

Title: The Paradox of Progress for Sexual and Gender Diverse Youth

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Highlights

- There is a “developmental collision” between typical adolescent development processes and the visibility and identity development of sexual and gender diverse youth.
- Despite dramatic social change in attitudes regarding sexual and gender diversity, disparities related to health and health behavior have widened.
- New studies illuminate diversity in patterns and sequelae of sexual and gender identity development.
- Numerous laws and policies have been proposed or enacted in the early 2020s that curtail rights for sexual and gender diverse youth; emerging evidence shows the strong link between policies that promulgate stigma and youth well-being.

Abstract (98 words)

In this essay, we explore diversity in sexual and gender identities, with a focus on implications of the current politicized moment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning youth. As youth come out at younger ages, their personal identity development collides with the adolescence period characterized by peer influence, stigma, and possible victimization. We consider the changing and diverse experiences of coming out in adolescence for sexual and gender diverse youth. The current social and political moment offers possibilities for new identities, yet anti-LGBTQ+ legislative and policy actions have crucial implications for health and wellbeing for youth.

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Introduction and Background

The arc of social change with respect to sexual and gender diversity – or to people who [historically] identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+) – has been irregular and unbalanced in recent years. In the half-century leading up to 2020, many scholars reflected on the swift and unprecedented pace of social progress and rights of LGBTQ+ people in the United States [1]. In fact, the speed of social progress throughout the 2000s had many believe that health and behavior risks for LGBTQ+ youth would dissipate alongside social progress. Yet despite societal and legal advances that suggest affirmation and acceptance, LGBTQ+ youth continued to experience discrimination, prejudice, and bullying, and consequential poorer well-being (including compromised school performance and behavioral and mental health) [2,3]. In fact, sexual and gender identity-related health disparities have been stable or even widening among youth [4–6]. Further, more recently there has been significant political backlash, including a spate of proposed and enacted legislation and policy aimed at curtailing rights for LGBTQ+ people. Most of those legislative or policy actions focus on schooling and gender-affirmative care for youth, and thus sexual and gender diverse youth have emerged at the center of U.S. “cultural wars” [7]. How do the social changes of the last 50+ years align with what we know about the lives of contemporary LGBTQ+ youth?

Beginning in the late 20th century, greater visibility and rights for LGBTQ+ people allowed youth to recognize and acknowledge diverse sexual and gender identities earlier in life [8,9]. The average age of coming out to a friend as LGB dropped from age 24 in the 1970s to younger than age 16 for youth coming out in the 2010s [8]. With the declining age of coming out for today’s youth, acknowledgment and disclosure of sexual and gender diverse identities occur during a developmental period when youth are uniquely susceptible to peer influences, but at the

same time remain financially and emotionally reliant on their caregivers. This is also a period when peer approval is integral to self-concept, but also when youth are most prone to peer victimization and harassment, particularly regarding “deviations” in sexual and gender norms [10]. Coming out in the context of the typical challenges of early adolescence creates a “developmental collision” – that is, a collision between sexual identity awareness and normative adolescent developmental processes [1]. This collision places contemporary SGD young people at risk of poorer health, a pattern that begins in adolescence and may carry across the life course.

Notably, transgender and gender diverse youth have experienced especially inequitable progress and vehement pushback. As data become available, studies document that transgender youth experience similar or greater disparities in mental health, substance use, and access to health care than cisgender heterosexual youth, and even their cisgender sexual minority peers [11,12]. Like cisgender sexual minority youth, transgender youth are acknowledging and disclosing their gender identity at younger ages [9], while structural and interpersonal stigma continues to instigate barriers to accessing social and medical support. These dynamics contribute to poorer mental health, elevated substance use, and social marginalization for transgender and gender diverse youth relative to their cisgender peers [13,14].

In this essay, we explore diversity in sexual and gender identities, and diversity in their development. We consider the experiences of coming out in adolescence, including the larger body of research on sexual orientation (i.e., LGB youth) and the smaller but growing body of research on transgender and gender diverse (TGD) youth. This discussion of developmental diversity provides a backdrop for discussion of the current social and political moment, one characterized by both possibilities for new identities, yet consequential anti-LGBTQ legislative and policy actions change the stakes for sexual and gender diverse youth.

Diversity in Sexual and Gender Identity Development

A decade ago, understandings of sexual identity were beginning to expand beyond historically typical categories: gay, lesbian, and bisexual [15]. Gender identity and expression were understood as distinct from sexual orientation and identity. Although the distinctions remain relevant – that is, that sexual identity describes identity based on physical or romantic attraction, whereas gender identity reflects one’s sense of being male, female, both, or neither – more and more youth identify with labels that blur the binaries of sexuality (gay or straight) and gender (male or female), and that blur the distinctions between sexuality and gender (genderqueer) [16,17].

However, with ongoing social change, contemporary youth may overestimate the support they will receive from family and friends [18,19]. A study that compared differences in parent responses to coming out as LGB across different age cohorts found that validating responses from parents were more common in recent cohorts (teens in the 2010s compared to those who were teens in 1990s or 1970s), consistent with increasing societal attitudes of support and acceptance. At the same time, invalidating responses were equally frequent across cohorts [19]. The study documents that although there have been increasing opportunities for visibility and support, experiences of stigma and discrimination have not abated.

