 1970, for one of the most well-known theoretical statements on lesbian-feminism). However, the extremism of the lesbian separatist ideology prevented lesbian feminism from garnering widespread popularity and mainstream support, and in the end, contributed to its short tenure.

The heyday of gay liberation was brief and declined by the mid-1970s (D’Emilio 1983), with lesbian feminism declining somewhat later in the early 1980s (Stein 1997). While the perspectives developed during those years continue on as cultural and theoretical sensibilities and undertones to the movement, a new assimilationist tone arose in the movement by the early 1980s (Seidman 2003). As Epstein reveals, the irony of gay liberation was that “the radical activists who foresaw ‘the end of the homosexual’ and the transcendence of constraining role
and sexuality, discovered instead, that they were helping to build communities organized around the notion that gays and lesbians were a distinct class of people with unique political interests.” (1999: 42). A schism was present early in gay liberation as to whether the movement’s focus should be on multi-issue, broad-based social change or the single issue of gay rights. By the end of the 1970s, the single-issue approach triumphed and the movement’s focus turned more explicitly to achieving gay rights through an emphasis on the community’s minority-like status and organizing for equal rights and societal integration. Battles were no longer waged to reconfigure societal conceptions of gender and sexuality, but instead aimed to acquire legal rights and protections at the local, state, and national political levels. The ambitious revolutionary movement, which began less than ten years prior, had by the 1980s dramatically abandoned its broad-based approach to social change in exchange for a more narrow and seemingly attainable agenda of achieving citizenship rights and social integration.

The 1980s was a tumultuous decade for the movement, with a variety of events initiating significant change. Internal differences within the movement, especially from marginalized groups, became more evident as the decade wore on. The intricacies of interlocking systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality continued to be of significant debate within lesbian feminist circles and the broader movement, resulting in a number of “border skirmishes” around lesbian identities (Stein 1997: 119). Women of color formed their own political groups in order to expand on the conceptualization of oppression they faced as racial minorities and members of the working class (Epstein 1999). Additionally, a series of “sex debates” ensued in the 1980s, deconstructing the various sexual expressions permitted to fall under the feminist purview (Duggan and Hunter 1995; Rubin 1984). While divisive to the
movement at the time, Epstein suggests these debates succeeded in elaborating a public discourse that more fully examined the relationship between sexuality and power (1999).

The 1980s also witnessed a rise in the Religious Right’s backlash against the gay rights movement (Adam 1995). Beginning in the mid- to late-1970s, a new conservative Christian movement began to take root. Anita Bryant’s successful “Save Our Children” campaign against a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida, signaled the beginning of a rise in the Radical Right that would flourish throughout the 1980s. In response to the overall conservative political climate and an organized countermovement escalating homophobic hostility, gay and lesbian organizations shifted toward unprecedented institutionalization (Adam 1995). Small-scale grassroots organizing gave way to a rise of professionally staffed national and state organizations. Now highly bureaucratized, the movement turned its focus largely to lobbying and electoral politics (Adam 1995).

A final set of shifts that occurred in the movement during the 1980s centered on the emerging AIDS crisis. The lack of government response to a disease that disproportionately affected gay men resulted in the major expansion of the gay and lesbian movement to provide AIDS service organizations (Gould 2001). Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS-related activism dominated the movement and moved it forward in new ways. In fact, Ghaziani argues that, on a whole, “AIDS single-handedly reconfigured gay life” (2008: 72). Despite prior divisions between gay men and lesbians, the two groups now successfully worked together for the first time with the common goal of solving the AIDS crisis.

The AIDS epidemic, coupled with the landmark Bowers vs. Hardwick Supreme Court decision in 1986 to uphold a Georgia sodomy law criminalizing oral and anal sex between consenting adults, inspired a key turning point in gay politics. More militant forms of grassroots
activism arose during this time. For example, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a militant AIDS organization formed in 1987 and used direct action civil disobedience as its primary tactic. Gould argues that the shift to more militant forms of activism was linked to a shift in the emotion culture of the movement at the time, from a focus on assimilation and respectability to an acceptance of anger (2001). Such a shift allowed for a change in strategy from interest-group politics, which had become routine at the time, to more militant direct-action tactics.

While AIDS organizing had a substantial impact on the strategies of the gay movement at the time, it eventually developed into a separate full-fledged movement (Epstein 1999) and the mainstream gay movement returned its focus to a rights-based, integration-oriented political agenda (Adam 1995). However, political tensions in the movement surfaced again with the rise of queer politics in the 1990s. Because identity politics has a limited ability to speak for multiple voices, it tends to lead to periodic eruptions of different kinds of politics (Epstein 1999). Partly a response to the “mainstreaming” done by the movement and partly a response to the continued marginalization of different voices in the movement, activists began criticizing the limitations of identity politics. Queer activists emphasized the fluidity and multiplicity of identities and began to actively resist labels (Engel 2001). In addition, queer activists argued that any movement based on a singular identity automatically marginalizes and excludes those who do not fit the bill and advocated for a “post-identity” politics. Queer activists (from groups such as Queer Nation) asserted that by framing identities within the constructs of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, the gay movement simply reinforced that binary and failed to challenge heteronormativity.

Integral to and alongside of the rise of queer politics in the 1990s was the growing discontent voiced by multiple, marginalized segments of the gay community. Long sidelined by
the mainstream movement, bisexual and transgender communities began articulating their grievances more concretely (Rust 1993; Stryker 2008). In addition, queers of color further criticized the movement’s goals and advocated more radical, multi-issue politics (Seidman 1993). The Lesbian Avengers, founded in 1992, embraced more radical tactics to attract attention to the continued sexism within the movement (Rimmerman 2008: 53). Queer and marginalized activists during this time advocated for a more progressive, social justice movement with an emphasis on coalition building and approaching social change on a much broader level.

However, as Epstein (1999: 32) notes, “non-identitarian politics” are often short-lived because they are hard to sustain and institutionalize; thus, the queer movement lasted only a short while. Queer activists were unable to produce a large-scale, radical movement or reorganize the mainstream movement in a substantial way; however, the tension between queer and mainstream identity politics remains (Gamson 1995). Radical queer activism persists on the local level (Highleyman 2002) and a queer “sensibility” continues to circulate among today’s activists (Seidman 2003: 70), especially among LGBTQ youth. In addition, although queer activism did not radically change the primary course of the movement, one visible impact was the ensuing expansion of the mainstream “gay community” to include bisexual and transgender concerns, as many gay rights groups formally changed their names in the nineties in an attempt to be more inclusive (Armstrong 2002). The success of this incorporation, however, has been met with wide skepticism (Broad 2002).

Since the mid-1990s, however, the gay and lesbian movement has returned to an integrationist approach, fighting for full citizenship and equality for gays and lesbians (Waites 2003). A variety of events in the 2000s pushed LGBTQ politics further into an integrationist,
rights-based approach. The trend toward institutionalized bureaucratized organizations, which began in the 1980s, continued as the movement’s focus shifted to a fight for equal marriage rights (attained nationwide in 2015). Davidson suggests the Massachusetts Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004 marked a turning point in the national movement; for the decade following, the movement fought almost exclusively for the single-issue of equal marriage rights (2008). National organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, organized massive efforts to combat state measures aimed at repealing marriage rights granted by state Supreme Courts and legislatures (for example, Proposition 8 in California in 2008 and Measure 1 in Maine in 2009). This shift further marginalizes those members of the community who privilege other forms of relationships over monogamous, marital-like relationships, and furthermore, relegates other important social concerns such as housing and health care to the backburner (Richardson 2004).

Despite the ostensibly united front of the national movement, internal divisions and disagreements persist and local LGBTQ politics remain more varied. For example, as Davidson notes, there is a tension at both the local and national levels between the mainstream agenda and radical, multi-issue strands of politics (especially of queer-identified and trans people of color) (2008). Echoing earlier liberationist critiques of major social institutions such as the family, more radical strands of LGBTQ politics view the most recent emphasis on marriage as severely problematic. While widespread support for marriage equality existed in the movement, same-sex marriage as a central goal remained controversial (Richardson 2004). In addition, as the movement has become increasingly mainstreamed, numerous criticisms from within have emerged. Among the most frequently cited is that in pushing for equality through social integration, the movement fails to adequately challenge underlying heteronormativity and
internal marginalization, and thus attains “virtual” rather than real equality (Bell and Binnie 2000; Vaid 1995).

In sum, although the gay rights movement in the United States is considered one of the most “internally differentiated” social movements (Epstein 1999: 60), tracking the national movement over time reveals several key political shifts throughout the years. Early gay rights activism sought revolutionary change to a homophobic and sexist society, yet quickly gave way to a rights-based, citizenship discourse seeking equality and social integration. Influential events, such as the onset of AIDS, the sex/race/class debates of the 1980s, and militant queer activism of the nineties, propelled the movement at times back into more radical, multi-issue approaches. Epstein notes the movement has perpetually “[oscillated] between mainstream identity politics and utopian nonidentitarian politics” (1999: 60), and while radical, multi-issue politics are difficult to sustain, they remain as potent and tangible undercurrents to the dominant movement and often figure prominently on the local and grassroots levels. In addition to the sustained rights-based approach of the movement, its focus has grown increasingly narrow with its recent emphasis on the citizenship claim of marriage (as well as the right to serve in the military and for adoption rights, though to a somewhat lesser extent). The trend toward a political discourse of citizenship is accompanied by larger cultural shifts in gay status that have occurred alongside these political shifts. I now turn to a summary of the major transformations in the cultural status of gays and discourses of sexuality, before discussing the effects of these combined shifts and the situation for queer youth today.

The cultural status of gays and lesbians has changed dramatically since the late 1960s. While these cultural shifts are largely a result of LGBTQ political successes, they also stem from broader socio-cultural transformations and the ever-evolving social construction of sexuality and
sexual identities. With increasing visibility, integration, and social tolerance, the status of gays and lesbians changed from one of polluted outsider to normal sexual citizen (Seidman 2001; 2002). The major successes of LGBTQ activism over the years, including same-sex marriage, the establishment of anti-discrimination laws, the overturning of state sodomy laws in Lawrence vs. Texas in 2003, and the 2011 dismantling of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” by the United States Military directly impacted the social positioning of gays and lesbians in society. Additionally, media portrayals and visibility of gays and lesbians improved dramatically over the years (Danuta Walters 2001; Peron 2011).

One of the most noteworthy contributions to the changing cultural status of gays and lesbians is a trend of normalization. Since the 1990s, there has been a steady push from within the gay community at large to view gays as “normal” individuals who are deserving of the same rights and privileges as heterosexuals (Richardson 2004). The relentless efforts on behalf of the mainstream gay movement to convince society that despite the gender of their sexual partners “gays are just like everyone else” have impacted the construction of gay and lesbian identities and their cultural status, as well as the regulation of sexuality in general.

Since the mid-1990s, gay normalization has increased tolerance for specific versions of homosexuals (i.e., white, monogamous, gender conforming), while at the same time marginalizing those on the borders of gay communities, i.e., trans people, bisexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, working class individuals, and youth. In discussing trans activists’ take on the normalization and mainstreaming of the national gay movement, Davidson notes, “By packaging LGBTQ activists’ work for sexual freedoms and gender self-determination in the most “palatable” ways, […] the movement has prioritized issues that disproportionately affect people who are more privileged at the expense of working with people with the greatest need” (2008: 39).
Richardson adds that part of the problem with assuming sameness between the straight and gay communities is that it also presumes unity within LGBTQ communities (2005). Although this approach has arguably led to significant advances in the number of rights and protections attained for gays over the years, it nonetheless advocates a narrow exclusionary approach.

In a similar vein, Seidman describes a shift from pollution to normalization that occurred in the social logic that enforces normative heterosexuality (2001; 2002; 2005). Prior to the nineties, heterosexuals largely acquired their preferred/normal status through their opposition to the polluted/abnormal homosexual. Homosexuality was proffered a “polluted” status that was characterized by unacceptable and non-preferred practices such as non-monogamous, pleasure-driven, recreational sexual experiences. In his analysis of Hollywood films from 1960 to 2000, he reveals the myriad ways the polluted homosexual was introduced to regulate normative and acceptable versions of [hetero]sexuality (Seidman 2005). However, as gays and lesbians were increasingly integrated into society in the late 1980s and 1990s, tolerance for overt expressions of homophobia declined and a shift occurred in the regulation of normative heterosexuality; normalization emerged as the new regulating logic, replacing homophobic pollution (Seidman 2005). Instead of relying on the hetero/homosexual binary for its organizing logic, normative heterosexuality now operates through the binary of good/bad sexual citizens.

Gays and lesbians have fought for normalization principally through a political discourse of citizenship (Richardson 2004). A “normal” sexual citizen is one who closely follows the rules of legitimate sexual expression (i.e., love-based, monogamous, etc.) despite the gender of their sexual object choice. Therefore, specific versions of gays and lesbians are now conferred normal sexual citizen status, deserving of rights and respect. In addition to staying within the confines of legitimate sexual expression, normal gays and lesbians must also display traditionally masculine
or feminine qualities, value the family and long-term monogamous relationships, and display national pride (Seidman 2005: 45). Furthermore, Seidman argues that although gay normalization has led to a new organizing logic, it does not imply the end of normative heterosexuality (2001: 321). In fact, an additional effect of continued gay normalization is the creation of divisions not only between good/bad homosexuals, but also between good/bad heterosexuals (Seidman 2005).

*Coming of Age in “Post-closet” Contexts: Empirical Research on Queer Youth*

The political and cultural shifts over the past four decades combine to produce a new socio-historical era characterized by what Seidman (2002) describes as “post-closet” contexts. The “closet” as a form of social oppression arose as an accommodation to a society in which heterosexuality was compulsory (Seidman 2002: 21). During the “heyday of the closet,” between 1950 and 1980, gays and lesbians maintained a heterosexual public identity, while struggling to keep their [homo]sexual identities hidden. The closet was a central organizing feature of gay life during this time and arose as a response to the public culture of the 1960s and 1970s that openly persecuted the homosexual identity. Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, the closet became less central in the lives of LGBTQ people, especially in urban centers across the United States. Increased normalization and social integration, as well as the shift in the logic informing normative heterosexuality, contributed to a changing society in which many gays and lesbians began to accept themselves for who they were and defined “being gay” as a positive element of their identities (Seidman 2002). The closet certainly remains a prominent feature for many individuals and relevant for some youth (Dobinson 2004), especially those living outside of urban centers; for many youth, however, it is a thing of the past.
Coming of age in the 2000s, many queer youth are distanced from the era of the closet. They have grown up in a society characterized by cultural visibility and the integration of normalized gays and lesbians. Many youth are growing up in contexts where same-sex marriage has been legal for as long as they can remember. For example, in Massachusetts, where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2004, youth are beginning to see gay marriage as the “status quo” rather than “radical” (Lobron 2007). Though homophobia continues to be a widespread societal problem and compulsory heterosexuality remains institutionalized, LGBTQ youth are more and more willing to be open about their sexual identities (Savin-Williams 2005a) and many find readily available support through online communities (Dobinson 2004) and/or their schools’ Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) (Miceli 2005; Russell 2005).

The end of the “closet” is apparent in both popular media accounts of LGBTQ youth and a growing body of empirical research. According to a recent article on The Huffington Post (a popular internet newspaper), “[gay youth are a new generation] who have always known that they are not alone, and they can’t go back into the closet; they were never there to begin with” (Peron 2011). Prominent LGBTQ youth researcher Ritch Savin-Williams expresses similar sentiments saying, “The closet, so to speak, is really something that’s far more characteristic of older men and women. Many kids today, they don’t come out, because they were never in.” (Lobron 2007). As added evidence of the increased acceptance of gays and lesbians today, Morris adds, “to these kids, homophobia is as socially shunned as racism was to the generation before them” (2006: 32). Furthermore, in post-closet settings, AIDS is no longer conceived of as a death sentence, as it was in previous generations (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Weststrate and McLean 2010). Gay and lesbian youth are instead coming of age during a time of burgeoning HIV treatments and increased hope for finding a cure in HIV/AIDS research, which further
distances them from the prior generation who experienced firsthand the sheer devastation of the AIDS crisis.

Today’s LGBTQ youth are referred to as a “new generation” and “the next wave” in popular mass media accounts and have grown up with out teachers and characters on television shows and politicians who are open about their sexuality (Cloud 2005; Hayasaki 2007; Lobron 2007; Sullivan 2005). However, youth coming of age in post-closet contexts have not yet been explored with respect to generational dynamics and their position in the gay rights movement. What unique challenges do youth face as members of a new generation? Are youth coming of age in post-closet settings predisposed to different types of politics because of this positioning, and how in turn do they negotiate identity and politics? I now turn my attention to a review of the literature on queer youth, highlighting the core tensions that characterize this generation of youth. Queer youth coming of age in post-closet contexts face a different set of challenges than prior generations, in particular, the need to: 1) navigate their positioning by society as at-risk victims versus well-adjusted agents; 2) tackle new and on-going debates about identity; and 3) negotiate participation in mainstream identity politics and/or alternatives such as radical queer activism. After reviewing the literature on queer youth and the main dilemmas they face as a result of post-closet settings, I discuss the gaps in the literature and the importance of this research for examining questions relating to sexuality, generations, identity and activism.

**Framing Queer Youth: At-risk Victims vs. Well-adjusted Agents**

One of the main challenges facing queer youth today is to navigate the ways in which they have been framed by both society and the gay community. Queer youth occupy a unique position within society, in general, and the gay community, in specific. Initially ignored by both larger society and the gay community, queer youth first received widespread recognition for their
at-risk status. The early recognition of youth as victims led to the development of much needed social services dedicated to queer youth concerns, such as homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide. Many benefit tremendously from these services. The narrow framing of youth as victims, however, has implications for who they can be and what they can do. In this section, I review the ways in which queer youth have been framed by the movement and society at large, as well as the effects of this framing on their involvement in the gay movement.

The contributions of youth to social movements, overall, have long been recognized as both immense and invaluable. Youth are widely acknowledged as key players in movement activism. McAdam observes in the U.S. civil rights movement, for example, that college students comprised the majority of activists in Freedom Summer and the sit-in movement (1988). Miceli claims that movements often value youth for their energy and willingness to take risks (2005). Although queer youth were at the center of early gay liberation efforts, researchers note their remarkable absence from narratives of gay liberation (Johnson 2007). Talburt et al. observe that no national gay organizations made youth concerns a priority; instead, a separate organization, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), formed to deal with these issues (2004). Only since the early nineties did youth begin to appear as visible in the gay community and movement. This delayed entry and recognition of youth is somewhat of an anomaly in social movement research. There are two commonly asserted explanations for why this is the case. First, early research and public perceptions of sexual identity proclaimed that homosexuality was not fully realized in men until late adolescence and in women until their early twenties; queer youth were simply thought to not exist and were, therefore, easily ignored (Miceli 2005; Rofes 1989). A second explanation for their delayed entry into the movement centers on the notion that early adult activists were afraid of contact with youth because of widespread societal
homophobia and persistent stereotypes defining gay men as pedophiles wanting to “recruit” children into homosexuality (Bohan et al. 2002; Lepischak 2004; Miceli 2005). Miceli suggests that a rise of youth visibility and activism in the nineties was a reflection of both a drop in the age of coming out as LGBTQ and the culmination of cultural changes that diminished some of the negative stereotypes surrounding gay adults (2005).

Prior to the rise of visibility and activism in the nineties, youth and their concerns were present within the gay community, but only marginally. In the early seventies, with the inception of the modern gay rights movement, gay student organizations formed throughout the country (Miceli 2005). Community-based programs offering emotional and social service support to youth also emerged at this time, in what Cohen argues represented a shift from early identifications of youth as “activists” to positions as “clients” (2005: 76). Several well-known organizations dedicated to gay and lesbian youth soon followed, with the founding of the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) in 1979 and school-based initiatives, such as Project 10 in 1984 and the Harvey Milk School in 1985. School-based counseling programs and alternative schools such as these aimed to help students facing victimization and harassment (Cohen 2005). These early organizations played a substantial role in establishing gay and lesbian youth as an at-risk population, with HMI publishing the first scientific research on the developmental challenges in the lives of gay and lesbian youth (Miceli 2005). Gay and lesbian community centers, previously aimed at building community solely for adults, also began offering programs, services, and drop-in hours for youth beginning in the eighties, and the rise of the GSA movement around 1989 began incorporating all students into the project of making schools safer for gay and lesbian students (Cohen 2005; Miceli 2005).
Although these early initiatives marked the start of recognizing youth concerns, gay and lesbian youth remained largely a hidden and ignored population up until the 1989 publication of the “Report of the Secretary’s Task Force on Youth Suicide” by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The results of the report spurred the first nationwide attention to gay and lesbian youth, finding that gay and lesbian teens were two to three times more likely to commit suicide than their straight peers. In reaction to the report, an abundance of social service organizations and adult-led interventions emerged to address the needs of youth facing seemingly higher rates of mental health issues and suicide. Many schools used the report to justify the provision of support groups for their gay and lesbian students, with Massachusetts leading the way with the development of their Safe Schools program in 1993 (Miceli 2005).

Thus, the majority of attention given to queer youth in recent decades originates from an early focus on gay and lesbian youth in crisis. Most research focusing on this population, therefore, stems from the fields of psychology, social work, and education, and focuses primarily on developmental and problematic outcomes. Numerous studies document the ways in which queer youth continue to be “at risk” victims subject to increased rates of substance abuse, depression, high anxiety, low self esteem, and thoughts of and attempts at suicide (e.g., Hillier & Rosenthal 2001; Russell et al. 2001; Uribe and Harbeck 1991). Furthermore, the negative effects of being gay or lesbian are well documented in studies that examine increased harassment, homelessness, and unsafe sexual behaviors (e.g., Lasser and Tharinger 2003; Lepischak 2004; Rivers and D’Augelli 2001).

A growing corpus of research that is critical of this “at risk” discourse and its effects is evident in recent literature (Rofes 2004; Russell 2005; Savin-Williams 2005; Talburt et al. 2004). Researchers describe the discourse surrounding queer youth in a number of ways, including the
“victim trope” (Marshall 2010), “suffering/suicidal script” (Bohan et al. 2002), narratives of risk and danger (Talburt 2004b), and “Martyr-Target-Victim” (Rofes 2004). Talburt et al. summarizes the essence of each of these descriptions in claiming that, “a common sense that frames [youth] overwhelmingly in terms of oppression and victimization” has seemingly taken over all public and academic discussion of queer youth (2004: 2, emphasis mine). The dominant image of queer youth in the public sphere is one of despair and martyrdom, with frequently invoked images of Matthew Shepard, Brandon Teena, and generalized victims of bullying and harassment.

Though the dominant discourses and narratives surrounding queer youth are entirely well intentioned, there are three problematic effects. First, by focusing entirely on the negative aspects of being gay, it is possible that youth are placed in even greater danger. Youth may be convinced that the popular depictions of themselves as victims are the only legitimate stories to be told. Bohan et al. suggests that the narratives may have prescriptive power: “Indeed, the visibility granted such stories of suffering may persuade teens that an enactment of this suffering, suicidal script constitutes an effective route to the attention and validation we all seek” (2002: 28). Youth may tell the stories they think they should invoke, because they are the ones they so often hear, rather than the ones that accurately describe their experiences (Bohan et al. 2002). Sonnie summarizes the situation for youth: “From suicide to substance abuse, from apathy to violence within our own communities, the hatred we internalize is one of the most threatening and universal constraints in our lives. Shame and self-hatred wound us, dividing us from ourselves and one another” (2000: xvi). Youth internalize the pathologies with which they are identified, and, oftentimes, this leads to internalized hatred and self-destructive outcomes.
Secondly, focusing on the at-risk status of youth unintentionally frames youth as the problem to be solved, rather than considering the source of the problem. The heteronormative culture of schools, therefore, remains largely unchecked, while youth themselves are pathologized and poised as the ones requiring fixing (Quinlivan 2002). This narrative thus perpetuates the problems by allowing the sources of the problem to endure.

A third and final effect of this narrow victim discourse is that adult “circumscri[ed] queer youth identities and practices” occlude youth agency (Talburt 2004b: 32-33). Through the at-risk/victim discourse, youth become characterized in one of two ways, as “clients” or “participants” (Cohen 2005: 76). Talburt et al. suggest that for the mainstream movement to begin to incorporate youth concerns into the movement successfully, without sparking predatory stereotypes, it needed to carefully craft an ambivalent and sanitized representation of queer youth as *victims*, and hence, deserving of public sympathy and support (2004). The movement’s focus on youth was to care for them as “clients,” providing resources and services to help them cope with their unique circumstances of oppression and victimization. However, defining them so narrowly has had the effect of weakening queer youth agency by construing them as objects requiring adult intervention rather than active subjects (Talburt et al. 2004). In addition to characterizations of youth as passive “clients” needing care, youth lack agency as far as participation in the movement. As Cohen argues, the narrow framing of youth as victims led to a proliferation of adult-oriented groups organizing “advocacy and social service programs for queer youth” (2005: 76, emphasis in original). Youth were incorporated into the movement
passively, unable to direct advocacy or activism efforts, but able to participate in adult-led
efforts\(^1\). Youth, therefore, were primarily cast as apathetic and apolitical “participants.”

Although the victim discourse continues to dominate queer youth intelligibility, Talburt
points out that an alternative positive development narrative emerged in recent years positing
queer youth as well-adjusted, out and proud individuals (2004b). However, she argues that this
conception is also narrow and limits the creativity youth have in negotiating their identities and
practices. The mainstream movement produces a successful “resiliency” narrative for queer
youth as reflective of the norms of what it means to be a well-adjusted adult (Talburt 2004a). The
narrative includes coming to terms with one’s sexuality by modeling a secure gay identity after
visible adult role models. In patterning well-adjusted youth after the normalized version of
mainstream gays and lesbians, youth themselves have become *normalized*. Similar to the story of
normalization of the gay community in general, queer youth are intelligible and acceptable, as
long as they are gender-conforming, white, asexual, etc. Those youth who fail to fit the
homogenous identities of “normal” are marginalized.

One powerful example of how queer youth are subjected to this “homonormativity” is
revealed by the “It Gets Better” (IGB) project. Following a wave of queer youth suicides in
2010, Dan Savage, a popular sex columnist, spurred the creation of an online video campaign of
LGBTQ people telling their stories of how challenges during their youth got better over time.
Now a multifaceted media organization working for social change, IGB has over 600,000 video
submissions and has aired award winning MTV specials, as well as published a book
(itgetsbetter.org, accessed May 2016). In Savage’s original video, he and his partner specifically

\(^1\) Early youth-led organizations exist as exceptions. For example, BAGLY (Boston Alliance for
Gay and Lesbian Youth) was formed in 1980 and continues to be a youth-led organization
dedicated to youth issues.
discussed how, despite difficulties in high school, they were now living a happy and fulfilling life with children. The IGB campaign aims to show queer youth who were considering suicide that life does indeed “get better,” and for that reason, they should not surrender to suicide. An almost immediate reaction to the campaign was a queer critique that the campaign was deceptive and promotes happiness at the cost of homonormativity “tied to racial, gendered, and economic privilege” (Goltz 2013: 136). Life might get better for certain youth, but what about those youth who fall outside of those categories? (see Goltz 2013; Grzanka and Mann 2014).

One of the central ways queer youth are normalized is through race (Herdt et al. 2007; McCready 2004). McCready points to the perceived whiteness of queer youth identities, with whiteness presumed to be the norm among queer youth (2004). This stems from the stereotype that queerness and the LGBTQ movement overall are white issues, with LGBTQ people of color largely existing on the margins of the mainstream community throughout the years (Herdt et al. 2007). As a result, students of color report that programs designated for “queer youth” are not for them and, therefore, do not attend (McCready 2004). Queer youth of color report that GSAs do not allow the space to deal with both race and sexuality (Herdt et al. 2007). In fact, the first school-based gay youth group, which formed in 1972, is ignored by popular accounts of youth support groups because the group was predominantly comprised of urban youth of color (Johnson 2007). Johnson emphasizes that this omission is a classic example of the political efforts of marginalized segments of the community being overlooked, and is revealing of the “racist, classist, and geographic biases of the greater LGBT movement” (2007: 384).

There is a call from within the field to move beyond the existing narratives of risk and resilience in order to capture the experiences of those youth who are being lost (Horn et al. 2009; Russell 2005). “Youth who are not comprehensible within the terms of identity constructed by
discourses of risk and counterdiscourses of positive development may be excluded from interventions designed for them” (Talburt 2004a: 120). Furthermore, Talburt argues that the dominant narratives about queer youth make youth intelligible to others and themselves in narrowly defined ways (2004b: 18). Talburt and colleagues summarize the situation for youth as follows: “the complexity of queer youth’s subjectivity, agency, sexuality, and cultural practices is flattened by a dominant framing of them in terms of danger and victimization” (2004: 7).

Today’s youth, while recognizing the importance of social service programs and adult-provided services, are calling for recognition of their own agency and want acceptance as well-adjusted, powerful activists in their own right. Youth are increasingly frustrated by the limitations placed on them through the movement’s narrow positioning of them. In an anthology of queer youth activists, *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology*, the editor summarizes the challenges faced by queer youth in the preface to the book: “in a world that constantly tries to speak for us, this book asserts that we are our own experts, that we can speak for ourselves…it is necessary for us to claim the autonomy to represent ourselves” (Sonnie 2000: xi-xii). Youth who recognize the limitations and marginalizing effects of the mainstream movement’s dominant discourses are calling for the need to act as their own agents of social change (FIERCE 2010).

An additional result of the narrow framing of youth is a perceived generation gap between adults and youth in the movement. De Vries claims that adult-led interventions and programming do not adequately represent the concerns of queer youth: “In-school activism, when spearheaded by gay adults, does not reflect the needs of queer youth. … Older, usually more conservative gay activists talk about the state of youth today and quote statistics about queer teens without actually consulting the youth movement they claim to represent” (2004: 117). Bohan et al. point to a similar disjuncture between adults and youth, observing that gay
youth believe adults consider them “the future,” but fail to acknowledge the contributions they make to the present (2002). On the other hand, adults feel that youth are unwilling to recognize the past contributions adults have made to the LGBTQ movement (Steele 2006). Furthermore, Fields argues that recent successes for adults in the movement, such as the acquisition of marriage rights and the overturning of sodomy laws in Bowers vs. Hardwick, do little to change the immediate situation for queer youth (2004). In framing youth narrowly, youth input is silenced and older generations fail to understand their priorities and the activities in which youth are engaged.

LGBTQ youth coming of age in post-closet contexts face a unique challenge: they need to manage the effects of the dominant discourses within which they have been framed for several decades in order to exert their own agency. In navigating these discourses, queer youth are working to establish their own identities and practices, while being told they have no say. How do youth work around prescribed identities to carve out their own unique identities that resonate more with their experiences? I now turn to a discussion of the second core tension facing queer youth in post-closet contexts: the negotiation of identity.

*Negotiating Identities*

In addition to having to navigate their lives within the confines of narrow frameworks, contemporary youth also face unique challenges regarding the negotiation of their sexual identities. One of the most commonly noted divisions between contemporary youth and their predecessors is that today’s youth are navigating their sexual identities in fundamentally different ways. As Morris writes in a *New York Times Magazine* article from 2006: “Go to the schools, talk to the kids, and you’ll see that somewhere along the line this generation has started to conceive of sexuality differently” (p. 28). Today’s youth are increasingly shunning the
traditional “gay” label and, instead, identifying with alternative labels or refusing identity labels altogether (Savin-Williams 2005a; 2014). Coming out in post-closet settings positions youth to be more creative and allows them to openly engage with innovative sexual identities. Youth in post-closet settings have access to resources and networks of support that previous generations lacked (Hammack et al. 2009). They are growing up in a culture with widespread gay visibility and reduced homophobia among their peers, allowing them to embrace new forms of sexual identities. In this section, I summarize the research on queer youth identities, exploring recent changes and potential explanations, and discuss the need to examine the significance of these findings for their impact on activism.

The renegotiation of sexual identities is hardly a new phenomenon; gay identities have undergone many significant transformations over the years, moving from hidden, shameful identities to out and proud gay identities, and of course, many variations in between. Today’s generation of youth, however, come out in a time in which the prospects for negotiating a sexual identity are far more open than ever before. Savin-Williams, a leading scholar on gay and lesbian teens, reports in his influential study, The New Gay Teenager, that youth are increasingly refusing to identify with traditional gay identities (2005a; 2014). Although research on queer youth identities is limited, a nascent body of empirical evidence has emerged in support of Savin-Williams’s findings (Bennett 2010; Cohler and Hammack 2007; Hammack et al. 2009; Ritchie 2008; Weststrate and McLean 2010). For example, Cohler and Hammack find that many youth are well aware of the limitations of traditional gay identities, and the “monolithic narrative” bracketed with them, and as a result prefer to be unlabeled or identify as “queer” (2007: 55). Similarly, Weststrate and McLean (2010) document recent changes in the ever-evolving nature of gay identity. The authors argue that “millennial gays” are increasingly
shunning labels and embracing more fluid sexualities because they have stopped identifying with, “antiquated master narratives, which no longer account for or capture the experience of what it is like growing up gay in this generation” (Weststrate and McLean 2010: 235).

As part of their refusal of traditional gay labels, post-closet youth are developing an expanded set of alternative identifications (Bennett 2010; Morris 2016; Savin-Williams 2005a). Morris sees many teens working up their own language to describe their sexual identities and behavior, and documents a group of youth in New York City who claim, in addition to “gay” and “bisexual,” identities such as, “polysexual, ambisexual, pansexual, pansensual, polyfide, bi-curious, bi-queer, fluid, metroflexible, heteroflexible, hetero with lesbian tendencies, or just sexual” (2006). Savin-Williams adds a lengthy list of descriptors youth currently use to describe their sexual identities, including “omnisexual, multisexual, boidyke, queerboi, polygendered, trisexual, etc.” (2005a: 7). Furthermore, several empirical studies are beginning to document the usage of this new terminology by youth to describe their sexual identities beyond traditional “gay, lesbian, and bisexual” labels (Highleyman 2002; Horner 2008; Schindel 2008).

The shift away from traditional gay labels and the development of new alternatives among post-closet youth can be explained in a number of ways. In post-closet settings, youth have a certain degree of ambivalence surrounding gay identities, as they have difficulty relating to the narrative and meanings associated with that identity. Savin-Williams claims that youth are increasingly refusing conventional labels because society is on the verge of a “post-gay” era, where gayness is becoming less of a significant distinction in adolescent identities (2005a). Additional reasons for the escalating refusal of traditional gay identities include a resurgence of queer identities, an acceptance of more fluid conceptualizations of sexuality, and an increased attention to varied forms of gender expression. Integral to these changes is a shift in the master
narrative informing sexual identity development among queer youth from a narrative of struggle and success to one of emancipation, which, in part explains the proliferation of sexual identities claimed by same-sex attracted youth (Cohler and Hammack 2007). I now turn to more fully consider each of these reasons within the context of the literature on queer youth.

Coming of age in post-closet settings, many queer youth experience a great deal of ambivalence about traditional gay identities. While some wish to claim a “gay” identity, many youth feel a disconnect with the implications of a mainstream identity. For example, youth name several areas of contention with traditional gay identities, including claims they are commercialized, normalized, commodified, and sold out (see Highleyman 2002). Savin-Williams quotes one youth’s sentiments expressed in an Advocate (10/12/2004) article: “The gay community has bought into consumerism and ‘gay’ no longer appears to be an identity that my peers and I are comfortable with….so please don’t call me a lesbian.” (2005b). Cohler and Hammack note that young people are embracing alternatives in hopes of creating identities that are “unbounded by a particular narrative constructed largely for a white middle class or a previous generation” (Cohler and Hammack 2007: 55). Additionally, Hammack et al. note that youth, in general, face a certain degree of ambivalence over sexual identity formation, “lack[ing] clear commitment to sexuality identity categories” (Hammack et al. 2009: 877). The combination of youth ambivalence over sexual identity formation and increasing criticism of mainstream gay identities places youth in a precarious situation with regard to identity, and in part explains the trend toward creating new, more fluid sexual identity alternatives.

One of the most controversial arguments for explaining youth’s growing refusal of traditional gay identities is proffered by Savin-Williams (2005a; 2005b). He argues that contemporary society is on the verge of a “post-gay era,” where being gay will be irrelevant to
individual’s lives. Savin-Williams is not alone in this assertion, and a debate ensues about whether or not we have reached a post-gay or post-modern (post-mo) era (see Nash 2013; Sullivan 2005). Savin-Williams makes the case that because sexuality is no longer central in adolescents’ lives it is becoming increasingly irrelevant (2005a). He comments, “Maybe real changes in society’s politics, laws, and consciousness toward gay people have raised the possibility that sexual orientation is or will soon be irrelevant in all important respects?” (Savin-Williams 2005a: 194). Savin-Williams’ argument is contentious in the literature (see Russell et al. 2009), despite the growing recognition of a decreasing significance of sexuality in the definition of one’s identity. For many members of the gay community coming of age prior to 2000, being gay was a central part of their personal identities. A large impact of post-closet settings on sexual identities is the trend away from sexuality being a core part of one’s identity, as it was for prior generations. As Seidman notes, sexuality is becoming more and more of a peripheral, rather than core, identity, as the closet is less of a central organizing feature in people’s lives (2002). Savin-Williams points to remarks from several college students quoted in a 2001 Rolling Stone article describing their sexual identities as “backgrounded” (2005a). One student noted, for example: “A lot of people don’t feel the need to foreground that part of their identity. Most gay people spend the majority of their time outside of strictly gay institutions;” another commented, “There’s a prevailing attitude of, because I’m gay, it doesn’t mean that’s my life. I’m not a gay person. I’m a person who happens to be gay” (Savin-Williams 2005a: 200). Furthermore, Cohler and Hammack argue that many young people fail to adopt labels such as “gay” or “lesbian” simply because they do not wish to elevate sexuality to the most important part of their personal identities; instead, youth believe that “same-sex desire need not be the ‘primary index of identity’” (2007: 54). These sentiments are reflected in popular accounts of
queer youth as well. In a photography project documenting queer kids in the United States, one youth was asked whether sexual orientation is important to his identity, and his response was, “No, not really. I think I am who I am” (Sharkey 2010). Post-closet settings create an atmosphere in which sexuality need not be the core defining characteristic of one’s identity; because there is less stigma surrounding same-sex sexuality, queer youth can place less weight on this dimension of their identities if they so choose. While one’s sexual identity remains important, it no longer has to be the central defining aspect of one’s life, as it was in the past. Today, queer youth are less interested in distinguishing themselves from their heterosexual counterparts (Ghaziani 2011). Whether this is the beginning of a post-gay era (in the sense that sexual identities are becoming irrelevant as Savin-Williams argues), however, remains up for debate and more empirical evidence is needed on young people’s sexual identity negotiations.

