InsideOut: Facilitating Gay Youth Identity Development Through a Performance-Based Youth Organization

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This article addresses issues of identity development for youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ), using the concept of a “visible social identity” (Côté & Levine, 2002) as the model for a positive developmental trajectory. LGBTQ youth face more extreme developmental challenges than most mainstream youth, such as learning to manage a stigmatized identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1987) in a potentially hostile environment, making participation in identity-work activities particularly important. Through a case study with About Face Youth Theatre, a performance arts organization in Chicago, this study explores the relation between narrative and identity, and the way in which the public performance of personal narratives both allows youth to explore possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and to see their painful, personal stories independent of themselves, allowing them to move beyond these events toward a positive future.

Inside out, or outside in?
Where do I belong?
Where do I begin?
Inside out I feel in between, every site of every scene.
Black or white
I’m not
Gay or straight
I’m not
Here or there
I’ve got it all.

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All inside out, or outside in.  
(About Face Youth Theatre, 2002)

As the theme song for About Face Youth Theatre’s (AFYT) 2002 production of “InsideOut,” these lyrics exemplify the power that performance has to facilitate the expression of multiple identities for youth. This article explores how youth learn to navigate the tasks of identity development through their participation in performance arts organizations. Although previous research on youth participation in performance arts organizations has demonstrated the characteristics of successful organizations (c.f. Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994), little work has been done to make connections between the artistic processes that comprise the work of the organization and the way youth come to see themselves differently as a result of engaging in these processes. Narrative theorists (c.f. Bruner, 1990; Mair, 1988; Sarbin, 1986; Schank, 1990; Turner, 1997) propose a reciprocal relation between narrative and identity development, in which narrative is both constituted by and constitutive of a person’s self-perception. In this way, participation in a community that performs the life stories of its members allows youth to see their stories (and therefore their identities) represented in different ways and allows youth to explore multiple possibilities for the future by engaging in performances of narratives other than their own.

This research connects the developmental process of “coming out” and the tasks that accompany this process with the telling, transforming, and performing of narratives. Through research conducted with AFYT, I explore both the developmental tasks that the youth of AFYT face, and the way in which the narrative-performance process facilitates identity management. Finally, I propose future research that will document the process of narrative transformation from story to performance to show the connection between this process and positive adolescent identity development.

YOUTH AND PERFORMANCE ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

Much work has already been done to understand the positive impact youth organizations have on the youth who participate in them. A review of the literature on successful community organizations for youth reveals an in-depth picture of the features of these successful organizations, such as providing a safe, social space (Gabarino, 1998; Hirsch et al., 2000), the presence of strong adult leaders (Herd & Boxer, 1993, Hirsch et al., 2000, Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998), and a positive view of youth (Roth et al., 1998). Researchers have also documented the kinds of psychosocial changes that youth experience as a result of their participation in the organization, such as increased motivation (Roth et al., 1998) and autonomy (Eccles et al., 1993) as well as the development of initiative (Larson, 2000).

Researchers who find particular value in arts-based youth organizations point to specific ways in which the performing arts support adolescents in ways that other youth development organizations do not (c.f. Heath, 2000a; Heath, 2000b; Ball & Heath, 1993; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). This foundational work has primarily focused on the environment created by the organization, paving the way for more in-depth work on the process youth engage in through participation in the work of the organization.

Other recent work on arts organizations and youth has turned to the learning processes inherent in the work of the organization. Soep (1996) and Worthman (2002) explored the cognitive skills learned as a result of participation in arts organizations. Soep’s work with a visual arts organization showed that youth learn the language of critique, developing a discourse similar to that of professional artists. Her analysis of their talk over time reveals specific ways in which the work of this organization allows this discourse of critique to come into being (Soep, 1996). In his work with Teen Street, a narrative-based performance arts organization, Worthman (2002) examined the function literacy activities serve in allowing youth to find their own voices.

Building on Worthman’s (2002) work, I explore the connection between literacy activities and what youth learn about their own identities, and specifically the tasks of gay youth identity development unique to this population. Placing the narratives that youth write and adapt for the stage at the center of my analysis, I offer that the narratives of their lives both comprise and construct participants’ identities (Schank, 1990), and that literacy activities such as narrative writing and adaptation are the means to making sense of the way youth see themselves in the world.

CREATING A Viable SOCIAL IDENTITY

Côté and Levine (2002) explored the multidimensionality of identity, where identity can be understood on three interrelated levels of analysis: how we see ourselves, how we relate to others, and how we integrate into the communities to which we belong. Erikson’s (1968) initial conception of identity suggests a balance between the way we see ourselves and the way others see us, marrying psychological and sociological approaches to identity. In their work, Côté and Levine (2002) interpreted Erikson’s work on “identity” in terms of three interrelated dimensions:

- The subjective or psychological dimension refers to the intrapsychic dimension of identity, “ego identity,” or the way one sees oneself. This is known as the “personality” dimension in social psychology or the “mind” in sociology.
Additionally, the ego identity allows environmental aspects of identity to be synthesized into the internal self (Erikson, 1968).

