In the wake of It Gets Better

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Now that the “It Gets Better” (IGB) DIY viral videos production has quelled a bit, perhaps this is the time to take stock of the recent spate of “queer youth suicides” and the consequences of the media coverage. Initially prompted by gay journalist Dan Savage’s response to Tyler Clementi’s and other suicides of young gay men, IGB became a veritable campaign. But in the weeks since the suicides were aggregated as a problem, specifically one of “bullying gay youth”,

429
many have been asking what is being forgotten in the push to imagine “gay youth” as exceptionally susceptible to bullying and suicide.

As noted early on by cultural critic Tavia Nyong’o, Savage’s IGB video is a mandate to fold into urban, neoliberal gay enclaves, a form of liberal handholding and upward-mobility that echoes the now discredited “pull yourself up from the bootstraps” immigrant motto. Savage embodies the spirit of a coming-of-age success story. He is able-bodied, monied, confident, well-travelled, suitably partnered and betrays no trace of abjection or shame. His message translates to: Come out, move to the city, travel to Paris, adopt a kid, pay your taxes, demand representation. But how useful is it to imagine troubled gay youth might master their injury and turn blame and guilt into transgression, triumph, and all-American success?

Despite this critique, the IGB project should hardly be dismissed out of hand. Quite the opposite: its virality is in itself interesting, generating many touching videos, from Project Runway’s Tim Gunn’s personal account of his suicide attempt to teen-produced videos such as Make It Better. It is no doubt crucial that IGB opened space for the expression of public anguish and collective mourning.

Many, however, have been struck with how these deaths have been made to serve the purpose of highlighting an exceptional class of aspirational gay citizens at the expense of others. Part of the outrage and upset generated by these deaths is precisely afforded through a fundamental belief that things are indeed, better, especially for a particular class of white gay men. For example, a blogger known as “femmephane” queried, in response to Savage’s video, whether it was possible to honour these tragedies “without turning them into an icon of suffering or of hope, without using their story for a soundbyte, without using their life as your proof of goodness, or of how the world is so liberal, or how it’s great to be gay?”

Although lauded by gay liberals for having “done something” to address the recent spate of queer youth suicides, critics note that queer people of colour, trans, genderqueer and gender nonconforming youth, and lesbians have not been inspirationally hailed by IGB in the same way as white gay male liberals. Quiet Riot Girl writes: “Basically the YouTube project suggests support for queer youth has to stay ‘on message’ and ‘upbeat’. Dissent and diversity does not seem to be encouraged. This is borne out by the vast numbers of videos being uploaded by white university-educated gay men, in comparison to those from women, transgender people, and working-class people, and people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.”. Diana Cage echoes: “We’re fans of the IGB project started by Dan Savage to address bullying and reach out to LGBT teens. It’s beautiful and well-intended, and I’m thankful it exists. But seriously, we all know it gets better a lot sooner if you are white, cisgendered, and middle class.”

The momentum from IGB has therefore convened a fairly predictable array of US liberal gay movement anger towards conservative opposition to anti-bullying legislation, as well as gay marriage bans, even as the apparently “sudden” spate of queer suicides appears irreconcilable with the purported progress of the gay and lesbian rights movement. What these comments suggest is that IGB is based on an expectation that it was supposed to be better. And thus IGB might turn out to mean, you get more normal.
Ultimately, the best part of the viral explosion of Savage’s project is that so many have chimed in to explain how and why it doesn’t just get better. The very technological platform of the phenomenon allows the project to be critiqued from within. As the reactions demonstrate, a number of complicating concerns have emerged as a result of the viral explosion of IGB. Latoya Peterson, for example, highlights the introduction of an alternative video campaign launched by the Embracing Intersectional Diversity Project, who argue that “the lack of discussion about the effect/impact of racism on how bullying and homophobia take shape is not only dismissive, it is in fact irresponsible.”

Another concern that has been highlighted regards a widespread claim about how queer youth commit suicide more often than their straight peers, a statistic that is not necessarily accurate. Laurel Dykstra worries about seeming unsupportive or unsympathetic by questioning this oft-cited empirical “fact”, pointing out that Aboriginal youth in Canada and the US might have a higher suicide rate than queer youth. Alec Webley, meanwhile, writes: “The problem is not homophobia. The problem is bullying.” Webley argues that teenage bullying is a widespread phenomenon that affects youth who are “different” and “don’t fit in” of many persuasions; he also highlights the wide prevalence of workplace bullying. Even Barack Obama, who added his contribution to IGB several weeks ago, made note to expand the register of who gets bullied in school beyond this narrow version of gay identity propagated by Savage.

These are only a handful of the many commentators that contributed to the debate surrounding IGB. While it is clear that there is no consensus as to the most responsible reactions to the recent spate of queer suicides, it is imperative that this conversation is connected to broader questions of social justice in terms of race, class and gender. Otherwise, projects like Savage’s risk producing such narrow versions of what it means to be gay, and what it means to be bullied, that for those who cannot identify with it but are nevertheless still targeted for “being different”, It Gets Better might actually contribute to Making Things Worse.