A resurgence of the term “queer” in recent years has also contributed to a decline of traditional gay identities among youth. The term “queer” is currently being used in multiple ways. Ritchie notes a split within the semantic manifestation of ‘queer,’ with the mainstream movement and culture using the term as an umbrella term and those activists who use queer with more of a political connotation (2008: 263). Mainstream culture and media have embraced “queer” as an umbrella-like term to describe the entire LGBTQ community, but as Horner notes, this adoption has translated to a description of almost exclusively “white, gay, nonbi, nontrans men” as a synonym for ‘gay’ (2007: 290). In addition to this usage of the term, some post-closet youth are purposefully claiming queer identities, rather than gay identities. The meanings behind these queer identities are convoluted. Some youth use the term as an alternative to “gay,” with the assumption that the terms are relatively interchangeable (Horner 2007). Horner also notes that some bisexual youth prefer the term “queer” to describe attraction that transcends gender
lines, while acknowledging that the two identities are not mutually exclusive (2007: 292). Many youth, however, make a clear distinction between the use of the terms gay and queer, with queer denoting more of the original nineties subversive essence. One youth, for example, summarizes his views on the terms in the following ways:

I realized I was gay pretty young, maybe the ninth grade. I realized I was "queer" this year, actually. I view those two things as very different. I like "queer" a lot more. I feel like it's a more confrontational identity that's necessary when you are in such a marginalized position. It's got a tough attitude about it that I like. "Gay" is really "nice" and "friendly" and, you know, you're friends with all the really nice girls, and you look pretty and wear your V-neck sweaters, and you want to maintain your privilege. You don't want to step on anyone's toes, and you don't want to be in your face. "Queer" is in your face and tough and calling people out and not being afraid to speak your mind, and that's more me, more of what I am about. I like "queer" – I'm "queer." (Sharkey 2011)

Ritchie argues that queer identities have become popular among youth over the last decade because youth are increasingly frustrated with assimilationist politics, attitudes, and identities; they embrace queer identities as a politically subversive project to challenge boundaries and norms, rather than reify them (2008). Horner argues that youth identifying as queer are, "mak[ing] a statement of resistance against what they see as narrow, limiting, dominantly structured, stagnant, and overly constricted categories" (2007: 292). Many post-closet youth who are embracing queer identities are doing so to make a statement on traditional gay identities, choosing to identify with a more dissident identification.

Another way contemporary youth are negotiating their sexual identities in novel ways is through embracing increased fluidity. Many of today’s youth possess a certain degree of flexibility regarding their sexual identities. Fluid sexual identities are most commonly noted among young women. Diamond, for example, has documented a large body of findings from a ten-year longitudinal study showing that women with same-sex attraction are, over time, likely to reject labels they once embraced and/or change identifications altogether (2005; 2008). Rust finds similarly, that women tend to have increased fluidity when it comes to sexual
identifications (1993). Although most empirical evidence suggests this fluidity is more common among young women, Savin-Williams reports that young men are describing their sexual identities as more fluid as well (2005b). Savin-Williams offers increased fluidity as one of the reasons for why youth overall are rejecting traditional gay identities; youth report that their same-sex attractions do not signify anything about the future or who they are as people, but rather are more unstable and changeable (2005b). Likewise, Russell and Seif’s analysis of The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health confirms research indicating greater fluidity than stability of youth’s definitions and expressions of sexuality (2002).

Contemporary youth face a great deal of freedom to explore the gendered dimensions of their identities as well. In post-closet settings, a heightened attention to gender has resulted from the influence of decades of queer theory and debates about gender within the gay and lesbian movement. As a result, there has been an increase in gender activism among queer youth in recent years. Schindel notes that through in-school activism, youth are working to expand not only the categories of sexual identification, but also the categories of gender identification (2008). For example, the GSA Network – a California organization connecting school-based GSAs – spent four years lobbying on behalf of the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, to make California the first state to protect students on the basis of actual or perceived gender (Schindel 2008). Fields and Russell also document an increased attention to gender among youth activism, citing that interest in GenderPAC (a national gender rights organization) has grown in recent years on college campuses, with activists, “remaking gender culture as they lobby for unisex bathrooms, housing for trans students, and healthcare forms to report gender identity” (Fields and Russell 2005: 513-14). When asked what activist issues matter most, one youth responded, “Definitely gender identity and assignment issues.
 Basically, anything involving the government regulating gender. It blows my mind that they’re even issues… intersex issues, trans issues” (Markey 2010). A growing interest in gender issues is clearly evident among many young people. Schindel claims that many youth – not only trans-identified– are more and more exploring their gender identities (2008). For example, one student she interviewed identified their gender as “faggot genderbend,” and reported playing with both masculine and feminine gender presentation and expression (Schindel 2008). Similarly, Griffin and colleagues highlight a growing fluidity with respect to gender among contemporary youth, noting a rise in “genderqueer” identifications (2004). Wilchins observes, “Young queers face new possibilities, they can be other kinds of individuals, they can explore other selves. …

Gender, the old battleground, is quickly emerging as the new battleground and the new playground, for today’s youth” (2002: 52-53). This increased play with gender may largely be a response to the strict adherence to masculine and feminine gender norms that is required of mainstreamed gay identities and reflects something new about this generation: the freedom to more deeply explore and express elements of their sexual identities that prior generations lacked.

Central to the changes occurring in the negotiation of sexual identities among youth is a shift that has occurred in the master narrative informing gay identity development. Studies emerging from a life course psychology perspective argue that a new narrative has emerged in recent years informing gay identity development for youth (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Hammack et al. 2009; Weststrate and McLean 2010). Cohler and Hammack identify two competing narratives of identity development relevant to today’s generation of LGBTQ youth: 1) a narrative of “struggle and success,” which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and reflects the overall framing of youth as at-risk victims; and 2) a narrative of “emancipation,” which emerged in more recent decades with the changing socio-historical context that has increased the
opportunities for queer youth’s futures (2007). The narrative of struggle and success includes the struggle of gay youth to overcome harassment, internal homophobia, and the resulting mental health problems and the eventual successful participation in the larger gay culture by constructing a gay identity resonant with the mainstream master narrative. Whereas the narrative of struggle and success includes the management of a victimized identity through the eventual adoption of a gay identity, the narrative of emancipation is free from having to manage a stigmatized identity and, therefore, opens the possibilities for new and more fluid identity development.

The social and cultural changes surrounding sexuality that have occurred over approximately the past two decades allowed for the new narrative of emancipation to emerge. Post-closet conditions, such as increased gay visibility, a more accepting society, less anti-gay prejudice, less emphasis on coming out, and decreased stigmatization of gay identities, permit youth to engage more creatively with identity development and release them from the homogeneity of a gay identity. Hammack et al. note that the shift in the context for identity development has been dramatic for this new cohort of gay youth (2009). As overt homophobia is less accepted in contemporary society, gay identities are becoming less and less stigmatized. The narrative of emancipation, therefore, depathologizes the experience of identity development and allows for increased creativity and flexibility. In addition, part of the transition to this new narrative includes a shift toward more personal and individualized identities overall, compared to the concentrated, cultural identities prevalent in the struggle and success narrative (Weststrate and McLean 2010). An examination of the cultural-historical specificity of sexual identities among different generational cohorts reveals that younger cohorts define their identities more personally – with reference to events in their personal lives, whereas older cohorts define their
identities more culturally – with reference to socially shared experiences (Weststrate and McLean 2010). In a generation that emphasizes the individual over the collective, many contemporary queer youth have been freed from historical understanding, allowing for increased individualization in the construction of sexual identities (Weststrate and McLean 2010).

Although much empirical evidence suggests that youth are moving past traditional, mainstream gay identities, not all youth are doing so. Russell and colleagues argue that Savin-Williams’ “post-gay” era overstates the degree to which youth have abandoned gay identities and is based largely on anecdotal evidence (2009). In their empirical examination, they offer evidence to the contrary, finding that traditional LGBT identities do in fact remain relevant for contemporary adolescents. Although Savin-Williams does not claim all gay youth are rejecting gay identities, he, and others since his 2005 seminal study, find a trend toward increasing refusal of gay identities (see Ghaziani 2011). Additional empirical study on queer youth identities remains necessary to deem whether this trend is overstated or if, as Russell and colleagues (2009) suggest, LGBT identities remain relevant in their current forms.

Regardless of whether traditional gay identities remain relevant for the majority of youth, post-closet settings allow today’s generation of youth to navigate their sexual identities in new ways that have serious implications for their political activism and involvement in the gay rights movement. The multiple and fluid identities youth are creating for themselves are at odds with the stable and unified gay identities required of mainstream, identity-based gay politics. This raises important questions for a post-closet generation of youth activists. What does it mean that a cohort of activists is increasingly failing to take the identity the identity-based movement relies on? How do youth negotiate these new identities with activism and inclusion in the larger gay rights movement? What implications do the new alternative identities and a lack of a stable gay
identity have for the movement? How do youth who refuse traditional labels interact with youth identifying with the traditional mainstream movement? I now turn to an examination of the third and final core tension contemporary youth face: the navigation of identity-based mainstream politics with more radical currents of activism.

*Mainstream Identity Politics vs. Alternative Activism*

The final conflict for youth coming of age in post-closet settings involves the types of activism to embrace. Post-closet contexts place youth in an ambivalent position with regard to participation in mainstream gay politics. Although a solid and well-established national gay rights movement is enticing for many youth, others are conflicted about participating in a movement that does not resonate well with their experiences. Instead of participating in identity-based mainstream politics, many youth opt to participate in alternative forms of activism in which they are able to engage in strategies that reflect new negotiations of identity, exert their own agency, and construct more multi-issue politics on an everyday level of resistance. The amount of empirical research on queer youth activism is limited, but has been growing in recent years. In this section, I review the empirical studies documenting youth involvement in activism, highlighting the tensions that exist between participation in mainstream-oriented activism, such as school-based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), and alternative efforts taking place outside of schools throughout the country.

Although queer youth were somewhat excluded after their initial involvement in gay liberation efforts, their engagement in Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) starting in the early 1990s signaled the beginning of more recognizable and widespread involvement in mainstream LGBTQ activism. Spurred by a number of highly publicized events, such as the discriminatory policies of the Boy Scouts of America and the death of Matthew Shepard in 1998, many youth
became involved in organizing (Fields and Russell 2005). In more recent years, a growing attention to bullying and suicides by LGBTQ teens across the country has continued to inspire youth activism. Many youth are involved in activism through their schools’ GSAs (although not all GSAs engage in activism), while others are involved in activist efforts through youth-specific organizations and the youth programs of large LGBTQ organizations. The most visible arena for LGBTQ youth activism, however, has been school-based initiatives taking place in youth-led GSAs. Miceli provides a comprehensive overview of the rise of the GSA movement, showing the broader social and political impact of GSAs as a social movement (2005). Tracing the GSA movement from its inception in two Massachusetts high schools in the early 1990s, she examines how the movement was able to spread as quickly as it did with the assistance of local and national organizations. The number of GSAs continues to grow and, as of 2012, there were more than 4,000 registered on the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s (GLSEN) website.

A growing body of empirical work on GSAs reveals that they play various roles for youth in schools. For example, Griffin and colleagues find that GSAs can be oriented toward several different goals: providing students with a safe space, counseling, and support, acting as a vehicle for raising awareness, education, and visibility, and as a part of broader school efforts to raise awareness and education (2004). According to the authors, the amount of political activism varies among different GSAs, but that, overall, the focus is on changing individual-level behaviors and awareness versus institutional change (2004). The authors argue that the GSAs in their sample focus largely on the safety of GSA members, and in doing so, fail to address larger issues such as racism, sexism or heterosexism. No schools in the authors’ sample address issues such as, “how heterosexism and gender oppression privilege heterosexual and gender conforming students and marginalize LGBT students” (Griffin et al. 2004: 20). Other empirical
research, however, points to more critical and political involvement of youth in GSAs (Herdt et al. 2007; Miceli 2005; Schindel 2008; Stonefish and Lafreniere 2015). For example, Miceli shows how students in GSAs have fought successfully to change the climates and policies of their schools, making them safer and more open for LGBTQ youth (2005). Similarly, Schindel argues that students in GSAs are directly mobilizing people and resources within schools, and “radically transforming discourses, practices and protections related specifically to gender identity” (2008: 57). Youth-led GSAs provide many youth with an activist outlet to work for social change within their schools, with opportunities to organize queer proms and Days of Silence, challenge heterosexism, and facilitate trainings for school personnel (Russell et al. 2009).

In addition to school-based activism in GSAs, many youth participate in mainstream activism through organization-based channels. National organizations devoted to youth concerns, such as Advocates for Youth, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), Campus Pride, The Trevor Project, and until recently (1993-2011), the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC), involve youth activists in a variety of ways. Advocates for Youth, for example, maintains the Activist Youth Network that connects 20,000 young people on-line in their efforts to secure honest sexual health information and services (Amplify 2012). In addition, Campus Pride is the only national organization for “student leaders and campus groups working to create a safer college environment for LGBT students” (Campus Pride 2012). The organization puts together an annual summer camp for leadership training, with the goal of building social justice advocacy skills among student activists (Campus Pride 2012). The efforts and achievements on behalf of these youth-oriented organizations are remarkable, but the fact that the majority are adult-led organizations oftentimes results in a disconnect between the
experiences and needs of youth and the direction of adults. Only one exception, known to the author, exists of an organization devoted to youth concerns that is led by youth: Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY).

In addition to the youth-oriented LGBTQ organizations, many mainstream adult-oriented organizations dedicate substantial resources to youth concerns. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, for example, lists “youth concerns” as one of their top priorities, and offers youth-oriented programming, community-building and networking opportunities for queer youth at their annual “Creating Change” Conference. The 2011 conference, for example, included such topics as, “Youth Organizing and the Infrastructure Deficit,” “For Us, By Us: How to Use Media as a Tool for LGBTQ Youth Organizing,” “Beyond the GSAs: Safer Schools for Queer Youth of Color,” “Building a Youth Led Movement,” and “Trans Youth and Schools,” among many others. Other large mainstream gay movement organizations such as, the Human Rights Campaign, include efforts to address youth concerns as well. One of HRC’s programs works to provide “Generation Equality” with the necessary tools and connections to facilitate the fight for LGBT equality on college campuses across the country.

Although participation in mainstream and adult-led LGBTQ activism and organizations is common for many youth, post-closet settings increasingly position youth in an ambivalent position with regard to mainstream politics. One explanation for this is the disjuncture between new negotiations of identity and the continuing reliance of the mainstream LGBTQ movement on identity-based politics. It is widely established in the social movements literature that for identity-based politics to be successful, a shared collective identity must exist among participants (e.g., Taylor and Whittier 1992). The ways in which youth are negotiating new identities, however, is problematizing the assumption of a shared, stable identity. Highleyman summarizes
the situation for youth: “Younger activists, whether homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or refusing labels altogether, have grown up in a more queer-accepting culture and widely embrace more fluid conceptualizations of sexuality and gender; few are as concerned as their elders as reifying identity-based categories” (2002: 118). Ghaziani finds that young LGBT students are constructing their collective identities in ways that emphasize inclusion (“us and them”) rather than opposition (“us versus them”) (2011: 117). Furthermore, Schindel suggests that youth are engaging in types of activism with different implications of identity (2008). In her study, she found a heightened attention to gender and transgender rights, with “youth engaging in complex negotiations and discourses about gender identity” (Schindel 2008: 68). This represents an important shift occurring in the treatment of identity; as Schindel notes, “[youth] efforts are not just focused on the protection and rights of particular identities (e.g., gay, bisexual, transgender), but are equally about expanding and creating discourse and dialogue that more accurately reflect the complexities of sexual and gender identification” (2008: 69). She shows that changes are occurring in the mainstream GSA movement and argues that the growing impact of the youth GSA movement is that they are engaged in a project that differs from traditional identity politics. Youth are instead “focused on building and validating a community based on difference rather than defining themselves and advocating based on a single group identity” (Schindel 2008: 69).

A second reason youth are increasingly ambivalent about mainstream politics is that youth frequently have different priorities than those of the adult-oriented mainstream movement. A prominent youth organization in New York City, FIERCE (Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment), argues that youth leaders are not involved in mainstream organization decision-making and, instead, are only consulted after the fact (FIERCE 2010: 12). Furthermore, in their 2010 national-level needs assessment, FIERCE found
that although marriage equality was important to many youth, it was not ranked as a high priority. In fact, marriage was ranked as the lowest priority among a list of urgent issues facing youth (2010). Because marriage has no immediate relevance in the lives of many youth, they do not wholly identify with it having been the primary goal that the mainstream movement embraced for many years. Davidson notes that many youth feel the mainstream movement’s framing of marriage as “we are just like you” is exclusionary and boils down to fighting for the rights of traditionally gendered people at the expense of non-traditionally gendered people (2008: 252). Many youth come of age with an awareness of the marginalization of trans communities by the mainstream movement and an increased sensitivity to gender issues, and therefore, find the movement’s treatment of trans issues unacceptable. Finally, the marginalization youth face specifically as youth plays a role in distancing them from the mainstream movement as well. The oppression faced by queer youth is unique in many ways, especially in the areas of family, work, law, education, health and social services, religion, media, and adult GLB communities (Dobinson 2004).

A final area of tension between queer youth and mainstream politics lies in the ways in which queer youth have been normalized by the mainstream gay community. McCready argues that this normalization revolves largely around race, with queer youth programs oriented toward white youth, leaving queer youth of color in a marginalized position with regard to participation (2004). McCready summarizes the situation as follows: “Project 10 and other queer youth programs privilege white students whose identities are viewed as normal and more understandable compared to queer youth of color” (2004: 47). Talburt argues similarly, that queer youth are being mainstreamed in GSAs, which has the result of silencing youth of color (2004). By disproportionately serving more white students than non-white students, especially in
urban schools, queer youth of color are increasingly excluded from mainstream queer youth and face increasing ambiguity in the larger movement community (Griffin et al. 2004; Herdt et al. 2007; McCready 2004).

Although the number of GSAs continues to grow throughout the United States, and empirical evidence suggests that youth activist efforts are expanding, there remains a significant amount of popular culture rhetoric that poses today’s generation of LGBTQ youth as apathetic to politics and activism. For example, Savin-Williams claims that many gay youth are not interested in activism because they do not see their gayness as anything out of the ordinary (2005a). A growing body of empirical evidence calls this claim into question (Bennett 2010; Driver 2008). Recent research on queer youth suggests that they are engaged in activism, not only within their schools (to varying degrees), but also within their communities. It is possible, however, that youth activism is taking on new and different forms, contributing to this lack of acknowledgement. Post-closet contexts are ostensibly altering the participation of youth in LGBTQ politics, with youth engaging in a variety of alternative methods, including: new political strategies that are more culturally-based, everyday modes of resistance, exploring their own agency, queer politics, and progressive multi-issue politics. Perhaps a shift to different forms of participation is a result of youth’s increasing ambivalence about mainstream politics and reflects changes in youth political engagement that are reflective of post-closet contexts.

The most obvious distinction between the mainstream and alternative politics in which youth are engaging regard the types of activist strategies utilized. In her edited volume titled, *Queer Youth Cultures*, Driver discusses a new arsenal of queer youth protest strategies:

“...Youth draw upon a diverse range of protest styles and tactics from street theater and drag performance to zine production, online mobilization, and visual art. Queer activism over the past two decades has expanded protest to include an expansive array of tools and
Driver finds that many youth are engaging in more cultural strategies of activism that have political implications (2008). Sonnie claims similarly and finds that the bulk of queer youth activism resides in their creative and cultural work (2000). For example, she notes, “Creative work is political; words and images move people and have the capacity to dislodge deeply entrenched systems, if we arm ourselves with a voice and surround ourselves with allies” (2000: xvi). Empirical cases documenting these new and different strategies are limited, but becoming more prevalent in recent years (Blackburn 2002; Driver 2007; Gosine 2008; Grady et al. 2012; Hickey-Moody et al. 2008; Markson 2008; Regales 2008; Rhoades 2012; Ritchie 2008; Shelton 2008). A shift from a traditional repertoire to a more “cultural repertoire” is seemingly occurring (Taylor et al. 2009) and, for queer youth, includes such things as, community-based theater, performance art, culture jamming, drag shows, and video and zine production (Driver 2008; Rhoades 2012). Much of the political cultural work of queer youth centers on identity construction. For example, many queer youth produce and distribute zines (small circulation magazines) to have their voices to be heard (Gosine 2008; Regales 2008; Ritchie 2008). Trans zine writers, according to the findings of Regales, use their zines as a safe space for thinking about sexuality, gender, theory, and performance (2008). The author notes that in doing so, trans youth are also making their voices heard in “alternative public contexts” and “writing themselves into theoretical discourse dominated by academic writers” (Regales 2008: 87). Instead of relying on the mainstream and mass-produced cultures for marginalized people such as themselves, queer youth create their own alternative spaces through zines, where they are able to construct any type of identity they desire (Regales 2008). Zines are not the only strategy youth use to negotiate political identity constructions. Hickey-Moody and colleagues show how on-line
cultural productions of identity can have political implications as well (2008). In an analysis of
*Pink Sofa*, an internet-based lesbian community, the authors find that the on-line community,
“facilitates a range of performances of sexual and gender identity,” with implications for creating
new narratives and images that can influence people’s self-perceptions and relationships
(Hickey-Moody et al. 2008:123).

Performance-based cultural productions are also a common protest strategy used by queer
youth (Blackburn 2002; Grady et al. 2012; Markson 2008; Ritchie 2008; Shelton 2008).
Blackburn reveals the ways in which youth aim to affect social change through the production of
literary performances that create worlds where lesbians are no longer victims of heterosexism
and homophobia (2002). Drag performance is another common strategy in the performance vein.
In a study of queer youth drag shows, Markson notes: “while initiatives such as *Drag it Out!* may
not result in federal policy changes, they have the potential to affect change at an intimate and
local level” (2008: 292). Furthermore, Markson writes; “The show was not initiated by, or in
reaction to, an oppressor, a mainstream, or an idea of ‘normal.’ It was created on its own terms to
reflect all participants, exemplifying a citizenship whereby queer is always already at the center,
demanding broad understandings of gender, sexuality, and relationships” (2008: 291-292).
Performance video art is also used as a tool for change, with queer youth using self-
representational work to counter their representations in mass media, lay claim to their lives, and
bring about collective change (Shelton 2008). Furthermore, Grady and colleagues demonstrate
the ways in which queer youth of color use the performativity of dance to challenge the
deleterious effects of neoliberalism and fight against homophobia, racism, and class exploitation
(2012).
In addition to the variety of new strategies youth use to engage in political activism, one can see they are also engaging differently by embracing an everyday level of political resistance, rather than an organizational level. While research on queer youth activism is somewhat limited, Dobinson reminds us that studies focusing only on organized resistance will not tell the full story of queer youth activism (2004: 40). Instead, she argues that queer youth face such severe oppression at the intersection of sexuality and age that Scott’s theory of powerlessness and resistance applies: the more severe the conditions of powerlessness and dependency, the less likely that members of that group will form organized resistance (1990). Dobinson claims, therefore, that many youth activist efforts are missed and the best way to understand their struggle is through an exploration of the specific ways they experience oppression and respond with “individualized, practical, and low profile forms of daily resistance and survival, rather than organized resistance” (2004: 42). Similarly, Blackburn points to the “modest resistance” on a “daily basis” that youth engage in for insight into youth social change efforts (2002). Specifically, Blackburn focuses on the literacy work and performances that work for social change by “disrupt[ing] heterosexist and homophobic perceptions of lesbians” (2002: 322). Efforts such as these are missed when focus remains solely on the involvement of youth in mainstream organization-based politics; however, these efforts are equally as significant in understanding youth attempts to produce social change.

Coming of age with strong victim narratives that limit youth agency, many youth in post-closet settings are exploring ways of engaging in activism that allows them the opportunity to assert their own agency. A burgeoning body of work documents the activism of queer youth in which they assert their own agency and refuse to be seen as simply victims (e.g., see Blackburn 2005; FIERCE 2010; Markson 2008; Sonnie 2000). Blackburn provides an empirical example of
queer youth acting as agents rather than victims, using language creatively to subvert oppression (2005). She shows how language, specifically a borderland discourse that she terms, “Gaybonics,” “served to position the users of this discourse as agents who subverted ageism and racism by creating a border that hindered those outside of that border from understanding what those inside the border were saying, a strategy they practiced within their community” (Blackburn 2005: 103). Blackburn thus provides an empirical example of youth’s ability to gain access to power by defining their own language and interpreting their own experiences (2005). Similarly, Markson shows how youth are creating alternatives to mainstream politics through drag shows (2008). Rather than being restricted to the mainstream’s image of youth as desexualized and depoliticized victims (Driver 2008), Markson demonstrates that drag shows allow youth to focus inward: “it is a place for an ever-expanding community to explore its own identities and broaden its ideas and boundaries around sexuality and gender – for the sake of all participants, not for the viewing (dis)pleasure of outside observers” (2008: 291). The author notes that in such a case, “politics becomes a communal activity involving individually empowered agents” (Markson 2008: 291). Youth involvement in self-expressive acts in which they define their own language and identities allows youth to empower themselves in ways that participation in the mainstream movement precludes.

An additional type of radical alternative politics LGBTQ youth are engaging in is queer activism. While the gay and lesbian movement has often oscillated between mainstream and queer currents of politics, youth coming of age in post-closet contexts are turning to queer politics as a way to challenge the boundaries and norms associated with the well-established mainstream movement (Ritchie 2008). Ritchie claims that the current conception of queer youth politics reflects a growing popularity of anarchist politics that can be seen in other movements as
well, such as the anti-globalization movement (2008). In fact, he argues that “much of queer youth tactics, organizational structures, and overall goals have been heavily influenced by anarchism,” and in examining new strategies of queer political action in Ashville, NC, he finds queer activist groups emphasizing “decentralism, networking, collective structures, and carnival” (Ritchie 2008: 261-262). With a generation of youth refusing labels and/or claiming queer identities more frequently, one can see how the influence of anarchism is reflected: “Just as anarchism is a political movement of a fiercely antipolitical nature (in that it refuses to use the ‘political’ system), so too is the label ‘queer,’ the ultimate anti-label” (Ritchie 2008: 270).

Finally, a trend toward more integrated, multi-issue politics is evident among the post-closet generation of youth. Increasingly, queer youth are calling for a broader view of social justice and joining together in the fight against homophobia, racism, sexism, capitalism, and economic injustice (Highleyman 2002; Spade 2004). Highleyman claims that, “in the absence of a strong progressive/liberation movement, some queer radicals have opted to devote their energies to a new convergence activism” (2002: 112). She observes that this activism has no name or specific agenda, but that it developed out of Seattle WTO protests and is characterized by principles borrowed from anarchists and feminists, such as non-hierarchical structures, grassroots politics, and flexible tactics. One of the most telling and widely cited examples that not only demonstrates multi-issue politics at work, but also highlights the tensions between the mainstream and radical segments of the movement, is the struggle occurring in New York City’s Chelsea Piers between residents and urban queer youth. A campaign by high-income gay and straight residents to “rid” (Residents in Distress –RID) their streets of the queer and trans youth of color who have gathered at the piers over the years has resulted in a battle to “Save Our Space,” spearheaded by FIERCE. Scholars such as Spade (2004) and Davidson (2008) claim
that this conflict typifies the mainstream movement’s exclusion of trans, race, and poverty issues and demonstrates the numerous “tensions between liberal gay and lesbian politics focused on mainstream acceptance and the unique predicaments of poor urban gay youth” (Davidson 2008: 245). Another New York-based example of youth engaging in multi-issue progressive politics is the Education for Leadership Project (ELP). Organized by FIERCE, the project brings LGBTQ low-income youth of color together for several months of political education to prepare the next generation of youth organizers (Davidson 2008). The emphasis is on building a movement that is “both by and for the people in the ‘base’,” and, thus, developing grassroots leaders in the struggle who are most impacted by the issues they face, such as economic injustice, homophobia and racism (Davidson 2008: 255). Multi-issue, progressive politics such as these examples continue to emerge as the projects that many queer youth are devoting their energies to in post-closet settings.

Coming of age in post-closet contexts has positioned many queer youth ambivalently toward the mainstream gay and lesbian movement in the United States. Although participation in school-based GSAs and mainstream organizations remains substantial, many youth seek radical politics as an alternative that meshes better with their experiences of new identities and narrow confines of a victim discourse. Post-closet youth embrace different, more cultural, protest strategies, engage in resistance on an everyday level, empower themselves by claiming their own agency, employ queer politics and multi-issue social justice activism. As Markson notes: “Where adult organizations are steeped in societal norms and institutional loyalties, youth, still involved in the dynamic process of self-discovery, organizing in organic, creative, and impulsive ways, demonstrate the most potential to challenge the roots of heteronormativity, and to forge new concepts of citizenship” (2008: 292). Does the future of the gay and lesbian movement lie in the
hands of a generation of youth who will engage in sexual politics differently? In the section that follows, I turn to a consideration of the major gaps in the literature on generational change in movements and queer youth activism and discuss the need for the present empirical study to address the state of post-closet queer youth activism.

**Gaps in the Literature**

The influence of generations on politics is clear. It is widely recognized that changes in social-historical contexts will produce generational units that possess outlooks that differ from their predecessors and will persevere over time (Mannheim 1954). However, many researchers, such as Johnston and Aarelaid-Tart find it, “puzzling that social movement research treats generational factors with such disregard” (2000: 673). Most accounts of the women’s, civil rights, and LGBTQ movements infer the significance of generations, but fail to analyze that significance directly. Even in the women’s movement, where generational differences have been central to debates about the movement for years, core generational dynamics remain fuzzy and underspecified. Most accounts of generational change in the women’s movement, with the exceptions of Whittier (1995; 1997) and Reger (2012), dismiss variations of identity, goals, and strategies within generations by lumping them together into homogenous “waves” of the movement and inadequately consider the transformation of the movement over time.

There has been considerable debate within the literature concerning both the usefulness and limitations of characterizing the movement in terms of generations and waves. Ferree and Hess argue that each wave offers its own values and ideas that shape a movement in constant flux (1994), while Naples cautions against the wave/generation model, arguing that it leads us to overlook many feminist strands and efforts (2005: 220). Similarly, Reger argues that we must be cautious in over-simplifying the actions of the most recent “wave” of feminist activism;
oftentimes, she notes, third wave actions often have cultural, as well as political, goals and are not always targeted at the state in visible ways (2005).

In addition to offering a solution to the oversimplification of differences between feminist generations, Whittier’s generational model of change and continuity also stands as a corrective to what she views as an over-emphasis on political and organizational dynamics of movement change (1995; 1997). Building on political generations and cohort replacement theories, Whittier’s model points to the significance of generations for understanding how internal and external contexts create new activist groupings with different collective identities and that while political generations in movements share a collective identity, variations exist among micro-cohorts. However, Whittier’s model is limited in that it has been developed solely in the context of the women’s movement. Additional key questions can be explored in the context of other movements, namely the LGBTQ movement.

Rapid social and cultural change around sexuality in the past two decades positions the gay movement perfectly for generational analysis. With only surface level treatments of generational dynamics in the gay movement, many questions remain unanswered in terms of generational influence. For example, Whittier notes that generational processes may function differently depending on the level of mobilization within a movement (1997). How does the gay movement compare to the women’s movement at the time of Whittier’s study as far as level of mobilization? Specifically, are youth entering a movement that is characterized more by maintenance rather than escalating mobilization? If so, what impact might this have on generational processes in the movement?

Furthermore, the post-closet settings emerging since the mid-1990s point to the readiness of the gay movement for the study of intergenerational factors. What past contexts have
contributed to the creation of different political generations within the gay movement and what are the major differences between these generations in their collective identities? In what ways does the collective identity of youth differ? How has the new generation of activists been incorporated into existing movement organizations and campaign? Has the collective identity of the movement been influenced by queer youth? An empirical, systematic exploration of the collective identities of youth growing up in post-closet contexts is needed in order to shed light on these generational processes.

A substantial gap exists in the literature documenting the involvement of youth in activism. Contradictory findings exist with one of the main scholars on LGBTQ youth suggesting youth are overwhelmingly apathetic to movement involvement (Savin-Williams 2005a). Savin-Williams is quick to conclude that this apathy is reflective of successful assimilation: “The culture of contemporary teenagers easily incorporates its homoerotic members. It’s more than gay-friendly. It’s gay-blind” (2005a: 197). The author points to a future of increasing “banality” of gays and lesbians and the eventual elimination of same-sex sexuality as a defining characteristic (a “post-gay” society) (Savin-Williams 2005a: 222). However, missing from his argument is a consideration of the ways in which a growing banality leads to the increased regulation of “acceptable” sexualities (Warner 1999). The author’s conception of the modern gay teen as completely reliant on assimilated and normalized versions of gay is a major problem for those youth who are critical of the effects of normalization and fails to account for the diverse experiences of sexual minority youth who wish to retain a unique sexual identity (Cohler and Hammack 2007). Furthermore, his argument leaves in tact ideas of normative heterosexuality and ignores the significant ways that youth are challenging and
resisting traditional identity politics by incorporating analyses of sexuality and gender into their everyday lived experiences.

Savin-Williams’ conclusions about the growing apathy and “post-gay” quality of gay teens are also troubling in light of the empirical research suggesting otherwise (for example, Highleyman 2002). Growing empirical research suggests youth are engaging in new types of activism, with varying political strategies, identities, and priorities than their predecessors. Identification with the term “queer” appears to be on the rise (Horner 2007; Ritchie 2008) despite Savin-Williams’ claim that, “most teens…do not think of themselves as queer or appreciate the word” (2005a: 210). However, these contradictions seem to stem from the various ways youth negotiate the core tensions they face as a result of post-closet contexts. Little research exists on youth activism, especially outside of the schools, and existing studies tend to treat youth activism in tangential ways (Dobinson 2004). In depth empirical study is needed to shed light on the differences that exist within contemporary youth and their perspectives on activism and participation in the gay movement.

**Analytical Framework: Outlining a Research Project**

**Introduction**

To examine the gay and lesbian movement through a generational lens, several key analytic concepts must be utilized. In this section, I elaborate on the analytic concepts to be used in this proposed study of LGBTQ youth activism. I begin by defining movement generations within the gay and lesbian movement and show how post-closet settings combine to produce a contemporary post-closet generation of youth. I call attention to the ways in which collective identities are negotiated and how members of the post-closet generation face several unique challenges in navigating their identities. Finally, I lay out the ways in which micro-cohorts will
be considered in the proposed study. Upon describing the analytical framework for the study, I turn to a discussion of the proposed methodology.

**Defining Movement Generations**

Both Whittier (1995; 1997) and Ross (1983) provide similar conceptualizations of how generations form within social movements. The definition of a “movement generation” offered by Ross, or in Whittier’s terms “political generation,” recognizes that new activist cohorts create different collective identities in light of changing socio-historical contexts and that it is this new shared sense of identity that gives the cohort the potential to bring about change in the movement. For the purposes of the present study, I will explicitly refer to these generations within movements as “movement generations,” as the term political generation implies a broader generation not specific to a particular social movement.

Movement generations form in response to significant changes in the movement’s internal culture as well as the external socio-historical context (Whittier 1997). In considering the specifics of how a movement cohort might coalesce into such a generation, both Ross and Whittier provide insight. Ross argues similarly to Mannheim (1954) that the central defining experience of a cohort is not necessarily shared age, but the shared experiences of an age group (1983). According to Whittier and Ross, the time of politicization and entry into the movement is key. While age plays a large role in determining the types of experiences one will have, shared experiences are often more significant than the age of the participants. For instance, Ross demonstrates how the earliest group of participants in SDS shared a common initiation into the civil rights movement that was characterized by the lunch counter sit-ins of sixties, while those joining five years later were mobilized by their opposition to the Vietnam War (1983). Whittier further explains that the concrete act of organizing together contributes to a shared worldview,
not just an abstract “spirit of the times” (1995: 17). It is the common experiences of participants in a movement that play a major role in shaping each cohort’s involvement, not necessarily their shared age or membership in a larger historical generation.

Age is, however, an important marker for inclusion in the post-closet generation. Part of possessing a post-closet outlook and worldview is dependent on coming of age in an era of increasing acceptance of LGBTQ people. Certainly older adults may embrace or develop an LGBTQ identity during this period, but their coming of age will have been marked with the legacy of a closet-centered environment. (This point brings up an important direction for future research, as questions remain concerning older adults who first become politicized within post-closet contexts. In many ways, they may be more similar to post-closet youth than their age-cohort peers who came to the movement at an earlier time, but crucial differences are bound to exist.) Age alone, however, is not sufficient for one’s inclusion in the post-closet movement generation. One must also come of age in post-closet settings, which as of present, is largely geographically limited. Youth living in near proximity to urban centers across the United States are more likely to be exposed to post-closet settings, whereas youth in rural, isolated environments may find the closet to be particularly relevant.

