

# Children of HORIZONS



**how gay and lesbian teens**

**are leading a new way**

**out of the closet**

**GILBERT HERDT**

**ANDREW BOXER**

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## Children of Horizons

*We dedicate this book  
to the courageous youth of Horizons,  
vanguard of a new generation*

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The true name of the agency "Horizons" is used throughout this book. It refers to the existing agency in Chicago, "Horizons Social Services Inc.," and we wish to thank the agency for permission to use the real name. We also use the real name of the director of the agency during the time of our study, Bruce Koff; and we thank him for this too. All other names of individuals in this book are pseudonyms unless otherwise indicated, a step we have taken to protect their true identities, consistent with standard social science practice. We regret that we cannot use the true names of the teenagers we came to know and who so generously opened their lives to us.

Lastly, we dedicate this book to the courageous youth of Horizons, without whom we would not only lack a study, but whose bravery and openness, as revealed in the story of coming out they have shared

with us, have enriched and changed our own lives forever. We hope that they enjoy this token of our respect and friendship.

*Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer*  
Chicago, Illinois



## P R E F A C E



A small storefront community center on North Sheffield Street in the city of Chicago bears a modest wooden sign in the window that reads "Horizons Social Services." The center serves as the major community-based social service agency for the gay men and lesbians of Chicago. It dates from the early 1970s and the "gay sexual revolution," when it emerged as the mainstream hub and heart of the gay and lesbian community. Originally founded as a nonprofit organization, it was staffed entirely by volunteers and funded by public and private grants. Its purpose was to provide legal, educational, and mental health services to adults who were struggling to come out.

Thus, the adult gays and lesbians of Horizons pioneered in the Midwest what was to become a new social phenomenon in the United States: the adolescent coming-out group. In New York, Minneapolis, Seattle, and San Francisco, gay- and lesbian-identified youth would participate in similar groups. And in the coming decade, new gay youth institutions would be founded, such as the Harvey Milk School in New York for gay youth, "Project 10" in Los Angeles schools, and the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth in New York.

By 1978, more and more youth were finding their way to Horizons, which in turn created a support system in the form of a Saturday afternoon "rap group" for Chicago teens (aged fourteen to twenty) in the process of coming out as self-identified lesbian and gay youth. This book is a study of these youth and the agency that facilitates their coming out. But it is also the story of how these youth are the offspring of a historical process that has given birth to a new gay and lesbian culture in the United States.

We conducted a two-year study of Horizons' youth between 1987 and 1988. The support group for youth was the immediate setting

of the study. The project was uniquely interdisciplinary, combining anthropological and psychological theory and methods with the holistic study of the emerging gay and lesbian youth culture. In addition to an ethnographic and historical study of Chicago's gay community and institutions, we conducted interviews with 202 (147 boys and 55 girls) self-identified gay and lesbian youth (aged fourteen to twenty) who are approximately representative of Chicago's population (though they are not a random sample). All of their names and identifying characteristics have been changed. We have discovered, through psychological testing and interviews, that the youth of Horizons are psychologically normative, in almost all regards, compared to their heterosexual peers. These youth are neither mental patients nor run-aways; many are in school and most of them live at home, usually with their parents. Almost all of them aspire to have what they call a "normal" life.<sup>1</sup> It is a utopian goal, in the face of bigotry and harassment, because they not only want to be gay but expect to be accepted by society as gay and lesbian. They do not know if they can achieve such a cultural lifeway, but they are trying very hard to find out.

We wrote this book to explain the situation of gay and lesbian youth in Chicago as we have found it. Our research shows that there is no stereotyped "gay" youth nor one prototype of a young "lesbian." Desire for the same sex does not obey the strictures of age, class, ethnicity, religion, or political persuasion. Gay and lesbian youth come in all sizes, shapes, and colors, from all manner of social backgrounds. What we have found cannot be described purely as a matter of individual desires or of collective social structures. What brings youth together at Horizons is the very process that forges culture. Our work shows that gay and lesbian culture is the result of a process by which historical forces and social events and practices lead the youth out of the alienation of secrecy into the public solidarity of gay and lesbian culture.

This book is not meant to represent all youth who experience same-sex desires during adolescence. It is about a special group of these teens, a historical cohort who are in the process of self-identifying as gay or lesbian. They have been resourceful enough to find the Horizons youth group, though not without many trials and struggles, as we shall see. Their resilience makes them distinctive. We are aware that many youth who feel attracted to the same sex may not find their way to Horizons until later, or not at all; and we are equally aware of the need that exists in many other cities and towns to create groups

where none exist. The stories of those youth who continue to be hidden are likely to be different than the experience of youth documented in this book.