• The personal dimension refers to the way one interacts with others in the world, the kinds of external behaviors exhibited. It is also referred to as “interaction” in social psychology and “self” in sociology.

• The social dimension refers to the broader social roles one takes on in a given community. In sociology, this is known as “society” and in social psychology as “social structure.”

Côté and Levine’s (2002) theory suggests that developing a sense of self involves the synthesis of these three concepts, wherein individuals can reconcile their psychological, personal, and social identities in a way that makes sense to them and to the people in their lives. The synthesis of these dimensions of identity facilitates success in the world; by working to align these three facets of identity, a person emerges as a young adult with a sense of how they fit into their communities:

Our reading of Erikson suggests that for him the *sine qua non* of identity lies in the interplay between the social and the psychic. That is, at some point the individual requires a *viable social identity* regardless of its content. (Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 88)

It is my claim that participation in the AFYT process allows participants to begin to forge connections between these three planes of identity through engagement in the storytelling and performance process.

DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH

For gay and lesbian youth, the tasks of “identity formation” and creating a “viable social identity” (Côté & Levine, 2002) come with additional challenges. Youth who identify as LGBTQ go through a ritualized process of identity development, termed *coming out*. Coming out is defined as “the acknowledgement of one’s homosexuality and the process of sharing that information with others” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1993, p. 622). Researchers have identified developmental tasks that youth must explicitly tackle to achieve a viable social identity as adults who openly identify as a part of the LGBTQ community. This is the “work” of development, the specific issues that gay youth must face in their daily lives. These tasks include the following: unlearning the assumption of heterosexuality (Herdt, 1989; Herdt & Boxer, 1993), identity disclosure (Ryan & Futterman, 1998), and learning to manage a stigmatized identity (Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Ryan & Futterman, 1998). These developmental tasks, although discussed here as unique to youth who come out in adolescence, are all related to the construction and maintenance of a viable social identity. If identity development is about the merging of an internal view of self with a socially constructed, external view of self, learning to manage stigma, stereotypes, and disclosure are crucial aspects of this work for all adolescents.

EXPLORING POSSIBLE SELVES

“Exploring possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Nurius & Markus, 1990; Oyserman, Gant, & Ager, 1995) provides a rich psychological description of the way in which youth arts organizations allow youth to work toward the formation of a viable social identity. According to Markus and Nurius (1986), “Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming, and thus provide a conceptual link between cognition and motivation” (p. 954). This approach implies a more fluid notion of identity, one that demands the acknowledgment of both past and future self-conceptions, and an understanding of the interplay between the past, present, and future, as the way in which identity is formed.

This construct has particular relevance in adolescence, particularly for students whose social environment does not afford legitimated opportunities to explore multiple possibilities (Oyserman et al., 1995; Phillips & Pitman, 2003). In their work with African American adolescents and school achievement, Oyserman et al. (1995) pointed out that “exploring possible selves,” may not be an unproblematic construct: “Thus, though sometimes conceptualized as a psychosocial moratorium in which a limitless array of identities are ‘tried on,’ adolescence seems to involve a general restriction of alternatives for many youths” (p. 1216). Given this reality for many nonmainstream adolescents, explicit efforts must be made to provide legitimate environments that facilitate the construction of multiple possible selves.

Providing adolescents with “the chance to glimpse alternatives,” and “the chance to break out of the boundaries imposed by their isolation,” is often an explicit goal of arts organizations for youth (McLaughlin et al., 1994, p. 107). This argument is particularly relevant for LGBTQ youth, who may not see legitimate possibilities for future selves open to them in their everyday life. By taking on the “stigmatized identity” of homosexuality (Hetrick & Martin, 1987), LGBTQ youth are not only entering a minority culture with traditionally marginalized places in the world, but they also often lose the familial support that many ethnic minority adolescents receive from their families. Thus, the opportunity to participate in organizations that can facilitate and support the exploration of possible selves is a crucial aspect of the adolescent identity process for queer youth.

NARRATIVE AND IDENTITY

Narrative and life story researchers posit a reciprocal relation between narrative and identity (Bruner, 1990; Freeman, 1997; Mishler, 1999; Sarbin; 1986; Schank,
are work; across a variety of social situations stories we tell, and the stories we tell shape who we are. In his view, the youth must learn to manage stigma in their lives as they move through adolescence (Halverson, 2003). Keller-Cohen and Dyer (1997) noted the importance of this relation in social science research:

In contemporary scholarship it has become commonplace to observe that speakers use the site of narratives to construct particular identities [where] each telling of a story offering the narrator a fresh opportunity to create a particular representation of herself. (p. 150)

Bruner (1990) argued that we must look to both the content and structure of the narratives we tell to understand how we construct our identities. Schank (1990) also saw narrative as the fundamental tool by which we construct our own identities. We are the stories we tell, and the stories we tell shape who we are. In his view, identity is not an abstract, psychological concept, but exists only as the narrative we tell of our own lives. The narratives we tell comprise our identities; therefore, if we tell different stories, we become different people.