With these considerations in mind, three primary movement generations can be identified in the modern US LGBTQ movement:

1. Gay Liberation/Lesbian Feminism [1969–late-1970s]: Key socio-historical events included the Stonewall Riots of 1969, the politicization of sexuality, rise of lesbian feminism and women’s community institutions. Movement aimed toward large-scale social justice through radical, grassroots organizing.
II. Gay Rights: [late-1970s–mid-1990s]: Key socio-historical events included AIDS crisis, sex wars of the 1980s, a conservative Religious Right backlash, radical queer undercurrents, and the emergence of militant AIDS activism. Overall, the movement characterized by a turn toward rights-based politics and increased institutionalization amidst a conservative political environment.

III. Post-closet: [began to emerge mid-1990s, becoming more concrete throughout the early 2000s –present] Key socio-historical events include the overturning of anti-sodomy statutes by the Supreme Court in 2003, the legalization of same-sex marriage in MA in 2004, the US government’s dismantling of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell in 2011, and the national legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015. Context marked by a “post-AIDS” era, the dwindling relevance of the closet, increased visibility, assimilation, and normalization of LGBTQ people. Movement characterized by the display of new sexual and gender identity negotiations, including increased fluidity and resistance of traditional gay labels, and new forms of activism, such as the growing trend toward everyday resistance and cultural expression.

*LGBTQ Youth: Navigating Collective Identity in a Post-Closet Generation*

With the new socio-historical context that began to emerge in the mid-1990s, a new movement generation was born. Post-closet youth possess markedly different collective identities, as a result of the combination of internal and external movement contexts from which they have emerged. Whittier notes that we must recognize the differences in collective identities among different cohorts of activists in order to recognize the potential for movement transformation. My analysis of the theoretical and empirical literature on queer youth reveals three core dilemmas they face in defining their collective identities and making sense of their
place in the larger movement. Such core dilemmas are unique to members of the post-closet generation and include the following: (1) the navigation of a narrow framing as at-risk victims versus well-adjusted agents; (2) the negotiation of new sexual identities; and (3) the choice between mainstream identity politics and alternative activism. The struggle around identity and politics for the post-closet generation is open in a way that was not perhaps available to older generations. These tensions are at the core of growing up gay in today’s society and combine to position youth ambivalently toward dominant forms of gay politics. How do they reconcile these tensions? Are all new movement generations positioned ambivalently for a period of time? What does this position help us understand about how movements adapt and respond to new generations? Analyzing how youth navigate these dilemmas is key for revealing the differences in their collective identities.

Furthermore, in a study of collective identities, it is important to clarify what specifically is implied by the concept, “collective identity.” As defined previously, collective identity refers to the distinct group definition and perspective on the world and on social movements that remains stable and consistent over time (Whittier 2006). I rely on Taylor and Whittier’s definition of the concept that points to three key strategies: the creation of a shared consciousness, the establishment of group boundaries, and the negotiation of this identity in everyday life (1992). Each of these dynamics is explored as part of post-closet youth’s identity development. Of critical importance to consider are the ways in which collective identity formation is problematized by the unique challenges faced by youth in post-closet settings. As Ghaziani suggests, we must consider the ways that collective identity is influenced by youth more interested in drawing commonalities with dominant “straight” culture than distinguishing differences (2011).
Micro-cohorts

While classifying a movement generation helps to identify the primary collective identity of that group and understand its generational significance in light of the future direction of the movement, one must be careful to not overstate its uniformity. I am not arguing that the post-closet generation is a homogenous group of activists. Rather, I will utilize Whittier’s concept of micro-cohort to examine the variations that exist within the movement generation. Whittier emphasizes the importance of timing for delineating micro-cohorts, noting that subtle differences that can emerge over 1–2 year periods in collective identities depending on the extent of both internal and external movement change. Reger argues similarly and shows how community context plays a significant role in shaping micro-cohorts with varying collective identities within a movement generation (2012). Similarly, I explore the ways in which varying negotiations of the key challenges facing the post-closet generation in combination with college context influences the creation of various micro-cohorts within a movement generation. Attention to the core challenges faced by this movement generation helps elaborate the various collective identities they form. Hammack and colleagues note: “Contemporary youth have access to a number of discourses on sexuality and we must query this process for individual youth rather than make assumptions about their identity development based solely on membership in a particular generation-cohort” (2009: 874). In discussing the challenges associated with youth identity development, Flacks suggests the most crucial task is “to grasp the different adaptations young people are making to their shared circumstances” (2007: 79). In other words, how can our understanding of a movement generation’s navigation of core tensions contribute to a deeper understanding of the variations that exist within that generation?
Conclusion

The examination of queer youth identities and activism using the core analytic concepts of movement generation, collective identity and micro-cohort enables a close study of youth’s positioning in the larger gay movement today. Recognizing social movements as constitutive of different “movement generations” allows for the better understanding of how and why they change over time. Specifically, examining how contemporary queer youth comprise a “post-closet movement generation” allows us to see the unique challenges they face and present to the larger movement. I now turn to a description of the methodology used in the study on LGBTQ youth activism and generational change in the gay and lesbian movement.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine whether LGBTQ youth emerging from post-closet contexts are constitutive of a new movement generation by documenting the new collective identities, goals, and strategies that can influence change in the larger movement. To that end, detailed, rich information was needed to reveal the meaning-making processes around identity and activism in which these youth engaged. Acquiring such in-depth information necessitated the use of qualitative methodology and was suited in particular to in-depth interviews (Lofland and Lofland 1995). In-depth interviews provide the depth of information necessary to reveal complex negotiations of collective identity. The interpretation of respondent identities and involvement in activism is key for revealing how respondents navigate the core dilemmas facing the post-closet generation. A qualitative approach leaves open the possibility of revealing additional identity dynamics and core tensions for post-closet youth, which may be missing in the extant literature. In this chapter, I detail the study design, sample demographics, data analysis, limitations, and ethical considerations of the present study.

Sampling Design

Obtaining a representative sample of LGBTQ youth activists is impossible and, therefore, this study was well suited to non-probability sampling techniques. A mixture of availability and snowball sampling was used to obtain 40 respondents between the ages of 18-25 years. I limited the age range to 18-25 years old for several reasons. First, by recruiting individuals who are at least 18 years old, I increased the likelihood of obtaining a sample with several years of experience in activism (although this was not a requirement of participation in the study). Second, setting the upper limit of the age range to 25 years old was to remain consistent with several youth organizations that use this age as the cutoff for defining “youth” populations.
Finally, while older activists (up to approximately 30 years old) would fit within the post-closet category, I wanted to focus on individuals who came of age in later, more established post-closet settings. Including individuals between the ages of 18-25 (approximately born between 1988 and 1998), resulted in a sample of participants who came of age well after the mid-1990s, when post-closet settings became more widely established.

The context of social movement participation is extremely important to consider when studying social movement dynamics, for depending on context, activism at the local, grassroots and national levels can vary greatly (Whittier 1997). For the purposes of this study, I recruited participants from a limited local geographic region. This choice was not only pragmatic because of my location as the researcher, but also helped to restrict the sample to a shared political context. Rather than sample more broadly, it was assumed that the local community context would shape activist opportunities in similar ways. While some respondents grew up far from the local region (with sometimes drastically different activist opportunities and political contexts), they each shared similar contexts as far as their current activist opportunities. Furthermore, efforts were made to obtain a diverse local sample in order to capture a variety of perspectives represented in the region. I purposively chose to not limit my sample to one specific case study of activists from a single group or organization; doing so would run the risk of missing the various negotiations of the core tensions facing this generation.

Participants were recruited on the basis of having participated in LGBTQ activism (see Appendix A for Recruitment Ad). As Bobel points out, caution must be exercised in relying on self-identified “activists” because of the reluctance among social movement participants to identify explicitly as such (2007). Therefore, I carefully chose the wording on the recruitment ad to reflect LGBTQ individuals “who have engaged in activism,” and not “LGBTQ activists” (or,
as Bobel (2007) states, those who “do activism,” rather than those who are “activists”). It is important to recognize that the definition of activism can vary greatly among individuals. In preliminary communications with study volunteers, I made it clear to respondents that definitions of activism can vary and that there was no minimal amount of past activism required for study participation. In addition, it was clear in the recruitment advertisement that affiliation with or participation in any specific movement organization was also not required, so as to ensure that respondents understood my broadly defined concept of activism.

To obtain a diverse sample of youth, mixed recruitment methods were used. First, participants were solicited through advertisements placed on local college campuses (including a large public university, as well as various smaller private colleges). McAdam notes that college students have long been significant contributors to social movements, making the college student population a logical and suitable starting place for locating youth engaged in activism (1988). In addition, recruitment ads were placed at the main community LGBTQ organization in downtown Albany, which hosts youth-oriented support and social groups. The recruitment ad was also published several times in their community newsletter. In an attempt to obtain sufficient representation of LGBTQ youth of color, ads for the study were also distributed at a local LGBTQ organization that provides services to LGBT people of color throughout the Capital Region. The organization also holds a regular support group for trans people of color and, therefore, attempts were made to reach this subgroup of hard to locate individuals. Recruitment ads were also left on the bulletin boards of local coffee shops in hopes to reach participants who were unaffiliated with formal organizations or universities.

In addition to the physical placement of recruitment ads at these various locations, significant efforts were made to recruit local activists via on-line sources. Since on-line
communities play a crucial role in providing support to youth in post-closet contexts, the majority of potential volunteers were obtained through these means. Recruitment ads were posted on the Facebook pages of local college LGBTQ groups and distributed via email to their membership lists. Approximately two-thirds of the way through data collection, it became apparent that the majority of participants were coming from three distinct colleges. In order to facilitate comparisons I saw emerging from the data, I focused my remaining recruitment efforts on these three colleges. Snowball sampling was used upon completion of interviews to ask for referrals of others who might be interested in taking part in the study, and several participants were obtained in this manner. Interviews were conducted until a level of saturation was reached, which occurred around 40 completed interviews.

An obvious limitation to consider in my sample design is that relying on non-probability sampling techniques means I am unable to generalize my findings to all post-closet LGBTQ youth. I am also limited to the respondents who viewed and responded to the recruitment ad, which introduces the possibility of a biased sample. However, I believe the richness of the acquired data supersedes these limitations and contributes substantial insight into the processes of identity construction and types of activism in which many post-closet youth are engaged.

**Demographics**

A total of 40 interviews were conducted with LGBTQ youth ranging in age from 18-25 years old. Data collection occurred from February of 2013 through May of 2106. Demographic information, including race/ethnicity, education level, socio-economic status, gender, and sexual identity, was collected from participants at the beginning of each interview (see Appendix B). Gender and sexual identity categories were ascertained through open-ended questions to encourage respondents to describe their identities in their own terms and to avoid classifying
individuals by pre-established identity categories. The mean age of respondents was 20.4 years, and the mode and median of the sample was 20 years old. The gender identity distribution skewed female, with 25 female-identified respondents, 12 male-identified respondents, and three identifying as fluid or non-binary. Within the 25 female-identified respondents, two further identified as either gender fluid or genderqueer. Within the 12 male-identified respondents, five respondents identified as transgender (six total in the sample, including one respondent who identifies primarily as non-binary). Two trans respondents specified their gender identities as “transmasculine” and “transman,” distinguishing their genders as separate from the traditional male/female gender binary. Attempts were made to recruit additional male-identified respondents when it became clear that a majority of respondents were female-identified. However, recruiting additional male subjects proved challenging, perhaps indicating either that females outnumber males in the larger activist-oriented population of post-closet youth or that females were simply more likely to volunteer for such a study.

Regarding race, the majority of respondents identified as White/Caucasian (70 percent), while 30 percent self-identified as non-White. Of the non-White participants, four identified as Asian, two as Black, two as Hispanic, two as Biracial (Black/Hispanic and Black/Caucasian), and one respondent each as Native American and Arabic.

The sample contained individuals with a rather diverse range of sexual identities. Because the demographic form allowed for youth to self-identify their sexual identities, a multitude of responses resulted. I collapsed the sexual identities into the general categories for the purposes of summarizing; however, a full list of the provided self-identified descriptors can be found in Table 1 below and is used in the discussion of study findings. Approximately one-third of the sample identified as “gay/lesbian” (14 respondents). The remaining two-thirds
identified generally in the following ways: nine identified as “queer,” eight identified as
“pansexual,” three as “bisexual,” two as “non-identifying or fluid,” two as “asexual or
demisexual,” and two as “other.” Romantic identifications were also identified for two
respondents, identifying as biromantic and panromantic.

Table 1. Self-Reported Sexual Identities of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Queer/Pansexual</th>
<th>Fluid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay/Queer</td>
<td>Queer/Lesbian</td>
<td>Bi/Pan/Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosexual</td>
<td>Queer/Bi/Polyamorous</td>
<td>Andro/Homosexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Asexual/Panromantic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bisexual/Transgender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer/Bisexual</td>
<td>Non-Identifying</td>
<td>Biromantic/Demisexual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A measure of socioeconomic status was broadly ascertained through self-reported parent
education and occupation. An analysis of the educational attainment of respondent’s parents
suggests that the sample is skewed toward Upper/Middle Class participants, with 50% of
respondents reporting at least one parent with an advanced degree. One-quarter of the sample
reported college-educated parents (n=10), while five respondents each reported “some college”
and “high school” educations for their parents. See Table 2 below.

Table 2. Parent Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Degree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most participants can be grouped into having attended three local colleges/universities: a
large public university (*Public University*), a small nondenominational liberal arts college
(*Liberal Arts College*) and a small private Catholic college in the area (*Catholic College*). (See

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Table 3 below for a breakdown of the number of participants by college/university. While these three groups were not initially intended to be sites of subject recruitment, the groups emerged about two-thirds of the way through data collection and analysis and appeared to yield noteworthy comparisons. Therefore, for the remaining subject recruitment, efforts were made to recruit additional subjects from these three groups so that comparisons could be made as far as local contexts and micro-cohorts were concerned. While the samples are small and not representative, the three comparison groups did yield differences and pointed to significant contextual differences that occur by college setting and location.

Table 3. Number of Participants by College/University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College/University</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public University</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Arts College</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic College</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher. The interviews ranged from 54 minutes to 127 minutes, with the majority of interviews lasting approximately 1 ½ hours. All interviews occurred at a time and location chosen by the respondents and each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Upon a review of the study’s consent form (see Appendix C), demographic information was obtained from each participant prior to beginning the interview. The interview then began with questions revolving around four main topics: 1) personal story surrounding sexual/gender identity (coming out story/process), 2) identity and labeling, 3) coming of age context, and 4) participation in activism (see Appendix D for a copy of the Interview Guide used in the study). Probing
questions were asked when appropriate to elicit further elaboration from respondents. The structure of the interview allowed for topics to be addressed in a natural, conversational order, rather than strictly adhering to the interview schedule. Data collection occurred concurrent to data analysis and, therefore, the interview guide was revised several times throughout the data collection process to follow up on particularly salient themes that were emerging from previous interviews.

In any qualitative interview methodology, a primary threat to validity stems from interviewer bias. It was, therefore, important to mitigate any potential effects of my identity as an older female researcher who self-identifies as a lesbian. Conscientious efforts were made to develop and maintain good rapport with all participants as a means to encourage open and comfortable conversation. In order to obtain as many respondents as possible to the recruitment ad, a small incentive of 15 dollars was offered as payment for participation. While such an incentive was arguably sufficient to thank one for their time and participation, the amount was not so much that it coerced subjects into participation. However, the sample was somewhat limited in that it only contained respondents who viewed the ad and took the initiative to respond. This group of respondents may differ in important ways from others who failed to respond to the ad or were not exposed to the ad in the designated recruitment settings. However, by including a variety of settings, universities/colleges, and groups, all attempts were made to ensure a varied and diverse sample of youth.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred simultaneous to data collection in order to pursue any unanticipated themes that arose and to dive deeper into emergent themes. Interview transcripts were analyzed utilizing the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. This not only allowed for
greater ease in organizing and accessing the data, but also permitted more sophisticated inductive analysis of the data. I conducted several rounds of coding. First, transcripts were initially coded for preliminary themes along the lines of the project’s analytical framework, using a set of a priori codes. Appropriate coding schemes were created and then a second, more focused, emergent coding occurred to analyze the key themes emerging from the data. Differences were analyzed by context, race, gender and sexual identity. In the analysis, the narratives of respondents were privileged. How do youth navigate core tensions and reconcile activist identities in the midst of movement and culture that views them in narrow ways? The answers to these types of questions lay in the respondents’ own words and meaning making processes, and they are, therefore, given prominence in the chapters that follow.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the data in this study. Interview data allow for the rich, detailed insight into the study participants’ personal and collective identities, activist strategies and goals, as well as their views on intergenerational dynamics. In addition, I am able to examine any generational or micro-cohort differences that exist within my sample. However, I do not have comparable data for older cohorts of activists and am limited to using secondary research for any comparisons. While this does not preclude comparisons among generations, it limits the types of comparisons to what is currently available. In spite of this limitation, the interview data I gathered allows for substantial insight into how LGBTQ youth may constitute a new movement generation in their negotiation of the unique circumstances they face in post-closet settings and allows me to hypothesize about how this generation affects the larger movement. It should also be noted that in addition to interview data, supplemental data was collected and analyzed for contextualization purposes. For example, I took detailed notes at
activist events I attended and I gathered more information on events that were described in interviews in order to contextualize them further.

**Ethical Considerations**

Any study with human subjects must be considered in terms of ethical impact. All respondents voluntarily participated in the interviews and were responsible for contacting the researcher to take part. The potential risk of harm was minimal in a study of this kind; however, an interview on sexual identity did run the risk of eliciting sensitive topics. Referrals to local support groups and/or resources were to be made available to any participant who expressed signs of emotional disturbance as a result of the interview; however, this proved unnecessary. At the beginning of each interview, respondents were reminded that they were free to withdraw their participation in the study at any given time during the interview. No respondents chose to do so and the majority of interviewees expressed gratitude for the opportunity to partake in the study.

Confidentiality was guaranteed to all participants and the process used for de-identifying all personally identifiable information from interview transcripts was explained. Participant names were not collected on consent forms; instead, verbal consent was given upon reviewing the Informed Consent agreement. The researcher transcribed each interview and all names and personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and replaced with subject identification numbers and pseudonyms. To further guarantee subject confidentiality, files containing interview transcripts were stored with password protection.
Chapter Four: Post-closet Queer Youth Movement Generation

Introduction and Overview of Chapter

The forty LGBTQ youth interviewed in this study represent varying components of a post-closet generation. Coming of age in a time of increased LGBTQ visibility and normalization, these queer youth often came out at very young ages and were generally met with acceptance from their families and friends. In Part I of this chapter, I provide a brief description of the three different college contexts that emerged in the data to help situate the different ways post-closet youth are challenging and changing sexual and gender identities and activism. Although unintended at the outset of the study, three distinct groups of respondents emerged from the sample that led to distinctions in contextualizing these members of the post-closet generation.

In Part II, I describe in detail the defining traits of the post-closet movement generation. I begin by describing the main themes that emerged from the participants’ coming out stories, including the young ages in which these individuals came out, the overwhelming amount of family support they received, and an apparent desire to downplay the process of coming out. In addition, I discuss the unique issues associated with negotiating transgender identities in post-closet contexts and the importance of social media for this post-closet youth generation. I then describe the main resources available to the generation of post-closet youth, including more supportive high school environments, GSAs, and on-line resources and communities.

Part I: Contextual Differences between Three College Environments

Several differences emerged in the ways in which queer youth constructed their identities and engaged in activism that were relevant to their college contexts. Post-closet youth negotiated the core tensions they face differently dependent on the context in which they found themselves.
Those differences are elaborated in the following chapters when relevant. In this section, I briefly describe the three college environments and the main differences in how the LGBTQ communities are accepted on campus.

“Liberal Arts” College: Integrated and Normalized Queer Community

Liberal Arts College is a small private nondenominational liberal arts college located in a small city in the Northeast. The racial composition of the college is approximately 69 percent white, with approximately 24 percent of the student population identifying as students of color (the remaining 7 percent of students are unknown). There are just over 2,500 undergraduate students enrolled at the college, approximately 60 percent female and 40 percent male. The college goes to significant lengths to incorporate and support the LGBTQ community on campus, even dedicating a section of the school’s main web page to LGBTQ resources. Multiple student clubs exist on campus working to educate, advocate, or socialize around LGBTQ issues. The college was among the first to create progressive policies regarding gender-neutral housing in recognition of the needs of its transgender and gender nonconforming population. Furthermore, options for gender-neutral bathrooms are provided throughout the campus. In addition, the college had a dedicated resource center for sex and gender issues until it was recently dissolved and integrated into a general health wellness center, approximately midway through data collection.

While students describe the larger town in which the college is located as “tolerant” to LGBTQ people and issues, they point out that the college is a “bubble” characterized by a queer community that is accepted and fully integrated into the campus culture. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that the campus is an open and accepting place in regard to LGBTQ identities. Everyone interviewed felt safe and comfortable being out on campus. Alyssa says that
she feels confident as a gay person on campus. She says, “It's definitely a positive atmosphere. It's not only queer tolerant, but very queer friendly. I think the school promotes itself publicly as being LGBTQ friendly and understanding, which is really important.” Sarah goes further saying that, “Liberal Arts College has really helped because they are so supportive in terms of really pushing you to be who you are and just totally embrace it and show people.” Students here report easily finding like-minded individuals and were proud of the culture surrounding queer identities and the support given by the larger community of faculty, students, and administration.

As a testament to the degree to which LGBTQ students are incorporated into campus life, two dances are held each year that are organized by the campus pride group; they are described by students as two of the most popular events for the whole campus community. Sarah says, “Well, they have a stereotype for getting really crazy, but it’s also...kind of about expressing who you are and breaking the boundaries of heterosexuality, basically. So anything can really happen at the dances.” Students unite in the safe spaces provided by the dances and are set free from the constraints of gender and sexuality for the night. Respondents describe students who identify as straight and queer alike as comfortable enough in the culture at Liberal Arts to let loose in the queer-friendly environment of the dances.

Interviews with students attending Liberal Arts describe a very progressive culture in terms of gender issues. Numerous respondents note that, depending on the class, professors are increasingly asking students their preferred gender pronouns as a regular practice. One respondent who describes arriving at Liberal Arts as a “culture shock,” recalls initially wondering why this was necessary; she quickly realized, however, that you cannot just make assumptions about people and that it is simply part of making a “conscious effort to be respectful.” Multiple respondents point to a large population of students identifying either as
non-binary, nonconforming, genderqueer, or transgender on campus, as well as the conscientious efforts made by students to address gender issues.

Students at Liberal Arts describe a queer community that is very liberal, progressive, and admittedly “intense.” Cara, who identifies as pansexual, talks about this in two different ways. She says that because of her political views, she feels like a bit of an outsider because she is “not as liberal leaning” and “radical” as everyone else. Aside from her political views, she says that even identifying as pansexual, she sometimes feels she is not “queer” enough for the culture there. She says that it was challenging to be in a relationship with a man who identified as bisexual and to present as heterosexual. She says, “I feel like the queer community is like when you're presenting as a heterosexual couple, you're almost like betraying the queer community. [laughter] It's like you’re straight, or you're not queer enough.” The queer community is well established, with cohesive ideas about queer sexualities (sometimes to a fault, as in Cara’s case).

In sum, Liberal Arts College has a normative and integrated culture around queer issues. Direct cohesive efforts are made to be inclusive of LGBTQ identities and a queer culture that celebrates difference and progressive attitudes on gender is integrated into the larger campus community.

“Public” University: Large and Diverse, but Separated LGBTQ Community

Public University is a large public university in the Northeast. Compared to Liberal Arts and Catholic Colleges, it is much larger and more diverse, with both a substantial undergraduate and graduate student population (approximately 13,000 undergraduates and 4,000+ graduate students). A little over half of the student population identifies as white (54 percent), with approximately 16 percent identifying as Black/African-American, 15 percent as Hispanic, and 9 percent Asian (the remaining 6 percent of students either identify as multi-racial, unknown, or
other). The university has many resources dedicated to LGBTQ students. There is a resource center focusing explicitly on issues of gender and sexuality, and there are several LGBTQ-specific student groups, including a general population group and dedicated groups for queer students of color, Hispanic students, and international students. In response to a push from students, the university began offering gender-neutral housing for trans and gender non-conforming students within the past several years.

The students interviewed from Public describe the environment as a “melting pot,” with many different types of people on campus. Respondents describe feeling comfortable being out on campus and feel able “to be who they are.” Hae describes how the environment at Public is a very different experience from her high school. She says:

Ok, so then college happened and I’m opened to this new world where you're not judged. Well, most people I’ve come across do not judge on race, gender, sexuality. And to me that was like, “Woah.” I didn't make a lot of friends in high school because I felt like my race had to play a role, and me being female had to play a role, and me coming out as bisexual had to play a role. So I was very outcasted. But here, I make friends everyday. I think it’s because we see personality here. There’s more openness, there’s education, there’s a resource center. There’s [the pride group]. So my reaction was like, “Wow, I can be who I am. I can dress however I want to dress, whichever way I want to dress. I can just be me. And there’s a resource center if I need anything. There are people that are going to support me and there is a support group.

Asher describes similar sentiments, saying he feels comfortable being out on campus. He gives an example of a time where he walked across campus “in drag basically,” with heels and fishnets that he was wearing for a theater club event. He says he felt comfortable enough to do that and that he “only got a few stares.”

While respondents generally felt like they could be open, they also expressed a need to be somewhat reserved. James says that campus and the surrounding area, “definitely has a long way to go, but it's also a lot better than some other places.” Jess says she has never had a truly negative experience, “other than the occasional kid in class who, when we are talking about
something LGBT, would say something obnoxious.” Others highlight the very “heteronormative” culture of fraternities on and off campus. However, many claimed that even in the fraternity houses, they felt the environment was okay. Valerie says you just have to be careful about where you are going and who is inviting you. Alicia mentions that she has gone to some fraternity parties downtown and had good experiences. She tells a story of a friend’s experience: “My friend, who’s also a lesbian, was dancing with some guy and when he tried to kiss her she told him she was a lesbian and it was cool. He just left.” Although students here describe a campus environment that could be improved in regard to LGBTQ issues, all seem to agree there is sufficient tolerance, at least to feel comfortable enough to be out.

Students at Public describe forming their own communities of LGBTQ-friendly people, echoing the sentiments of others at Catholic College and less so at Liberal Arts. Such a large and diverse community offers many different opportunities to meet like-minded people, and this was reflected in the interviews. A freshman at Public, Kate, says, “So far, it’s only been a few months, but it seems pretty accepting. I always hang out in the [resource center] with all my friends. I’d say all of my close friends here identify as LGBTQ.” Several respondents mentioned their own “little gay bubbles” that felt a little separated and cut off from the rest of the school community. Alicia says:

I feel like this happens everywhere, because of the society we live in, but LGBT places always seem more segregated than the rest of the campus. The [pride groups] seem more segregated than the whole rest of the campus. If you go up to anyone and say, are you going to [Asian or Hispanic Clubs], everyone knows what you’re talking about. I feel like the actual groups are segregated. Which we’re trying to be more integrated. And I don’t think it has to do with the LGBT factor, but I think maybe it comes off as LGBT things aren't fun and they're always really serious, which is not true. And also, it could be the people don't want to be associated with gay things because they don't want other people to think that they’re gay. Like if you’re straight, why would you be at a gay event? And that's a stigma that needs to be changed, everywhere, not just here. Overall, we’re really accepting.
Despite feeling a bit of a division from the rest of the campus community, respondents note the strong communities they are able to build within the LGBTQ community. In sum, students at Public have many diverse resources available to them and describe a community that is open and tolerant of LGBTQ identities, but with room for improvement. They create their own visible and supportive LGBTQ enclaves, but feel a sense of separation from the rest of the campus community.

“Catholic” College: Subdued LGBTQ Community

Catholic College is a private Catholic college located in a suburban area in the Northeast. Slightly larger than Liberal Arts College, the undergraduate student population is approximately 3,500; over 80 percent of students identify as white and there are approximately equal numbers of men and women. The college describes “diversity” and “respect” as two of its main pillars, and offers a campus center working to foster to cross-cultural inclusiveness and promote diversity in terms of race, religion, and sexuality. There is a Pride GSA group on campus, but participants describe it as being “tiny,” saying there are only about 50 people on the email distribution list. The Pride group organizes events on campus aimed at education and awareness, for example, they created a GSA PSA and a Trans 101 video, and students report that those types of events generally go over “well enough” on campus.

Students describe the college as “conservative” and talk about forming their own safe, small communities on campus. Zander says the environment is “okay,” and that “there are a lot of negative things that make me not want to be there, but I have a really good group of friends and that helps a lot.” When asked how it is to be out on campus, there was some disagreement. Some respondents said that it was “difficult” and that they are cautious when walking on campus holding a same-sex significant other’s hand. For example, one respondent said that if a professor
walks by that she does not know while she is holding her girlfriend’s hand, she will let her hand go. She says, “You want to assume that they’re okay with it, but there are a lot of conservative white males here, mostly that teach in my department. I have a hard enough time with them having favoritism over [some other students] that I don’t need them to deny me the equal right of getting a good grade based on anything else.” Other respondents do not hesitate to be out on campus and hold their significant other’s hand without reservation, saying they have not been victimized or verbally attacked in any way; some report getting “a couple of looks from people,” however. Zander reports hearing a “bunch of slurs” that happen on campus regularly, saying, “I still hear ‘That's so gay,’ every now and again. And I shut it down, but it still happens.” Maggie says she lost one friend, who was more of an acquaintance, when she first came out, but that she has plenty of supportive friends at the school. Kayla says the school is not exactly what she expected, but that she feels safe and does not feel the campus is a hostile place for LGBTQ people. Natalia notes that when they do a club fair at the beginning of every semester, they get a lot of interest and never have posters ripped down or anything like that.

Unlike at Liberal Arts College, the LGBTQ community at Catholic College is somewhat disjointed, as evidenced by criticism regarding how visible LGBTQ identities should be on campus. Stella, a Pride GSA member, speaks about how the pride group is looked at “with disdain,” even by those within the LGBTQ community. She says that a lot of people who are gay do not attend the group because they are looked at negatively. When asked why, she says, “I honestly think that our GSA doesn’t give itself a reason to have validity. When we try to promote ourselves we do it in a – for lack of a better term – the gayest way possible. And I literally mean, the gayest.” She continues, saying that members of the GSA should not present with such an “opposition to heterosexuality,” because she believes that will prevent ally support. Instead,
Stella believes differences in regards to sexuality should be downplayed and similarities should instead be celebrated. While the queer community at Liberal Arts appears somewhat united as far as visibility on campus, Stella’s statements suggest there is a less cohesive community at Catholic, with divisions existing on how and when LGBTQ identities should be expressed, especially among the GSA members. Stella believes an approach focusing on similarities and normalization is the way forward, while others in the GSA believe in expressing their queer sexualities.

Because Catholic College is a Catholic school, there are elements of religion that play a role in setting the context for LGBTQ students. Jane describes a huge religious community on campus and that, while it is largely an accepting place, she says, “There are still people who are unsettled by our presence.” She describes an experience she had with a former friend:

We have a policy on campus that you can’t have sex unless you’re married. So there’s a group of students right now who is trying to bring sexual education and distribution of condoms to campus, and [this former friend] said, “I guess if I had to chose between GSA and that, I guess I’d chose the GSA.” And I was like, great awesome. Love it that you hate us. Okay. The lesser of two evils, was kind of her response to that.

Kayla’s impression is that even some of the more religious and conservative students do not judge. She says: “They're like, ‘You do whatever you want. I don't judge people. I think you can do whatever you want as long as you’re not harming anyone. You do you.’ They don't really judge people.” But she points out that students there may have the opinion that, “gay people are wrong,” but that, “they’re okay with them.” She says, “I don’t know how I feel about that, with people saying they're okay with it, but then thinking that we’re going to hell [laughs].”

Comments such as these from Jane and Kayla suggest an environment on campus that is not exactly supportive, but not entirely hostile as well.
In addition to religious and conservative overtones on campus, several respondents point to the overly heteronormative culture at the college. This is demonstrated in a story also told by Jane. She says she was talking to a gay male friend one night about his initial impression that everyone at Catholic College was against the LGBTQ community. She asked why and he explained that where he grew up, in the city, everyone was very open about asking whether you are gay or a part of the community and what your pronouns are, but that at Catholic, no one asks. He said, “No one asked me that and no one questioned it. I got some weird looks sometimes and I thought they didn’t want to know.” Jane says, “But really, it is just the kind of people that go here. We’re a pretty whitewashed school and pretty heteronormative in every sense of the word. I just don’t think people know that you can ask, kind of thing.” However, attempts are being made to bring discussions of gender and sexual identity more into the forefront. Aaron, a transmale who attends Catholic, needed to come out to professors before his name was officially changed and reports that professors were very respectful of both his name change and pronouns. Jane serves as a Resident Advisor in a freshman dorm and at the start of her monthly hall meetings she asks for preferred gender pronouns (PGPs). She says, “And as much as my residents don’t really understand, because none of them, other than myself and my roommate, identify within the community, they still try to use the right pronouns. They make the effort. And I think in the freshman dorm, where I live, there’s really an effort being made.” Despite being in a somewhat unsupportive environment, efforts to educate and advocate for LGBTQ identities and issues are visible. At Catholic College, the LGBTQ community is more subdued than the other schools. Students carve out small enclaves of supportive groups as places of comfort on campus and work to educate a mostly tolerant, but largely conservative campus community.
These three very different college contexts set the stage for differences in the ways these respondents form and express their identities and influence the ways they engage in activism. The supportive environment at Liberal Arts cultivates a queer community that is accepted and integrated into the larger campus community. At Public, the large and more diverse student population fosters a seemingly safe environment for out LGBTQ students, though students report a sense of separation from the rest of the campus community. Finally, at Catholic, a more conservative religious environment results in a slightly more subdued LGBTQ community on campus, with students giving mixed reviews about how safe or open they feel they can be on campus. These three unique contexts shaped respondents experiences in negotiating their identities and engaging in activism. However, before discussing their identities and activism in detail, I first turn to a discussion of the key characteristics of the post-closet generation that emerged from the interviews.

**Part II: Defining Traits of a Post-closet Movement Generation**

In order to reveal some of the most salient characteristics of the post-closet generation, I asked respondents to begin interviews by describing their coming out stories. I asked respondents to describe the process of first realizing their same-sex attraction and/or transgender identity, as well as whom they first told and what that process was like. Themes of overwhelming family support and downplaying the need to “come out” emerged from these stories and support the notion that the closet is less and less relevant in their lives. However, the closet remains more relevant for trans respondents, although within this sample they are also experiencing high levels of family support. Questions surrounding respondents’ experiences in high school revealed environments that were largely tolerant and supportive of LGBTQ identities, with most offering formal resources and support groups for students identifying as LGBTQ. Such levels of support
and resources are unprecedented in previous generations, but have become commonplace in the post-closet generation, leading some to take for granted the numerous resources available to them.

“Coming Out” in a Post-closet Generation

One of the most noteworthy characteristics of coming out in post-closet contexts is the decreasing age in which LGBTQ people are coming to terms with their sexual and gender identities. Recent studies cite the average age of coming out LGBQ as approximately 16 years old (Shilo and Savaya 2011). The findings of this study are consistent with such claims, with the average age respondents report first coming out to a friend or family member as approximately 16½ years old. Many participants report coming to the realization of same-sex attraction and/or transgender identity at very young ages. More than half of respondents describe an awareness of same-sex attraction beginning in middle school or younger (21 respondents), while many others report early high school (13 respondents) as the time they first realized they were something other than heterosexual. A much smaller minority of respondents said they first considered their queer identities when they got to college (6 respondents). Faced with a society characterized by increased LGBTQ visibility and normalization, with access to online LGBTQ resources and community, it is no surprise that these youth came out as young as they did. These data are consistent with and further support the growing body of research documenting an earlier age of coming out (Savin-Williams 2005a; Shilo and Savaya 2011).

For participants coming out as LGBQ, stereotypical coming out stories characterized by initial apprehension and fear are present in the data. When these youth first became aware of their same-sex attraction, they were unsure what it meant for their identities. However, this period of uncertainty oftentimes ended quickly. Most respondents note that they did not struggle
long to accept that their same-sex attractions meant they were something other than straight.

Apprehension about how their families would react to them coming out was also common. For example, one respondent named Kaden discussed the trauma he experienced with his first coming out as gay (his second coming out was as transgender and is discussed later). He says:

> It was traumatizing to think about my parents not accepting me, but once they did, everything fell into place. It was the fear of coming out that was more traumatizing. It was the secret. Which is always the issue with coming out. The fact that I would keep it a secret for years and years and not say anything, that's the traumatizing part.

In what is likely a significant difference from past generations, however, many respondents commented that the fearful period preceding coming out was short-lived. Very few individuals spoke of “hiding” their sexual identities for long periods of time, indicating that a “closet” was not very relevant to their experiences. In fact, while Kaden spoke of keeping his sexuality a secret, he came out as gay to his parents by the time he was 13 or 14 years old. Jonah was an example of someone who felt like he did hide his sexuality for an extended time, hiding his gay identity from friends and family between eighth and tenth grades; however, he came out fully to his friends, family, and extended family by the age of 16. Initially he came out to friends as bisexual, though he never truly felt he identified that way and felt he was hiding his true gay identity. He describes how he eventually came to a point where he was comfortable coming out as gay to everyone in his life. Although he described those several years of being “in the closet” as difficult, it is important to note that he was fully out by the time he was just 16 years old. The processes of self-discovery and acceptance of same-sex attraction and/or trans/non-binary gender identities will always be a struggle to some degree, as long as we are living in a culture of institutionalized heteronormativity; however, the anecdotes of post-closet youth such as Kaden, Jonah and others point to a short-lived struggle that typically ended in the teenage years.