As we have presented the preliminary findings of our research—to national scientific meetings in anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, education, and public health; to colleagues in seminars across diverse academic fields; to university task forces on issues of gay and lesbian education; to public high school counselors; and lay groups—we have found, time and again, a common concern raised by diverse Americans: “Aren’t these youth at Horizons just confused? Aren’t they like other teenagers who are going through a “stage” of sexual development, who are not homosexual, but who don’t know who or what they are?” And then we have heard two stronger complaints. “Shouldn’t these youth be protected from homosexuals—who might victimize them? Isn’t this agency socializing these confused teens, brainwashing them into making sexual choices from which they should be protected?” These questions represent a misunderstanding of the development of lesbian and gay youth. They rest, in part, upon antiquated and misleading stereotypes from the popular and scientific folklore on the origins of “homosexuality.”<sup>2</sup>

As we will show in the following chapters, the youth of Horizons are not confused about their sexual identities, but they are confused about what to do with them. Usually they have nowhere to turn in exploring and expressing the dimensions of their identity because they feel hindered from approaching parents, friends, and teachers whom they fear will disapprove of or dismiss their feelings, or worse. They turn, sometimes in desperation, to the Horizons agency for a refuge of social support and peace of mind; and for some of them the agency becomes a symbolic second home, a way station preceding the larger stage of adult life. They are not “brainwashed” or absorbed into a cult; they are not socialized into a sexual identity, nor do they have sexual “choices” made for them, any more than these choices are made for heterosexual teenagers. Rather, for the first time in their lives, they begin to talk openly about sexual feelings with peers and friends of their own age who show them respect, finding others like themselves, and adult role models, whom they can admire. Their worst fears are that they are “out of their minds,” full of sin or disease, that they are doomed to dress as transvestites, molest children, hate the opposite sex, or contract AIDS, which may lead them, if they remain alone and isolated, into desperate acts of risk, including drugs

or suicide. At the Horizons agency, these fears can eventually be laid to rest. Another country has opened up its arms to them: the gay and lesbian community.

But why study the cultural and developmental problems of gay youth? Of what general import are these youth—who are usually thought of as “deviant”—to an understanding of the problems of human life in other times and places? The answers, it seems to us, speak to basic processes of becoming and being a person, and of constructing social rituals to this end, all of which further the struggles of youth to feel good about their own society and to take their place as worthy members of the emerging lesbian and gay culture. The stories of the youth of Horizons tell of their search to find themselves and to locate the new culture of lesbians and gay men, which is to become so much a part of their lives. These narratives reveal the very opposite of the stereotypes we Americans harbor regarding the mythology of the secret homosexual. These are the brave pioneers of a new generation whose special nature affords an insight into the timeless struggle to be human in the larger sense.

In spite of the prejudice and stigma, these are resilient youth. They struggle to overcome hatred to others and guilt in themselves. They work harder than their heterosexual peers to gain understanding and acceptance from those around them, especially the people they love. They struggle harder to achieve excellence and success in school and competence in their jobs because of their hiding, isolation, and fear of discovery. And always—just beneath the surface of these everyday struggles—lies another noble task: to feel worthy and valuable, to find respect for themselves as objects of self-love. That most youth succeed and excel in social development, in their competencies at home, school, work, and with friends and lovers in social relations, is a testimony to the remarkable resilience of the human spirit.

## **Perspectives and Methods**

Our study of sexual identity development is novel in certain respects; we are probably the first team of social scientists to tackle these issues in an interdisciplinary voice. We are a psychological anthropologist (Herdt) and a developmental psychologist (Boxer). We address both the levels of culture and of individual development, and this “bifocal vision,” as the American anthropologist Edward Sapir once referred to a similar perspective, requires us to be somewhat more self-conscious

about the narrative voice that we choose throughout the text. We thus feel compelled to identify ourselves more fully than has been the case in the past for reasons we shall explain; namely, the need to describe our theory, methods, and research procedures for those who would like to undertake similar studies in future; and we must identify our audiences in order to make clear our communications to the reader.