Researchers have recently begun to explore how this relation between narrative and identity can serve as a research tool. Whitty (2002) claimed that through the narrativization of future experiences, youth are able to explore possible selves in a way unavailable through other, more traditional research methodologies. Her study concluded that, in asking questions about youth identity development, "we should take into account the stories people have about their lives, rather than how their lives simply actualize" (p. 225). Although Whitty's research shows the value of a narrative methodology in helping researchers understand the ways adolescents view themselves, she does not examine the potential for this process to transform he youth themselves. It is my intention to explore the process of telling and transforming true stories into plays as an active way for adolescents to work through and change the way they see themselves. Thus, analyzing organizational processes that pay explicit attention to stories as a means to support their development provides a powerful occasion for understanding how stigmatized youth come to explore their sexual, gendered, and ethnic identities.

CASE STUDY: ABOUT FACE YOUTH THEATRE

All youth must learn to manage stigma in their lives as they move through adolescence (Goffman, 1963). However, those who are not members of the majority culture such as youth of color (Oyserman et al., 1995) or youth with few economic resources (Phillips & Freeman, 2003) may be more prone to the negative effects of taking on a stigmatized identity. LGBTQ youth represent an extreme version of youth who must learn to manage stigmatized identities in their lives, given that traditional institutions such as families, schools, and religious organizations may not be able to provide support (Herdt & Boxer, 1993). For this reason, I chose a youth organization as the site for this research that works exclusively with LGBTQ youth and their allies.

AFYT is a narrative and performance organization whose primary mission is "to foster positive youth development for at-risk youth...and to foster safer, more nurturing learning environments for all young people" (About Face Youth Theatre, 2002). AFYT begins their season with a weekly workshop series, meeting with a cohort of approximately 25 youth, ages 14 to 20, once a week for 14 weeks. Each workshop has a different theme, chosen by the adult leaders. The purpose of these workshops is to provide a safe space where youth can tell the stories of their lives to other queer youth and adult mentors. If youth are more comfortable telling their stories anonymously, they are also given the opportunity to submit their stories through the AFYT Web site (http://www.aboutfaceyouththeatre.com). Throughout the workshop series, youth and adult leaders meet regularly to synthesize the story material gathered at the workshops into themes, which eventually become the organizing framework for their public performance. Through group discussions, writers' workshops, and individual work with material, AFYT develops scripts based directly on the stories told at these workshops as well as stories submitted electronically when the workshops are not in session. The 4 weeks following the workshop series involve an extensive rehearsal process where the preliminary script is adapted and shaped into a play, as workshop participants take up the stories of their cohorts and become the lives of others for the purposes of sharing these stories with a public audience. The culminating event is a 4-week run of this play with six performances per week.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This article chronicles a year-long, ethnographic case study of AFYT that explores the relation between identity development and exploration for LGBTQ youth and their participation in a performance arts organization. In this study, I sought to address the following questions:

• How does being a member of About Face Youth Theatre facilitate the developmental tasks of adolescence, particularly those associated with coming out and being a part of the queer youth community?
• In what ways does the narrative-performance process (the telling of life stories and the subsequent performance of those stories) allow youth to work toward building a viable social identity?

This study explored why participation in these organizations is so powerful for youth, particularly for those who take on a stigmatized identity in adolescence (Goffman, 1963; Hetrick & Martin, 1987; Phillips & Pittman, 2003). In asking
questions about the youth, their community, and the process in which they engage, describe the relation between participation in the narrative-performance process and the development of a viable social identity (Côté & Levine, 2002).

METHOD

Using a multiple-method approach, I collected data from a variety of sources over the course of the AFYT 2002 season, to build a holistic picture of the relation of his narrative work to the youth who engage in it. For the first study, I conducted an analysis of written stories youth submitted to the AFYT Web site; for the second study I conducted interviews with groups of youth to gain their perspective on the kinds of challenges they face and the ways in which participation in AFYT allowed him to take on those challenges.

Collecting multiple forms of data provided access to youth’s experiences with AFYT from multiple perspectives. I was able to observe youth engaging in the core practices of the workshops, collect and analyze the stories that eventually comprised the script for the performance, and talk to youth themselves about their experiences as members of AFYT and as queer youth in the community-at-large. Furthermore, these multiple data sources allow me to understand the relation between what youth say about their identity development processes and what they do to help them engage in these processes. For instance, in interviews, youth discuss at length the challenge of learning to manage stigma in their daily lives. Stories that deal with the topic of managing stigma, then, show that through storytelling and performance, youth are directly able to work through this issue, by both having their story told and by telling others’ stories.

Study 1: Written Stories

The first step in building plays from true stories is to collect material. For the 2002 production “InsideOut,” the AFYT staff received submissions in three forms: (a) oral stories told and performed during the workshop sessions, (b) oral stories told to staff members during personal communications, and (c) written stories submitted anonymously via the AFYT Web site (http://www.aboutfaceyouththeatre.com). For this study, I collected all the stories submitted to the Web site, 34 in total. Stories were posted in theme-based categories, created the previous week during the workshop session. The written stories were submitted to an online discussion forum to insure anonymity for youth to risk the disclosure of their personal stories early in the AFYT process; youth revealed their authorship to the staff only by choice. These written stories represent approximately 50% of the total material submitted to the AFYT staff. Using these written stories as a sample of the writing produced by members of AFYT, I was able to conduct a narrative analysis of the content and structure of their stories, to understand the kinds of identity-related issues they tackle through their writing.