Another prevalent theme in the data was a quick timeline of coming out to families. It
was common to see respondents come out to their families rather quickly. For example, Cara recalls, “I'm one of those people who are decisive to a fault. So I kind of just burst out of the closet and was like, well, I thought about it yesterday, so I'm going to tell you right now.”

Another respondent named Jess, for example, notes that it took her exactly eight days of dating her first girlfriend before she came out to her parents as bisexual. Others respondents mention “promptly” telling their parents, while others divulged the information “accidentally” in unrelated arguments without giving it much forethought.

Part of the explanation for such short-lived fears and the quick timelines of disclosures appears to stem from post-closet settings where dialogues regarding LGBTQ issues were common and openly addressed in many households. Prior to coming out, numerous youth describe being raised by parents who purposefully used gender-neutral terms in discussing their children’s future partners to denote their support and openness toward LGBTQ identities.

Respondents, such as Shawn, clearly remembered the first time her mom hinted that it would be acceptable if she were to ever date a woman:

I have a distinct memory of when I was in high school. … We had come from church and we were at dinner and we were talking, and I don’t know how the topic came up, but all of a sudden, out of the blue, my mom puts her hand on the table and says, ‘Shawn, I don’t care if you love men, if you love women. I don’t care if they’re purple, yellow, polka dot. It doesn’t matter to me. But they have to love you. They have to respect you. And if they don’t, we’re going to have problems.’ And I remember her saying that.

Kim, who credits her father for fostering an open mind while growing up, echoed similar sentiments. She recounts a story where he spoke of her future “partner” and told her specifically that she should not just assume it would be a man. It was common to hear youth refer to their parents as accepting and open as far as LGBTQ sexualities were concerned. Paige, a freshman at Public University, describes her parents’ efforts to make varying sexual identities a “normative part of her life” growing up: “They were so open. I had all of these lesbian ‘aunties’ who I
adored as a girl growing up. They were the coolest people ever. I don't know if you know the book, *Heather has Two Mommies*, but my mom had that for me growing up and it was one of my favorites.” Another respondent, Beck, who describes her gender identity as “fluid,” recounts that her parents took their support for LGBTQ issues and feminism a step further by raising her in a more explicitly gender neutral way: “Both of my parents really pushed me to not conform to gender roles, to not conform to sexuality roles. When I was a really little girl, they told me, just because you're a girl, doesn't mean you have to be this way.” Although Beck’s parents were somewhat unique in their messages about not conforming to gender and sexuality norms, the overt familial support for LGBTQ identities was not rare in the sample. Additionally, many respondents pointed to their family’s implicit support of LGBTQ identities. One respondent named Rachel notes, “Every once in a while, like if something on the news came up, my mom, especially, was like, ‘I don't understand why anybody cares.’ If you’re not hurting anyone…” Her whole thing is if you're not blowing people up, no one should give a crap.” Such implicit statements of support were frequently mentioned by youth when asked to describe how their parents felt about LGBTQ issues growing up. The high education levels of parents among this sample likely explain this level of support, as support for LGBTQ identities is known to be greater among more highly educated individuals (Loftus 2001). Given these statements of explicit and implicit support for LGBTQ people and issues, it is unsurprising to see so many of these youth coming out so readily to their parents.

In addition to parents expressing support for LGBTQ identities, youth were also exposed to conversations about LGBTQ issues in their homes growing up which made coming out easier. Several people recalled that relevant issues at the time, such as same-sex marriage and the repeal of *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell*, would come up in family conversations. For example, Matt recalls:
“Things would just come up, like on the news. I remember they were talking in California about gay marriage. This was the time I was growing up in, when it was starting to be a conversation, gay marriage and things like that. So it was a topic, so I remember my parents were into it." Youth were pretty well versed in and aware of their parents’ opinions on such issues as a result of these discussions. They were also aware of their parents’ LGBTQ friends and acquaintances. Joe describes his parents as always having had gay friends and being exposed to LGBT people through church. He says that he was raised Episcopalian and that “at least three of the pastors that we had were gay or bisexual.” He continues by saying that his mom’s hairdresser was the first transgender person he met and they have been good friends for a very long time. In addition to family friends identifying as LGBTQ, several respondents also noted they had friends who grew up with same-sex parents. In fact, two respondents within the sample had same-sex parents and report the discussion of LGBTQ identities integrated into how they were raised. Such dialogues and exposure to LGBTQ issues in the family growing up led many youth in the sample to feel safe in coming out to their families.

Parents of the post-closet youth generation, especially highly educated and upper/middle class ones, are more aware of the possibility that their children may grow up to be something other than heterosexual and their openness and normalization of LGBTQ issues contribute to a backdrop that creates a very different kind of coming out for this generation. In fact, many youth specifically qualified their coming out stories by saying they were in stark contrast to the “typical, nightmare” stories of LGBTQ youth being kicked out of their homes, rejected by their families, etc. Youth would often begin their stories with comments such as, “my coming out story is not as bad as others,” evoking the narrative of queer youth as victim. The majority of youth instead told stories that were characterized by positive family support. Long periods of
hiding one’s sexuality were few and far between in the data and coming out was only occasionally met with hostility or disapproval. Instead, common narratives of family support and acceptance included stories where parents were “not surprised,” were “always supportive growing up,” and/or “always knew.”

One of the most common themes in the coming out stories was that parents often suspected or knew beforehand. In describing his mother’s reaction to his coming out, Mark says, “I don’t know; it was kind of like she knew. She just wanted me to confirm. It was a positive reaction in that she was happy that I was being honest with her. And that I was coming clean, sort of.” Some parents “guessed,” as with Natalia who says, “I promptly told my parents. And they’ve been accepting. So it’s been nice. I always tell my mom stuff. She kind of guessed, it was really cool. She was like, ‘Did you meet someone in college yet? What's his name or her name?’. And so that was cool, it was uncanny.” Other parents even took the tack of directly asking whether their sons or daughters were LGBTQ. Sarah describes her experience with her mother in the following passage:

And I guess one thing that is notable in this whole thing is that throughout my high school experience and into college, my mom had always asked me if I was gay. Like when I was younger, when I was a freshman and sophomore in high school. She went [to Liberal Arts College too] and was a Women's Studies major and she's straight and married my dad. But she's very intuitive and understands a lot about people and sexuality and relationships and whenever she asked me, I said no, I'm pretty sure I'm not. Or no, I have this boyfriend that I like or I don't like any of the girls that I go to school with. And she just kind of always pressed it with me. Not in a really overwhelming way, but it continued throughout my life for years. It was always maybe something she was thinking, and I knew that. And so that was weird and I think pretty unique. Knowing that she thought that, it made it a little bit easier to process it when I started thinking it…. So the encouragement of my mom was kind of hard in the beginning, but it's turned out to be really important for me.

Many parents expressed some sort of relief, as they had known their sons or daughters were not yet telling them what they already knew. James, a 25-year-old who attended Public University,
provides a clear example of this in telling his story about coming out to his dad. He said his dad got emotional when he came out to him several months after realizing he was gay: “He had a really good reaction. He even started tearing up a little bit, saying, ‘I was just upset that you weren’t talking to me, because I knew something was up.’” James then recounted the story that his father said he knew he was gay when he was younger, because at 13 or 14 years old, “he didn’t know how to clear the history on the computer.” He said that it was a “cool bonding experience,” especially since his dad had been waiting years for him to tell him.

Of course, not everyone’s parents knew. Jess addresses this specifically, saying she commonly heard the narrative of parents having always known. In her experience, however, she says that her parents definitely did not know and did not take it well. However, in her case, and others like her, it just took a little time to come to acceptance. Jess notes that while her parents “were not happy at all” with her coming out as bisexual, they came around rather quickly. She recalls:

But as bad as it was, I never felt like they didn’t love me. I just felt like they didn’t understand and they were very afraid of other people’s perceptions. I think a lot of times parents are afraid of other people’s perceptions and the way they handle that is to say not to come out. Which is not helpful because you can handle other people’s bullshit as long as you have your family there to support you. But it took them a while to get there. Now they are really lovely and are my biggest supporters, but they definitely have selective memory about that six-month period. Because I think they’re embarrassed by that behavior a little bit.”

It only took about six months for her parents to fully come around and they are now, eight years later, “her biggest cheerleaders.” Like Jess’ parents, several respondents noted that it took only a couple of months for their parents to come around and it was typical to hear that initial negative reactions from parents were quickly resolved. In fact, a common refrain in the data included comments along the lines of, “but by the time I was 15, everything was okay.”

A certain degree of caution was expressed by parents in their initial reactions to their son
or daughter’s unexpected coming out in post-closet contexts. This caution is typified by Jen’s story. Despite being surprised by the news, Jen’s mom clearly wanted her reaction to be positive.

Jen tells the following story:

I kind of just called home and was talking to my mom and I said, “I’m going to go over and see my friend later. Her name is Veronica. I have a crush on her.” And my mom was like, “Okay. As long as you’re happy. Okay.” And then she completely changed the subject. But then she called back later and said, ‘I didn’t want to react like it was weird or anything. I wanted you to know that it’s totally okay and I didn’t want to act differently if you had said it was a guy that you were talking about, so I was trying really hard.’ And I was just like, ‘It’s okay, mom. You did fine. You’re okay. It’s alright.’ [laughs] So it wasn’t a super intense coming out process.

Jen’s dad reacted well to the news as well. In fact, she did not remember whether she specifically came out to her father, but said, “I think I mentioned to him that I was seeing a girl…I knew he wouldn’t care.” She recounted a story where after lamenting to her dad about how there were “no good straight guys” at her college, he responded by saying that maybe she “should date some girls then.” In this and similar examples, it is clear that parents of post-closet youth appear to want to be supportive of their children.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from the data on coming out is how youth are attempting to shift the coming out story to be at least less momentous and at most one of non-necessity. Respondents did this in several different ways, including resisting the need to come out by pushing for queer identities as normal and resisting traditional labels and embracing fluidity, thereby making coming out less crucial. Kayla, an 18-year-old freshman at Catholic College is someone who typifies trying to normalize queer identities and resisting the need to come out. Kayla notes that she is not really out to her parents, but also feels like she will never come out formally. She says:

I’m not out to my family or my parents really. They know I’m involved in GSA and stuff and everything. It’s not that I haven’t told them, I just don’t feel like I should have to come out to them. I shouldn’t have to tell them that explicitly. If I'm dating someone, I
just plan to bring them home. I have a girlfriend right now and I plan to bring her home. They know her, but they don't know that we’re dating yet, but I plan on telling them soon that we’re dating. But I don't feel the need to tell them that I'm queer or whatever. They probably know. I've been involved with GSA so much. And so many of my friends are queer and everything.

Kayla mentioned several times throughout her interview that her queerness did not feel like something she should have to declare to those around her. When I asked if she felt like she was hiding anything from her family she replied that she did not. She said she tells them everything she is involved in with regard to LGBTQ activism. However, she says she has never told them about the relationships she has been in, even with men, and that she simply does not talk about that type of stuff with her parents. In fact, she said, “So I do feel like I’m hiding my relationships, but not the fact that I’m queer.” While Kayla thinks that coming out should be unnecessary, she does admit that telling them stresses her out a little, but that she really wishes it did not and wishes she did not have to tell them anything.

Several other respondents downplayed their coming out experiences. Kate, for example, says she does not necessarily have a coming out story because she has never discussed it with her family; rather, it is an “assumed thing.” However, she planned to tell her father directly soon, but in a very nonchalant way. She feels like she should not have to make it into a big deal, because, “honestly, it shouldn’t be.” Instead she plans to say something along the lines of: “You guys know I'm gay, right? [laughs]” Other respondents downplayed the significance of coming out to their families and friends emphasizing that it should not have to be a big deal. Annie, who grew up with two moms, felt similarly as far as the significance of coming out. She explains:

That's where the LGBT community and I differ because it's a part of my life, but it's not my whole life. That's not the most important thing to me. Which is different from a lot of other people because when they come out it's this big thing and blah blah blah. I grew up with it and I lived with it for 18 years and so it's not new. It's nothing new. I’m just like whatever. I told my parents, I don’t understand why straight people can't just say I'm straight and why gay people can't just say I'm gay and move on. That just doesn't resonate
with me. Why do you have to go through this whole thing?

And finally, Jane also reiterated that her coming out was not a big deal, saying how she mentioned it in passing to her mother once in a conversation about high school. She said, “Well, considering I thought I was only attracted to men at the time.” To which her mom replied, “Wait, what?” and she replied, “Yeah, by the way, I’m pansexual.” She said her mom sort of just dropped the topic after she explained what she meant by pansexual and summarized the experience by saying, “So that’s pretty much it. My coming out was never a big, “I’m gay” kind of thing.” She says, “I don’t put a lot of stress on it.” A large number of these post-closet youth repeatedly downplayed the significance of coming out as a monumental experience in their lives, which makes sense given that the closet is less and less relevant to their experiences.

Respondents also noted efforts to resist labels and coming out as a way of normalizing queer identities. When I asked Joe, a student at Liberal Arts College, about whether people were avoiding labels, he spoke of a former president of the pride group who “did not like labels at all and did not like coming out at all.” He describes what he saw as a generational difference in coming out:

Some people think coming out is a big deal either because they have to do it in their environment if they want to be respected or just because they want to take pride in who they are. But a lot of people, especially in our generation, there's more of a push to treat sexuality like it's just no big deal. And to just treat it as normal, in a move towards people not having to come out or do anything like that.

On many occasions, respondents noted that their sexual identities should not be considered anything special because it is simply normal to fall somewhere along a spectrum.

Comparable sentiments were expressed about how coming out should be unnecessary when respondents were asked about what sexuality would look like in their ideal society. Stella, for example, says how she feels like it should be an unspoken, normal part of society. And Jane
In my ideal society, no one should have to come out. It should never be assumed that your child is going to be straight. It drives me up the freaking wall when parents are like, “Oh look at my cute little daughter with your son. Maybe they’re going to get married some day. Ohh. She’s such a little lady. He’s such a little player.” Please stop. In my ideal society, you don't have to come out as anything different. You don't have to feel different because of who you're attracted to. It should be, one day you bring home your boyfriend, and your mom goes, “All right. Cool. Nice to meet you.” You bring home your non-binary partner, and you say, “Hey, Mom. This is so and so. Their pronouns are they/the/their.” “Oh, it's wonderful to meet you.”

Multiple respondents felt that this was the direction society is headed, though they acknowledged we are a long way away from such a reality. However, it was apparent in these interviews that attempts are being made to move the coming out conversation in new directions.

Others in the sample lacked much of a coming out story because they either do not identify with a label or came out before identifying with a label. Shawn, for example, who does not identify her sexuality with a label, says she does not have a coming out story because she does not identify as anything so as to not “[be] a part of the social construction” of gender and sexuality. In addition, Beck, whose parents pushed her to not conform to gender and sexuality norms and identifies simply as “fluid,” spoke of coming out as not being a thing in her life. It was more like, “are you dating anyone?” When she told her parents she had her first girlfriend, they responded with, “Cool. What’s her name?” Liz had a similar experience where her “coming out” was not necessarily an event in her life. In describing her first realization that she liked another girl, Liz says:

It’s so interesting because I feel like my coming-out story is not there. In terms of an entire process it’s relevant… in high school, there was one girl that I liked. I remember having a crush on her and disclosing that to one of my friends. I was making him guess, saying quite well who do you think it is? He kept naming all of these boys and I said well think outside of the box. And at some point he said, “A girl?” And I told him about this girl. He didn’t really think anything of it either. …And another time, with my first kiss with a girl, I knew I liked her, but I didn’t necessarily see myself as bisexual or put a label on it. I never thought about a label in high school. And most of my girlfriends in
high school had expressed liking women as well, so it was kind of an accepted thing among all of our friends. … The first time I told my mom about this one girl I liked, I said, Mom, I like Sadie. And she just didn’t really think anything of it and neither did I. So it was fine. That was that.

Liz did not feel as though she had a definitive coming out, especially before she identified with a label. She says that college was really the first time she started labeling her sexual identity. She remembers reading a booklet of different definitions at her first pride group meeting, landing on the word, “pansexual” and thinking, “That’s it! That’s awesome, I like that. I like all genders. I don’t care.” She says it felt good to finally have a label and that she also now identifies as queer, which in itself brought “a kind of coming out” because she had to explain to her mom what queer meant. She says, however, “It was more of an education thing.” Respondents who did not associate their sexual identities with labels when they told their parents of their same-sex attractions and/or relationships reported the lack of a concrete coming out story.

Finally, themes of fluidity emerged from coming out stories. Cara, for example, talks about her coming out story as not being as “streamlined” as others because she had so many different instances of and revisions on coming out. She describes her coming out as a bit “weird,” saying that she first came out as bisexual when she was 16, and then identified as a lesbian until she dated a guy a year later. Ultimately, she came to the “pansexual” label and says: And it's actually been pretty easy coming out ever since because I have a better sense of what I should be labeled as, so that's made it easier. I feel like it’s also changed because coming out when I was in a relationship with a man was very different than when I was with a woman. I'm currently dating a woman and everyone is like, “Oh, you’re a lesbian.” And then I have to alter their perception of how I identify. Whereas, when I was dating a man for a year, I’d have to come out in a different way and everyone was confused. So general confusion surrounding my coming out story. It hasn’t been as streamlined as many people having that moment. [laughs] I don’t really have that.”

Even currently identifying as pansexual results in a less clear coming out process because it varies greatly depending on whom she is dating at the time. Sarah, who also identifies as
pansexual, was actually taken back by the question of sharing her coming out story. When asked, she said that it sounded funny that she would even have a coming out story because she never thought she would ever come out as anything. The more she thought about it though she realized she does have one and she should “be proud of it and go with it.” She continues, “I always thought that was for other people, like I could never do that, there’s nothing to come out as. But there totally is.” In Sarah’s experience, “coming out” was for someone who more clearly identified with a traditionally lesbian or gay identity, and not a more fluid identity like hers. Lastly, Zander, a transman, recounts how he does not really have a coming out story regarding his queer/bisexual sexual identity. He tells a story of talking with a relatively new friend and pointing out that a nearby guy was cute. And the friend responded, “Wait, you’re into guys?” And Zander replied, “I don’t really have a preference…whatever floats my boat for that day.” In reference to coming out as queer or bisexual, he says, “That was the only coming out I’ve ever really had…Never really happened, ever, just kind of gradual.” His blasé attitude about coming out suggests how the closet is not something he considers very relevant to his experience, while Sarah is similarly distanced from the experience of coming out.

Stories like these emerged from the data indicating that for many the process of coming out is becoming more of a fluid process and less of a monumental moment in a post-closet generation open to increased fluidity around their sexual identities (see Chapter Five for a more in depth discussion of fluidity). While any LGBTQ person has to repeatedly come out to people over the course of their lives, the increasing fluidity in sexual identities appears to be ushering in a shift in the coming out story that differs from more stable traditional identities. While some respondents in the sample certainly remain entrenched in more closeted circumstances due to cultural and religious factors, for many, the process of coming out is changing. Shifts in the
significance of coming out appear reflective of a new generation of youth less concerned with declaring traditional labels and more willing to embrace fluid sexual identities.

Five respondents in the sample explicitly identified as transgender men on their demographic forms, while one additional respondent identified as non-binary, and referred to himself as trans throughout his interview. Although a sample size of six transgender respondents is obviously limited, noteworthy themes emerged regarding coming out trans\(^2\) in post-closet contexts that are significant to mention. The existence and experience of a closet appeared more relevant for trans youth, especially when compared to coming out as LGB prior to coming out as transgender. In addition, it is clear that while there are openings for alternative sexual identities in post-closet contexts, the normative structures surrounding gender remain more in tact and are experienced as more restrictive. Finally, although not typical or representative of the spectrum of trans youth experiences, it is notable to see high levels of support after these six respondents came out as trans to their families.

Several respondents experienced two types of coming out, first with regard to sexual identity and then in regard to their gender identity. As would be expected, those experiences were vastly different. The stakes of coming out trans are higher, as it is clearly more of a “life changing” experience. Multiple youth experienced a rather significant period of time in the “closet,” followed by a very significant coming out event. Kaden, for example, spent four to five years researching the transgender experience on-line before he was able to bring up the topic with his parents. It was only after seeing numerous examples of other trans youth on-line successfully transitioning over the years that he felt able to come out. Several respondents described a long period of uncertainty before telling their parents and others about their trans

\(^2\) The language of “coming out” is an imperfect fit for trans individuals, as the closet is more relevant to LGBQ identities and experiences (see Kelly 2012 for an argument against its use).
identities. Aaron spoke of the very gradual process of figuring out the path he wanted to take and how it took a couple of years before he was ready to officially come out. During this time he recognized there was a certain degree of hiding, but not in a typical sense. He says, “I didn’t necessarily hide it, but I didn’t express it specifically. It’s hard to explain…I just kind of let it be.” He described this time as an adjustment period, saying, “Because it’s one thing to say, I feel this way, and it’s another thing to actually take steps in your environment because you don’t know how people are going to react and if they’re going to accept you or not.” Although not technically closeted at the time, because he did not yet realize that gender dysphoria was responsible for his depression at the time, Zander describes the time before he realized he wanted to transition as a very difficult time in his life, one where he attempted suicide multiple times. When he finally recognized his dysphoria and that his problems stemmed from “wanting to be a man,” he was able to disclose this to his family rather quickly and begin transitioning to a more authentic, male-identified self. After gradually figuring out the paths they would take, most respondents spoke of a monumental coming out experience. Kaden says the following of the conversation he had with his parents: “There were a lot of tears. It was probably the most painful conservation I’ve ever had in my life.”

Despite post-closet contexts with increasing acceptance of varying sexual identities, it is clear that trans individuals face a different set of challenges. Social norms and rigidity around gender remain apparent in the stories of trans respondents. Part of the reason Kaden waited so long to reveal his trans identity to his parents was the feedback he received about gender after he initially came out as gay. He describes his family as being supportive of LGB identities when he

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3 For the purposes of this study, I refer to the LGBTQ community throughout this dissertation as if it were one cohesive group; however, it is important to note that while issues of sexual and gender identities are linked, there are innumerable differences between transgender and LGBQ issues, including different experiences, priorities, and communities.
first came out; his mother’s sister, after all, was in a committed lesbian relationship. His parents made it clear they were okay with gay and lesbian identities and that they still loved him after he came out. However, he began noticing that his mother, in particular, was not okay with the masculinity he began expressing as part of his lesbian identity at the time. He recalls that his aunt and her partner were both very feminine expressing and thinks that was partly why his mother accepted them so readily. As he began expressing more masculinity, he remembers his mother refusing to wash his more masculine clothing, which, among other things, led him to believe that “being overtly masculine was not okay.” He says, “There were things that told me if I came out as transgender, I would be left by myself to deal with it. So that’s why I was so terrified to come out as trans.” In the end, it was a different story for Kaden, as his family ended up being very supportive. However, a clear distinction remains between sexual and gender identity in post-closet contexts, with conventional ideas surrounding gender remaining much more entrenched. This rigidity around gender is also exemplified in Joe’s story. Joe identified as bisexual since about middle school, but says he never came out about that because he never felt like his family would care. He remembers mentioning it a few times to his friends, but that since he didn’t date any girls at that time, he didn’t have a real reason to come out. When he did come out as gender questioning to his parents, he also came out as bisexual because his parents were curious if he was really “just a butch lesbian or something.” He recalls them not reacting to his coming out as bi, “probably because they didn’t care or because the gender questioning thing was taking priority.” He says that it was pretty upsetting to them for a while because, “They had thought about sexual identity before, but gender identity was totally not something they had considered.” Zander had a similar experience where his parents were clear about supporting lesbian or gay identities, but had a very difficult time understanding why someone would question their gender
identity. As he was coming out to them, he tried explaining the concept of gender identity versus biological sex versus sexual identity, but he says, “they didn’t get it.” They kept saying things like, “We don’t care who you like. Whoever you bring home, we don’t care as long as they’re a good person.” In post-closet contexts, new sexual identities are commonly accepted, but gender remains a powerful organizing force, despite increasing attempts by this generation to challenge the gender binary (discussed further in Chapter Five).

Although the closet appears to be more relevant and that coming out is more momentous for trans youth in this sample, support from families was not lacking in their stories. This is certainly not generalizable or perhaps even common for the majority of trans youth, as evidenced by the number of references made in the interviews to problems of homelessness, suicide and familial rejection; however, it is noteworthy to mention that among this sample of respondents from largely upper/middle class and highly educated families, family support occurred in the majority of cases. Kaden notes that his coming out trans actually changed the dynamics in his family for the better, saying that a previously strained relationship with his mother improved through her conscientious steps to support Kaden in his transition. Leo also describes a supportive relationship with his father and stepmother. They started attending PFLAG two weeks after he came out, and his dad has even organized other fathers in his community to support trans youth who are lacking parental support. His relationship with his mom was negatively affected, although this was not explained entirely by his trans identity. He was living with his mother when he revealed his transgender identity, but she essentially asked him to leave to avoid dealing with his transition. However, Leo explained that his relationship with his mother was extremely strained prior to him coming out, noting a history of mental abuse and suggesting that there were other issues at stake.
Aiden was another respondent who was met with family support when he first came to identify as non-binary, despite growing up in a context that is far less reflective of post-closet settings. He describes growing up in a very upper-middle class, conservative area of the United Kingdom that was extremely sexist and “horrible” on LGBT issues. Despite this, he found himself with a very supportive family as he came to embrace his asexual, panromantic, and non-binary identities. He describes realizing when he was 15 or 16 years old that he “might not be a girl.” He recalls, “basically, it was at the stage where everyone I told was not surprised in the slightest. It was almost like, well, yeah, that would be the case. I told my mom and she was kind of like, ‘Yeah, I think it’s kind of obvious. And that was a relief in some ways.” However, he was hesitant to transition to using different pronouns because he felt uncertain about his trans identity. Once he arrived at Liberal Arts College though, he felt it was an accepting environment with other trans students and was comfortable experimenting with male or gender neutral pronouns. Two years later, he wishes he had done it sooner. He says, “So it's been good. I've been very lucky in terms of my various identities in that I’ve been in a very accepting environment. Like I said, my mom sent me an article on asexuality. Whose parents would do that?” Despite growing up in a very conservative area, Aiden was fortunate to come out with supportive family and to attend college in a setting that allowed him to transition fully to a more authentic identity.

In almost every interview with trans respondents, it was apparent that social media sites, such as Facebook, played a crucial role in managing their transition. In 2014, in response to user demand, Facebook expanded the available gender options beyond the traditional male/female binary to include more than 50 options, including variations of cis, non-binary, fluid, trans and others. One year later, in 2015, they abandoned categories altogether to allow for open-ended
responses, giving users the choice between male/female/custom, which allows you to write up to ten terms describing your gender. In addition, the site allows you to select preferred gender pronouns, including feminine, masculine and gender neutral “they” pronouns. The ability to proclaim one’s preferred gender pronouns on such a visible platform proved helpful for many youth in coming out and transitioning. Kaden, for example, speaks of coming back to campus after spending a semester abroad and finding Facebook and email useful for telling people his new name and preferred gender pronouns. Similarly, Joe notes that he came out to his peers on Facebook on the day he left for college, which he says was “kind of a marker between living as female and me living as male.” He says that for a while he identified as questioning, but that he was going by male pronouns, and that Facebook allowed him to say: “I don't know if this is going to be forever, but for now this is what I want to be called. And this is why.” It wasn’t until later that he identified as transgender.

For respondents coming out and identifying as LGBQ, social media sites also proved useful. Many respondents noted a time where they made their coming out “Facebook official,” explaining how it “was a thing” at the time. This served as an effective method of revealing the news to a large amount of people, especially to extended family and friends, so they could avoid the hassle of “coming out over and over.” Numerous respondents said that after they had told the people who mattered most personally, they would post it on Facebook for the rest of their friends and family. Many commented that the news was met positively without incident, with friends liking the post and commenting things like, “good for you.”

While the large majority of respondents were comfortable being out on various social media platforms and the closet is seemingly less relevant to most of their experiences, it is important to recognize that it does remain a powerful force in the lives of some. It was very rare
for respondents in the sample to be fully closeted to their friends and family, but there were certainly individuals in the sample who followed different paths than the majority in the sample. One respondent, Michelle, who grew up in a very conservative Christian family in Southeast Asia and is in the United States for her college education, expressed a need to be cautious about revealing her sexual identity at home. She noted that she wanted to “come out” (adding, “if you can say that”) to her parents at age 16, but did not for fear of devastating them. She describes her family as a very “God-fearing Christian family” with “closed” views on homosexuality. She did come out to her sisters, and while one has been somewhat supportive, she says that her sister believes “it is a phase” and that it is “wrong.” Although Michelle has told many friends at home that she “likes girls,” she says she needs to be careful about telling those friends who know her parents so the information does not get back to them. Her experience in the US has been a positive one and has allowed her more openness in terms of her sexuality. However, she finds it somewhat hard to relate to other LGBT people here because she grew up in such a vastly different culture. Regardless, she has found a supportive community in a university group for LGBT international students. A Westernized version of “the closet” clearly does not accurately capture her experience growing up in Southeast Asia, as people there do not identify with the traditional labels of “gay” or “lesbian.” Michelle, however, does provide interesting insight and contrast in seeing just how far the United States culture has come in terms of post-closet settings, compared to other areas of the world.

Unlike Michelle, Eric and Hae grew up in the US, but spent a significant amount of time “closeted” due to the cultural and religious resistance to queer identities they faced growing up in immigrant families within the United States. Both Eric and Hae were in the unique position of coming of age in traditional Asian families against a backdrop of a larger post-closet socio-
Eric’s coming out story was laden with tears, a testament to the pain that remains around the experience. He grew up as a first generation American with very traditional Chinese immigrant parents that hold strict Confucian beliefs and values, especially around traditional gender roles. Furthermore, he was raised in a black and Hispanic community that he describes as “homophobic in terms of the whole Christianity thing.” Eric realized he was gay around 10 or 11 years old, but spent years hiding his sexuality from his family. He says he carefully managed, “everything I said and everything I did so I would appear to be a cisgender\textsuperscript{4} heteronormative male heterosexual.” This was a very unsettling time for him where he struggled to control every mannerism and admits to overcompensating by being hyper-heterosexual appearing. Eric eventually told his older brother when he was 13 years old, and while his brother said, “I kind of already knew,” he wished for Eric’s sake that it was not the case. As Eric was fully aware, coming out to his parents would be disastrous for his future. He says:

Throughout middle school and high school I was thinking about how my life would turn out and what it would be like in an adult life without my parents. I had the really real possibility of one day I will get married and my parents aren't going to be there. I wouldn't have any contact with them. And the only person that I would have relations with would be my older brother. So we both agreed to keep it a secret from my parents.

In high school, Eric began dating boys and eventually came out to various friends. Being out of the closet had an enormous impact on his life, as he says in his own words, “It felt awesome. I didn't have to control my mannerisms anymore. I started smiling in pictures and hugging friends and posting those pictures on Facebook. And that was that.” He said he did not necessarily “come out” in high school; he just stopped caring. He stopped conscientiously controlling his

\textsuperscript{4} Cisgender refers to when the sex you were assigned at birth matches your gender identity.
every move and lived his life openly as himself. If anyone asked him if he was gay, he would no longer lie and instead would say, “Yes, whatever.”

While Eric found a way to be happy and open in his life at school and with friends, telling his family was a different story. After coming out to some of his younger cousins, he came out to an aunt who was like a mother and helped raise him. He said it was a very emotional experience, and cried heavily both in the actual moment of telling her and in recounting the story. He says, “And I was crying so hard because she didn't judge me and she didn't say anything mean, she just held me and I just felt really safe and supported. She didn't say anything, like, ‘Oh I support you no matter what or anything like that.’ She was awesome.” His experiences with his mother and father (who divorced when he was young) were rather different. When Eric told his mother, she denied that it could be true and, among other things, warned him of his impending death from AIDS. He recalls, “To my embarrassment, I lied to her and told her I would change. I felt really bad because she was talking about how she wanted to die and how she wanted to kill herself. So I felt really bad. And when I tried to hug her, she just pushed me away. I felt this cold emanating from her. And I was just thinking, ‘Wow, you're kind of failing to be a mom right now.’” His father was much less “venomous,” and expressed that he still loved his son and remained warm, but said he wished he had the money “to fix” Eric. Eric’s sexuality has not been a topic of conversation much since coming out to them; he says that it was simply swept under the rug and forgotten. Eric, however, is now in college at Liberal Arts living openly within a supportive community. Despite lacking the support from his family that so many of his peers have had, he is happy with the support he has found at school and struggles to reconcile his parents’ “old views” with the current socio-historical climate.

Hae’s story has many similarities to Eric’s. She grew up in a very traditional Korean
family and was also a first generation American. She describes a struggle on three fronts in coming out to her parents: (1) a language barrier prevented adequate communication with her parents, (2) her parents’ “hard-core” Christian faith, and (3) an Asian culture that is homophobic and believes gay and lesbian identities are a Western construct. Hae discovered her sexuality in 8th grade, but hid it in a self-described “depressed state” until she got to high school. When she started dating other girls in high school and wanted to come out, she decided to tell her parents. It did not go well, as she describes:

Immediately after coming out to them, my mom was really hurt. I remember every night afterwards… she would spend every night in the kitchen after bedtime with a cross and the Bible, just praying and praying. She’d say, “Please help her. Please guide her in the right direction.” And she would just be crying and crying. And I’d be crying with her and feeling guilt and shame.

Her dad appeared to reach out at the time, asking Hae to go get breakfast and talk the next morning, but Hae was so ashamed that she declined. They have not talked openly about it since and several years have passed. Her mom tried convincing her that she was wrong for about a year, but no longer talks about it. Despite living openly at Public and with her friends, Hae continues to struggle to reconcile the culture of her parents with a more accepting and tolerant society.

Other respondents conscientiously kept their sexual identities hidden from certain family members who were culturally and/or religiously opposed to homosexuality. While these respondents also largely lived their everyday lives beyond the closet, it is important to recognize that they did feel a need to expressly hide their sexual identities out of a fear of rejection of certain family members. For example, Cassandra, a 20-year old who started identifying as a lesbian when she was about 15, comes from a Haitian family with strong Catholic beliefs surrounding sexuality. She feels as though she may never come out to her parents. She says:
So religion is a big part of my family’s life. But never have I heard [my mom] say these people are wrong or I don’t like these people. The most memorable thing she’s ever told me was, “I may be religious, but I’m not brainwashed.” That made me happy and gave me the most support in terms of my sexuality, indirectly. With just that, I feel like I could tell her and I think she’d have to warm up to it. She wouldn’t just be like, ok it’s fine. But she definitely wouldn’t throw me out or disown me or anything. She’d still support me 100 percent because I know I make her proud. Regardless of what I do. And I’ve wanted nothing more than to make my family proud. If I would come out to her, it wouldn’t change anything. It’s just me not being comfortable talking about it.

Cassandra says she mostly does not want to come out to her parents because talking about intimate relationships is not something she is comfortable with, whether she is with a man or a woman. However, it is clear that her family’s homophobia and religion plays a large role in keeping the information a secret. Similarly, Liz mentioned that her father was unaware of her queer sexual identity. He lives in the US Virgin Islands and she says, “In terms of culturally different, that’s a thing.” However, she is completely out to all of the rest of her family and describes her relationship with her dad as “sporadic,” suggesting it is not so much that she does not want to tell him, but that it matters less because of their limited relationship.

Some respondents with very conservative and/or religious families chose to come out to their families and described the experience as being rather challenging. For example, Maggie spoke about coming out to her Catholic parents who were very disapproving, which, at the time, subconsciously encouraged her to go further away for school. Another respondent, Asher, grew up with a very conservative family with a lot of overt homophobia among his brothers growing up. When he came out, he said that it was awkward for a year or two, but that, “Somewhere along the way it got better. My mom said she loved me no matter what and my brothers just accepted me instead of joking around. It just took some time.” Alicia spoke about religion being the reason behind her family’s disapproval when she first came out to them, but she says that they have “kind of gotten over it” and that they “just don’t want to hear about it.” She says,
If I bring it up at all and if I say have a new girlfriend, she just doesn't want to hear it. She’s just kind of like, okay, whatever. But I've gotten messages from my cousins being like, “How could you do this to God? How could you be this way? Whatever, whatever.” And then I’m like, okay, a year ago, you guys were talking about how great I was and now this happens and I’m the black sheep of the family?

Regardless of their disapproval, Alicia continues to share details of her life with them and tells them about people she’s dating because she’s unwilling to allow her sexual identity to define who she is as a person. These individuals took a different path than the majority of respondents in the sample who were able to come out more easily to supportive families. However, despite hiding their sexual identities or facing backlash from their conservative and/or religious families, these youth still express themselves and live openly away from their families in the public sphere, with access to support networks that extend beyond their immediate families.

**Resources for Post-closet LGBTQ Youth**

Whether or not they had the support of their families, in post-closet settings many youth came out with various other supports readily available to them. A majority of youth had access to several support systems that prior generations lacked, namely high school environments that no longer tolerate overt homophobia, and instead offer GSAs and regularly observe events queer-friendly events such as the Day of Silence. Youth also have access to various LGBTQ resources and communities on the Internet. To a certain extent, it became evident in the interviews that many youth coming of age in these settings take for granted the socio-historical context in which they live and do not recognize the uniqueness of their position. The ability of these youth to take post-closet contexts for granted has important consequences for the ways in which they construct identities and implement them into activism and speak to the successes of the LGBTQ movement thus far (Reger 2012).