First, by sexual orientation we are both gay men, and we believe that this information is important to the reader as we shall make clear. Herdt is a forty-three-year-old man who is in a committed relationship to another man who is also a scholar. Boxer is a forty-year-old man in a committed relationship to another man who is a pediatrician. Our separate careers, relationships with our respective lovers and families, and our friendship and mutual research collaboration have brought us to this point of fitting our professional identities with our personal lives. Our book constitutes another level in the process of our own coming out, integrating the professional with the personal, though we are publicly "out" and are already recognized for work as individual scholars and also as a collaborative team in the area of sex and gender research.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, neither of us has placed our sexual identity in the forefront of our books or papers; like many other gay and lesbian scholars in the field it has remained implicit that we are gay.

We have utilized a collaborative team approach that combines the talents of several gay men and lesbians in studying culture (anthropology) and the individual life course (developmental psychology). Each of the components of our project were headed by a study director: an ethnographic and historical study of Chicago's gay and lesbian community (by anthropologist Richard Herrell); an ethnographic study of gay and lesbian youth and of the Horizons' agency (by Gilbert Herdt); a developmental study of the youth through interviews and psychological assessments (by Andrew Boxer, assisted by Herdt and Floyd Irvine, a clinical psychologist); and a study of the parents of gay men and lesbians (conducted mainly by Andrew Boxer). In this book we present the findings of the first two studies, together with information from the third study.<sup>4</sup>

Being a team of gay researchers suggested advantages and problems in the conduct of our study. Being gay made it possible for us, both by social identity and by sensitivity to the issues, to gain entry into the gay and lesbian community, including the Horizons agency. Taking the cue of anthropology we have sought to understand Hori-

zons and the youth in terms of the language and culture of real actors in natural contexts. In fact, it was mainly because of our gay identities that we were allowed to work at Horizons. A special characteristic of the community is the small town, face-to-face quality of social relations. Although Chicago is a large city, its gay community is small, with a social network of intense and overlapping fields. This poses special problems for research in a different way than it does for psychotherapy with gay and lesbian clients, a point made by John Gonsiorek some years ago.<sup>5</sup> We were able to gain a level of trust from the Horizons agency that ensured the validity of our information.

In the past, it was assumed in science that the investigator was heterosexual, and this assumption, even in "cultural studies" today, is unchallenged unless the author indicates otherwise. In thinking about the new culturally conscious perspective, we have puzzled over why scholars have generally ignored the moral voice of gays and lesbians whose development is heavily influenced by cultural processes of coming out. One's identity, including the sexual aspect of identity, is no different than other factors in research that inhibit the discovery process. Thus it is important to communicate to readers in publications how the investigators presented themselves and their identities to informants or respondents in research, as this element entered the conduct of research.

It remains one of the remarkable social facts of sex and gender research that virtually all studies fail to identify the sexual identity of the investigators. Some writers today, particularly in humanistic studies, declare their identities as gay or lesbian, but this critical piece of information is still usually hidden in the social and natural sciences, although there are signs of change.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as Herdt and Robert J. Stoller have suggested in another context, all research—whether in anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, or any other field—must grapple with the fundamental problem of how the researchers' identities and experience enter into the observations and findings of a study.<sup>7</sup> Studies of "homosexuality" are no different; it is often assumed that the research scientist is gay or lesbian, but this is neither explicitly stated nor questioned; so researchers have, in general, remained as hidden as their homosexual or gay subjects (see chapter 1 on the distinction between homosexual and gay subjects). This is not just because of the proscriptions of the canon of normative science. Another powerful reason is the stigma attached to sex research in general and to homosexual research in particular.<sup>8</sup> There has long been a tendency to mute

the researchers' identity, and some misuses of homosexuality research have resulted from this hiding. In fact, many works on homosexuality that have appeared during the past century can be historically attributed to writers who were explicitly homosexual or gay, though they did not reveal their identities in the text. We believe that the discovery narrative is important to findings in the history of homosexuality research. Today, when our identities remain hidden to the reader, it is difficult both to understand the conduct and validity of the research and to compare the results (positive or negative) to other studies.

While we have tried to minimize the potential bias of sexual identity in this work, this factor must be taken into account through training and interpretation processes. Otherwise the results are skewed. What kind of identities and behavior did we communicate to the adults and youth in our research? The interview and observational material you will read did not come out of thin air, nor was it derived from just any interviewer. The structure of the present study is based upon the advantages and difficulties of its being conducted by a team of gay investigators with the assistance of a group of heterosexual (male and female) and gay- and lesbian-identified interviewers. In retrospect, we recognize a slant toward the study of gay males. In part this bias results from the numerically large number of boys than girls in the 1987–1988 youth group (see chapter 3); it is also partly a result of the fact that the historical material from Chicago available to us was predominantly concerned with homosexual and gay men (see chapter 2). Furthermore, we self-consciously recruited white, black, and hispanic interviewers to give the youth a choice from a full range of people, regarding the sexual identity, gender, and the color of our interviewers. We believe this heightened the research "alliance" of rapport in the interview.