Study 2: Interviews With Youth

At the conclusion of the 2002 season of AFYT, I conducted interviews with two groups of six youth each. The 12 youth were selected to represent the broader population of the 2002 cohort (a total of 42 in workshop and performance) around biological gender, gender identification, sexual preference, and ethnicity. In addition to these criteria, youth were also grouped together to ensure that any youth who told a story that appeared in the play, along with the youth playing the role of that person, were in the same group. This allowed them to engage in a dialogue about the story and how it affected both parties. Group interviews also allowed for more naturalistic responses to questions, as youth could discuss the stories together, rather than directing all responses solely to the interviewer. The purpose of these interviews was to elicit what the youth saw as the challenges facing them as adolescents, as well as their perceptions of how participation in AFYT had affected them (interview protocol are available from the author). These issues were selected both because they emerged as common themes from field notes taken during the workshop sessions, and to understand whether youth faced the same challenges prevalent in the literature on LGBTQ youth identity development.

ANALYSES

Study 1: Written Stories

The written stories demonstrate the ways that youth address the psychological, personal, and social dimensions of their identity as well as their attempts to merge these dimensions into a coherent presentation of self. The analysis that follows illustrates the relation between the stories youth tell and the identities they adopt. Each week, AFYT staff developed guiding questions and themes for these stories, based on the previous week’s workshop. Table 1 outlines the basic themes and prompts presented as options for story submission.

By providing youth with story prompts that explicitly address issues of identity and development, they are given a platform to discuss the challenges of queer adolescence, and to explore the relation between their internal and external views of self. In the analysis of written stories, I explored four basic categories: the internal view of self (psychological); the social, interactive self (personal); the self situated in a broader cultural context (social); and the merging of these dimensions of identity. A narrative analysis of the structure and content of the stories (Labov, 1997; Labov & Waletzky, 1967) helped to define the way these four basic codes are
TABLE 1

Story Themes and Prompts Created by About Face Youth Theatre Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Tell A Story of a Time When ...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrimination</td>
<td>You felt discriminated against within a community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding</td>
<td>You or someone you know had to hide part of your/their identity to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participate in a group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>HIV/STD or AIDS intersected with your life and became real.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Someone misunderstood who you are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to</td>
<td>You realized you were different.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stories</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeform</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

marked. These markers are described in each of the four sections that follow. In addition to the definition of rhetorical markers of identity in written stories, I also analyze the content of the stories relative to these four dimensions, to discuss the way in which AFYT participants use the art of personal narrative to explore and work toward the formation of a viable social identity.

Of the 34 stories submitted to the AFYT Web site, 32 explored at least one dimension of identity. Twenty-three stories explored psychological identity, 17 explored personal identity, and 13 explored social identity. Nineteen of these 32 addressed multiple dimensions of identity and 8 of these stories addressed all three dimensions of identity as well as what the merging of these dimensions of identity might look like.

Psychological

Psychological identity refers to the way that individuals see themselves. This dimension of identity is concerned with self-labeling, not with how others see and label an individual. Self-labeling, primarily in the form of "I am" statements, figures prominently in youth stories. By telling stories, real or imagined, youth are given the opportunity to call themselves something; this label can represent a portion of a youth's self-perception or their holistic view of themselves. These stories give youth an opportunity to give themselves a label, at a time when others are often labeling them, without their input. Stories also provide a safe space for labeling, as they are anonymously posted online. Four different ways of approaching the psychological dimension of identity emerged through these stories: "I am" followed by a literal descriptor, "I am" followed by a metaphorical descriptor, other phrases beginning with "I," and references to self-labeling.

Literal descriptors that followed the phrase "I am" referred to a variety of identities including sexual, racial and ethnic, and religious. The following is a list of the literal descriptors used in written stories:

- "Bi[sexual]."
- "Human and not invincible."
- "HIV negative."
- "American."
- "Black and gay and female and many things in between."
- "A special guy...not a lesbian at all."
- "A very non-religious person."
- "A lesbian."
- "A transgressor person."
- "A girlie girl."
- "A future dyke!"

Metaphorical descriptors also followed the phrase "I am," but paint a more holistic picture of an individual rather than referring to a specific aspect of the person's identity. The following is a list of metaphorical descriptors used in the stories:

- "I am constantly evolving...I am becoming-evolving-changing."
- "I'm the limb broken branch falling in the wind."
- "Me, a pit stop on the highway...me, a tear glistening in the shadows...I am also a daydream believer of homecoming queens."
- "Even I don't understand exactly who I am."

One story is comprised entirely of self-identifiers, both literal and metaphorical. Youth also found ways to self-identify without using the phrase "I am" by employing other active verbs. The following is a list of self-identifiers beginning with phrases other than, "I am."

- "I feel sexy. I feel bare. I feel like I'm powerful. Like I can't hide."
- "I have always been different...I came to realize that being a freak was way cooler than being like everyone else."
- "Once again, this is facet of me laid out on the table for me to see."