The high schools these respondents attended were largely characterized by a culture of
tolerance and visibility of LGBTQ identities. Numerous respondents mentioned a culture of acceptance of LGBTQ students, despite commonly heard insults such as “fag” or “that’s so gay” echoing throughout the halls (see Pascoe 2007 on the role of homophobic discourse for structuring masculinity in the high school context). Most respondents describe their high schools as having been an “open” and positive environment for LGBT students. Several point to the presence of “standard” safe space stickers around their schools and a recurrent theme throughout the majority of interviews was that there was no overt homophobia or bullying. A number of respondents report feeling like “they could be themselves” in high school and, although there were sometimes negative comments made, they never felt unsafe or threatened. The majority of the sample reports out students in high school, and several mention out faculty and administrators as well. The Day of Silence, an annual event where students take a vow of silence to call attention to anti-LGBT bullying and harassment in schools, was regularly held in the majority of their schools. In sum, most respondents describe a culture where LGBTQ students felt comfortable being out and had access to support groups when needed.

A minority of students describes their schools as having been very heteronormative and that LGBTQ students were less visible. Even for those respondents who describe their schools as less open and less tolerant, there were still stories of visible accepted LGBT identities. Although it was rare to hear examples of overt homophobia, Hae provides examples of homophobia she experienced in her “Korean-oriented” high school:

Everyone was straight, except a few people. Being gay was the worst thing possible. There was no Gay Straight Alliance, no Pride Alliance, no LGBT club. No support group. If the counselor was LGBT-friendly, the students wouldn’t know, unless they had some safe space sticker or rainbow flag. But my counselor didn’t. We had a teacher that everybody assumed to be gay and made fun of, and that also discouraged me from expressing my sexuality. I was also on the varsity volleyball team and softball team. I remember being bullied on the way back home from my teammates after softball practice. “Oh, I heard you’re with this girl. And all the girls would laugh.” And I would
be really embarrassed. And it’s ironic because softball is associated with being a lesbian sport [laughs]. There was a student, a straight white boy, who made all these jokes in class. There was this one incident where I just walked by the group he was with and they all just fell silent. And he said, “lezbihonest” and everyone would laugh. So there were incidents where I felt some kind of bullying and homophobia towards me. And there was no support group at all.

Despite having negative experiences being out in her high school and lacking a formal support group, Hae says that she was not the only one identifying as bisexual at the time, noting that several other girls identified as bisexual. Similarly, Shawn says that there was not a lot of visibly out people at her school, but that, “I did have one really good friend who was gay. He was out. But he was kind of the token gay. All the girls wanted to hang out with him because he was gay. Not that he was particularly flamboyant or anything, he was just, everyone wanted to be best friends with him. He was probably the only one who was out, out.” Matt’s experience growing up in a rural area was similar in that there was limited visibility of LGBTQ people in his school. He says that it was never hard finding support in such an environment, but he did not necessarily enjoy being one of the few representatives of the LGBTQ community. He says:

> There was one out teacher and he was supportive. But it was weird, I didn’t want to be the representative of all the gays in the world, ya know? I just didn’t feel like I needed to be that voice and I feel like sometimes I would be called upon to speak up. He was probably the worst one about it. He’d start talking about something in class and he’d sort of look at me, and maybe the other bi girl, and ask what we had to say about this. And I’d be like, I’m not in the rainbow parade here. This isn’t what I’m trying to do. I’m just going to school. I guess this is what I have to say about it… I feel like it’s reductive to make yourself only by your sexuality. When you’re a target identity, it’s really easy to do that. To be like, the only thing about you is the thing that’s oppressed. And that’s all that you have, it’s your only thought every day. But for me, that has never been something I want to do. I don’t want to be the gay kid. I want to be Matt.

Even in describing what Shawn and Matt considered closed environments regarding sexuality, describing the “token gay” that all the girls wanted to hang out with and lamenting being singled out for his sexuality suggest at the very least a culture where queer identities are not lambasted.

> For trans students, the high school climate varied, but it was clear that trans identities
were less accepted than LGBQ identities. Kaden describes a very open high school environment, but one that seemed to draw the line at trans identities:

I went to a high school where the vice principal was a lesbian herself and her children with her partner were also in my classes. So it was a very open community in high school. And yet I didn't feel like it was a place where I could come out as transgender. It was open to lesbian and gay students, but there was nobody who was trans in my school so I still had no idea how to announce that I was trans and how that would be perceived because I knew it wasn’t a conversation taking place in my high school. Lesbian and gay was okay, but transgender wasn't talked about or thought about in public, even in our GSA club meetings. There was nobody identifying as trans so it just felt like I was the “other” in that sphere.

Kaden’s description suggests that trans identities and issues are lagging behind the incorporation and acceptance of LGB identities in the high school culture. Another respondent named Natalia specifically addressed this issue as a problem at her high school as well. She says,

I remember in 10th grade, for our GSA, we had terrible advisors. We got new ones and they were very educated. There was this one discussion we were trying to have about the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and they were like, well, this is the GSA, so we only focus on gay stuff. And we were like, oh no, it's still very important! … So since then, we’ve been advocating for trans people, all the scopes.

Natalia’s story suggests that, at least in her experience, the faculty advisors were hesitant to embrace trans identities at the high school level, while the students were more progressive and willing to fight for more inclusivity.

Others note progress that was being made as far as trans issues and visibility. Patrick points out that the president of his GSA was trans and several respondents mentioned taking part in the Transgender Day of Remembrance when they were in high school. Leo came out as trans his senior year of high school and, although he was the first to come out as trans at his school, he describes it as a “hugely supportive community” with at least 20-30 LGBT kids throughout the school. He said, “people you wouldn’t think were LGBT were,” and that he had very little problems with bullying in a population of students he described as “very liberal.” However, Leo
did meet some resistance in his school with several teachers, saying, “The teachers were the problem. My chorus teacher and the two other directors for the music department ended up being the most transphobic. So that was a weird experience. But some of the other teachers were really great.” He said that his guidance counselor sent an email to all of his teachers apprising them of the situation and that once his name change went through everything went smoothly. Although the school did not have gender-neutral bathrooms, they were accommodating when Leo was no longer comfortable using the single sex restrooms; at that time, he was able to use the nurse’s bathroom, which he felt was a safer alternative. He then went on to describe the many positive experiences he had with the majority of faculty and administration, mentioning that he came out at the perfect time because they had just passed the Dignity for All Students Act. He also said that while it was not perfect, he was hoping the school was working on how to deal with future trans students, as he knew another trans individual was coming up from the middle school after he graduated. When asked if his school had a formal support group for LGBTQ students, he said they did not, though he tried to start one at the time and was stalled by the large amount of paperwork required.

Despite some respondents, such as Leo and Hae, lacking formal support groups or GSAs at their schools, most youth in the study came from high schools that did in fact have formal support groups for LGBTQ students. Seventy-five percent of respondents recall having a GSA (or similar LGBTQ group) at their high school and several of the students who lacked formal groups when they were students report the establishment of one subsequent to their graduations. The remaining few were either homeschooled or grew up in other countries or communities far less reflective of post-closet contexts. Access to GSAs was greater for white students (82 percent of white students report access to a GSA, compared to only 58 percent of students of
Numerous respondents actually reported either individually or as a group starting the GSAs in their schools. Slightly more than half of those respondents who had GSAs in their high schools report participating in them (17 out of 30 respondents) with other members comprising their main friend group and support system. (Additional information on respondents’ involvement in high school GSAs is discussed in Chapter Six.)

Of particular significance in respondents’ discussions of GSAs was a recurrent theme that the GSA was “not the place for them.” Almost half of those with a GSA at their high schools were not members and did not attend (13 out of 30 respondents). This is a testament to the post-closet contexts in which these respondents were raised. There were several reasons given for why respondents were not involved with their GSAs in high school. As expected, some individuals who identified as straight in high school report not being interested at the time. Others, however, identified as straight allies and were involved with LGBTQ activism with their GSAs. In fact, many interviewees responded that the majority of people involved in their high school’s GSA were straight allies and typically females, which is why some gay men said the GSA was not their “scene.” Slightly more females than males reported involvement in high school GSAs (63 percent of females versus 44 percent of males). A slight difference also existed by race, with a greater percentage of non-white respondents reporting participation than white respondents (86 percent of non-white respondents with GSAs participated in them, compared to only 48 percent of white respondents). There was some element of “hiding” for one respondent who noted that while he was not yet out and was not really “interested” in joining the GSA, he also felt like he may have been “subconsciously” hiding and not wanting to be “on stage” about LGBTQ issues.
One of the most common explanations for not being involved with their GSAs, however, was the lack of “popularity” of members of the GSA. Many respondents pointed to GSA members as being outcasts and people with whom they would not ordinarily be friends. Interestingly, several people were careful to note that these individuals were lacking in social capital for reasons that were unrelated to their sexualities. Patrick described members of the GSA at his high school as “losers” who were “pretty low as far as the popularity scale was concerned.” He further explained that, “Not a lot of people liked them in general, but not because of their sexuality, mostly because of other aspects of their life.” A different respondent, Rachel, remembers going once to check out her GSA and described the whole experience as “weird,” with the people attending being some of the “weirdest kids in school.” Several people commented that they were not friends with people in the GSA, and that was the reason why they did not attend. This suggests that these youth were able to take the GSAs for granted because they did not need the formal support systems offered in school. Rather, in post-closet contexts, where there is adequate support coming from friends and family, as well as other resources both on- and off-line, many youth do not feel compelled to seek out other queer-identified students as their main support network. As Jen recalls, “I never went to GSA. Like I said, beyond that view, I just didn’t have that much in common with [a lot of the kids].” Sexual identity was not something that automatically united people, unlike perhaps in previous generations.

Part of the reason for such a large portion of youth not needing the support of a GSA is likely due to the accessibility of other resources. Many youth pointed to the Internet in helping realize they were not alone and finding others like them. For example, although Matt had a GSA at his school, he says that it was all straight girls and not for him. As one of the few out students, he says that he joined The Trevor Space on-line because he lacked a larger community at school.
Patrick, who is still struggling to accept his gay identity to some degree, mentions “a secret group of friends” in on-line forums that he could talk to about certain stuff that he did not want his regular friends to know. He also recalls researching sexuality and different identities early on when he was trying to figure out his identity. Similarly, Paige says the Internet was really useful for identifying how she was feeling when she first developed feelings for another girl. She says, “When I was about 16, I got online to a couple of different websites, like Tumblr and some blogging websites. And that really opened me up to the concept of bisexuality. When I heard about that, something went off in my head and I was like, wow, I didn't realize that was a thing. I didn't realize that you didn’t have to be either straight or gay.” The easily accessible information on the Internet helped these youth sort out early feelings of confusion around their identities.

Numerous respondents pointed to Tumblr and how it provides “access to this community that I wouldn’t otherwise have access to.” Trans respondents in particular mentioned the importance of Tumblr; the site is commonly known for having a large active trans community. As mentioned earlier, Kaden says that he spent years researching the transgender experience on-line before he came out as trans. He says, “I watched videos of certain other transgender individuals who were around my age and seem to come from the same cultural background. I watched them on YouTube, starting hormones, and talking about the changes that were occurring in their social lives. I just made myself aware of what I would go through in the future if I decided to transition to being male.” Kaden describes these individuals as his “idols,” saying:

The people I started to watch when I was 15 or 16, who were telling their stories in an open forum and on such a public website that people can access. And yet they were showing other kids their age that they could go through the process and do it successfully. But also to have their failures and discuss how it felt to have transition difficulties. Watching those people move on with their lives after years of transitioning and physically appearing male, was totally something that changed my life. And I started to reach out to those people and the fact that I could communicate with them and that we could potentially meet in real life. Those people are my idols because they allowed me to
understand that it's not a future of bullying, and discrimination, and losing family, and all kinds of things that you think of when coming out as transgender. It was a long tough struggle for them, but in the end there were things that came out of it that were positive. So it was really important to hear those voices in a public space and be able to access them so easily. And so that was a really important community.

The importance of the resources available on-line, especially for trans respondents, cannot be understated. In post-closet contexts, despite still limited visibility of trans people in the mainstream media and culture, the Internet opens up a large visible and accessible community. Unlike prior generations, these youth had the Internet as a safe space for them to express their fears and emotions, to find others like them, and ultimately to help embrace their sexual and gender identities.

Conclusion
In conclusion, post-closet youth are a generation facing a social and cultural context around sexuality and gender that is very different from prior generations. As a result, they are coming out at younger and younger ages in large part to families that are supportive. These findings are consistent with recent claims by Savin-Williams who also observes more frequent acceptance and support by families of queer youth (2016). However, as noted earlier, it is important to note that the majority of these respondents came from families who were largely upper/middle class and highly educated, and thus caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions about the family support witnessed in this sample for the post-closet generation in general. While the majority of youth certainly experienced supportive families, others in the sample had different experiences; religion and more traditional cultures, especially among immigrant families, remain influential for many. However, although some remain closeted to their families, these findings point to a generation living openly in a public sphere characterized by post-closet settings.
As the closet becomes less relevant for many of these individuals, the experience and significance of coming out is changing (Savin-Williams 2016). Within this sample of post-closet youth shifts are observed in the traditional coming out story, with many respondents experiencing coming out as less monumental. Many are downplaying the need to come out at all, as they push for queer and more fluid sexual identities to be recognized as simply normal.

Post-closet youth are largely being educated in tolerant, if not accepting, high school environments. Although the “fag” discourse remains prevalent (Pascoe 2007), most respondents noted high school climates that were largely supportive. The availability of on-line resources is something unique to this generation, with ready access to information and others like them. For trans respondents, in particular, the importance of the Internet, and its access to blogs, on-line communities, and tools of social media, cannot be understated. The numerous resources at their disposal, from formal support groups to on-line communities and information are sometimes taken for granted among LGBQ youth because they have the support they need from families and friends elsewhere. Sexual identity no longer automatically unites people as it once did, as witnessed by the many LGBTQ youth who did not participate in the GSAs that were available to them.

These characteristics of this generation, from family support to GSAs and on-line resources, enable post-closet respondents to negotiate sexual and gender identities and activism in new ways. Furthermore, it is evident that the culture of visibility and normalization post-closet youth have grown up with, and ushered in these changes, continues to change rapidly. Several respondents note that just in the years since they have graduated from high school, they have seen many changes. For example, Asher, who is now 25 years old says of his high school experience: “At that point, no one was out. And of course, now, everyone’s out! And they’re
doing shows about sexuality and identity. They even did a piece on transgender issues. And it’s so progressive now! And it wasn’t that long ago that I was there! But when I was in high school no one was out.” Similarly, Annie graduated only two years ago, but also says that a lot has changed at her high school just in that time. In the remaining chapters, I lay out the ways post-closet youth are changing identities and activism around sexuality and gender. The rapid change around sexual and gender identities suggests these changes are only the beginning; as more youth come of age in these post-closet contexts, they will be increasingly more willing to push the boundaries of what is “normal.” In the next chapter, I begin with a brief consideration of how respondents negotiate the first core tension for post-closet youth, the framing of youth as the victim versus well-adjusted youth, and then detail how post-closet youth are negotiating new sexual and gender identities.
Chapter Five: Resisting Normalized Queer Youth Identities

Introduction and Overview of Chapter

In this chapter, I present the empirical findings for how this sample of queer youth negotiates sexual and gender identities as members of a post-closet movement generation. The queer community and society at large frame LGBTQ youth narrowly in terms of an at risk/victim discourse. The consequences of this framing are multiple, including internalized self-hatred, pathologized queer youth, and occluded agency, as discussed in Chapter Two (see Bohan et al. 2002; Cohen 2005; Talburt 2004b; Quinlivan 2002). Queer youth face the challenge of navigating this restrictive framework, while attempting to carve out a sense of agency. I begin this chapter by briefly highlighting the ways these youth navigate the at risk/victim framework by locating their experiences in opposition to the victim discourse while prioritizing their activist concerns within the framework. I find that queer youth are largely stepping outside the narrow frameworks placed upon them through new negotiations of identity that are resistant to normalization. The remainder and bulk of the chapter focuses on those identity negotiations.

Post-closet youth are resisting the secure and gender conforming traditional sexual identities required of the “resilient queer youth” narrative (Talburt 2004a) and are instead creating alternative sexual identities. Although traditional lesbian and gay identities remain relevant for many in the sample, the ambivalence around those identities are clear. As a result, post-closet youth are working to create more complex versions of sexual identities that are more individualized, peripheral, fluid, and critical of gender binaries. I conclude the chapter with a consideration of how this post-closet generation is set to influence LGBTQ activism by resisting normalized queer youth identities. In Chapter Six, I examine the findings on how youth are creating collective identities and engaging in activism.
Navigating the Frames of At Risk and Victim Discourses

The internalized narratives and frames surrounding queer youth are evident in their stories (Bohan et al. 2002). Post-closet youth draw on at risk and victim discourses in two key ways, in distinguishing their experiences from the “typical” queer youth and in establishing priorities for activism. However, the findings suggest this sample of queer youth is fighting to carve out their own agency separate from the at risk/resilient youth discourses. By resisting and questioning the stable mainstream identities required by the well-adjusted/resilient youth narratives (Talburt 2004a), these individuals are resisting normalized versions of queer youth and carving out new stories of what it means to be queer in today’s society.

One of the main ways queer youth draw on at risk and victim narratives is by setting their experiences in direction opposition to the story that is expected of them. A majority of respondents spoke of how they were fortunate their experiences were vastly different from the “nightmare” stories of other youth. They spoke of not experiencing the extreme bullying from peers or rejection of families they so commonly heard about on television and in the media. One result of this incongruity is that it seemingly invalidates the negative experiences youth do have; they do not feel justified in those experiences because they do not compare to the more extreme versions in the narrative. For example, Jonah speaks of the loneliness he experienced after coming out to two friends in eighth grade. He says:

I wasn't bullied that much. I wasn't a depressed kid. I wasn't hurt in any way. I wasn't tormented. But at the time, I did feel very alone, and people were not so supportive of even just me, not knowing that I was gay. So locker room situations were not fun. But I wasn't being pushed up against the locker and being punched in the face or being yelled at. It was just odd comments, like, ‘Oh, that's so gay,’ or ‘Stop being so gay.’ But it was in passing. It went fabulous, but they weren't the worst things that [have] ever happened to anyone, which I am incredibly thankful for.

Because Jonah did not experience more drastic bullying, he appears to downplay his loneliness and how homophobia impacted him. Similarly, Alicia speaks of how her experience was not “as
bad as a lot of other people.” She says, however, that she does receive comments from her family such as, “I’ll be praying for you,” or “are you not going to have kids now?” Instead of recognizing such statements as stemming from homophobia, she puts them off as “disheartening.” Both Jonah and Alicia appear to say that because their experiences are not congruent with more typical horror stories, their experiences are somewhat less significant. As a result of the persistence of risk/victim narratives, youth need to push harder to legitimize their experiences and fight to recognize the less obvious dimensions of homophobia in society.

Post-closet youth are beginning to call attention to less overt homophobia in their activist priorities. When asked to identify the issues that are most important to them for activism, they often began by identifying the issues that are most compatible with the at risk/victim discourses, such as suicide prevention, bullying, homelessness, substance abuse, etc. (Bohan et al. 2002). Mark, a sophomore at Public University, says how the highly publicized group of suicides that occurred several years ago really had an impact on him and inspired him to volunteer with the Trevor Project. He said it really “struck a chord” because he had such a hard time relating. He says, “They were just heartbreaking. And it made me value my life, because I thought to myself, what would really make me want to kill myself? But I couldn't really think of anything … It was so heartbreaking to see other people and other kids think I can’t even be myself, and so I need to kill myself.” The prevention of suicide among queer youth, and in particular trans youth, was commonly identified as a priority, especially early in the data collection process when heightened media coverage was fresh on their minds.

Connected to suicide prevention, an overwhelming majority of youth identifies bullying as a major issue needing to be addressed. Interestingly, respondents point to a need to solve the more widespread problem of bullying, not exclusive to LGBTQ individuals. For example, Kate,
another student at Public, says, “Even if it’s not just bullying in the LGBT community, but bullying in general…There needs to be more awareness to the fact that kids are committing suicide because they're being bullied because they're gay or just because they're different.” Several respondents noted that bullying in schools is a problem, and that there is still a dire need for the creation of safe spaces for LGBTQ individuals in middle and high schools.

Although the most common priorities identified by youth stem directly from the at/risk victim discourses, it became apparent in the interviews that youth are becoming more aware of the micro-aggressions (versus overt homophobia) that persist in post-closet contexts and identify these issues as important for activism moving forward. Zander summarizes the situation in the following way:

I think it's more talking about micro aggressions with everything. It's not the outward calling somebody the F word. It's not the outward stuff anymore. It's saying something offhand. It's telling a black person, “Oh, you are so articulate.” That's still racist. You’re just not being outwardly racist. I don't find anyone who was outwardly anything anymore. If that makes sense. It's not someone who says I hate the gays or I hate black people. No one really says that anymore. Or they do, but it's very small numbers.

Hae lists off a variety of different examples in discussing how micro-aggressions are problematic and need to be addressed. She says just in her personal experience, she recounts comments like, “‘Who’s the man in the relationship?’ Or with my race…someone came up to me and asked if I was Japanese or Chinese. And I was like, ‘Actually I’m Korean.’ And he was like, ‘oh they’re all the same shit.’ Those are all micro-aggressions.” She says micro-aggressions are not necessarily spoken: “Eyeing someone that’s black in a convenience store, clutching your purse when a Latino person approaches, looking at me and then looking at the gender sign on the bathroom to see if it’s correct.” While many of their experiences do not resonate with the at risk/victim narrative extremes, queer youth are calling attention to the different forms oppression takes and the ways heteronormativity and homophobia remain unchallenged, despite seemingly accepting
environments.

It is important to recognize, however, that the experience of some queer youth still resonates strongly with the at risk/victim discourses. Queer youth remain at a disproportionate risk for suicide, violence, depression, and substance abuse, especially those coming of age in isolated contexts (CDC 2011). For example, much of Tarek’s story reflects the victim narrative, although his experience was rather unique in the sample. Tarek described his middle and high school years as fraught with challenges; he told multiple stories of violence and bullying, suspensions, and an eventual expulsion from one high school. He was hesitant to share many details, but spoke of past sexual abuse and a suicide attempt that was thwarted by his mother. In the end, Tarek said he refused to “become another statistic of queer/LGBT youth,” and instead turned his attention to activism, something he was previously involved with on issues of war and civil liberties. The realization that he could also fight for his rights as a queer individual had a dramatic impact on his life and ever since has focused on queer activism and fighting heteronormativity and homophobia as part of a larger intersectional fight against racism, capitalism, and xenophobia.

This brief examination of how queer youth manage the at risk/victim narratives reveals that youth continue to be restricted by the stories told about them, as Bohan et al. (2002) and Talburt et al. (2004) suggest. The frequency of references to how their stories were “not as bad as others” is a testament to the strength of this narrative for this generation of youth. They evaluate their experiences in relation to what they are taught to expect, i.e., a nightmare coming out story, for example; and, as a result, their actual experiences become less tangible and valid. The victim narrative largely dictates the kinds of issues they believe most important for their activism. Time and again they prioritize suicide prevention and bullying, even though those
issues may not resonate well with their experiences. As Savin-Williams (2016) argues, their experiences are rather distanced from the stories they hear. Nevertheless, they frequently draw on these discourses, despite that disconnect. It is evident in this sample, however, that queer youth are starting to recognize that although they are not experiencing the overt homophobia they so often hear about, the less overt micro aggressions they face are just as important to address in their fight against homophobia and heteronormativity. It is clear in the data that post-closet youth want to take the position of a new well-adjusted youth with their own sense of agency. One of the ways they are claiming this agency is through new negotiations of sexual and gendered identities. Specifically, queer youth are questioning the secure, traditionally gendered mainstream identities that are required of “resilient” well-adjusted youth (Talburt 2004a) with new labels that bring increased attention to fluidity in both sexual identity and gender expression, thereby resisting normalized youth identities. I now turn to a discussion of the findings regarding how these forty queer youth negotiate their sexual and gender identities.

**Negotiating New Sexual Identities: Resisting a Normalized Queer Youth Identity**

Although queer youth have been framed by larger society in limiting ways, an examination of the ways these youth are negotiating sexual identities reveals the very significant ways they are changing and challenging structures of heteronormativity, normalization around queer identities, and the gender binary. Coming out in post-closet settings allows youth the freedom and opportunity to craft sexual and gender identities that resonate more fully with their experiences. Traditional gay and lesbian identities remain relevant for this sample of youth, however, a great deal of ambivalence surrounding those identities is apparent. In response to that ambivalence, many youth are negotiating identities in ways that support a shift toward what Cohler and Hammack term a narrative of emancipation (2007). Relieved from the constraints of
the closet and free from managing a stigmatized identity, the youth in this sample are resisting the traditional identities linked to the narrative of struggle and success (Cohler and Hammack 2007) in a number of different ways. I begin this section by laying out the main findings for how post-closet youth are constructing personal sexual identities. First, they are constructing sexual identities that are highly individualized. Although many in the sample find traditional labels still relevant, they experience ambivalence around the stereotypes so commonly attached to them. Many respondents work to navigate those stereotypes and question whether the identities reflect their authentic selves, while some resist labels altogether. Part of the shift toward creating more authentic identities is a move to recognize all parts of one’s identity as significant, relegating sexuality to more of a peripheral rather than core part of their identities. Finally, a majority of youth are choosing alternative labels, such as queer or pansexual, over traditional LGB labels in order to more accurately describe their identities and to call attention to the spectrum and fluidity of both sexuality and gender. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of the constellation of changes occurring among post-closet youth identity negotiations and how they result in a resistance to normalized queer youth identities the mainstream movement’s resiliency narrative requires (Talburt 2004a). Post-closet settings allow the movement generation to resist the normalization of youth by embracing identities that call more attention to the fluidity of sexuality and gender, and consequently work to deconstruct and reconfigure both the gender binary and heteronormativity in the process.

Ambivalence and the Rise of Individualism

One of the most apparent differences in post-closet sexual identity construction is the trend away from traditional sexual identity labels. The findings of this study support claims by Savin-Williams (2005a) and Morris (2006) that there is a proliferation of new identities among
youth. These new identities stem partly from an increase in the individualization of identities. Respondents’ descriptions of their sexual identity labels more often than not include a call to embrace an authenticity of self. Throughout the interviews there is a repeated emphasis on being yourself and a refrain of “you do you” emerged. This individualistic narrative stems in part from what some argue is a larger general trend of individualism among the millennial, or “me,” generation (Twenge 2011). However, living life beyond the closet allows this generation to create identities that are more reflective of their experiences than past generations. A culture of widespread acceptance and normalization permits youth to claim sexual identities that are more authentic and less prepackaged.

One of the main reasons for the increasing individualization of identities is linked to the ambivalence youth experience around the stereotypes associated with traditional labels. Consistent with recent findings by Coleman-Fountain (2014), youth ambivalence to traditional labels stems largely in part from the stereotypes that are so entrenched in them. Respondents in the sample felt a persistent need to navigate stereotypes in order to negotiate identities that reflect their individuality. Commentaries on the stereotypes associated with mainstream labels were frequent in the data, especially among those youth who adopt traditional labels, and are best exemplified by the following three examples. First, Jonah remembers how being out in high school felt limiting in terms of the stereotypes surrounding gay identities:

The freshman at the time had two gay parents, two gay dads. He was gay. He was this tall, thin, blue eyed… the epitome of a twink. And walked down the hallway going, “Heeey, how are you!?” And I just felt like, you need to stop and come out of the stereotypes and be yourself... So we were out, there were those of us who were out and everybody knew we were gay and it was very obvious. But apart from two of us, they were incredibly stereotypical. To the point where the community only saw stereotypes of homosexuality, and so that was somewhat closed off. I felt like I couldn't express myself in any other way. I would jokingly tell my friends, I really don't want to hang out with them because I feel ashamed to be gay. And this is in a totally joking space, but to some extent it was true….So the stereotypes to some extent, I enjoy falling into them and
playing with them because I am confident, so I can jokingly be like, “Yep, I'm a bear. Let's move on with my life.” ... But then I always come back to myself and think, well, maybe don't do that as much. Because at the same time, sometimes when I'm participating in the stereotypes, I feel blocked in. I'm a big proponent for the idea of a multi-faceted human being.

Jonah felt a certain degree of ambivalence about being gay in high school. On the one hand, he felt comfortable being out and seemingly fitting certain stereotypes of the gay identity (being a “bear”), but at the same time, he felt “boxed in” and unable to express himself in a more multidimensional manner.

Chloe also spoke at length about how she sometimes struggles with the stereotypes attached to the “lesbian” label and how she feels she must navigate them daily:

You find yourself thinking, ‘Oh, don't do that, it's stereotypical.’ If I were living in a place where people didn't automatically assume that it is a part of my character, it would be a lot easier to just say do what you will and not worry about being labeled. But I'm constantly making sure that I present myself in a non-stereotypical way if just to prove a point. Just to prove the point that it's not who I am. So even though there's nothing about me that's gay per se, there are certain things that I’ll go to do and be like, ‘Oh no.’ Or a certain outfit, I'll be like, ‘Nope.’ And it's unfortunate, because it’s just something that's in my brain. But I'm fully out on campus. I'm not ashamed of being out on campus.

When I asked Chloe to elaborate more on this, she spoke of the various stereotypes associated with the lesbian label, such as being perceived as not feminine, unattractive, domineering or bossy. She says that most disturbing to her are stereotypes surrounding spirituality and assumptions that because one is gay, they must also be atheist. She says, “I know that one of my concerns is that my religious identity has nothing to do with my sexual identity. I don't want anyone to ever see me and say, ‘Well, of course she's an atheist, she's gay.’ Or, ‘Of course she's gay, she's an atheist.’ I don't want that connection to ever be made because it's so off the mark. So that's something I'm constantly aware of.” The strength and endurance of certain stereotypes, such as the presumed lack of religiosity in the queer community, result in a constant identity struggle for some post-closet youth.
Lastly, Mark speaks in similar ways about how he navigates stereotypes that go along with his gay identity. He describes carefully managing things like his appearance to downplay his sexual identity in certain circumstances. He says, “Sometimes I don’t want to dress too gay or too fashionable because all gay people are fashionable.” However, he recognizes it as a double-edged sword of not wanting to have your life dictated by stereotypes, but at the same time wanting to fit in. He says, “Something as simple as going shopping or even going out to eat. There’s a stigma that gay guys in particular aren’t out of shape and are generally good-looking, they have good bodies. So when I go out to eat, I don’t like stuffing my face because I don’t want to not fit the mold.” Respondents like Jonah, Chloe, and Mark identify their sexualities in traditional terms, but the problems associated with doing so are echoed throughout their interviews and those of many others.

Although the majority of the sample resists traditional labels, traditional identities remain relevant for a large number of respondents. In fact, approximately 43 percent of the sample (17 respondents) identifies primarily with traditional identity terms as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Male-identified respondents identify more with traditional labels than non-traditional labels (approximately 60 percent identify with the traditional label of gay, whereas approximately 40 percent identify with non-traditional labels, see Table 4 below), especially in comparison to female-identified respondents (40 percent identify with traditional labels, compared to 60 percent with non-traditional labels). The traditional gay identity remains relevant for men in this sample, especially among cisgender males (86 percent of cis men adopt traditional identities compared to only 20 percent of trans men). However, as evidenced in the interviews, the adoption of these

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5 For the purpose of comparing traditional with non-traditional identities, identities that were labeled lesbian, gay, or bisexual on respondent’s demographic forms were considered “traditional,” while those falling outside of lesbian, gay or bisexual were considered “non-traditional,” including queer, pansexual, androsexual, asexual, etc.
traditional identities is not as straightforward as it seems and is oftentimes adopted for the sake of convenience.

Table 4. Sexual Identity by Gender Identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Identity</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male**</th>
<th>NB/Fluid</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10 (40)</td>
<td>7 (58)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>17 (42.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15 (60)</td>
<td>5 (42)</td>
<td>3 (100)</td>
<td>23 (57.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25 (100)</td>
<td>12 (100)</td>
<td>3 (100)</td>
<td>40 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages in parentheses
**Among males, 86% of cis males and 20% of trans males adopt traditional identities; 14% of cis males and 80% of trans males adopt non-traditional identities

Male-identified respondents, especially cis men, are more likely to be comfortable with the mainstream gay identity label. For respondents like James, however, the adoption of the gay identity is more complex than it appears, as they question and recognize the limitations of their identities. James identifies as gay and provides a good example of the amount of questioning and scrutiny youth are bringing even to traditional sexual identities. He says:

Behaviorally, I guess I would more identify as pansexual, but to me, my gay identity is important to me. And also, I guess going by attraction, I'm attracted to bio men and trans men. But especially for trans men partners, dating somebody who has a gay identity doesn't really invalidate their identity as male. So after processing and really thinking about it, I decided that sticking with identifying myself as gay is really important to me and I just identify that way for myself.

Although not as simple as it might seem, James finds the traditional gay identity suits him and considers it an important part of his identity. Jonah describes a good fit with the gay label as well. He says, “Labels in general, I'm okay with. I enjoy them. I think they create safe spaces. They can be confusing and they can be tumultuous and they can change and they can be incomplete and added onto, but they still, in my opinion, create safer spaces.” Asher is another cis male comfortable with the gay label. He recounts a conversation with a friend who had recently changed from a self-described “constricting” lesbian label to a more “universal” queer
label. She asked him if he would consider changing his label. He replied saying he hates labels in general (pointing to “top/bottom, masculine/feminine, butch/queen”), but he does “like gay.” He says that it was a struggle to initially “own it and come out gay,” but since he did, he fully embraces it. Although they recognize the gay label is limiting in some respects, most cis men consider it a good fit for them and express pride in their gay identities.

While the gay identity fits some men more comfortably than others, many spoke about how they will use traditional labels for the sake of simplicity. Erik identifies his gender as fluid and his sexuality as androsexual, but he will often identify as “gay” because “it’s a lot easier”:

> If I go up to a heteronormative straight person who has no idea about any of this labeling stuff and say, “Hey, I’m an androsexual.” They’d be like, “What the fuck is that?” And I don't want to stay there and have a 15 second conversation about what it means to be androsexual and explain to him what it is. I would just say, “Oh, I'm gay, so he would have a general idea of what I am.” The thing about labels is that, they're for clothing, not for humans. We’re humans. We are these giant bags of chemical reactions walking around. Putting a label on that is kind of hard. But if you have to put a label on someone, understand that those labels come with asterisks that say, "Oh well, I am technically this” by definition, but there's an exception. Except this and except that.” You know?

Erik’s comments on labeling reflect a lot of comments in interviews about traditional labels; i.e., they are not perfect, but they are convenient. Matt agrees saying that he really likes labels because they offer some comfort and community. He argues people “should be able to access [a label] without feeling weird about it.” He says, “I think it’s easier for me to say I’m gay, then to say I am sexually attracted to men, but I think I could have romantic feelings toward a woman and maybe if I were drunk I’d make out with a woman. That’s just such a long conservation. It's just easier for me to say I am gay.”

Although a smaller proportion of women (40 percent) compared to men (58 percent) choose traditional labels to describe their identities, they are still present in the sample. Seven of these women identified as lesbians. Like men, many of these respondents justify the use of these
labels as being easier than alternatives. However, many women note the label does not perfectly describe their identities. Chloe provides a good example of this in the following discussion of how she demonstrates various sexual and gender identities at ally trainings:

So if you want to get really specific, I always loved that you can put yourself on the spectrum. … when I teach my ally trainings I’ll put on the board two lines. One is gender and one is sexuality… Zero is male and 10 is female. And zero is straight and 10 is totally gay. And I'll say, come up and give me a number for your sexuality and give me a number for your gender identity on the scale. … Another thing I'll do is that I’ll teach asexuality and things like that … I’ll put [sexual desire] and then I’ll put romantic identity. And so someone who identifies as asexual you will usually put zero as no [sexual desire] or a one. And if they really interested in women and they’re a woman, they'll put 10 on the romantic scale. It makes it connect in people's brains.

Chloe describes her various attractions and identities on the aforementioned spectrums, but then concludes that she calls herself “just a lesbian” because it is easier. Chloe recognizes her sexual identity as much more complex than the word lesbian allows, but that for her it is the best option available. Maggie, who identifies comfortably as a lesbian, realizes that some of her attractions to people who are agender or fluid, for example, are not a part of her label. But, she says, “It's good and I like it and it's an easy quick identifier. It groups me in with a certain set of people who I relate to in most aspects.” However, she’s quick to then point to the stereotypes that come along with the lesbian identity, which she describes as “annoying.” She also suggests openness about the future of her lesbian identity that was absent in men’s accounts of their identities, saying her lesbian identity is “something that I've grown to be very familiar with, and if I wanted to change it, I know that I could because all of my friends would be very accepting. People grow and people change.” Cassandra describes similar issues with her lesbian label explaining the label “doesn’t completely fit me well.” She says she uses the term lesbian “kind of loosely” and that she knows a lot of women who do the same.
Three women use the traditional “bisexual” label to describe their sexual identities. The bisexual label appears to be one of the most contentious labels throughout many of the interviews, with respondents describing ongoing biphobia and persistent stereotypes from both within the queer community and society at large. Many respondents in the sample who are attracted to more than one gender choose alternative labels, such as queer or pansexual; however, among those identifying as bisexual, a certain amount of ambivalence around this identity was clear. Rachel provides the best example for demonstrating this ambivalence. She is a student at Liberal Arts College where many other students who are attracted to more than one gender identify as queer or pansexual. She has thoroughly considered the bisexual label and the alternatives, but decided ultimately she prefers bisexual because of the potential it has for resonating with diverse audiences. She says terms such as pansexual or omnisexual are only understood among certain populations, namely college-educated elites. She cites attending a conference where Robyn Ochs (a prominent bisexual activist and writer) argued such identities are not understood outside of those contexts, such as less educated or lower income communities. Rachel says, “It almost seems like the most socially just thing to do, to identify as bisexual, instead of all these other things.” However, she notes her adoption of bisexual comes with a disclaimer to counter all of the troublesome connotations associated with bisexuality, namely it does not imply support for the gender binary or that she is not attracted to trans people.