To locate and train interviewers for this study took more than a year. Many applicants were turned down. The training procedures related to interviewing were complex and laborious because we required empathic but rigorous people who could create an effective research alliance for three or four hours in interviewing youth. We experimented with various forms of training graduate students and lay persons to interview gay and lesbian youth. Time and again in our study we saw the difference that knowing the sexual identity of the interviewer makes in the response of the informant. Our sensitivity to the issues enabled the entire research team to bear witness to the coming out process of these youth: implicitly and explicitly to give



youth "permission" to share candidly their life stories with us. Ultimately, our procedures suggest that with proper training in cultural and clinical interviewing, other projects of a similar kind can be undertaken around the country.

We have struggled to find the clearest and least offensive way of representing the voices of different kinds of persons. The impersonal language of "male" and "female" so often used in works on sexuality and gender does not correspond to ordinary language. "Boy," "girl," "man," and "woman" are preferable terms. But when in a culture does someone qualify as, say, a "boy" and not a "man"? At what age is it better to speak of a "young woman" rather than a "girl"? To avoid both clinicalism and sexism we have adopted the following conventions. We usually refer to people under the age of twenty-one as boy or girl, and collectively as youth. For those over this age we use man or woman, and collectively adults. Adolescent, youth, and teenager are used variably to refer to persons between the ages of thirteen and twenty.

Who are our audiences? First there are the Horizons' youth, who opened their lives to us and shared their life stories, but only on the condition that we would in turn share our knowledge with others. The reason for this was clear: the youth felt a sense of being trapped in out-moded stereotypes not of their own making. They expected us to help break down these myths, to ease the burden and fears of coming out for the next generation of youth. No less a challenge is their utopian desire to *change their society*—to eliminate the bastard forms of homophobia that stalked them in growing up, waiting for them in their parents' homes, school classrooms, friendships, and the neighborhoods of their own city. Our research project provided these teens with another confirmation of their existence. As you will see in chapters 5 and 6, our narrative study gave the youth a new context in which to come out—and not just to anyone, but to older, adult gay and lesbian positive role models—who cared enough to understand and listen to them.

We have studied parents, too, and we are very aware of the problems they face in accepting and understanding their children. We hope that our study will speak to these adults in a new way that provides basic insights into their dilemma of accepting their children as gay men and lesbians. We also hope that adult gay and lesbian readers, looking back on their own development, will see both similarities and differences in the stories of the youth. Of course, times



have changed; there is a new generation of youth, whose standards and ideals are possibilities unknown to those of us who grew up in the past. We have tried to show from our study, however, the lifelong nature of coming out, anticipating new futures for youth.

We also speak later to social service providers who find themselves confronted with the policies and problems of gay and lesbian development. Mental health and social service providers, public health officials concerned with AIDS education and prevention, and teachers and counselors will find new information here for the creation of effective strategies and policies of social action.

Finally, we hope that this book will make a contribution both to developmental theory and to culture theory. We would like to think that in asking how sexual identity emerges in context we have returned to a central problem of human life that our intellectual ancestors, such as Freud and Margaret Mead and Alfred Kinsey, have pondered.

We entered into our project at Horizons with a promise to the youth that we would tell people about the lives of gay and lesbian youth. Our book speaks to their experiences, and we write in the hope that young people in other places and times will benefit from the story of the challenges and struggles of Chicago youth. It is powerful to watch these youth find themselves throughout the youth group, wherein they explore and forge identities that “feel right” to them. Such a journey in the search for identity is heroic in the sense of searching deeply within the human spirit, and in society, to create loving social relations. The youth thus aspire to a utopian vision of the world and their place in it; and the adults aim to provide for this utopia in their culture building. From such a utopian idea once sprang “The Children of the Dream,” psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s classic study of people born and reared on collective farms (*kibbutzim*) created by the visionaries of the modern state of Israel.<sup>9</sup> *Children of Horizons* represents a similar kind of historical outgrowth of a new culture, and our work on these “children” belongs to the study of all such utopian visions—a freedom movement born from the moral cry of “coming out.”