Finally, youth make direct references to their own self-labeling, the identities they impose on themselves. These phrases go beyond direct self-identification and reveal an additional understanding of the effects of self-identification. The following are references to the act of self-labeling:

- "The uttering of this word, bisexual, reminds me of my label that I have put on myself."
- "I found it very hard to keep my lesbian identity."
- "I truly did not identify with just one gender."
- "I labeled myself as a gay man."
Personal
The personal dimension of identity refers to the interactions between the self and others, or individual social relationships. These are not broad community identifications, but personal relationships with family members, friends, or individual strangers. Through story, youth are given the opportunity to express their perceptions of the way others see them and treat them. In constructing others' perceptions of them, youth can begin to make sense of the relation between these perceptions and the way they see themselves, (as in the psychological dimension of identity, discussed earlier). In stories that explore the personal dimension of identity, three basic categories emerge. First, youth express self-perceptions that are constructed as a result of interactions with others. These self-labels are different than the ones described earlier, because they exist as a direct result of interpersonal interactions, rather than from internal thoughts and feelings. For example, in a story that describes one youth's struggle to transition from childhood to adulthood, she expresses that she is "sick of being too something for one person and not enough for another." Another way that youth explore the interpersonal dimension of identity is through recognition of externally-imposed labels and perceptions. These statements often take the form of either speaking directly to the other person, "You continue to shun me as tu hermano and call me a fag," or as a recount of a statement made by someone else, "Aren't you a lesbian?" Finally, youth posit their relationships with others as a result of being identified in a certain way. The sections that follow provide the excerpts from stories that address the personal dimension of identity.

Self-perception as a result of interaction with others.
- "The uttering of this word, bisexual, made me again realize just how much I cannot hide anything from anyone, especially my family."
- "Do I let [the homophobic remarks] ride...ashamed and embarrassed of who/what I am?"
- "I was officially uncool."
- "I realized I would never be like them."
- "I was the one who didn't fit in...I was an outsider."

Others' labels and perceptions.
- "You continue to shun me as tu hermano and call me a fag."
- "They tease me and say how funny I am."
- "SPIC, JAP, CHINK, What the hell are you...I know people see me in a particular way because of how I look."
- "One of the boys replied, 'He's a girlie girl.'"
- "You need to stop speaking Spanish with your parents. You need to get rid of your accent they said."
- "HOMOSEXUALITY IS A SIN!! YOU BELONG IN HELL!!"
- "Aren't you a lesbian?"
- "They would think I was a homosexual, and they would be right."

Social
The social dimension of identity refers to the relation between youth and the communities in which they live. This is multifaceted, as everyone belongs to multiple communities and may take on different roles within each of these. Further, some of these communities may be communities of choice (e.g., belonging to AFYT) whereas others may be communities that youth are born into (e.g., a family). Communities also vary in size, from something as local as a school, to broad references to the community-at-large and the identity youth have in this very broad venue. In the stories that address the social dimension of identity, youth explore all of these communities and the way they see themselves in them.

The predominate form of community referred to in written stories focuses on the world-at-large; youth examine both the way they are perceived by this broad community and the way they perceive themselves. In a story titled "Our History," one youth self-identifies as a member of a minority community within the broader mainstream through the use of nonspecific pronouns as a device to explore the dynamic of "us and them." The opening line of the story reads as follows: "They say our history isn't there...so we have to write it."

Although he never specifically identifies the "they" and "we" throughout the story, it is clear that this youth sees himself as a member of a community outside of the norm. Another author creates a similar reference to a generic "them" by defining herself in opposition to a broader society: "They ask me who I am and I can't say." Other stories represent this generic population by naming it, but always leaving themselves outside this sphere:

I was on the outside looking in. The sphere of society was almost out of range at times. But when was I in alliance with America? And now that I'm a "legal" adult, I cannot understand why the world views me as a child more than ever.

Finally, one youth separates herself from society-at-large by recounting the mandate set forth by this society: "You have to go to college and get an education. I get
A's for participation, but I can never score more than a C in the things people think I should know.

In addition to exploring their social identities in relation to society at large, youth also wrote about themselves in relation to more specific communities. These specific communities include school communities, ethnic communities, socioeconomic communities, and the queer community. For example, in a story written by a Latino youth who struggles with being born into an ethnic community that is not always accepting of homosexuality, he reflects on the identity he maintains within his Latino community:

Whenever I walk down Pilsen, Little Village, or Cicero, I can feel my community whisper at my modos, and laugh at my “gayness.” Pero hoto y maricon don’t effect [sic] me anymore. I refuse to be silenced in a community that is very ignorant towards homosexuality.

Although this youth delineates a specific role for himself within the community as a gay man, he still sees himself as a member, referring to it as “my community.” Other youth also identify themselves within these smaller social worlds: “We’re all a bunch of spoiled rich kids,” writes one youth about her school community, taking on this social identity along with her peers. In a story about cutting all of her hair off, one youth acknowledges previously separating herself from the queer community by criticizing its practices: “So what if I’ve ranted on and on about how it’s silly that queer women feel the need to cut their hair short in order to be seen.” This form of criticism places her within the queer community, but in an identity of difference, one that disagrees with some of the communities’ ways of life.