Not everyone who identified as bisexual experiences the ambivalence Rachel describes around the identity. Annie’s only frustration with the identity stemmed from her parents, two moms, predicting she will ultimately become a lesbian, which she appeared to be annoyed with and not necessarily troubled by. Natalia, only the other hand, clearly experiences some of the ambivalence noted by Rachel. Although Natalia describes herself as “bisexual,” she does not
appear to be connected deeply to the label, suggesting throughout the course of her interview that maybe “queer” is a better descriptor to capture her identity. She says, “I feel like it encompasses everything… Because it’s very flexible, sexuality. You can identify as bisexual and then a month later…no, I’m a lesbian or I’m gay.” It was common to hear similar declarations about the fluidity of sexuality from women respondents throughout the sample, echoing similar sentiments in the literature (Diamond 2005; 2008). The fluidity inherent in sexuality led some in the sample to resist labels altogether. I now turn to a discussion of the ways youth are resisting labels.

Resisting Labels

One solution to resisting the stereotypes associated with traditional labels is, of course, to resist labels altogether. Savin-Williams (2005) points to this happening with increased frequency among youth; however, the present sample offers limited evidence of this trend occurring in this region. Among the 40 respondents, two actively resisted labels in describing their sexual identities. Beck, who grew up in the South, prefers to not label her sexuality at all. She says:

Well, I don’t really like to be contained by a label. I think that labels are a nice way for other people to understand and oversimplify something that is deeply personal. For me, my choices sexually and with my gender expression are completely mine. And when someone wants to say are you straight or are you a lesbian? Are you bi? What are you? They want to contain me. And I’m like, “Well, today, right now? I’m feeling pretty damn gay.” But in ten minutes from now, maybe I’ll be feeling really straight. I don’t know. But right now, I’m expressing the way that I am expressing and I’m expecting that, as a person who respects me, you would treat me in the way that I’m expressing myself. Does it matter really what my gender identity is? Doesn’t matter really what my sexual identity is? That’s how I feel about it.

She says, “I just have a tendency to shy away from labels. Even writing ‘fluid,’ I’m like, it's a label. I'd rather just be me. Take me as I am.” She goes on to explain how she understands the need for labels and the instinct to categorize things, but she emphasizes a desire to change that about society. She says, “If I could make a zap and change something about the world, it would be to take each person for who they are. I just don't see the need for that, personally.” Beck’s
sentiments reflect the theme of individualism present throughout many of the interviews; while others resolve to identify their sexualities with labels, however restrictive, she strives to avoid them altogether.

Shawn is another example of someone fighting against labeling entirely. Although she does not report same-sex attraction, refusing to label her sexual identity is something that remains very important to her. She became involved with LGBTQ activism in high school with her GSA and later discovered that two of her siblings identified as gay. She says:

I mean, to the outside world, you would perceive me as a heterosexual individual, because I have sex with men and I identify as a woman. But I really hate labels, and at times, I’ve almost wanted to identify myself as a lesbian. But not because I want to romantically love women, but because I really relate to lesbian feminism ideals. And then sometimes I’m like, well, maybe I’m bisexual, because I can really appreciate beauty in a woman and at times I’ve thought about, well, would I want to experience sex with a woman or a relationship with a woman? But then, I kind of think I don’t want that. So identity is kind of something I struggle with on a day-to-day basis because up until my sophomore year, it was, I’m straight. I like this type of man, and that is it. But then I took a Queer Theory course and it started to open my eyes to the concept of “queer.” Because when I grew up, all I ever heard was queer as a derogatory term... But then I learned about it and I learned also the concept of “genderqueer” and how identity to a certain extent, and how gender are very much socially constructed, and I was like, well, I really don’t want to be a part of this social construction, so I guess my anti-identity is just not identifying. And so probably about a year ago, ya know, I always used to have this thing, like, I am a staunch ally even though I’m a straight girl from upstate New York, and I kind of stopped the whole straight girl line. I was like, I’m just a staunch ally and that’s where I’m going to go with it.

Shawn’s opinions on labeling her sexuality, like many others in the sample, reflect an exposure to academic discourses on gender and sexual identities, namely queer theory’s emphasis on the deconstruction of the sexual and gender binaries. It is clear that among this college-educated sample many identities were informed by the queer theory writings they were exposed to in college courses, especially at Liberal Arts and Public.

Paige is a unique example of someone who grew up reading about heteronormativity and challenging the traditional gender binary (she was homeschooled) and is now incorporating that
education into her personal sexual identity construction. She identifies as biromantic/demisexual, saying that she is romantically attracted to people of any gender expression and sexually attracted to them only after she is emotionally close to them. However, in talking more about her identity it is clear that the descriptors she uses to describe her sexuality are simply that. She says she chooses words that are the closest to how she identifies, but that she feels like she’ll never find a definitive label. I asked if she wants one, to which she responded, “Not really! I’m kind of just floating out there doing my own thing.” This ambivalence around labels suggests a desire for fluidity that labels simply do not offer.

When asked whether they are seeing peers refuse labels, other respondents suggest, at least anecdotally, that this is occurring to some extent. When I asked Kayla if she sees people refusing labels, she says:

Yeah I guess I do. You mean like not even queer? Like no label at all? I don't know, maybe a few. Anyone I know will generally label themselves as part of the LGBT community. If you want to be in it they have to have a label that corresponds with it somehow. Like how are you going to be in it if you're not one of the letters? But I know a lot of people who like to push away labels about gender and sexuality. They're just like, I am who I am. I don't feel like I need a word or something to show who I am. Which I really get that. I think that's a really empowering thing. Just to let yourself be who you are and not try to fit into a certain term or identity.

Many others note that they are seeing an increase in people refusing labels for identifying their sexual identities. Patrick, a student at Liberal Arts, says he has one friend who chooses not to label herself, “even though she's attracted to girls as well as guys. She refuses to label herself as bisexual or pansexual or anything.” Respondents note, however, that in order to be a part of the queer community and participate in activism, labels offer a certain level of convenience and are viewed as necessary to connect with others (especially for dating purposes in college).

One explanation for why only two respondents in the sample refused labels is that this is not a common practice in this region. Beck was one of two respondents in the sample who did
not attend college in the area and perhaps the practice of not labeling is more common elsewhere. Recruitment ads for the study expressly sought individuals identifying as “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, unlabeled, queer or anything in between” who engage in LGBTQ activism. A more likely explanation for why only two respondents in the sample actively resisted labels is that unlabeled individuals are less likely to engage in LGBTQ activism. Participation in social movements requires the adoption of a collective identity to some extent, a way of delineating who is in and who is out (Taylor and Whittier 1992). As Chloe, who reluctantly identifies as a lesbian, says, “it's stupid, we don't want labels. But in order to be activists and to have the vocabulary to talk about what we’re doing and interact with other people, we unfortunately need the labels.” Without a label for your sexuality, it is hard to participate in the activism. Regardless of the reason for why there was such a limited presence of unlabeled respondents, it is clear, at least anecdotally, that members of the post-closet generation are resisting labels and the implications for that are important for considering both how sexual identities are evolving and the future of activism around queer issues.

Sexual Identities as Core vs. Peripheral

A major component of youth resisting traditional labels and working to create more authentic sexual identities is that youth are less and less likely to consider their sexuality a core part of their identities. Supporting claims that sexual identity is becoming more peripheral (Cohler and Hammack 2007; Savin-Williams 2005a; Seidman 2002), I find a large number of respondents in this sample downplaying its significance. Clear narratives emerged from the interviews supporting more peripheral views of sexual identity, with respondents pushing for their sexualities to be seen as “ordinary,” suggesting their identities are more complex than a reduction to their sexuality. Just over half of respondents described their sexual identities in ways
that were reflective of a more core identity, which in large part is associated with a commitment to LGBTQ activism.

I asked respondents whether their sexual identity played a large role in defining who they are as a person and coded the responses for the purposes of analysis. Nineteen out of the 40 respondents answered in ways that were categorized as “peripheral,” while 21 were categorized as “core.” Given the importance of a politicized collective identity for social movement participation, it is unsurprising that a majority of the sample attached such prominence to their sexual identities. On the flipside, however, it is telling that within a sample of activist-oriented youth, so many do in fact relegate their sexuality to the periphery. In this section, I first describe the ways youth are negotiating sexual identities that are more peripheral before moving onto a consideration of those youth maintaining core sexual identities.

Among the most common explanations for why sexual identity is not a defining feature of their identities is the claim of ordinariness. Respondents, like Kate, say they just want to be treated like normal people. She clarifies, saying, “I don't want to say normal, because everyone is normal. I just want to be me.” She continues, “It is who I am. I can't get away from that … I don't care if anyone sees it. I don't want my sexuality to define who I am as a person. It shouldn't matter if I'm gay or straight, I am [me]. That's who I'll always be.” Jonah goes a step further in wanting to simply be seen as himself and not a gay person. He says that he’s actually had conversations with his family and friends saying, “You're not allowed to introduce me as your

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6 I coded each interview as either “core” or “peripheral” depending on the general impression received from answers to the questions: “Do you consider your sexual identity to be a large part of who you are? Why or why not?” If respondents answered with a definitive “yes,” they were coded as “core.” If they answered with a mixed response of “yes and no” or “yes, but it’s not the most important part of me,” they were coded as “peripheral.”

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gay son or gay brother. I told my best friends, you're not allowed to introduce me as your gay friend, because that is not who I am. I am your friend. I am your son. I am your brother. Period.”

There are recurrent calls among post-closet youth to not have their sexuality define them. When I asked Annie whether her sexuality plays a significant role in her identity, she says:

It's about as significant as I write with my left hand and I have really dark brown hair … I'm kind of edgy about it, especially when I'm with some of my friends, because I just don't want to talk about it. I don't see a need to talk about it 24/7 … I just think it's a nice part of who we are, but it doesn't define us. I don't think it defines people … That's where the LGBT community and I differ because it's a part of my life, but it's not my whole life.

Annie feels strongly that her sexual identity should not be a marker for difference in life. She attributes this attitude partly to growing up with same-sex parents and questions whether she feels like way because it was always a part of her normal. Her sentiments, however, are echoed by many of the other respondents I interviewed. Chloe talks about how others automatically assume things about your character when they see your label and, while that is true for some people, it is not true “across the board.” She says, “Honestly, the only thing that makes me a lesbian is that I sleep with girls. That's literally it. [laughs]…The rest of me is just me. There are a lot of other ways that I label myself… American, Buddhist, a woman, an activist. I'd much rather have those labels, before I'm labeled as a lesbian.” Respondents emphasized other aspects of their identities that they consider just as important as their sexual identity. Leo says, “It’s part of who I am, but I don't let it be the main thing that I am. I mean, first of all. Yes, I'm trans. Yes, I’m pansexual. But, I'm also a musician. I'm also a marching band member. I'm also a friend, a brother, a son. I’m all of these things, and they equally shape me to be who I am.” Similarly, Kim identifies more strongly with other elements of her identity. In fact she says, before she cut her hair short, she passed as straight and never faced marginalization based on her sexuality. However, she says: “I felt that much more with my gender as a woman because I can feel the
marginalization of that all the time. Also, because I look for it. So I identify with being a woman so much stronger than I identify with being pansexual or queer.” Because she has never had to manage oppression from overt homophobia on a regular basis, her sexuality has never been a core part of her identity.

Many respondents emphasized other elements of their identities that play more important roles in defining who they are as individuals. Race differences emerged on this issue, with slightly more non-white respondents (67 percent) identifying their sexual identity as peripheral when compared to white respondents (39 percent). When I asked Liz if her queer and genderqueer identities are important parts of her identity, she responded in the following way:

Yes, definitely. They're not the most defining parts of me. … When you're in the oppressed group, that's where you are going to identify. So in terms of my racial identity, I'm biracial and it think that's something that I strongly identify with and what that brings, always being in the middle space, which is fine. I'm also comfortable with that in terms of the ambiguity in my race and my gender. That's something I have definitely started to navigate. And I think that now, racially, I am “othered” more now that I am ambiguous in the gender sense as well… And then in terms of my socioeconomic class and status, that's something I strongly identify with because I'm working class and it's a struggle every day. So those are the other identities that I strongly identify with… my queer identity is huge to me and very important and very valued, but it's not everything.

For some post-closet youth of color, such as Liz, sexual identity is one of many important identity markers. In her experience, her race and class play equally vital roles in defining her identity. Erik similarly notes that his gayness plays a part in his identity, but that it’s no more important than his identities as Chinese and first generation American.

Numerous respondents expressed frustration with media portrayals of queer characters that are defined primarily by their sexualities, further emphasizing the way they view their sexual identity as less a defining feature of their lives and more something they happen to be. Chloe says:
We have a lot of characters who their only identifying quality is that they are gay. Their entire storyline has to do with the fact that they’re gay. … But it's so unrealistic because my entire life is not focused on the fact that I'm a lesbian. And that's why I find characters like Willow and Tara from *Buffy* really relatable characters, because it just happens to be something they are…Game of Thrones is another great example. There are gay people in the world, so you should have gay characters because it's time fiction started reflecting reality. But the only thing about them isn't that they are gay, so you shouldn't make it the only thing that surrounds their story and their character.

Unlike previous generations facing overt homophobia and seeking to build strong community around a stigmatized sexual identity, sexuality no longer has to be the singular defining feature of youth’s lives. Matt says that while his sexuality is an important part of whom he is and has shaped his experiences, it is not the biggest part of his identity. In fact, he says, “I think if it were, I’d reexamine my life a little bit and think, ‘Okay, why is my sexual preference the thing that is defining me at this moment?’ Because people will always define me by that, but I don’t want to give consent to that necessarily.” Post-closet youth are calling for recognition as more complex individuals, relegating sexuality to the background of their identities. As Aaron says, “I think in day-to-day life… I'm just a college student just trying to get by.”

Conscientious efforts to keep sexual identities secondary are apparent in the data. Several respondents mention “not wanting” their sexualities to define them, and struggle to reconcile this for the reality of their lives. For example, Rachel talks about how she struggles to find a balance between her sexual identity and involvement in activism that works for her:

I think I'm also self-conscious around my sexual identity to the point where I think if I engage in LGBTQ activism, that's going to consume my identity. *[MM: What do you mean?]* So if I join some bisexual women's support group or action network, everyone's going to be like, ‘Okay, we get it, you're bisexual, you're wonderful. What else can you do?’ And also, I just have more interests in other things. I don't know … The summer I worked with homeless LGBTQ youth, but specifically, trans women of color… I think I found comfort in working with a population of trans youth, specifically trans women, that I felt separate enough from that I could be an activist in that way and still feel like my sexual identity is not consuming my career.

Rachel describes her sexual identity as being core to her identity with the disclaimer that she is
“still figuring things out,” explaining why it is so significant to her right now. However, from her statement above, it appears that once she is more secure in how she identifies, she will likely make a move to locate her sexuality as more peripheral, to avoid the aforementioned dreaded “consumption” of her identity.

Among respondents describing their sexual identity as core to their identities, the most significant explanation stems from ties to activism. Not surprisingly, respondents who identify as activists also considered their sexualities to be more core parts of their identities. Just under 70 percent of respondents identifying as activists considered their sexual identities to be core, whereas 90 percent of those not identifying as activists described their sexualities as more peripheral (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. Activist Identity by Core/Peripheral Sexual Identity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core/Peripheral</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>20 (67)</td>
<td>1 (10)</td>
<td>21 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral</td>
<td>10 (33)</td>
<td>9 (90)</td>
<td>19 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30 (100)</td>
<td>10 (100)</td>
<td>40 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Percentages in parentheses
** For analysis purposes, each respondent was coded with “Yes/No” based on the interpretation of their response to a question asking whether they identified as an activist.

Alyssa talks about how being an activist for queer and feminist issues is incorporated into her identity. When I ask whether being queer is a large part of her identity, she says, “Yes, definitely. I'm a gender studies major and I want to be an activist and advocate for gay advocacy and gay rights and women's rights. And so I am always thinking about queer identities and queer politics, constantly. It's probably the biggest and most important thing in my life.” Similarly, Kayla says, “Yeah, I do think of it is a large part of who I am. I guess it doesn't have to be. I guess it depends how much a part of your life you want to make it. If it's just part of your love life… But I like to
get involved with GSA and activism and go the events and stuff. So I like to make it a bigger part of my life.” Kayla points to the choice that exists for this generation around the primacy of sexual identities. Sexual identity no longer has to be a big part of your life; in fact, it can be “just a part of your love life.” However, for those seeking to organize for queer rights and equality, many choose to make their sexual identities a core part of their identities.

Navigating Alternative Identities

One path post-closet youth are taking to deal with the ambivalence around traditional gay identities is embracing alternative, non-traditional identities. These include a parsing out of a variety of different micro-identities (i.e., thoroughly analyzing attractions and desires and labeling them) and adopting labels, such as queer and pansexual, that allow for more fluidity and openness with respect to sexuality and gender.

One part of the growing individualization of sexual identities is the trend of many post-closet youth to define their sexual desire, romantic attraction, and gender expression with increasing precision into various micro-identities. Savin-Williams (2005a) points to the proliferation of terms queer youth are using to describe their identities, and these findings offer further support to this notion. Terms such as biromantic, panromantic, demisexual, asexual, and androsexual, among others, emerged from respondent’s descriptions of their sexual identities. While youth do not often label themselves with these micro-identities, multiple interviews suggest many youth are scrutinizing the detailed aspects of their sexual and romantic attractions as part of their sexual identity negotiations. Paige labels herself as “biromantic demisexual” and provides a good example of her negotiations in the following thoughts about her sexual identity labels:

I don't love the label bisexual just because I don’t believe in only having males or females to be attracted to. I feel like I fall more into the pansexual or panromantic kind
of thing. But I use that typically because people tend to know what bi means more than pan. So when I tell people, it's a little bit easier to understand what that means, but generally I understand about myself that I could be attracted to trans people or somebody who is not part of the gender binary. So all those things. I chose [biromantic/demisexual] because it’s the closest, but I don't think I'll ever be able to find a definitive label.

Youth are increasingly identifying their sexualities with greater precision, as greater thought goes into not only sexual attraction, but also romantic attraction and gender expression.

Similarly, Erik provides another example of how he considers his sexual identity is more precise ways. He identifies as “androsexual,” which he describes as attraction towards masculinity. He says that this more accurately reflects his attractions and desires because he is not only attracted to cisgender men, but to trans men and masculine women. He admits, however, that he often just identifies as gay because it is easier. Even youth who identify with traditional labels for simplicity’s sake are considering the various elements of their sexuality in their personal thinking about their identities and in conversations with others in the community.

In addition to the increased sub-division of sexual identities into micro-identities, post-closet youth are adopting more non-traditional sexual identity labels. Within this sample, two primary non-traditional identities emerged, pansexual and queer. Ten respondents, eight women and two men, described their sexual identity as pansexual, either exclusively or in combination with additional identifiers such as queer. Respondents at each of the three main colleges represented in the sample identified as pansexual, suggesting it is a widely adopted identity, at least regionally. Although a limited sample, the pansexual label appears relevant for multiple races, as three of the ten respondents were non-white. According to several respondents, pansexuality is: “the sexual attraction to people regardless of gender” or “attraction to all genders.” Most pansexuals recognize the term is a recent phenomenon that many people are familiar with yet. Some say they often use the term bisexual when describing their identities to
people outside the LGBTQ community for simplicity’s sake. However, they claim it is becoming more widespread and is commonly understood amongst their generation.

Many respondents describe learning the term pansexual when they first got to college and appreciated it for being more inclusive. They also spoke of it as a way to avoid the stigma that comes along with the bisexual label, which Kaden summarizes as, “Oh, you’re secretly lesbian or you’re secretly gay and you don’t want to admit it. How could you go back and forth? You’re still trying to figure it out.” Others similarly appreciated the distance it provides from stereotypes associated with women’s bisexuality as linked to performance for men’s pleasure and the association of bisexuals as hypersexual. Leo, who identifies as a trans man, says, “For me, the distinction between bisexual and pansexual is that with bisexual there's some care as to whether someone identifies as male or female. But I just don't care. I’m fine with whatever.” The tension between pansexual and bisexual labels, however, is far from resolved, as Rachel pointed to earlier; she rejects the label because it is not widely adaptive and potentially alienating to those in more marginalized communities. Although Joe feels he is truly pansexual, and used to identify that way, he has switched to bisexual because it’s “more culturally understood.” Several respondents note ongoing debates around the differences between the two labels, with some not truly understanding the difference between the two, and thus rejecting both options.

For others, the label offers a more accurate and authentic description of their lived dating experiences. Several respondents note the people they are currently dating or people they have dated in the past identified outside of the gender binary, either as non-binary, genderqueer or trans. Coming to a pansexual label was commonsense to them, given the limitations of other labels. Kim says, “I feel like the term bisexual is too narrow in my frank opinion, because there are people outside of the gender binary, and outside of the sex binary, and it’s about time we
started to face that.” The post-closet generation of youth is increasingly challenging traditional conceptions of gender, as visibility around transgender people is increasing and more people are identifying as genderqueer, gender fluid, non-binary, or non-conforming. Asking people for their preferred gender pronouns is commonplace in these college queer communities, especially at Liberal Arts and Public, and increasingly at Catholic, and recognition of the fluidity and openness around gender identity and expression are key characteristics of the post-closet generation. For many young women, especially, gender is being removed from the equation of attraction. Sarah’s comments exemplify this point well. She says:

I would not classify myself as bisexual. I guess I can like boys sometimes and I can like girls sometimes, but to me that's too limiting. I don't know. I'm not bi. I don't want to be bi. I think pansexual was the only label that made the most sense for me because it was more about just seeing the person for who they are and not so much their gender. And it's not that I like boys and I like girls, it's like, I like a person, any kind of person.

The pansexual label appears to have appeared to fill a void in accurately describing the experiences, attractions, and desires of this generation.

Another non-traditional label that is used prominently in this sample is “queer.” Nine people in total identify as queer, including seven women and two transmen, with three respondents out of the nine identifying as non-white. However, many other respondents describe also identifying with the term queer throughout the course of their interviews. Queer is used in two primary ways in the sample. First, it is used as an umbrella term meant to encompass the entire LGBTQ community; when an individual uses it to label their sexual identity, they often add a more specific identity, such as gay, pansexual, bisexual, or lesbian. Respondents point out that the younger generation is reclaiming the word queer, and, as Liz says, using it as “a strong power word and a word of solidarity with the community;” however, they are unclear whether it
is used or appreciated much by older generations. Secondly, queer is used as an identity on its own, defined by respondents as “not straight.” Paige says:

We are reclaiming the word queer quite a lot because basically it's the lack of straightness, so anything under the umbrella fits. You can be trans, you can be gender non-conforming, you can be bi, you can be close to bi. It’s just anything that's the absence of heterosexuality. And I think that's nice because it gives a lot of liberation. For me it's nice because it's whatever I am that isn't straight…it’s queer. It's kind of easy. It allows you to just be you.

Specifically, queer implies a fluidity and openness that traditional and more specific labels lack and oftentimes denotes a political stance as well.

Two respondents in particular, Jen and Kayla, provide good examples of the way that queer is being used to counter the ambivalence and restrictions associated with more traditional labels. Jen is a student at Liberal Arts College. In discussing why she prefers the label queer above all other options, she struggles to pinpoint the source of her apprehension about labels in general. She says, “To me … saying I'm bisexual or pansexual feels just as restrictive as being straight. If I identify as bisexual but I'm attracted to someone who is agender\(^7\), then do I have to come out again? [laughs] You know what I mean? If I'm pansexual but then only date cis men and women, am I a lying pansexual? Am I misusing the label?” Part of her apprehension stems from not wanting to invalidate or disrespect the labels. She continues:

I just know I'm not straight and that's why I identify as queer and within that I am hopefully not offending anyone or detracting from the identities of other people who label their sexual identity in a particular way. I don't want to detract from that … And I like the term queer because it leaves things open enough that it clarifies that I'm not straight and I think for most people it designates that I'm attracted to women. But it's also broad enough that it doesn't need to invite conversation. Someone can just know that she's not straight and just take it for whatever it means to them. But it can also invite conversation like, ‘Okay, you’re queer. What does that mean for you?’

Identifying as queer for Jen keeps the assumptions on her identity open and allows for fluidity

\(^7\) Agender refers to someone who does not identify themselves with a particular gender.
and change without feeling like she has failed to authentically represent her identity.

A similar desired sense of openness is reiterated in Kayla’s thoughts about her choice of sexual identity label. Kayla is an 18-year-old student at Catholic College who says she’s given a lot of consideration to identity labels such as pansexual and bisexual. She says, “But now I just say queer because I think it’s a really open-ended term and really general.” She says that in addition to the stereotypes associated with limiting identities like pansexual or queer, people tend to take any label very “literally.” She continues, “Like, you have to be like this or this. I think attraction is more than that. It's more than gender, it's just who you like, about the person and stuff. So I've been using that recently. That's the only word I've ever really felt fits and that I can identify as.” Kayla acknowledges that people used to say they were simply “gay” when they were looking for an open-ended term, but that gay has come to imply only “a gay male,” and for that reason she likes queer better. These sentiments further demonstrate the ambivalence faced by this generation of youth in locating their realities in increasingly obsolete terms.

In addition to respondents associating queer as a “power word,” many explicitly used queer to describe a political stance. For example, Jess says the following about her use of the term queer for describing her activism (she identifies as bisexual and not primarily as queer):

It’s a reminder about how marriage is not the end goal, even though it's in the cultural narrative, as it's the only goal people talk about, it's certainly not my main goal. Even though I personally do want to get married and I want federal stuff, I think my estate planning is less important than whether or not a trans person has housing or has access to good health care or somebody who is an immigrant is able to get asylum here if they’re queer and coming from another country. So the word “queer” reminds me that it's not just about me.

While the queer identity is not new, its widespread reclaiming and common adoption by this movement generation is telling of its potential for influencing change in the larger movement.

In sum, the findings on post-closet sexual identity negotiations offer further empirical
evidence to support generational differences in LGBTQ identities. Increasing individualization, resistance of traditional labels, and the adoption of more fluid and open-ended alternatives such as queer and pansexual point to experiences of post-closet youth that are increasingly distinct from prior generations within the community.

**Conclusion**

In this study of post-closet youth, the empirical evidence supports various negotiations of sexual identities beyond traditional LGB identities. Youth are positioning their experiences in opposition to traditional at risk and victim narratives, and instead carving out their own sense of agency partly through new negotiations of identities.

Traditional gay identities remain relevant for some in the sample, as Russell et al. (2009) similarly observe; however, youth express ambivalence about those identities and feel a need to actively challenge and negotiate the stereotypes surrounding them (Coleman-Fountain 2014). Some of this resistance to stereotypes is not new and potentially stems from desires to assimilate and normalize themselves along the lines of traditional respectability politics. In addition, the resistance to some stereotypes reflects a degree of internalized homophobia, such as Jonah feeling ashamed of hanging out with the other gay kids in high school or Chloe not wanting to wear clothing that is too masculine. There is, however, a strong theme of wanting to resist stereotypes because they preclude a true expression of self. I find that post-closet youth are resisting the stereotypes around gay and lesbian identities in order to negotiate identities that are more authentic and reflective of their individuality. These negotiations are consistent with what Cohler and Hammack term an emancipation narrative (2007); freed from the constraints of managing a stigmatized identity, post-closet youth are able to negotiate their identities in a more authentic manner.
I find limited empirical support within this sample for increasing complete resistance to labels (Savin-Williams 2005a), though it is feasible to expect queer youth who lack engagement with LGBTQ activism to be more resistant of labels. Participating in activism requires a certain amount shared group consciousness and a sense of collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992) and several respondents point to the necessity of some labels for engaging in activism around LGBTQ issues. In addition, I find sexual identity is increasingly considered one of many important parts of one’s identity and less of a core defining feature (Savin-Williams 2005a; Seidman 2002). However, among more activist-oriented individuals, sexual identity remains central to defining one’s self.

Most significant in post-closet youth negotiations of identity are findings supporting a trend of adopting alternative non-traditional identities. Identities such as queer and pansexual not only allow for more openness and fluidity that traditional gay and lesbian identities lack, they also call into question the central organizing binaries of straight/gay and male/female. These findings provide additional empirical evidence that this generation is increasingly adopting “queer” as an alternative label with political consequences (Horner 2007; Ritchie 2008; Rupp et al. 2016). Queer not only expresses a political positioning but also makes clear an opposition to traditional gay identities reliant on sexual and gender binaries. These findings contradict Savin-Williams (2005a) who witnesses few youth labeling themselves queer, and instead emphasize the importance of recognizing regional and contextual variations as well as the relevance of queer in more activism-oriented groups of LGBTQ youth. In resisting (homo)normalized versions of queer youth identities – that is, ones that rely on stable gay identities and conform to traditional gender expectations – youth are elaborating a new normal for queer youth that primarily assumes fluidity and openness around sexuality and gender.
Given the ways post-closet youth are negotiating their personal sexual identities, how is the activism of this generation impacted? How are post-closet youth constructing collective identities in their activism? Are post-closet youth engaging in activism that rests on the laurels of decades of assimilation and normalization or are they challenging and resisting the assumptions on which the mainstream movement was built? I now turn to a discussion of the types of activism in which this sample of youth engage in Chapter Six.
Chapter Six: Post-closet Youth Activism

Introduction and Overview of Chapter

The post-closet generation is positioned ambivalently toward participation in mainstream LGBTQ activism, in terms of both mainstream priorities and identities. However, questions remain regarding whether and how post-closet youth are engaging in activism. In this chapter, I present the findings for how this sample of youth engages in activism around LGBTQ issues. In Part I, I discuss the ways youth experience a disconnect from the priorities and identities of mainstream activism. First, I find youth resist activist identities and distance themselves from the perceived activism of prior generations. Youth consider their engagement with activism on the more everyday and cultural levels as distinct from prior generations. While a portion of youth carve out participation through institutionally available means, such as high school GSA involvement, events, and conferences, the majority of youth activism exists as more political cultural work in the realm of everyday resistance/education with actions organized around performance, visual art, poetry, and the Internet (Blackburn 2002; Dobinson 2004; Taylor et al. 2009). This type of political cultural work allows youth to engage in forms of activism that resonate more with their post-closet generation experience and provides avenues for challenging institutionalized heteronormativity on their campuses and mainstream assumptions about sexual and gender identities.

In Part II, I present a comparison of the different collective identities formed in the three college environments, as well as detailed examples of activism at each, to illuminate the ways collective identities are being deployed in these different contexts. I find that variations exist within the collective identities of this sample of the post-closet generation: a critical queer collective identity is formed in the accepting context of Liberal Arts where students create visual
arts-based activism aimed at breaking down traditional discourses of sexual and gender binaries; at Public, a diverse tolerant campus community contributes to the development of an intersectional collective identity where internal differences are celebrated and expressed through performance-based activism; and finally, at Catholic, a normalized collective identity is formed within a more conservative and hostile climate with activism focusing on education and building ally support. Central to activism at all three contexts is a concern for trans rights and discussions of breaking down traditional gender binaries (as evidenced by the increasingly common practice of announcing PGPs) and a critique of stable sexual identities. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications of these findings for the social movement literature on collective identity and generational change, namely how movement generations share common core tensions, but negotiate them differently depending on context.

**Part I: Ambivalence toward the Mainstream LGBTQ Movement**

While it is clear that post-closet youth experience a great deal of ambivalence around the mainstream movement in terms of priorities and identities, it became apparent early in data collection that youth also experience a great deal of ambivalence around using the term *activism* in general. Throughout interviews most respondents describe detailed examples of efforts aimed at producing social change, but there was some hesitance in describing those activities as activism. First, respondents note a clear distinction between the past activism of the gay rights movement and the present in which they engage. Many of their comments exemplify what Bobel refers to as the problem with the “perfect standard”; people engaging in activism often do not identify as “activists” because they do not live up to an image that *lives and breathes activism* day after day (2007). Many post-closet youth qualify their statements saying that they are not “real activists,” like those they perceive from the seventies and eighties; however, they consider
what they do important and describe much of it as *participating in* activism. For example, Jen’s comments are typical in the sample:

> It's a weird term because when I think of an activist I think of someone older who's leading marches…I would think of someone heroic and not like fully human. [laughs]. I’d think of like a real figurehead. So it's weird to think of myself as an activist. But when I break it down to what I would think on a personal level, it would be someone who takes action on their beliefs. Not only do they hold certain social, political, what have you beliefs, they do things to actively create what they find to be an ideal… or transform the world around them in a way they think to be creating positive change.

Similarly, Shawn and many others describe “real activists” as more extreme and “angry.” She says, “The image that comes to mind are people protesting, but *yelling* protesting. And being very loud. And being almost obnoxious and angry…I feel like an activist is someone who would go on a hunger strike until marriage equality was passed or something like that. I think of it as a very extreme word or action. I really prefer the word advocate or ally.” She says that while her generation may lack that kind of enthusiasm, she does not actually see a lack of enthusiasm for the issues. Despite the disconnect with the activist label, she considers the activism she and her peers engage in to be important with consequences for changing the social and cultural world in tangible ways.

I asked respondents to define what activism meant to them as a way of gaging the types of involvement they would report in the interviews. One major distinction arose between the idea of *formal* versus *informal* activism. Participants describe much of their activism as *informal*, but argue that it could have a great impact. For example, Shawn says, “I guess the formal stuff I’ve done isn’t so much, but I think sometimes having a conversation is really more powerful than signing a petition or whatever.” This distinction between formal and informal activism suggests a disassociation with the perceived activism of prior movement generations as large-scale, visible protests; youth instead locate their activism on the more informal, less visible platform of
everyday cultural efforts aimed at social and cultural change. While less formal and everyday activism is certainly not a new phenomenon, queer youth perceive their attempts as novel and different from past generations (see Reger 2012 for a discussion of perceived generational differences in feminist activism).

Respondents were asked whether they saw truth to claims that their generation is apathetic with respect to activism (Savin-Williams 2005a). Although most in the sample did not consider themselves apathetic, a few admitted a sense of personal apathy feeling at times they have little left to fight for and lack experience with direct discrimination. More respondents pointed to a trend of apathy among their less activist-minded peers, but were quick to note that those peers are members of the privileged group who fit the version of gay that is most accepted in our society (male, upper/middle class, white and gender conforming). Paige talks about apathy she sees in her generation in the following comments:

The most apathetic people that I know are the ones that are online doing their thing. The real apathetic people aren’t even doing that. They think it's over. They think women have Constitutional equality and they don't. They think that because we have a few gay people on TV shows, that that's all fine. People will sit there, and I'll say something about characters or movies or actors that are white-washed, and they’re like, what do we have to have next? A black bisexual amputee? Like, what is it? And I’m like, you’re acting like if you’re not a white male, you’re not a person. It’s diverse or it’s weird or it’s extra. It’s not extra! These people exist and they’re real. And we’ve done such a disservice to representation. And it bothers me.

Paige’s comments point to a divide in post-closet youth between those complacent in a position of assimilated “normality,” and those still keenly aware of the inequality that remains for much of the community. Many respondents note the importance of recognizing personal privileges and fighting for those who remain marginalized in the community and lack basic rights and representation, such as trans people and people of color.
Most others point to what they view as a misconception around their generation’s apathy. For example, Matt and Rachel make the following comments about the apathetic label attributed to their generation:

I think that’s a nice little label older people have put on us…Older generations think, ‘Oh, the Me generation,’ but honestly, I think we’re more involved, more connected. I think it’s in a way that they can’t necessarily see and I think that’s through social media. I think older people miss out on that whole experience. But I think it’s incredibly important….Maybe we’re not marching, but we’re doing other things. And I think they’re important too. And sometimes we are marching. Maybe we’re marching in Ferguson\(^8\) or protests like that. (Matt)

I think activism looks very different now than it did then. I think a lot of it is on social media. Things circulate on the Internet in a way that the older generations have not had and are not necessarily participating in so they don't necessarily see the activism that's being done. So I can totally see how they would get that impression, that we’re apathetic. But like, maybe we’re just using a different platform or doing different things in different ways that they don’t have access to. (Rachel)

Although respondents recognize they may be perceived as apathetic, they suggest the ways they are involved are typically not seen or recognized by older generations within in the movement, with findings suggesting this is partly true. Still, others point to apathy that resides in political involvement in general and involvement in the mainstream LGBTQ movement in specific, but not in queer youth activism. When I asked Leo about apathy in his generation, he says, “Absolutely not, absolutely not. Maybe on the big-scale activism, maybe some of us don't want to get involved with that. But activism on a smaller scale, people certainly want to get involved with that.” Leo and others agree that many post-closet youth are not involved in mainstream movement efforts, especially at the national level, because they do not relate well to them; however, they are motivated and involved in more immediate and local level efforts.

\(^8\) Matt is referring to the August 2014 protests and unrest in Ferguson, MO that followed the shooting death of an 18-year-old African-American named Michael Brown by a white police officer that in part sparked the Black Lives Matter movement.
When I follow up asking Leo why so many in his generation might not want to be involved in “big-scale” activism, he says it’s because “they have a one-track mind.” Alluding to marriage, he says, “They're just happy they're getting the one thing that they wanted and they don't see the rest of it.” Leo continues:

Everyone is just so focused on marriage, they forget that the trans community gets fired for simply being trans. There are a lot of LGB-friendly laws that say maybe they can't get fired from their job, but I can get fired from anything. Yeah, that’s my resistance toward being involved in the large-scale activism. We can’t just focus on the one thing. It doesn’t work. It’s not working now. It hasn’t worked in the past. Don’t want to contribute to a broken system… I don’t particularly want to get involved with larger scale things like HRC. I won't support HRC. I won't support FckH8. I won't support any of those right now because they're so centered on singular ideas. It's terrible.

