Restoring Lives: Developmental Research on Sexual Orientation

Anthony R. D'Augelli

Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pa., USA

When I first started reading the psychological literature on homosexuality nearly 25 years ago, several omissions were painfully evident. On the positive side, studies were no longer focusing on whether or not lesbian, gay, and bisexual people were mentally disordered; their minds had been rescued from psychopathology with the 1973 removal of homosexuality from the official list of mental disorders. However, the literature I read about 'homosexuals' described people who seemed to spring from nowhere, that is, they were never children or adolescents, and did not seem to have siblings, parents, or grandparents. Nothing in the literature at the time alluded to long-term relationships, or even important friendships. The implicit portrait was of an adult homosexual person, almost always a male, living in a metropolitan area on his own (although having sex on a regular basis – this was not left out!). Although they now had their mental health restored, they still did not have lives.

In essence, what was missing was any focus on their development – over their lifetimes in relationship to others, in distinct social circumstances, and at particular historical moments. For example, in the early 1980s, there were no lesbian or gay adolescents in the professional literature. The gerontological literature did not contain older adults who were lesbian or gay. Research on families did not include same-sex couples or lesbian, gay, or bisexual parents. Helping to finish this fractured portrait was the problematic methodology used in early studies. Although samples were no longer drawn from clinical settings, researchers used small samples found in a limited set of urban gay venues, and were conducted with a model of sexual orientation that had two boxes, gay or heterosexual. (The bisexual box was added later, and the transgendered person – a new gender – would not appear in the psychological literature until the 21st century.) The psychological findings were decontextualized. Research never included such profoundly important factors as the widespread discrimination based on sexual orientation that sealed many in their 'closets,' the harassment and violence that made fear a normative aspect of daily existence, nor even the fact that their private sexual behavior was illegal in most parts of the country. It was remarkable to me that researchers could make generalizations.

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Anthony R. D'Augelli
Department of Human Development and Family Studies
Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802 (USA)
E-Mail ard@psu.edu

Few mainstream developmental researchers cared about any of this two decades ago and probably did not notice the distorted image emerging from studies. The people who repaired the portrait were those of us who had just come out as lesbian or gay and who were willing to take on the professional risks involved with conducting research on this stigmatized, hidden population. Change gradually occurred as their research appeared in high-visibility journals. For instance, the 'gay adolescent' made his (only males were included) first appearance in a professional journal in 1987 in *Pediatrics*. I learned of this when a colleague – who had never discussed my research with me – excitedly showed me the journal. A similar event occurred years later with the appearance in January 1995 of a special issue of *Developmental Psychology* on 'Sexual orientation and human development.' Once again a colleague brought the journal to me, and for the first time discussed research in this area with me. As new research appeared in important journals, others began to pay some attention. Now research on sexual orientation could move from the margins, a bit.

The pace of productivity increased in the mid-1990s. More conceptually important and methodologically rigorous work appeared that would examine lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people over the life span. There were many reasons for this, including the HIV epidemic, which opened the doors on the lives of gay and bisexual men. There was much more visibility of this population in American society, which prompted more people to come out, and at earlier ages. All of this changed the way in which we framed their lives. For instance, as more lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth came out and then became available to take part in our research, we learned how early many understood that they were attracted to their own biological sex, even though they might not yet have the cognitive understanding of its sexual nature. What had been seen as a characteristic of adults turned out to have emerged in late childhood. Some gerontologists finally included this population in their work; there were not only lesbian and gay grandparents, but older gay and lesbian adults in long-term care facilities. A robust literature on same-sex couples and children raised in same-sex households was developing. By the early 2000s, there was sufficient research for a colleague and I to co-edit three volumes reviewing developmentally focused psychological research [D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995, 2001; Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998]. Moreover, we will provide a comprehensive 'state of the science' in an upcoming volume [Patterson & D'Augelli, in press], which shows the progress since those earlier volumes.

Thus it would seem that more components of a developmental approach to sexual orientation are converging to provide a multidimensional, multigenerational portrait. What the change from the early literature to the current situation clarifies is how important it is to include considerations of cohort in understanding sexual orientation. Just as different cohorts had very different professional literatures providing knowledge about lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives, different cohorts of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth develop very different lives. A junior high school student who wonders whether she is lesbian or bisexual can now learn about sexual orientation, even in (some) schools. She can talk to her family about her feelings, assume that they would know what she was talking about, and not fear rejection. As she progresses to high school, she may find that her school has a Gay-Straight Alliance that provides her support. If she is lucky, she lives in an area that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in such essential domains as employment; this might allow her to have openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual

teachers. She will not think that her sexual orientation will limit the kinds of careers she can have. She can date other girls (and boys, if she wants) during her high school years, and her family can help with questions of commitment to another person and child rearing. She can marry (or not). In other words, a 'normal' life is available for this young person. Consider what her life would have been like in 1980, when not even the professional literature acknowledged that youth like her even existed. The life script for a contemporary 'queer' teen may be remarkably similar to that of any other teen. Years of research has literally reshaped development. Note that this is clearly a 'best case' scenario – many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender teens struggle with their futures, contending with hostile families, inhospitable schools, rejecting spiritual communities, and routine victimization.

Having been asked to consider future research directions, I am overwhelmed with the breadth of possibilities. What I hope I have conveyed is that the one-dimensional, marginalized homosexual of the earlier literature has been replaced by many questions about a core human characteristic. What do we need to know to help us understand how all of us develop over the course of our lives in our emotional and sexual attractions and behavior? What methods will generate information that can provide an unbiased, accurate representation of these lives in context? Only a human development model that considers development over the life span, the impact of proximal close relationships, and the impact of social and cultural contexts can adequately frame meaningful questions. As I commented in an early effort at articulating a human development perspective, 'One consequence of a human development view for the study of lesbians and gay men is that to talk about the development of their lives without focus on family, social, institutional, and historical factors is fundamentally distorted' [D'Augelli, 1994, p. 122]. With some of the distortions of the past removed, we can now begin to fill in many blanks. Whether mainstream human development scholars and researchers become part of this process of restoration remains to be seen.

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