Finally, one youth struggles with having membership in multiple communities. In a poem entitled “Sleepy Safe Space,” she pushes to maintain multiple identities in the social world, “I am black and gay and female and many things in between,” but laments the inability of the external world to accept her this way:

I feel stuck in this world
Where it’s too complex
To be Black
Queer
and Female
All at the same time
So people always want me to pick
Who I am representing today.

In this piece, she both acknowledges her membership in multiple communities and expresses the pressure she feels from the world-at-large to privilege one community over another. She is comfortable with her multiple identities but does not perceive that to be true for those outside of herself.

Merging Dimensions

In about 25% of the written stories, youth merge these planes of identity together, attempting to create what Coté and Levine (2002) have termed a viable social identity. This is accomplished primarily through literary devices that allow the authors to play with voice and point of view. These stories tend to be highly stylized and focus more on the structure rather than the content of the story. This focus on structure allows youth to explore the same issue from a variety of perspectives and to take on others’ views as well as their own. I use two specific examples to highlight the different literary devices employed by youth as a means to merge multiple planes of identity.

In a story that recounts a family vacation to Canada, one youth explores the concept of bisexuality and its relation to her identity:

The uttering of this word, bisexual, has made me again realize just how much I cannot hide anything from anyone, especially my family.

The uttering of this word, bisexual, makes me know how people identify me.

The uttering of this word, bisexual, reminds me of my label that I have put on myself.

The uttering of this word, bisexual, forces me to remember me.

By using the same opening phrase each time, she asks the reader to think about what “the uttering of this word, bisexual,” represents across multiple planes of identity. By taking on the role of “bisexual,” she is aware of how she is perceived by her family (personal plane), by people in the outside world (social plane), and by herself (psychological plane), both as she wants others to perceive her and as she perceives herself. Here, the device of repetition facilitates the recognition that taking on a bisexual identity is relevant across multiple planes.

Voice is another powerful literary device that youth use to think about their identity across psychological, personal, and social planes. In a story that laments the lack of attention paid to non-White populations in queer history, the author takes on the voice of dispassionate outsider, but does so in a way that allows the audience to feel their personal judgment of the way non-White populations have been treated:

No, do not try to mess with your color dials. I know you thought a group as marginalized as the queer community would be able to recognize the incredible atrocity that is America’s binary racial scheme, but it turns out you were wrong. According to the highly intelligent gay gurus in charge of designing this course, the bis-
tory for queer individuals who are neither black nor white does not exist ... If you somehow fit into these categories ... well, you obviously cannot, or there would be writings about you for this class.

The author of this story is Mexican American and purposefully takes on the voice of those who have left his people out of their history classes. This voice, however, is portrayed in such an openly hostile way, “All concerns can be written and delivered to our trashcan, all complaints can be directed to deaf ears,” that the audience is aware of the author’s critique of this persona. By taking on the role of the outsider, he explores how they perceive his identity as queer and Latino. Additionally, in criticizing this voice by exaggerating its lack of sympathy, he is also reflecting his opinion of their perception of him, which is that he will be who is he despite their lack of attention. He is also aligning himself with other members of the queer community of color, who may not have found a way to create an oppositional identity to the predominant view of the queer community as “black and white.” The author is not only representing the way he sees himself and the way outsiders see him, but he is also inserting his perspective on his role in the community-at-large; he willingly takes on an oppositional identity.

Study 2: Interviews With Youth

To establish a relation between the developmental tasks that LGBTQ youth engage in and the AFYT process, interviews with youth focused on their perceptions of the challenges they face as LGBTQ youth as well as the way that participation in AFYT has helped them to manage these tasks. Interviews were analyzed using a coding scheme that synthesizes the literature on identity development, with an emphasis on LGBTQ youth. (See Table 2 for coding scheme.) First, interviews were coded for the developmental tasks specific to taking on a queer identity, as well as youth’s understanding of the relation between engaging in the AFYT narrative-performance process and their ability to manage issues of identity development. In the analysis that follows, I first address the ways that youth understand the developmental tasks that they must face as a result of their LGBTQ identification. Then, I argue that through both having a story performed and by performing others’ stories, youth are allowed to explore these developmental tasks in an explicit way not found in daily life.

Developmental Tasks Revisited

To understand whether the youth of AFYT struggled with the same developmental tasks identified in the literature, during the group interview sessions I asked them, “What was (or is) hard for you about coming out?” In the following section, I provide specific evidence that the developmental tasks outlined in the literature are relevant for this cohort of youth, and give specific examples of how these tasks play out in their everyday lives.

Unlearning the assumption of heterosexuality. Interviews and written stories reveal that although AFYT youth struggle against assumptions about the way adolescents should behave with respect to their sexual identity, assumptions about having a “gay sexual identity” are also included. Rather than assuming that all adolescent youth are straight, those that come out often feel that there is an expectation of behavior, set up in part by current popular media portrayals of gay life. Before youth come out, they are assumed to be heterosexual; once they do, they are assumed to behave like a stereotype.