His statements reflect more of the ambivalence the post-closet generation faces in regards to the priorities of mainstream LGBTQ politics. By allowing other major issues facing the LGBTQ community to fall by the wayside, such as transgender rights, the mainstream movement is considered too myopic. Respondents point to a problem with this single-issue approach, but also point to marriage equality itself as not resonating well with all respondents. Some respondents note that the passage of marriage equality is “inevitable” and that such an exclusive focus on it comes at the expense of other important issues. As Valerie says, “Yes, marriage is a human right, but there are more important human rights that trans people don't have that should definitely come before marriage, or at least be talked about.” Shawn agrees saying, “Why are we fighting for gay marriage? I get that it's a civil right, but in the 1970s in the gay liberation movement, we weren't fighting for gay marriage. We were fighting to be accepted as gay…. I think it's good fighting for all of those rights, but I worry that the movement is losing its identity.” Similarly, Amber says: “I get that it's important, but it just doesn't seem like the most important thing. It shouldn't be our top priority. I know that people like to work on that because it's happy, the outcome is happy. Rather than dealing with gay teens committing suicide or people who are
being bullied in schools or homeless youth. That's so much more depressing than I want to marry my wife!”

Approximately mid-way through data collection, when the denial of same-sex marriage was deemed unconstitutional across the United States, respondents expressed concern about the future of the mainstream movement. Zander, for example, says: “I feel like everyone was working towards marriage equality. I can't remember the name of it right now, but one campaign literally just shut itself down because they were like, okay, we’re done. And that's not true in any way, shape, or form. There’s still discrimination happening and marriage equality isn't going to fix everything.” Zander is likely referring to the Empire State Pride Agenda, which was New York’s leading organization advocating for LGBTQ rights since 1990. The organization announced it would disband in December of 2015, “citing the fulfillment of a 25-year campaign for equality” (McKinley 2015). Zander’s concern was clearly warranted, as despite the governor’s use of “executive powers to extend a 70-year-old anti-discrimination bill to transgender people” just prior to disbanding, much work remains to ensure the safety and equality of LGBTQ individuals in New York State.

Respondents also critique the normalizing tendencies of the mainstream movement when discussing its focus on marriage, saying for example, “Their ads are always two adorable men holding hands. I think there's not a whole lot of representation of people of color. There's not a whole lot of intersectionality in general with HRC.” Matt and others argue that as a generation, he sees his peers looking to incorporate a more intersectional approach to oppression. He says,

I think we've become, as the younger cohort, more intersectional. I think that we think of, it's not just about being gay. It's about, ‘I'm gay, so I need to stand up for black people when they’re being oppressed.’ And, ‘I’m gay, so I need to stand up for trans people when they’re oppressed.’ I think it's less, “I'm gay, and I need to get married now.” I think it’s like, ‘I'm gay and some places I can get married and that's really important, but also because I’m part of a marginalized group, I need to stand up for other marginalized
So I think there's a greater responsibility for being part of a minority for younger groups and less so for older.

Matt continues saying he thinks that the younger generation of people less than 25 years old assume a greater responsibility for recognizing multiple oppressions. He says, “Maybe it’s the product of third wave feminism bringing in women of color” or simply the fact that as a generation, they face less oppression than those who came before them. Regardless of the cause, a great deal of respondents in the sample express similar sentiments urging a need to look beyond the mainstream’s narrow focus on the needs of the elite white gay community.

In fact, youth identified several key priorities that they felt were largely ignored; many of these were specific to their life-stage as youth, including, cyber bullying, overhauling sex education in middle and high schools to reflect queer identities and experiences, homelessness, suicide, the creation of safe space for queer youth, and bullying in general. However, it was clear that youth prioritized additional issues that were distinct from their particular life-stage, such as a desire to fight multiple oppressions, violence against trans women of color in particular, and transgender rights in general (arguably the most commonly cited priority throughout the interviews). There is a clear struggle around why marriage equality takes precedent in the mainstream movement, when these respondents feel so other issues within the community, especially trans rights, require more urgent attention.

In addition to the ambivalence post-closet youth face in relation to priorities, they also face a mainstream movement that relies on restrictive identities that “put them in a box.” As discussed in detail in Chapter Five, members of the post-closet generation are negotiating identities that differ from traditional gay and lesbian identities. Post-closet youth are keenly aware of generational divisions regarding identities. When I asked if they could identify any generational divides in the LGBTQ community, numerous respondents repeatedly pointed out
that the kinds of identities queer youth are adopting today differ dramatically from older
generations. The following thoughts by Cara provide a good example of this sentiment:

I feel like there’s that stereotype that non-binary identities aren’t accepted in the older
generation. But I don’t know that for sure because I don’t spend a lot of time with people
in my parents’ generation who are queer and probably don’t like the term queer. We just
have those differences. I feel like since there is this detachment between generations, we
have these preconceived notions about what the older generation is doing or what the
younger generation is doing and no one really knows who’s talking about what. I feel like
there’s almost this hesitation or fear that we’re going to piss off the older generation or
that the older generation just won't understand us because we’re new and we talk about
these things and they don't understand what we’re talking about. But who knows, because
I don't really know many older LGBT people.

Cara’s sentiment was repeated often in the interviews, with respondents proposing possible
differences that exist between the generations but admitting they don’t have much experience
with older activists or members of the community. Regardless of their exposure to older LGBTQ
people, however, those members of the post-closet generation recognize they are growing up in
vastly different times and doing things differently thanks to the progress for which their
predecessors fought so hard. Kaden, for example, notes the division he sees as it pertains to
identity. He says:

Because my generation, or the people that I associate with who identify as queer,
understand gender and sexual identity on more on a spectrum. That's not to say that the
older generation doesn't, but I think that “spectrum” or “continuum” or those kind of
phrases became something that happened within my generation. I don't know. I don't
want to make broad statements and offend anyone, but that's my personal view. The older
generation was about defining lesbian and gay and the younger generation is about being
undefined, and being allowed to transgress the binary and express gender identity in
different forms.

Kaden recognizes that members of older generations of the LGBTQ community potentially also
view their sexualities and/or gender identities on a spectrum (and certainly, queer identities are
not a new phenomenon), but suggests he sees an important generational divide where his
generation is defined by transgressing the boundaries that prior generations fought to be seen as
valid. With all of the differences between the post-closet movement generation and the mainstream, “closet” movement generation in mind, how do post-closet youth engage in activism?

A large portion of respondents in this sample has engaged in some version of more mainstream-oriented activism. This includes participation in institutionalized activist opportunities, such as school-based GSAs, safe zone/ally trainings, conferences, community pride centers, and events such as the Day of Silence. Although few respondents indicate much interest or awareness of the mainstream LGBTQ movement, especially at the national level, many respondents describe participating in activism that aligns with mainstream goals, such as attending rallies on behalf of marriage equality. As discussed in Chapter Four, just under half of the sample were members of their high school GSAs and engaged in activism through that venue. This type of activism often consisted of educating the larger school community about LGBT issues and identities as well as building safe spaces for LGBTQ-identified youth to convene and discuss issues relevant to their sexual and gender identities. Many took the role of initially helping to establish GSAs at their schools, and then became involved in organizing and participating in events such as the Day of Silence, National Coming Out Day, and Trans Day of Remembrance. For many, participation in high school GSAs helped to cultivate specific activist identities. For example, Jess describes a powerful experience she had fighting for her school to support the GSA’s organization of the Day of Silence:

I also was prepared with a card from a lawyer from the ACLU when I went to this meeting. I didn't have to do anything. It was going on and on for 45 minutes with them being like, it should be a “Be nice to everyone day” and take the whole gay thing out of it. Or it should be half of the day, or you shouldn't have to be silent. So not gay, not the whole day, not silent, that's just not the Day of Silence. So I had to go to my chemistry class, had to move on with my day, so I just slid the card across the table and they saw it and they were like, “Okay, fine.” Which felt pretty cool when you're 15 to have that sort of power at school. But by the time I … was a senior in high school, the principal got on
the intercom in the morning on the Day of Silence and ... announced specifically the school’s support of [it].

Jess went on to engage in a variety of activism through Public’s Pride Alliance as well as the local community pride center that built off a sense of empowerment nurtured through her participation in her high school GSA.

Several youth grew up in areas with access to community pride centers and the majority of these youth noted that they were introduced to those community centers as a result of being involved with their high school GSAs. Youth encountered additional activist opportunities at these centers and report opportunities for involvement on issues that resonated more with their experiences. For example, Kayla recalls marching with her local pride center in support of Leelah Alcorn⁹ and against conversion therapy, something she is very passionate about. Through the pride center, she was also introduced to Equality and Justice Day (an annual event in New York State bringing together multiple movement organizations to lobby at the Capitol for LGBTQ rights) and was involved with lobbying efforts against conversion therapy. Asher was not really involved much with his high school GSA, saying they weren’t doing anything progressive at the time; he credits the GSA, however, for introducing him to his local pride center where he was able to find opportunities that resonated more with his interests. He became involved with various youth leadership programs and participated in other activist opportunities, such as lobbying for the Dignity for all Students Act and Marriage Equality and working for the center for many years as a teenager and young adult.

A large majority of youth at each of the colleges report regularly attending conferences such as Creating Change (organized by the Lesbian and Gay Task Force), Leadership Summits,

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⁹ Leelah Alcorn was a young trans girl who gained international attention after posting her suicide note on Tumblr describing the lack of support for transgender people and the hope that her death would spark dialogue on these issues.
and the Northeast LGBT Conference (a student run conference for college students from D.C. to Maine). The Northeast conference was cited most among students, saying that most send Pride group members every year. The conference is hosted by a different college each year, making it accessible to students from around the region. Students report positive experiences at the conference, saying it serves both educational and community-building purposes. Maggie talks about the importance of bringing things back from the conference every year and how this year, after learning a great deal about intersectionality, they have been consciously trying to better incorporate discussion of multiple overlapping systems of oppression in their events and meetings at Catholic.

In descriptions of her more formal involvement in activism, Jess expresses a certain amount of frustration. She describes how she almost didn’t accept her internship with HRC because of their exclusion of trans issues. She says:

[It was] right when ENDA, which is the federal employment nondiscrimination act, was happening. It was going to fail anyway. Even if it did get past in the Senate, Bush said he was going to veto it. There was no hope for this bill. And yet, HRC, after promising they would not support taking out the trans inclusion part of it, supported taking the trans inclusion part out of it! And they said they did it for political strategy reasons for getting it passed, but there was no way that it was going to get passed. There was no point in doing this. All it does is alienate trans people. And it's five years later, and the bill has still not passed, either with trans inclusion or without trans inclusion. And the same thing happened in New York with SONDA, the sexual orientation nondiscrimination act. It passed in January 2003. That bill had trans inclusion in it, and in order to get it passed, they took it out. And it got passed, but now it's 2013, and we still don't have any New York State protection for trans people. It was like, oh, we'll catch you later, but a decade has passed and we still haven't gotten there. Where our priorities? Obviously not on trans people.

Despite hesitation in supporting organizations that do not align well with their priorities, respondents like Jess describe meaningful participation in such activism. When presented with opportunities that resonate with their personal interests and priorities, some post-closet youth in
this sample report being involved with activism through typical political channels, though such experiences were somewhat limited in the sample.

Although some respondents described participating in more formal mainstream activism, the majority of the activism described by respondents was located in the alternative spheres of everyday resistance and political cultural work. Many respondents note the power of everyday interactions and how they contribute to breaking down people’s misconceptions about those in the LGBTQ community. For example, Mark describes an incident of a straight friend at Public “freaking out” when he found out that Mark’s roommate happened to be trans. Mark said he felt the way he stood up to his friend comprised activism, saying, “it’s the little things like that, trying to clarify for somebody or trying to spread knowledge about what the LGBT community is and that we’re not a bunch of freaks like a lot of people make us out to be.” Similarly, Gabriella says that standing up for others in the LGBTQ community is crucial to the activism she engages in daily, saying, “If you can change someone’s mind, you’re changing the world a little bit at a time. And that’s really great. That’s why I always try to call people out when they say something that might be transphobic or sexist.” Pointing out the misconceptions of their straight cisgender peers on a daily basis empowers these youth to “change the world a little bit at a time,” something the majority of interviews suggests they are clearly committed to. As Kim says, “Even at the smallest level, you can make some kind of impact on someone else’s life. And that’s going to be a chain reaction…I am a big fan of subverted, covert [“gotcha”] moments. I think that those are some of the moments that will stick with people a lot more than [participating a march.]”

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10 One participant describes his activism as radical progressive queer activism. Tarek describes the ways he has organized for anti-capitalist, queer, race, and class movements over the past several years, with an emphasis on intersectionality and bringing movements together. His activism relies on more confrontational, direct action tactics. Although this type of activism is certainly significant in certain circles, especially in large urban centers, it was an exception in the current sample.
taking the time to educate straight peers on LGBTQ issues, as well as explaining the complexities of their sexual identities to them, youth are working to produce cultural change on a daily level. Such small-scale interpersonal actions and education were core features of this sample’s understanding of their activism and resonate well with other findings on queer youth (Blackburn 2002; Dobinson 2004).

Everyday-level resistance and education were deemed important by numerous respondents, but most respondents engaged beyond this type of involvement. In addition to the types of everyday education they consider to be activism, many describe engaging in more political cultural work such as visual art-based initiatives. At Liberal Arts College, Liz considers art central to her activist identity. She describes her current work in the following:

I was trying to recreate a figure of a drag queen and it was really difficult. And people were really responding to this dress form that I made that was a lot more abstract and surreal because it had this elongated neck. … And I like the idea of the identity of the figure being different, so I made these animal head structures with the same technique and they had human bodies. So the idea was just the disconnect between the body and the mind and what that means to someone’s identity. I knew I wanted to have that different headed thing… But then I thought about how I could get the same idea of gender… so I thought I’d make the male body, with penises on them. They can be this idea of a femme men-entity (“femininity…So it still has that idea of the drag queens within it, or the idea of performance of gender or transwomen identities. …. So I still want them to be very flamboyant, whimsical, elegant, and then the penis would be the last thing you see on them, so it’s not overpoweringly queer. But it’s definitely there.

Liz uses her art as an “activist platform to challenge or illuminate these identities that are deemed as other or seen as taboo.” In another visual campaign at Liberal Arts, Cara says she created posters on gender expression aimed at educating the larger community on the different identities and experiences of queer people on campus. She says she affixed posters describing various gender identities, such as “bi-gender,” around campus explaining “what it meant generally and that people identify with it in different ways.” To encourage involvement she incorporated a social media element to the campaign, offering prizes for those who found certain genders and
uploaded them to Facebook. These types of art and visual displays aim to not only to educate the larger community, but also to disrupt the heteronormative space around campus with visual images of queer identities (see Adams 2001 and 2002 for overviews of the role of art in social movements).

Performance-based activism was common in the sample as well. Forms varied, including drag shows, alternative proms, and theater productions of queer-centered shows such as *The Laramie Project* (on the 1998 death of Matthew Shepard) and *Dog Sees God* (an esoteric production dealing with issues of bullying and the queering of seemingly straight characters). Spoken word and slam poetry was considered central to several respondents’ activism. For example, Chloe speaks of the strength of her spoken word performances for reaching people in a really personal and meaningful manner. She describes poems that address issues of labeling and authenticity of self as well as poems that address bridging the racial and cis/transgender divides that exist within the LGBTQ communities and speaks of the potent effects they seem to have on the audience. Alicia describes her slam poetry as being central to her activist identity as a queer a woman of color (although she acknowledges the difficulty in focusing too much on her sexuality because it brings up painful memories around an ex that committed suicide). However, she describes how her poetry affects others by making them feel empowered. She says, “I think that's really what activism is, making yourself and those around you feel empowered. It's a sense of empowerment to know that you have a voice and you can speak. You can speak out about things that bother you. You have the power to change things.” Research has established the potential for such performance-based cultural forms of activism to build “solidarity and oppositional consciousness” (Taylor et al. 2009).
Numerous students pointed to the cultural realm of the Internet as an arena that circulates a lot of relevant activism (Earl and Kimport 2013). Almost every respondent noted some level of involvement in activism on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The ability to create and share Twitter hash tags in particular were described as useful for collective organizing and spreading awareness on an international scale. For example, the death of Leelah Alcorn and subsequent attention to trans youth suicide and conversion therapy is a testament to the widespread impact of the social media (see also Earl et al. 2013 for how Twitter plays a role in protest). Within this sample, youth pointed to the Internet as an avenue for accessing and signing petitions, sharing resources and other information, and recognized its ability to get the word out about events (see Earl and Kimport 2013 for an account of web-based activism). Kim provides an example of how it allows you to publicize small things, such as a sexist news article, and then organize a massive amount of people to write in and complain. She says, “Social media makes it so much easier to do things in a more consistent, nitpicky, every single day way. I can find these things and make other people aware of them. We didn’t have these things fifty years ago, which is really exciting.” As a tool, the internet provides youth easy methods of spreading awareness and information.

As mentioned earlier, the Internet provides youth important access to community through social media, blogs and platforms such as Tumblr and YouTube, that they would normally not have, especially for people in isolated areas. For trans people in particular, this is especially important, as they are able to access a whole community of people with similar experiences they might not have otherwise known. Other LGBQ respondents note how important the Internet is for their activism saying things like, “For me, it’s access to this community I wouldn’t otherwise have access to, honestly. Unfortunately, my city is not really big on LGBTQ issues.” Others talk
about the way they use Facebook or Tumblr to try to change people’s minds. Gabriella says about her Facebook page, “It’s not really my personal profile, it’s like a political blog.” Many in the sample recognize the value such a forum for opening dialogues around LGBTQ issues among their social networks, despite the opportunities it provides for homo- and transphobic counter discourses.

Post-closet youth use the Internet, and social media, in particular, in the variety of aforementioned ways and most consider it an important element of activism. However, the extent to which these posts actually do anything to impact change remains up for debate. It is crucial to note that many feel posting things on the Internet is not sufficient for impacting broader change and dismiss it as “keyboard activism” or “slactivism.” Paige’s comments about the Internet sum up many people’s thoughts. She says:

And social media and online is great for networking and raising awareness and getting in touch with huge groups of people, but so many of my friends will sit there and have this sense of complacency. They’re scrolling through their feed or tweeting or re-blogging and it gives them this sense like, I’m doing something. I’m posting this post. Well, what is that going to do to change policy? What is that going to do to change a social norm really? It has an impact, but it’s not the way it used to be … Now we don’t see people as much. We’re not in the real world. We’re online doing the keyboard activism that so many of my friends feel is just as good of an equivalent as the real thing. And I don’t feel like that.

Paige and others like her emphasize the need to show up and do the in person work required of true social change efforts and worries that the complacency she sees in her generation as problematic. However, as discussed in the next section, youth are finding ways to more effectively incorporate elements of social media and the Internet into their activism. I now turn to a consideration of the collective identities at each of the colleges in the sample, along with examples of relevant activism in order to paint a general picture of activism at each school.
**Part II: Collective Identities and Activism at Three Different Colleges**

To examine how the negotiation of post-closet identities are influencing the activism of this generation I consider in this section how personal identities are being incorporated into the collective identities and activism at Liberal Arts, Public, and Catholic. An examination of these collective identities follows with attention to Taylor and Whittier’s three processes of collective identity formation: 1) development of a shared consciousness, 2) creation of boundaries between the marginalized and dominant group, and 3) negotiation of identity in everyday life (1992). The differences in collective identities formed at each of these schools demonstrate how variations occur among micro-cohorts within a movement generation. I summarize the main differences and major aspects of each dimension of collective identity for each college in Table 6 below.

**Table 6. Summary of College Communities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Liberal Arts</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>LGBTQ Community</strong></td>
<td>Integrated, Accepted</td>
<td>Large Diverse, Separated</td>
<td>Subdued</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collective Identity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Consciousness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Intersectional</strong></td>
<td><strong>Normalized</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boundaries</strong></td>
<td>Difference-muting Internal diversity</td>
<td>Difference-muting Internal diversity</td>
<td>Difference-muting* Internal diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Negotiation</strong></td>
<td>PGPs, identity explaining, class discussions</td>
<td>PGPs, communal space, meetings</td>
<td>PGPs, limited to GSA meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples of Activism</strong></td>
<td>Queer Identity, Umbrella/Spectrum, Homophobia in Sport</td>
<td>Coming Out, Monologues, Queer Bombing</td>
<td>Straight as an Arrow, GSA PSA, Trans 101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*At Catholic, the name of the LGBTQ student group changed recently from “GSA” to “Pride GSA,” indicating a move towards more difference-muting tendencies. Some in the sample referred to the group as simply “Pride” while others called it “GSA.”
Critical Queer Collective Identity at Liberal Arts

The ways that respondents negotiate personal sexual identities at Liberal Arts College are greatly influenced by a larger campus community that supports and integrates the queer community. Students at Liberal Arts adopt a critical queer collective identity in their activism, one that emphasizes the adoption of more open personal sexual identities and challenges the gender binary. Liberal Arts College provides ample opportunity for critical discussion on queer issues and identities in both courses (a wide range of sexuality and gender studies courses are offered) and at student group meetings that help create a shared consciousness around queer issues. Students describe a cohesive queer community, with specific ideas of how larger society and culture needs to change to bring about equality for LGBTQ individuals.

One student’s experience over a recent break is a testament to the strength of the queer activist community at Liberal Arts. When someone asked Alyssa what she was “into,” she responded, “something about liking sports.” She laughs, saying she doesn’t know why she said that because a much more obvious answer would have been to talk about her activism. She says,

I forget that people aren’t activists because I’m in an environment where a lot of people, if they’re not actively doing something about it, they’re thinking about it or thinking, “I should do something about it.” So I realized through getting away from this environment for a minute, that that is a very important part of me and that's something that not everyone does. So it's probably the biggest part of me, queer work and queer life.

Students at Liberal Arts are so entrenched in a queer activist community, they often fail to recognize it and take it for granted as part of the norm.

Almost every respondent from Liberal Arts spoke about identifying with the word queer, whether they personally identified as queer or not. Most respondents at Liberal Arts identified with non-traditional terms (four as queer, three as pansexual, and three as other combinations of different labels). Only four out of the 14 respondents identified their sexual identities in traditional terms, one bisexual woman (Rachel, who, as previously mentioned, chooses to
identify as bisexual over pansexual because it is more accessible and culturally understood) and three gay men. Of the respondents at Liberal Arts, they all spoke of appreciating and using the term queer within the community and regarding activism. Matt, who identifies as gay, says, “I think queer is a great thing. I am a big fan of the queer identity. I think it puts us all on more equal footing.”

Respondents speak of the “queer community” at Liberal Arts as a palpable thing and recognize their use of “queer” as a power word that emphasizes solidarity over segregation that, as Liz argues, is implied when terms as “LGBTQ” are used. Cara points to the strength of the queer collective identity when she speaks about how “the ‘fluid’ identity is kind of scoffed at a little bit within the Liberal Arts community.” She says she wishes there was more openness around being fluid, but that at Liberal Arts there is a pressure to identify more concretely as “queer” or “pansexual” to be validated in that identity. Even though queer implies a sense of fluidity and openness, at Liberal Arts it is important to label oneself as queer rather than go unlabeled or identify as “fluid.” Fluidity around gender is more welcomed. Students note that the culture allows for greater freedom of expression with many students not conforming to traditional binary expressions of masculine/feminine. According to Jen, there is a visible community of people who openly identify as gender fluid, agender or trans at Liberal Arts. Kim talks about how she values the freedom she has within “this nice college bubble” to express her gender fluidity, recognizing it would be “extremely frowned upon” elsewhere. Similarly, Liz describes her gender as fluid and says that at Liberal Arts she is able to navigate her gender differently everyday. Regardless of one’s personal gender expression, freedom around gender expression is an important priority for activism at Liberal Arts.

Not everyone embraces the queer label at Liberal Arts and the disagreements around the
label help reveal the boundaries of the collective identity. Jonah, who identifies as gay, says that he sees so many people at Liberal Arts identifying as queer that he questions its usefulness. He recognizes that queer means “non-defined” and that it works for people who don’t like labels; but, he says he sees people who are bisexual, genderqueer, asexual, etc. all identifying as queer and that, in his opinion, such varied use creates too much confusion. Others talk about the people at Liberal Arts who are uncomfortable using the word queer. Liz says, “I’ve heard them say that they felt like they had to identify as queer within our Pride group. They felt like that had to identity as that label, as queer, and they were not okay with that…That label holds more of an extreme then just ‘gay.’ So there’s that idea of being too queer.” Such conversations around the label provide further evidence for how central it is to the collective identity formed at Liberal Arts.

The main LGBTQ group for students on campus is named the “Pride Alliance,” which is telling in terms of the explicit group boundaries being negotiated at the college. Consistent with Ghaziani’s (2011) claims that post-closet (or in his terms, “post-gay”) collective identity reflects a shift towards a difference-muting logic of not “us versus them” but “us and them,” the name Pride Alliance does not explicitly name LGBTQ individuals, but rather uses more general inclusive terms. Ghaziani says that such a shift suggests, “identity construction in a post-gay era is motivated less by drawing boundaries against the dominant group and more by building bridges toward it (and thus blurring the boundaries)” (2011: 117). This kind of difference-muting group naming is also seen at Public and somewhat at Catholic. Although the name of the group allows for the presence of allies, students note that there are few “exclusively straight” allies involved at Liberal Arts. The difference-muting tendency among this sample of students at Liberal Arts is also seen in the two annual dances organized by the Pride Alliance. At these
events, the whole campus community comes together to celebrate sexuality and gender diversity, and a night of debauchery ensues. On those nights of the year, students report, “no labels really matter” among straight and queer students alike.

It should be noted that on campus the Pride Alliance was reportedly thought of as a group for “white gay men” on campus, although others contradict this sentiment pointing out the small numbers of actual gay men who attend meetings. However, it is likely that white students are over-represented within Pride Alliance, as queer students of color branched off to form their own student group several years ago. No respondents belonging to that group are represented in the sample, despite efforts to purposively sample from the group. As a result, the sample at Liberal Arts is largely white, with two exceptions (one student identifies as Asian and another as biracial), and it is important to keep this in mind for recognizing that findings at this school speak primarily about the experiences of mostly white students. Although students often talk about an awareness of and a need to address the intersectionality of racial, gender and class oppressions, an incorporation of intersectional activism remains admittedly limited in the sample.

The development of a collective queer identity is reinforced through daily negotiations of that identity in the lives of students at Liberal Arts. One way students negotiate this collective identity on an everyday level is through the common practice of declaring preferred gender pronouns (PGPs). In many classes and all meetings of the Pride Alliance, students announce their PGPs, reinforcing their collective commitment to breaking down assumptions around and recognizing the fluidity of gender. Furthermore, genderqueer and nonconforming students on campus contribute to a sense of the collective identity simply through their lived everyday resistance and living lives beyond gender binary. For example, Kaden says, “they use clothing,
or gender cues in a lot of different ways day to day and don’t act consistently and that’s in direct opposition to the gender binary.” Such visual challenges to the gender binary contribute to a critical collective identity at Liberal Arts that seeks to deconstruct that binary. Another way the collective identity is reinforced through daily negotiations is exemplified by Cara’s comments regarding the extra steps she sometimes needs to take in identifying as pansexual:

That’s the only issue with being pansexual, you have to explain yourself when you come out. You can’t be like, oh, I’m gay. And everyone’s like, oh yeah, that makes sense. So you have to explain what non-binary is and that you can be attracted to more than one gender and that there are more than two genders. You have to go on a bit of a rampage … What I like about the queer community and labeling - it’s almost like an act of rebellion. It’s like, I’m going to label myself the way I want to and you are going to learn the term that I want to use instead of letting the dominant group define how you are. Because I think that it’s easy for the majority of people to be like, “Oh, you’re straight or gay,” but it’s like, “No, I don’t identify as either of those and I’m going to explain to you why.” That’s sort of empowering. So the hassle is usually worth it.

Every time a student at Liberal Arts chooses to take the extra step of defining precisely what they mean by a non-traditional label such as pansexual, they help to reinforce a collective identity at Liberal Arts that seeks to challenge binaries of male/female and straight/gay by focusing on the more open-ended queer identity. It is the unique context at Liberal Arts that integrates and bolsters the mostly white queer community to develop a critical queer collective identity that does not stop at acceptance and tolerance, but instead fights to break down traditional assumptions about stable gay identities and fluid gender expression.

One example of activism at Liberal Arts that best demonstrates the ways the queer collective identity is deployed is the Queer Identity Umbrella and Spectrum that was created in collaboration with art students on campus. Students created an art project in order to visually examine the binaries and assumptions sexual and gender identities are built on. The project was aimed at educating the wider Liberal Arts community about issues relating to gender and sexual identities. Queer students created an overhead tent shaped like an umbrella that had pictures
hanging all around with images of students (taken at a prior time) and written statements about their sexual and gender identities. Some students described themselves in other ways, such as “gay male Jewish artist,” to emphasize they are more than their gender and sexual identities. Respondents described it as a giant queer umbrella that created a powerful visual effect.

In addition, Rachel describes the spectrum element of the display next to the umbrella. There were ribbons representing the spectrums of sexual identity, romantic attraction, gender, and gender expression and, she says, “And you would tie a string to put where you fall on each of those spectrums and you could see that people were all over the place, which was pretty cool, I thought, especially the visual with all of the strings. I also thought because if didn’t want your face in those pictures, you still got an opportunity to be represented.” By purposefully not labeling the ends of the spectrums, students did not know where exactly they were placing their identities. They put up a poster describing all the different spectrums, but purposefully omitted labeling the ribbons so that students wouldn’t know which side was which and were forced to place their ribbon anyway. By not labeling the ends of the spectrums, the exercise in effect queered all identities to the extent that the placement of each ribbon was arbitrary.

A second example of activism at Arts includes the Show Your Sport campaign, originally aimed at reducing homophobia in sports. Many students described the athletic community as the most heteronormative group of students on campus and sought to address the problem of accepted homophobia in sport culture. Although the project originally began as a student class assignment to incorporate art as a form of protest, it has since developed into a wider “student-athlete activism program” at the school. Athletes from various campus sports were recruited via social media to take part in the campaign and be photographed as supporters of the queer community who publicly denounce homophobia. Images of the athletes were then posted around
campus, some with individualized quotes from the athletes, and online in a dedicated project Facebook page. Several rounds of photographs have been taken, with over 200 student athletes participating thus far.

An art-based campaign such as this has immense power to shift the discourse around athletes, homophobia and heteronormativity, and has been successful in its attempts to do so. The campaign has grown in popularity and gained very positive feedback from the larger campus community. The powerful visual display both on campus and online of strong athletes displayed in black and white images calling for a rejection of homophobia and intolerance is effective. It queers the athletes themselves, as the consumer of the image does not know for sure whether the athlete is coming out as queer or coming out as an ally. Superimposing support for the queer community over one of the last bastions of acceptable homophobia is a transformative project and one that points to the strength of cultural forms of activism.

Some students at Liberal Arts spoke about how the queer community was overly focused on themselves and oriented too much of their activism internally, which in their view did not contribute to change. However, two of the most visible activist projects during the time of data collection did the exact opposite. The location of a queer visual art project of such magnitude in the main art museum on campus was clearly oriented toward the larger campus community and, more specifically, the cis heterosexual community as a way to powerfully display the variation of sexual and gender identities on campus and question their own identities more thoroughly. Asking cisgender, heterosexual individuals to think through various elements of their identities is a worthwhile effort, as it is likely many of them never examined their identities in such a way. Furthermore, challenging the deeply held heteronormative culture of sports at Liberal Arts with images of athletes proclaiming their support of their queer teammates and intolerance for
homophobia is another powerful example of how art can be used as a tool to effect social and cultural change. The integrated queer community at Liberal Arts enables activism here to take a critical and visible stance against entrenched forms of oppression; students here feel empowered by their collective queer identity to critically address even problems as deeply held as homophobia in the culture of sports.

*Intersectional LGBTQ* Collective Identity at Public*

While the culture at Liberal Arts cultivates a critical queer collective identity, the emphasis at Public is on a more intersectional collective LGBTQ* identity (the asterisk represents all other potential initials in the acronym). The queer community at Public holds a collective identity focused on recognizing the wide range of diverse sexual and gender identities while promoting intersectional awareness of interlocking systems of oppression such as race.

Like at Liberal Arts, the group for LGBTQ students on campus is also called the Pride Alliance, again indicating a desire to mute the differences between the gay and straight communities. The respondents from Public are more varied in terms of both sexual identity labels and racial identity. There is a more equal division between traditional (nine respondents) and non-traditional labels (eight respondents). Regarding race, nine respondents identified as white and eight identified as non-white, including Black, biracial, Hispanic, Asian and Arab respondents. Descriptions of the LGBTQ* culture at Public, the personal sexual identities of students there, the types of activist events, and the meetings and discussions students point to a focus on respecting the proliferation of identities within the community and the ways people experience their sexuality in combination with other factors such as race and gender.

Among the 17 respondents from Public University, just over half (53 percent) adopt more traditional sexual identities. Unlike at Liberal Arts, women here are just as likely to adopt a
traditional lesbian or bisexual label as they are a more non-traditional label such as pansexual or queer, while 60 percent of men adopt traditional gay labels. Although labels such as queer and pansexual are used at Public, the collective identity appears to focus more on celebrating the diversity of identities, rather than encouraging the use of one specific label (as was the case with “queer” at Liberal Arts). For example, emphasis is placed on recognizing and respecting all the identities in the community. Hae says, “There’s a shit ton of identities! [laughs] And you need to respect each one of them.” She says, “There are a lot of identities and just being the identity of LGBT is so boring. It’s almost mainstream…All you hear is LGBT, LGBT, but there’s really LGBT ABCDEFG identities. [laughs]” At Public, there’s a repeated emphasis on respecting other’s labels and identities; this is demonstrated in the following comments by Kate:

There are so many people identifying as so many different things. The other day I met someone who was a male-identified lesbian, which confuses me to no end. I'm not going to judge you, if that's how you identify. Whatever you want me to call you, I will call you whatever … People will come up with their own labels so that they don't have to conform to a label. There are some people, they’ll go by a name like “Batman” and use the pronouns they/them/their. So if that's what you want to be called, that's what I'll go with. If that changes, let me know. I'm not here to judge your choices. This call for general acceptance to the variety of identities falling under the spectrum of LGBTQ* was common in comments from respondents describing the community at Public. Unlike at Liberal Arts, where the community more uniformly advocates adopting a queer identity, students at Public find acceptance for a wide range of identities.

A shared consciousness around the collective LGBTQ* identity at Public is not only developed in intra-community dialogue, but also more explicitly in the resource center on campus. Having a designated safe space for the queer community is key in developing a shared sense of collective identity for students at Public. Many respondents report spending a lot of time at the center, hanging out and building community. Kate describes it as a “safe space, no
matter who you are.” Part of the routine at the center when introducing yourself to others is to provide your PGPs, highlighting a call to recognize and respect everyone’s identities and to not make assumptions about them. Although some go to play video games and do homework, many report attending the weekly meetings dedicated to a variety of topics on LGBTQ issues and identities.

A testament of the commitment to addressing the experience of multiple oppressions is the biweekly “Intersections” meetup that enables intersectional dialogue on a regular basis. Students of color report having the space in the LGBTQ community at Public to discuss the ways that their race impacts and intersects with the queer identities. For example, like many people, Hae says that the idea of intersectionality wasn’t introduced until she came to college. She says that she’s learning how different combinations of gender identity, race and sexual identity combine to create different experiences for everyone and that this is something that’s incorporated into activism here, especially with the biweekly intersections meetings. White students at Public also discuss how intersectional it is in the LGBTQ community at Public. For example, Paige says:

I’ve been so pleased to see how intersectional it is here. And a lot of that is because so many people here are racial minorities. So it’s, like, look, I’m African American or I’m Latino or I’m from the Caribbean, or whatever. Or they’re trans. The options go on and on. And I think having had to grow up with that barrier, and that struggle, it’s this conflict of identities for them that in college, they’re starting to put together and it’s great. So everyone I’ve come across is focusing on stuff from a multidimensional perspective.

Unlike at Liberal Arts, where there is a great deal of talk about the importance of issues around intersectionality but not a lot of action, students at Public are actively taking a role in making the conversations happen.

The collective identity at Public is also apparent in the events they organize. For example, an example of activism at Public is the Coming Out Monologues, an event held annually over the
past several years that calls explicit attention to the variety of coming out experiences as a way of bringing everyone together. Students worked to gather a variety of different written coming out stories from the community and then actors would perform the monologues in front of an audience. Valerie says of the monologues, “And that was cool because I felt like everybody learned a lot. Everyone's coming-out story is different. Me coming out as a lesbian is so different than somebody else coming out as bisexual or a gay male. It’s just very different for everybody. So we spread awareness … of the fact that people are different, but still the same.” The monologues’ emphasis on celebrating the internal difference within the LGBTQ community at Public points to a collective identity here – and in the post-closet generation in general – emphasizing internal diversity, rather than a singular stable identity as identity politics in the past required (Schindel 2008). While this specific event was largely geared toward the queer community at Public, other acts of activism were oriented toward the larger community.

Another example of activism at Public included what respondents referred to as “queer bombing,” where students arrange ahead of time to all wear the same T shirts (with “a little bomb and a Q on it”) to various events. The purposes of queer bombing are multiple. First, it is a way of building within community solidarity, to physically show that they are all in it together. Second, it is understood as a way of increasing visibility of the queer community in general. Valerie says, “And it's just to… show that we are the LGBT community and we are being active in the community in general and that we are here. To make us visible.” In the face of growing normalization and the lack of emphasis on the differences between the straight and queer communities, this is an act of saying, “We are here as queer people.” Although most respondents in the sample express support of the idea, others such as Annie, were less comfortable “putting herself on stage” in that way. She says, “I just don't believe I need to air out the fact that I'm a
bisexual and you should all love me. That's just not how I work. But I can respect people who do it.” Annie admits elsewhere in her interview, however, that she is an overly private person and prefers to keep expressions of her sexuality to herself.