Youth question the stereotype placed on them as members of the queer youth community:

... part of it is like fitting into this queer identity of like, what do you see on the media like, what do you see and when you don’t fit to what you see, then you’re like, “Am I really gay?” because you don’t see yourself on TV and then you feel even more isolated. (Tino, 7/27/02)

Rather than the assumption of heterosexuality, the assumption these youth seem to be fighting is that they fit into a gay stereotype: “I’ve actually had someone say, ‘um, you know, you need to be more gay’” (Jane, 7/27/02). Other youth also reported struggling with assumptions from outsiders that their behavior will mirror popular media-based stereotypes.

Identity Disclosure

Several youth brought up the idea that knowing who you can and cannot reveal your sexual identity to is a struggle for them. “I think it’s just, it’s a constant process of having to come out to people, seeing who’s ok with it and who’s not,” Tino.

### TABLE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Dimensions of Identity</th>
<th>Developmental Tasks</th>
<th>Exploring Possible Selves</th>
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<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Psychological: Internal sense of identity</td>
<td>Unlearning the assumption of heterosexuality</td>
<td>Personalization of motivation: Making visible internal desires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal: Sense of identity through interactions with others</td>
<td>Identity disclosure</td>
<td>Evidence of existence of possible self (real or imagined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social: Sense of identity through organizational interaction</td>
<td>Learning to manage a stigmatized identity</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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...
a gay male Latino youth noted. Gina, a White female youth, discussed how she deals with people she knows are uncomfortable with her sexual identity:

... when you see certain people, and they ask you certain questions, and you know that they're just completely opposed to your lifestyle, and they're just, like, trying to pry into your life? Yet you don't wanna, like, give too much information? And you're kind of afraid because you know that they're gonna, like, jump all, all down on you for that... So, like, when it comes to that, it's kind of, you have to kind of like, put a blanket over it. (Gina, 7/28/02)

Other comments about the challenge of identity disclosure included a fear of rejection by family, friends, and peers, and an obligation to reveal your sexual identity to everyone, including strangers. Eric, a transgendered biological female, talks about being “exhausted by coming out continually,” ‘cause you have to do it continually.”

Managing a Stigmatized Identity

This is a challenge that youth discussed at length during interview sessions. Youth outlined the dimensions of what it means to manage stigma in their daily lives as a result of their LGBTQ identification. A variety of topics around managing stigma were broached, as youth describe the different ways they have to manage a stigmatized identity:

- Problems with peers and friends isolating themselves from you “Um, just the, the way people treat you... it's just that it's different, you know? They treat you a little bit different, they're a little more cautious...” (Jane, 7/27/02).
- An unsupportive adult community (teachers, administrators, community members)—“But like, the girl I was dating got like, cornered and then molested, like, a couple times. And like, I don't know, I talked to like teachers and they didn't do anything. And um, I talked to the principal and then he yelled at me for being gay... Um, yeah, people were just really, jerks. Like not supportive at all...” (Sandra, 7/28/02).
- Constant questioning from outsiders—Jane: “...a lot of people don’t expect [you to be gay] and then when you tell ’em they're like, so what made you like boys?”
  Robert: “It’s like when did you know?”
  Jane: “You know, like, what, what turned you on about a guy, why don’t you like girls, is, is being with guys better than being with girls?”
  Eric: “Oh, oh, they, all the questions!”
  Tino: “I think that everyone’s always questioning your identity...” (7/27/02).

... and then I just took youth, section, I outline on multiple selves without truly taking on Tino, a Latino male youth, talked about the transition from feeling incapable of playing someone else, to the assumption of this other identity:

Exploring possible selves: Telling someone else's story. In interviews with the 2002 cohort, I asked the youth to reflect on what it meant to them to play another member in their group. Tino, a Latino male youth, talked about the transition from feeling incapable of playing someone else, to the assumption of this other identity:

...I look at Jane and, I'm saying, I'm nothing like Jane, you know what I mean? But somehow it happened, like, and they gave me, you know, the ability and the like, the power to do it. And then I just took it, kind of like, how would, how would I
feel...what would Jane have felt at that moment. And then I just try to put myself in
that. (Tina, 7/27/02)

Tina has made the transition from feeling he is "nothing like" the person he is
portraying, to imagining what Jane (a transgendered biological male) would feel
at a given moment in the scene. This kind of sympathy allowed Tina to open up
to the possibility of taking on a different type of gay identity, and to explore this
part of himself. The story in which Tina plays Jane recounts the first time Jane
tells her mother she wants to be a woman. Jane's mother then dresses her up as
a woman and takes her out on the town. In our interview, Tina says she found a part
of himself that he did not know was there, through the taking on of this
transgendered identity:

Then the wig and the dress and the heels, like something happens, like I just came
out. And I love it, you know what I mean? It's like putting that on, it's a whole—like I
have different bits and pieces of me, of course, but like it's a whole different thing that
happens on stage, like it's so liberating. (Tino, 7/27/02)

Before playing this role, Tina would not have considered taking on a trans­
gendered persona. During a workshop discussion on gender, Tina made a clear
self-identification statement: "For me, I identify as gay and male. I think I would
date a trans, though I only label myself and not others" (field notes, 3/30/02). After
playing this role, however, he talked about the benefits of taking on this very differ­
ent persona. It is "liberating" to relax ideas about yourself through the telling of
others' stories. Tina learned to step outside his own labels and live comfortably in­
side someone else.