In sum, at Public, a large diverse university setting supports a collective LGBTQ* identity that emphasizes respect and tolerance for a diverse set of sexual and gender identities, while also recognizing the importance of intersectionality for activism. At Public, the sentiment is that despite our apparent differences, we are all the same, equally deserving of the same rights and equality.

Normalized LGBTQ Collective Identity at Catholic

Although the number of interviews at Catholic, seven, limits the insights into the collective identity developed there, the available data suggests there are internal disagreements not uncommon in LGBTQ movements (Gamson 1997). The students at Catholic highlight the unique positioning of the post-closet generation with competing claims for both normalcy/assimilation and celebration/confrontation as students incorporate more openness and fluidity into their sexual and gender identities.

The collective identity at Catholic centers on fighting for tolerance and acceptance within the somewhat hostile religious conservative community. Students describe engaging in campus activism that focuses on education efforts and the development of ally support, with one of their most visible annual efforts focusing on “straight” students demonstrating their tolerance for difference. There is Pride GSA on campus for LGBTQ students. Unlike at Liberal Arts and Public, the name of the group maintains an emphasis on gay identities, thus establishing a boundary between gay and straight students in more overt terms. However, in talking with respondents here, many express an emphasis on claiming normalcy and downplaying the
differences between the straight and queer communities. Out of the seven respondents from Catholic, three identify as traditionally lesbian, gay, or bisexual, although the respondent who identifies as bisexual clearly relates strongly to the queer label as well. Four students label themselves in non-traditional terms including two each identifying as queer and pansexual. Students note there are very few allies involved in the GSA and those that are involved are reported to feel out of place.

Internal disagreements within the GSA point to conflicting opinions about what its role should be on campus. Stella, who identifies as pansexual and is involved in the GSA, thinks it lacks “validity” on campus even among others in the LGBTQ community. She says:

I had been abroad last semester so I wasn’t on the E Board this past year. But I was the year before and I will be next year. I came to the club fair this past January and there was a giant rainbow boat. Giant rainbow boat on our table. And I said, “Where did this come from and why is it here?” Instead of just saying “Jeopardy” because we usually play Jeopardy during the week leading up to the Day of Silence, we have to call it “Queer Jeopardy.” Our president wants to have a “Pride Ball” as opposed to just having a “Diversity Dance,” which I’m going to really strongly sway her to change the name of because I feel as the way we approach things makes people think that if people are associated with us that they are of LGBT status. We don’t have validity because of the way we carry ourselves. Some of the members of our club carry themselves with such an opposition to the world and an opposition to heterosexuality. And I don’t think it should be like that. I don’t think it should be an issue one way or the other. That’s kind of where I stand, I guess.”

Although Stella participates in the GSA, she finds it presents itself as “too gay,” and instead believes the LGBTQ community should instead try to fit in. Stella is clearly calling for LGBTQ students at Catholic to emphasize their similarities to the straight community, rather than focus on their differences. However, her comments also point to quite a bit of internalized homophobia, something that is not lacking in a post-closet generation. Stella and others at Catholic believe that aside from their sexuality they should be viewed as essentially the same as straight students, reflecting Seidman’s notion of the “good gay” (2005). Zander’s comments
imply a similar desire for queer students to blend in on campus. He says: “Last semester, someone was doing a speed dating and we looked at the poster to make sure everyone knew they were welcome. And it was like, ‘All Sexual Orientations Welcome,’ instead of just being like, ‘Everyone’s Welcome.’ And it was like, are you going to separate us all with straights over here and gays over there? And thankfully they didn't do it. [laughs]” Although more subdued than Stella’s position, there is a sense among students here that the best tact is to try to fit in, reflecting the respectability politics and normalizing effects of assimilation in the wider community (Seidman 2005; Warner 1999). Of course, the “queer” and “rainbow boats” that emerged in Stella’s absence point to a divide in the students at Catholic, with others who are more comfortable openly expressing themselves as queer. Other GSA members I spoke to, such as Kayla and Natalia, implied they were much less concerned with normalizing themselves and blending in to the heteronormative culture and instead presented as visibly queer on campus. Given the somewhat hostile conservative climate at Catholic, the push to minimize difference is unsurprising, although the disagreements around this point to a growing influence of post-closet identities.

Students here have few formal opportunities to discuss LGBTQ identities and issues in courses, which to some extent impedes the development of strong group consciousness in the context of the wider campus community. One student spoke of taking a class on race where the idea of straight privilege was discussed for one day and points to the overwhelmingly heteronormative culture in most of the classes he takes. Kayla tells a story about her freshmen seminar that highlights the inability to create discourse around LGBTQ identities opportunities on campus. She says:

Everyone has to take a first-year seminar as a freshman and mine is called “Thinking Sex” and it's literally about sex. … This semester we’re talking about sexual diversity.
It's the most eye-opening and interesting class I've ever taken. It got a lot of pushback from the school. People were complaining. Friars heard about it and they wanted to cancel it. They actually came in and asked us if we are okay with the class and everyone fought for it so hard. Everyone in the class loves it. It's the most interesting conversations…[MM: Has that course been taught often?] It was new, but it won't be taught again after this year. It's not because the school said no. The teacher’s just not teaching it again because I don't think he wants to have to fight so hard.

Kayla’s account of the negative response by the college to this seminar points to just how limited the opportunities are for queer students to engage in critical dialogues around LBGTQ identities within courses at school, especially when compared to Liberal Arts and Public. Students at Catholic lack access to the frequent class discussions around sexuality that students at Liberal Arts and Public report being so crucial for the development of the strong shared group consciousness at their respective schools. The discussions around queer identities and issues are therefore limited to conversations at GSA meetings. In sum, because of the somewhat hostile conservative environment of Catholic College, the collective identity of LGBTQ students largely downplays difference focusing on education and tolerance from the wider campus community.

Activism at Catholic reflects the subdued, normalized collective identity of students here. Students focus their efforts on educating the larger Catholic community on issues relating to LGBTQ individuals. Maggie describes their current work creating a GSA PSA video including, “some things to remember when you're talking to people so as not to offend anyone or things you might be confused on or general definitions,” and a Trans 101 video on “how to use pronouns and how to ask people for their proper gender pronouns.” Other educational efforts include regular ally trainings for the wider community, hosting films, such as Milk and Trans, to educate both the internal and external community about LGBT issues, and participating in the Day of Silence and Trans Day of Remembrance. Additional actions were oriented more clearly toward the queer community, holding meetings dedicated to various topics such as the intersectionality
of queerness with ability, race, and religion, as well as different identities such as asexual and polyamorous.

The annual event named “Straight as an Arrow, Straight but not Narrow” provides a good example of the types of activism engaged in here. The GSA was in the third year of organizing the event at the time of interviews. Maggie describes the way it came about in her following comments:

“We had a lot of issues getting approval for this, and it’s now in its third year, but it’s called “Straight as an Arrow, Straight but not Narrow.” Essentially what it is is that they make this big canvas that says that and it's to promote straight allies on campus. We know there is not the biggest LGBT population, but there are a lot of people who could be allies. So it’s to promote them. We take little arrows with sponges on the tip and we dip them into paint and shoot them at the canvas and we have this pretty piece of art that we hang up. And it's nice. And we get a lot of people to go. The first year, we had a lot of issues getting approval for it. And they were like, well, it's going to be out on the green and what are people going to say if they don't like it? There were no issues whatsoever. If they didn't like it, they just walked past and muttered something under their breath, and we just ignored them as much as they did us.

Maggie’s comments reflect how tenuous the position of the GSA is on a Catholic campus, with events aimed at simply building solidarity with the ally community are approved hesitantly. Regardless of the administration’s reluctance, students describe the event as a popular, well attended event that is publicized by the college to incoming freshmen. The medium of art (through the painted canvas\textsuperscript{11}) allows students to visually portray ally support in an otherwise hostile climate. This desire of activists at Catholic to build solidarity with the straight community is consistent with their collective identity that seemingly seeks to build bridges toward the straight community, rather than focus on the differences that divide them (Ghaziani 2011).

\textsuperscript{11} Interestingly, no respondents describing this event spoke explicitly of what I viewed as a subdued queer message of the project. By having “straight” students shoot arrows onto a canvas, the inevitable spread of where the arrows land on the canvas is telling about the spectrum nature of sexuality in general. However, this type of critical analysis of the event was lacking in respondent descriptions.
Although the post-closet generation faces the same core tensions in negotiating their identities and activism, the contexts in which they engage in activism influence them in different ways. Even within the same geographic region, we see visible differences in the collective activist identities dependent on the context provided by the specific college, which suggests the importance of recognizing micro-cohort differences within movement generations (Whittier 1995; 1997). At Liberal Arts, a wider campus community that accepts and integrates queer students provides opportunities to develop a more confrontational and critical queer collective identity aimed at challenging sexual and gender binaries. The political cultural activist work at Arts thus targets the broader community as a means of confronting homophobia and deconstructing the assumptions that underlie sexual and gender identities (Taylor et al. 2009). At Public, we see a collective identity oriented toward recognizing and fighting for the acceptance of multiple diverse sexual and gender identities within the contexts of recognizing multiple oppressions. Activism at Public uses elements of performance to build solidarity and celebrate internal diversity (Taylor et al. 2009). Finally, in the somewhat hostile conservative context of Catholic, LGBTQ students focus on a collective identity oriented toward normalcy and assimilation – although rumblings of more open and expressive post-closet identities are present – and activism is geared toward education of and acceptance from the larger campus community. These differences reflect different negotiations of the choices they face in their navigation of identities.

The ways new negotiations of identity contribute to the collective identities and activism of youth vary depending on context. As Whittier demonstrates with the concept of micro-cohort differences, it is important to recognize the differences that exist within movement generations (1995; 1997). Although post-closet youth face similar core tensions in negotiating their identities
and activism, contextual factors (and the specific timing of entry) determine the kinds of collective identities they form and the types of activism in which they engage. Examination of the collective identities within the sample reveals a variety of potential collective identities in this movement generation. Contextual factors help determine which elements of sexual identities are emphasized. For example, the integrated and accepted queer community at Liberal Arts is enabled to create a collective identity among primarily white students that is more critical of mainstream assumptions about stability and binaries. At Public, a large diverse university setting allows for the development of a community working to celebrate internal diversity and intersectional awareness. At Catholic, the conservative religious environment encourages a collective identity emphasizing similarity and normalization, with activism efforts focused primarily on education and ally support. However, at all three contexts and regardless of the collective identity, personal sexual identities that are more open to fluidity and deconstruct the gender binary remain influential contributing to an overall reimagining of what it means to be gay in contemporary society.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined the involvement of post-closet youth in activism. Although contemporary youth are largely conceived of as apathetic (Savin-Williams 2005a), the empirical evidence from this sample of 40 queer youth suggests otherwise. I find that youth are ambivalent about participating in mainstream activism, as their priorities and identities differ from those of the mainstream in significant ways. However, many youth find ways to get involved in various forms of mainstream institutionalized activism, carving out opportunities through GSAs and local pride community centers that resonate more with their experiences and priorities. Post-closet youth bring a critical view of mainstream priorities and identities to this
activism, for example, by calling out the neglected priorities of trans protections and youth concerns.

While mainstream participation remains relevant for many in this sample, the majority of youth report engaging in activism that is less visible. Namely, post-closet youth point to the importance of negotiating activism on an everyday level of resistance and education. This finding resonates well with others who argue that youth’s access to more traditional means of politics and activism is restricted (Blackburn 2002; Dobinson 2004). In addition, post-closet youth engage in a variety of political cultural work, relying on cultural tactics such as performance and visual art to challenge the existing discourses and binary structures around gender and sexuality as well as to build solidarity (Taylor et al. 2009). The political cultural work of their activism resonates better with their sense of collective identities compared to organizationally-based mainstream alternatives.

The collective identities created by the three groups of students in this sample varied in significant ways, pointing to a need to recognize the micro-cohort variations that exist within movement generations (Whittier 1995; 1997). Although members of the same post-closet movement generation, facing similar core tensions for navigating identities and activism, each group of students created a slightly different collective identity as a result of their college context. The primarily white activists at Liberal Arts were able to create and sustain a critical queer identity amongst an accepting environment that served to bolster the queer community. This allowed them to cultivate critical cultural activism that called into question the hetero/homo and male/female binaries their more open and fluid sexual and gender identities. These findings echo Rupp and colleague’s recent observations of students on the West Coast similarly adopting more fluid queer identities in the context of a supportive campus culture (2016). However, the
findings at Catholic for students who were also largely white, point to the challenges post-closet youth face in negotiating identities and activism in settings that are more hostile. The less accepting environment of the religious campus creates a strong desire among students to adopt claims of normalcy proffered by respectability politics (Warner 1999). Such claims were often made in the presence of internalized homophobia, highlighting its continued presence even among post-closet generation. Finally, the large, diverse university setting at Public contributed to the creation of an intersectional collective identity with activism aimed at recognizing and celebrating internal diversity and difference.

Common to all three collective identities was a difference-muting strategy of establishing boundaries (Ghaziani 2011). Adding to Ghaziani’s finding regarding the construction of “post-gay” or post-closet identities, I find similarly that students are negotiating collective identities that emphasize similarities between straight and queer communities, rather than focusing on differences. At the same time, youth are also constructing collective identities with an emphasis on internal diversification (Schindel 2008). This emphasis on internal diversity reflects the exclusionary tendencies of the mainstream movement in recent decades and was exhibited in all three cases. It was especially relevant at Public where there is a potent call for recognizing the diversity of identities within the queer community. Such variations in collective identities demonstrate the importance of recognizing the differences that exist within movement generations and the important ways that local contexts drastically shape activism. While movement generations share an overarching social and cultural context, they are not uniform in composition.

The combination of everyday level activism with more cultural strategies of protest results in a less visible picture of activist participation among post-closet youth. Unless you are
looking explicitly at the specific communities and the impacts they make locally, you will largely miss their contributions. It is here that interesting parallels emerge between the predicament of the post-closet movement generation and contemporary feminists in the United States. Not unlike the post-closet generation, Reger sets out to show how contrary to public opinion contemporary feminism “is not dead,” but rather alive and well “if you look” (2012). Contemporary feminists are also growing up in a society drastically different from their feminist predecessors, thanks to their successes, and are thus doing things differently (Reger 2012). Reger finds that contemporary feminists are similarly engaging in cultural tactics that emerge in ways that are specific to their environment (2012). She says that although younger feminists are doing things differently, they are still there; they are less unified, but their activism is more dispersed and varied (Reger 2012). The activism of post-closet youth similarly remains vibrant and relevant for producing social change within the communities they live; however, without looking closely, their contributions could easily be missed.

In the final chapter, I conclude the dissertation with a brief consideration of the implications of these findings for the larger sexualities and social movement literatures. In addition, I lay out the study’s main limitations and areas for future research.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Main Findings and Implications

The past several decades have ushered in rapid social and cultural change around LGBTQ individuals and politics in the United States (Adam 1995; Engel 2001; Epstein 1999; Seidman 2002). As a result, youth are coming of age in a socio-historical context characterized by increasing normalization and visibility of LGBTQ people and less overt homophobia; in fact, LGBTQ individuals are no longer beholden to the closet as a central organizing feature in their lives (Seidman 2002). In this dissertation, I explore the unique characteristics of this post-closet generation and the ways they negotiate their identities and participate in the larger movement for LGBTQ rights and equality. In this chapter, I lay out the study’s main findings and their implications for the relevant literature. In addition, I discuss the limitations of the study and areas for future research.

In this study, I find the post-closet generation of queer youth differs in many ways from prior generations. LGBTQ youth are increasingly coming out at younger ages and are overwhelmingly being received positively by their families. Changes are occurring around the traditional coming out narrative, with many youth in this sample downplaying its significance as a monumental experience and instead ushering in a shift toward the recognition of fluidity and the changing nature of sexual identities. The numerous resources available to youth, such as GSAs, more supportive high school environments, and on-line community allow post-closet youth the freedom to negotiate sexual identities differently.

Of particular importance in these findings are the various ways youth are negotiating sexual and gender identities. I find youth are navigating the dominant at risk/victim frames by locating their experiences in direct opposition to such frames and also resisting the stable
identities that the well-adjusted/resiliency narratives rely on (Talburt 2004a). Therefore, post-closet youth are instead exerting their own agency by resisting normalized identities and instead creating more individualized and personally authentic sexual identities (Weststrate and McLean 2010). Freed from the constraints of managing a stigmatized identity, youth are able to construct sexual identities in ways that are more reflective of their personal identities. These findings support a shift in the narrative of youth sexual identity construction from one of struggle and success to emancipation (Cohler and Hammack 2007). In addition, I find the sexual identities of post-closet youth to be less a core part of their identities (Savin-Williams 2005a; Seidman 2002), although they remain primary for those youth who also strongly identify as activists.

Furthermore, although some youth remain comfortable using traditional labels, many are increasingly identifying outside of the traditional gay/lesbian identities and choosing labels that are more open and fluid, such as pansexual or queer (Rupp et al. 2016). By adopting identities that resist stability and incorporate a deconstruction of gender binaries, as well as incorporating the announcement of PGPs into their daily practices, many post-closet youth are challenging the assumptions that underlie normalized traditional lesbian/gay identities and instead elaborating a new normal for queer youth that allows for openness and fluidity around sexuality and gender.

In addition to contributing to the empirical research on queer youth sexualities, these findings also contribute to a broader understanding of how the social construction of sexualities is changing in contemporary society. Specifically, as “coming out” becomes less salient for this generation and trends continue toward more open and fluid identities, the future of LGBTQ identities looks different. Questions remain around whether more men will increasingly abandon traditional gay identities alongside of women, or if this is largely a gendered pattern. In addition, in this sample, cisgender men are more likely to adopt traditional gay identities, likely because
they serve to benefit the most from normalized identities. However, as this generation of youth continues to adopt identities that call traditional sexual and gender binaries into question, how will normalization processes be impacted? Can more open and fluid identities be normalized in and of themselves? Where would these identities fall in the regulation of good/bad sexual citizenship (Seidman 2005)?

Recognition of the contemporary generation of queer youth as a post-closet movement generation contributes to the social movement literature on generational change in movements (Ross 1983). While generational dynamics have been explored in the feminist movement (see Whittier 1995; 1997; Reger 2012), they remain largely overlooked in the LGBTQ movement. This study specifies how the contemporary generation within the LGBTQ movement exists as a post-closet generation facing unique core tensions. The post-closet generation faces three unique core tensions: navigating restrictive victim frames, negotiating identities in the face of growing ambivalence toward the traditional categories of gay and lesbian, and carving out activist participation in a mainstream movement that is largely detached from their identities and priorities. Analysis of how the movement generation navigates those tensions helps to explain how social movements change over time. Specifically, with the post-closet generation, we see that post-closet youth are positioned ambivalently toward the prior generation’s movement identities and priorities. Attention to the generational differences within a movement yields greater insight into various ways social movement actors of multiple generations are fighting for change simultaneously within movements.

Although movement generations share similar challenges in negotiating their identities and activism, those negotiations vary depending on their context. In this study, I find three groups of post-closet youth who construct their collective identities around activism differently
depending on the college environments in which they were located. These differences suggest the necessity of recognizing various micro-cohorts within movement generations (Whittier 1995; 1997). For example, students at Liberal Arts College construct a critical queer collective identity within a college environment that fully integrates and accepts the LGBTQ community. Activism at Liberal Arts relies on visual art to incorporate a queer critique of traditional gender and sexual binaries to educate the large campus community about the spectrums of sex, gender, sexual identities and gender expression. At Public University, students create a slightly different collective identity focusing on an intersectional approach to LGBTQ identities within a larger and more diverse setting. Students here emphasize the vastly differently experiences of those who comprise the queer community and use elements of performance to highlight those differences and foster group solidarity. And finally, students at Catholic College negotiate a more normalized and subdued collective identity amongst a conservative campus climate. Activism here focuses on education efforts and building ally support in the larger community. Recognition of these contextual differences allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the post-closet generation navigates the core tensions they face and negotiate and engage in activism differently.

Although queer youth are popularly deemed apathetic (see Savin-Willams 2005a), my findings suggest otherwise, with youth in the sample engaging in both mainstream activism options and alternative cultural forms. While certainly some youth are less inclined to participate in activism because they benefit from normalization (namely white, gender conforming males), many in this sample remain committed to working towards social and cultural change around LGBTQ issues. This suggests that proclamations of this generation as apolitical are perhaps short
sighted. Rather, I find queer youth engaging in activism in perhaps less visible ways on the everyday level and through political cultural work (Reger 2012; Taylor et al. 2009).

**Limitations and Areas for Future Research**

The limitations of this study are important to recognize when considering the significance of these findings. While these findings are not generalizable and are specific to the sample at hand, they point to potential patterns within the larger post-closet generation. Opportunities for organizational-based activism remain somewhat limited in the region where data collection occurred, especially when compared to the opportunities in large urban centers. A similar study of LGBTQ youth from a large urban center would be beneficial to see what additional insight and/or differences emerge regarding the negotiation of identities and participation in activism. Similarly, the East coast location restricts the findings geographically, although a recent study by Rupp and her colleagues point to very similar queer identity constructions occurring among college-age women in California, pointing to the salience of this identity and issues of fluidity for this generation (2016). Regardless, it would be interesting to see what other geographical differences emerge between post-closet youth across the country, especially in areas that are characterized by less acceptance of queer identities. For example, how are youth negotiating identities and engaging in activism in more isolated areas of the country (see, for example, Barton 2012)?

In addition to regional limitations, the sample is comprised primarily of white, college-educated, upper middle class students from highly educated families. This in part explains the high levels of family support exhibited by many in the sample. One respondent – who happened to identify as queer and working class – referred to the popularly held notion that “queer” is an identity of the “elite college student;” another pointed out Robyn Ochs’ sentiment that
“pansexual” does not likely resonate well in more working class communities. Additionally, the majority of respondents in this sample, especially at Liberal Arts and Catholic Colleges, were white. At Public, we see how issues of race especially are incorporated into respondents’ activism and understandings of sexual identities. While these data reveal interesting dynamics and themes for these respondents, there is limited insight into the experiences and identity negotiations of queer youth of color and youth from more working class backgrounds. Finally, some youth in this sample came from families with religious or cultural views that were less supportive of queer identities and thus were unwilling to disclose their sexual identities to their families. Additional research is needed on how these youth are negotiating the divide between living openly in the public sphere while remaining closeted to their families to shed light on the varying paths of youth in post-closet settings.

The limitations and findings of this study point to several areas of future research, especially given the significant shift that occurred in the political climate of the United States as this project was nearing completion. The election of Donald Trump as President threatens to reverse the steady progress on LGBTQ rights made by the Obama Administration and potentially places the larger movement into a politically hostile environment for the first time in many years. For the youth interviewed in this study, they have witnessed nothing but progress on LGBTQ issues throughout their lifetimes. However, within the first several months of a Trump administration, we have seen calls for reversals on the protections of transgender students, a newly confirmed Supreme Court Justice with a tenuous record on LGBTQ rights, and an emboldened sense of hate directed toward the LGBTQ community across the country. Such a drastic shift in the context of a movement that has seen many successes in recent years will likely inspire new levels of activist involvement in youth. The country has witnessed record numbers of
people participating in the Women’s March on Washington following the election (and satellite marches across the country); organized resistance is building.

The concept of differing micro-cohorts within movement generations will be especially useful for examining the involvement of the post-closet movement generation from here on out. Trump’s election will no doubt politicize some post-closet youth who were perhaps apathetic and uninspired in this sample. It will be interesting to see the larger generational impact of this election and whether sustained organized resistance will endure. Youth coming to terms with same-sex attractions during the Trump era will likely have different perspectives than those who came before them. The question is whether these youth will be mobilized into more traditional strategies of movement activism as a result? Or, will the collective identities built more on the difference muting tendencies seen here remain prevalent? Furthermore, will these youth negotiate identities and politics differently in the face of a more hostile political context? Will more post-closet youth assume mainstream identities for the purposes of collective action? And what will large-scale collective identities that rely on more fluid conceptions look like in such activism?

The findings of this study are consistent with recent studies documenting the increasing adoption of more open and fluid sexual identities, such as queer and pansexual, among women (Diamond 2005; Rupp et al. 2016). Although, several male-identified respondents in this sample do adopt non-traditional identities, such as queer and pansexual, the amount of male respondents in the sample was limited. It would be interesting to compare how more young men who engage in activism are constructing their sexual identities and engaging with the challenges of their ambivalent placement toward mainstream sexual politics. Savin-Williams argues that young gay men lack an interest in activism because they no longer see their sexual identities as central or as
something that sets them apart (2005a); this may be why so few males responded to participate in the study. It certainly reflects some comments among respondents about the lack of men participating in activism on their respective campuses. However, some men, especially trans men in this sample, continue to engage in activism. It would a worthwhile endeavor to dive more deeply into the differences that exist between women- and men-identified post-closet youth identity constructions and activism. In addition, other groups lack representation in this study, such as straight identified trans respondents and trans women. These distinct perspectives are needed for ascertaining a more complete picture of how the post-closet generation negotiates sexual and gender identities and politics.

Although limited in this sample, the trend of refusing labels is also an avenue ripe for research (Savin-Williams 2005b). More examination of post-closet youth who are refusing labels could provide more insight into the generational processes at stake here. Under what circumstances (in what contexts) are post-closet youth refusing labels? If these youth then engage in activism, and how does a lack of “identity” problematize that engagement? Although limited in this sample, either for regional or methodological reasons, finding out more about the activism of unlabeled individuals with same-sex attractions/desires could reveal additional processes at work in sexual identity construction in post-closet settings.

The post-closet youth in this sample remain engaged in a variety of different activist efforts that reflect a changing social and cultural world around sexualities. There are many parallels with the LGBTQ and feminist movements; like the feminist movement, new queer activists are coming to LGBTQ politics in drastically different contexts than their predecessors who began the movements. Just as contemporary feminists are doing things differently (Reger 2012), so are queer youth. They are less involved in visible mainstream types of activism and
more involved in the everyday level advocacy, education, and political cultural work in hopes of challenging and changing world around them. If a recent report by GLAAD, titled “Accelerating Acceptance 2017,” is any indication, progress is continuing to be made (2017). Not only do we see a large majority of the non-LGBTQ Millennial generation identifying as allies to the queer community (63 percent), we also see reports that 20 percent of Millennials (ages 18-34 years old) identify as LGBTQ, as well as 12 percent identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming (GLAAD 2017). In addition, the survey finds that Millennials are also more likely to identify their sexual and gender identities outside of the traditional labels of gay/lesbian and man/woman. Such findings are remarkable and further support the findings of qualitative studies such as this one. Arguably the first generation deeply influenced by the insights of decades of queer theory is increasingly coming into focus and they are doing things differently. Only time can tell what this means for the future of the movement, but the identities and activism of the post-closet movement generation indicate that traditional definitions of straight/gay and man/woman are shifting once more.
References


Johnson, Dominique. 2007. “‘This is Political!’ Negotiating the Legacies of the First School-Based Gay Youth Group.” *Children, Youth and Environments* 17(2): 380-87.


Appendix A: Recruitment Advertisement

Study on LGBTQ Activism Seeks Volunteers

The purpose of the study is to explore the lives of young LGBTQ activists, who are often ignored and misrepresented in the scientific literature. This research will work to fill this gap by revealing the true experiences of young LGBTQ individuals and the ways in which they define their sexual identities and engage in sexual politics. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University at Albany, SUNY.

I am seeking volunteers who:

- are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, pansexual, unlabelled, queer or anything in between;
- have engaged in activism around LGBTQ issues (however you define it – membership in a specific organization is not required nor is a minimum amount of activist participation) and;
- are 18–25 years old.

Participation involves:

- completing a one-on-one interview (lasting between 1–2 hours, time and location to be determined by you)

Participation in the study is completely voluntary and all information provided will be kept confidential. Upon completion of the interview, volunteers will receive $15 as a thank you for your time and participation.

If you are interested, please contact me at: mmurphy2@albany.edu

Thank you,
Megan Murphy
Department of Sociology, University at Albany
Appendix B: Demographic Form

Please fill out the following demographic information.

Age: _________

Race/ethnicity: ___________________________

Gender: ___________________

Sexual Identity: ___________________________

Education (highest year completed /degree): ________________

Occupation (if relevant): ________________________________

Parents’ educations (highest year completed/degree):

  Parent 1: __________________________
  Parent 2: __________________________

Parents’ occupations:

  Parent 1: ______________________________
  Parent 2: ______________________________

Respondent ID _____
Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent

Title of Research Project: Queer Youth Activism: Generational Change in the US LGBTQ Movement

Principal Investigator: Megan Murphy, PhD Candidate in Sociology, University at Albany, SUNY

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences, identities, and activism of young LGBTQ individuals. Participation involves completing an in depth interview about your experience as an LGBTQ person who has engaged in activism. The expected duration is 1-2 hours. I do not anticipate any risk in your participation other than you may become uncomfortable answering some of the questions. Sensitive topics such as sexual behavior and HIV/AIDS may be discussed. However, you are welcome to skip any questions or withdraw participation if you become uncomfortable at any time. Although you may not receive direct benefit from your participation, others may ultimately benefit from the knowledge obtained from this research.

With your permission, interviews will be audiotaped. This will allow me to listen to your responses without having to take detailed notes. I will, however, take some notes throughout the interview to remind myself to follow up on certain topics. You may still participate in this study if you are not willing to have the interview recorded. Do I have your permission to audiotape the interview?

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. To ensure confidentiality, audiotapes and transcripts will be identified by ID number only and will be stored in a secure location, accessible only by the Principal Investigator. In addition, all personal identifiers will be removed from the interview transcripts and pseudonyms will be used in the presentation of any findings. Audiotapes and interview transcripts will be destroyed upon completion of the study. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board, the sponsor of the study (e.g. NIH, FDA, etc.) and University or government officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect these records.

To thank you for your time and participation, you will be given $15 cash upon completion of the interview. However, if you choose to withdraw your participation prior to completing at least half of the interview or ask that your data be excluded from analysis upon completion, you will not receive the $15.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the Principal Investigator: Megan Murphy, PhD Candidate in Sociology, University at Albany at (518) 334-0714 or via email at mmurphy2@albany.edu. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep. In addition, a copy of the findings from the study can be provided upon request from the Principal Investigator.
Your Rights as a Participant:
If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, please contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at its toll-free number 1-866-857-5459 or via email at hsconcerns@albany.edu.

Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions and may refuse to complete any portions of the research you do not wish to for any reason. Even after you agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise have been entitled. I will retain and analyze the information you have provided up until the point you have left the study unless you request that your data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed.

I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.
Appendix D: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Begin by reviewing informed consent document.

Thank for you volunteering to participate in this study. Again, the purpose of this research is to explore the experiences, identities, and activism of young LGBTQ individuals. I would like to hear your thoughts on various topics, and, to that end, I have a list of general questions that will guide the interview. However, the interview will not follow a strict script; we can discuss some issues at great length and skip around to others, depending what you have to share. I want to hear what you have to say about these topics. As a reminder, participation is completely voluntary and if at any time during the interview you would like to stop, you may. Everything you say will be kept confidential.

Where did you see the ad? Why did you decide to participate?
Where do you live? College student? If so, what year? What are you studying?

**Topic 1: Personal story surrounding sexual identity**

I want to begin the interview by asking you to tell me your “coming out” story, if that’s even a term that applies to you. How do you identify? When did you first start to identify that way/consider same-sex attraction/not straight/different sexual identity/ally identity, if straight, etc.? Can you tell me about that process?

Who did you first tell? Friends/family/etc.?
   - What type of reactions did you receive?
   - What sort of expectations did you have about their reactions?

Do you feel your family understands your sexual identity? Do they have different ideas about sexuality/gender identity than you do? Tell me about this.

Did you hide your identity for any period of time? How did you decide to come out? What was your thought process surrounding revealing your sexual identity? (Did your or your family’s religion play a role in this process?)

**Topic 2: Coming of Age Context**

I’d like to talk about where you grew up. Tell me a little about where you grew up – how would you describe the community as far as political views (liberal/conservative, tolerant and accepting of diversity, open-minded, etc.)?

How about your family? (i.e., Political views? Tolerance for difference? Religious? Etc.)
What, if any, experiences did you have growing up with gay people in your community?

What is your earliest memory of realizing someone was gay?

Local community vs. broader society - how did each view gay people in your opinion?

I’d like to hear about the school climate you grew up in. Describe to me what the environment in your high school (or middle if appropriate) was like for gay students. Were there out students? Out teachers? Etc.

Was there any sort of formal support for gay students? GSA? Or other gay group? Were straight students members of these groups as allies?

Did you learn about LGBTQ people or issues in school? What specifically do you remember learning?

Current school climate (if in college) – what is environment like for LGBTQ students/allies on campus?

I’m interested in hearing what you think about pop culture depictions of LGBTQ people. How about on television – do you remember any gay characters on TV growing up? Where did you first learn about gay people? Was it on TV? What are your impressions of the pop culture depictions of LGBTQ people on TV?

Were there particular shows that you remember watching that had any gay characters? Tell me about them and the characters.

Did you consider these individuals role models? (If so, tell me about it. If not, did you have other role models who were gay? Other actors, celebrities, politicians, for example?)

Were there any memorable or especially meaningful events that occurred during your lifetime that concerned LGBTQ people? Tell me about them and what they meant to you at the time or now.

(Either personal or in larger culture – same-sex marriage becoming legal in certain states, supreme court decision overturning anti-sodomy statutes, Prop 8, DADT, etc.)

**Topic 3: Identity and labeling**

Do you identify your sexuality with a label? If so, tell me about that label & how you came to it.

Have you always identified in this way? If not, tell me about how you used to identify and why you changed?
Do you feel like this identity “fits” you well? Describe for me why.

Are there any concerns you have with this label? Tell me about them.

I’m interested in how your friends/peers also label their sexual identities. Can you talk a little about what labels your friends or peers use?

Queer? Unlabelled? Bisexual? Gay or lesbian?

Any differences by gender? Men vs. women and fluidity?

How about your straight friends – do they label their sexual identities?

Do you feel like there is any sort of divide between you and your straight friends? Tell me your thoughts on this. (For example, do you feel like your sexual/gender identity sets you apart from your straight friends? Or are there other things that matter more in creating differences between you and your straight friends?)

Do you think there is a trend toward more young people refusing labels? If so, why do you think this is?

I’m interested in hearing about the role your sexual identity plays in your everyday life. Tell me a little about how being LGBTQ impacts your life.

Do you consider being ___ (sexual/gender identity) a large part of who you are? Why or why not? Something you think about everyday, in how you present yourself, etc.?

If not, explain to me why not. (For example, is your sexuality less important to you than other characteristics/qualities you possess?)

Do you think other people consider your sexual identity to be very important in defining who you are? Family? Friends? (Straight vs. gay?) Etc.

How would you describe your gender identity/expression? (strictly feminine/masculine/trans/androgynous/liquidffects/etc.) Can you talk a little about your views on gender? In society in general, and specific to you?

Do you think ideas about gender have changed in recent years? For example, is there more or less freedom than in previous generations? (to be less traditionally feminine/masculine than your parents or grandparents, for example)

**Topic 4: Activism**

I want to talk now about your experiences participating in activism. First of all, what does activism mean to you? How do you personally define activism?
Would you say that you identify as an “activist”? Why or why not? Is identifying as an activist something that is important to your identity?

When would you say you first started to identify as an activist? Was there a particular event or time in your life you can associate with first identifying in that way? Tell me about that.

Have you ever experienced what you’d consider discrimination/oppression because of your sexual/gender identity? Describe example(s).

Tell me about the types of activism you’ve been involved with (formal and/or informal)

Have you ever been involved in any groups/organizations? GSA or other gay support/social/activist groups inside or outside of school.

Do you have straight friends that participate in LGBTQ activism? Do you see a lot of allies involved in activism? Can you tell me a little about that?

What do you think are some of the best examples of youth engaged in activism locally/on-line?

Do you feel part of an activist community? Why or why not? If so, who is that community comprised of?

Do you feel connected to others who identify as LGBTQ?

Feel connected to others your age? Feel connected to older members of community? Younger?

Perceive any apathy on behalf of peers when it comes to participating in activism?

Do you feel/perceive any divisions in the larger LGBTQ community? If so, tell me about them. Do you think there is a generational divide? Do age differences have an impact on types of activism LGBTQ community engage in?

What are your thoughts on the role of social media and the internet in activism.

Feel a part of a digital community? Role of digital community in activism?

Role of internet, in general for activism or for coming out? – i.e., visibility, open discussions/dialogue, community, etc.
In your opinion, what types of discrimination does the gay community continue to face today?

Let’s talk about the LGBTQ movement on the national level. Have you ever participated in a nationally organized event? What did that participation involve?

Do you have any impressions of the national gay movement in the US? What do you see the role being of large movement organizations, such as HRC or GLAAD?

In your opinion, is the movement on the right track? What do you see as its top priorities? Do you agree with its priorities? What would you do different if you were in charge?

Do you feel like you are a part of the national gay movement?

What about older segments of the LGBTQ community or movement - How do you feel they see you?

What do you think the older LGBTQ community considers your role to be in the community/movement?

I’d like to talk a little about how the LGBTQ movement is connected to other movements.

Do you think HIV/AIDS activism still has a central/prominent place in LGBTQ movement? Or is it a separate movement?

Do you think HIV is considered less of a threat among people in your age group? Or is it something that remains an important concern?

Do you think there are any important ties with other issues? Are LGBTQ issues linked with other issues, in your opinion?

What about connections to other social movements? Do you consider yourself an activist for other movements? Tell me a little about that. See connections to feminist movement? Race, class, etc. movements?