Exploring possible selves: Having your story told. Equally powerful for
youth was the experience of having their story performed for a public audience by
other youth. In interviews, youth spoke at length about watching their story transition
from a deeply personal experience to an anonymous scene in a play. Of the five
youth who were asked about the experience of having their story told, four of them
reflected on how it feels to see his story performed: "[About Face] made me put my
story out there and got, and detached from it. And they made me grow and they
made me like, um, like, leave the past behind and go on with the future" (Robert,
7/27/02).

In seeing his story performed outside of himself, Robert was able to distance
himself from the events of his past to take positive steps forward in his life.

Kelita, an African American lesbian youth, discussed how it was not until her
story was performed for an audience that she was able to gain the distance from her
story that youth claim is so helpful in allowing them to shape their future selves:

I really had to let go "cuz it really wasn't funny to me at all? Like, that scene's not
funny to me? Ever? But like, it is. Like, now I can laugh at it. Which is like, really
good because, you know, that's one of those relationships that like, bothers you for
the rest of your life... Like, when you pull it away from yourself? You can like, look
at it and laugh. (Kelita, 7/28/02)

Kelita's story about her experience dating a female-to-male transgendered per­
son who questioned Kelita's sexual identity because she was dating a male, was a
painful experience for her. But having her story performed, and allowing that story
to take a life of its own beyond her internal interpretation, gave new meaning to the
story for the audience, the actors, and most importantly, for Kelita.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This article represents the first findings presented from an extensive research pro­
ject that will probe the connection between the narrative-performance process and
adolescent identity development. Here I established that the youth who participate
in AFYT struggle with the same kinds of developmental tasks as other queer
youth. The notion of learning to manage a stigmatized identity is potent, but gen­
eral. The youth of AFYT identified multiple ways that they must learn to manage
stigma in their lives: feeling isolated from peers and friends, unsupportive adult
community, constant questioning from outsiders, feeling different, and fear of
physical harm.

Written stories, one primary form of material gathering for AFYT's 2002 pro­
duction, "InsideOut," allowed youth to explore the three planes of identity: psy­
chological, personal, and social. In many cases, youth were able to use creative
writing as an external media to merge these dimensions together, providing them
with an outlet to work toward the development of a viable social identity. Transfor­
}
possibilities for the future by separating from the events of their lives and taking on the roles of other LGBTQ youth.

This work is potentially generalizable to other populations of youth who struggle with the management of stigmatized identities, particularly minority youth and youth with few socioeconomic resources. By recognizing this as a critical developmental task that many groups of youth must contend with, we can open a space to build communities with the tools and resources to support these youth with positive outlets to manage stigma. The ways in which community organizations that work with gay youth handle this task may provide insight for other groups of socially stigmatized youth.

The first step of this research program, outlined in this article, demonstrated how the AFYT narrative-performance process allows gay youth to work toward the formation of a viable social identity. Once the connection is established between identity development and the narrative-performance process, the next step is to understand how this process works. In other work, I examine the process of transforming narratives from a personal story to a public performance, and specifically, what youth learn as their own narratives change over time. I am currently tracing the narratives of six individual youth through the AFYT process, from initial telling to final performance. Uncovering the design principles of how narrative-performance groups facilitate youth identity development should open new doors for educators, psychologists, social workers, and program developers to help stigmatized youth come to terms with their identities.

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REFERENCES


**BOOK REVIEW**


Reviewed by Jane  
*Department of Psych; University of*  
*Temple, A*

What does it mean to be an adult? Why do so many adults seem to settle for a restricted version of what they might become? Are adults merely "grown versions" of their prior selves? What are the potential goals and purposes of adulthood understood in biopsychosocial terms? These are the types of questions guided Erik Erikson's professional inquiries during his own adult years as those of Carol Hren Hoare in her groundbreaking journey through Erikson's published and unpublished documents.

Although Erikson is perhaps best known for his theoretical and clinical contributions to an understanding of the identity formation process during adolescence and optimal personality development across the entire life span, the psychoanalyst also spent a significant portion of his own adult life attempting to answer questions such as those listed earlier. Following the publication of *and Reasons* in the 1970s (Erikson, 1977) when Erikson himself was in his sixties, he wrote a letter to Dorothy Burlingame indicating that he could not leave the field of adolescent as Freud had done; rather, he felt bound to undertake what drove the mature adult forward through the remainder of the life. Erikson published several volumes devoted solely to an understanding of various portions of the adult life span (e.g., *Gandhi's Truth*, 1969; *Adulthood*, 1979; *Involvement in Old Age*, 1986). He also undertook a large-scale project to consider what it means to be an adult by inspiring the "Conference of Adult," organized through the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Following his many discussions and reflections on adulthood, Erikson neve

Many of his important ruminations have remained archived in libraries not