More recent research elucidates the complexity of LGBTQ+ youth’s lives as they navigate visibility and disclosure of SGD identity and expression, documenting diverse patterns of development, interpersonal relationships, and consequences related to “coming out”. Two new studies compare sexual identity development milestones (e.g., acknowledging difference, first “coming out” to friends, first same-sex relationship) across cohorts in a national probability sample. One study showed that LGB people from more recent cohorts reported earlier milestones

and quicker pacing between milestones relative to those from older cohorts and identified considerable gender and race/ethnic diversity in milestone development [8]. A second study identified distinct patterns in milestones; in older cohorts, LGB people reported same-sex sexual behavior a year or more before they disclosed LGB identities to others, whereas more recent cohorts showed closer timing between self-awareness, disclosure, and sexual behavior [18]. Thus for older LGB people, sexual behavior prompted sexual identity awareness, whereas the pattern for younger LGB people is similar to typical heterosexual sexuality development in adolescence [20]. Other studies examine diversity in patterns of outness – to whom and in what contexts – highlighting the ways that being out is environmentally situated [21], or elucidating that the benefits of coming out and being out differ for gay and lesbian youth, who occupy binary and historically typical sexual identity categories and have greater emotional health benefits from coming out, compared to bisexual and questioning youth [22].

Parallel research on the complexity of gender identity development is still emerging; existing research is often focused on studies of youth seeking gender-affirmation and care. New research explores dynamics between intrapersonal feelings of gender and social interactions among Canadian children accessing gender-affirmative care, identifying distinct pathways of development [23]. Another study based on a national sample of German 10-16-year-olds found diverse gender identification and experiences during the teenage years: while congruent gender experiences were most common, some youth in the study reported incongruent pathways from childhood into adolescence, and there was evidence that gender experiences were still developing among some adolescents [24].

Notably, adolescence is also a critical period for the onset of mood and anxiety disorders as well as substance use behaviors [25,26]. Indeed, studies demonstrate that youth who disclose

their sexual or gender identities to family and peers are more susceptible to victimization and harassment, and that disclosure is more strongly associated with depression at younger ages. [27] Thus, youth are navigating these developmental complexities at a sensitive period that has implications for health and wellbeing across the life course.

The Current Social Moment

In the United States, we are in a unique social and political moment. On the one hand, record numbers of youth are recognizing and asserting their sexual and gender identities, with approximately 15-20% of Generation Z (those born between 1997-2003) identifying as part of the LGBT community [28,29]. On the other hand, we are witnessing rampant backlash in the form of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and rhetoric, and increased violence towards LGBTQ+ people.

For example, in 2022 U.S. state legislative sessions, there have been more than 200 bills proposed in 35 states that included bans on developmentally-appropriate trans-affirmative medical care, exclusions from sports participation that aligns with youth's gender identity and restrictions on insurance coverage of trans-affirmative care. Given the mental health benefits of developmentally appropriate gender-affirmation [30], these bills create significant barriers to trans-inclusive and supportive educational environments and health services for transgender youth and their families. There has also been a renaissance of anti-LGBTQ discourse, with the state of Florida's "Don't say gay" bill, policies requiring the forced disclosure of youths' LGBTQ+ identity to parents, and accompanying rhetoric that resurrects harmful stereotypes of SGD people as dangerous to children. Relatedly, LGBTQ-related hate crimes are also on the rise in the United States [31]. In June 2022, there were numerous news stories highlighting violence and harassment at various LGBTQ Pride events around the United States, including drag queen story hours that typically draw audiences composed of children, youth, and families [32].

Policies that restrict the rights of SGD youth – and the media and public discourse that accompanies these political efforts – are harmful to the health and wellbeing of SGD young people and further embolden the harassment and victimization of SGD youth. In states with laws that restrict rights for sexual and gender minority people, transgender youth report less frequent use of their correct names pronouns [33]. In fact, several studies now document the fears of parents of transgender and gender diverse youth, and the concerns of transgender youth themselves, that recent laws and policies undermine the health of transgender children and adolescents [34,35]. Regarding the impact of anti-LGBTQ discourse, studies show that leading up to the passage of the California ballot Proposition 8 intended to ban same-sex marriage in 2008, students in that state reported a statistical increase in homophobic bullying that dissipated in the years following [36]. Other studies show anxiety among families with transgender children following the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign [37], and that U.S. Black and Latinx sexual minority adults reported compromised mental health during the 1.5 years after the 2016 U.S. presidential election [38]. Most recently, an examination of LGBTQ-related litigation demonstrates an increase in homophobic bullying in school districts directly following court rulings that struck down student plaintiff seeking monetary or injunctive relief; conversely, reductions in bullying were observed in instances where the plaintiff’s case was substantiated [39].

Looking Forward

Sexual and gender diversity historically have been conceptualized through personal and community identities, understood through affiliation and or adoption of marginalized identity labels (e.g., LGBTQ+). With growing numbers of youth reporting their affiliation with broader terms that reflect sexual and gender diversity (e.g., genderqueer, non-binary), we argue that

sexual and gender diversity is now more than ever a reflection of growing societal awareness of sexual and gender possibilities. These changes raise new awareness that everyone has a sexual and gender identity. Cisgender and heterosexual are becoming (or have always been) part of this diversity – no longer simply the unnamed, privileged and dominant majority group, but among the now-expanded gender/sexuality continuum.

In the context of current social reverberations against expanding sexual and gender diversity among young people, we acknowledge the political climate and its rhetoric, and the evidence that such rhetoric will “get under the skin” and seep into the social lives of SGD young people [36,40]. For SGD young people growing up in this historical moment, during the adolescent period of vulnerability for identity-based stigma and rejection, risks to mental and behavioral health are clear and urgent – even for those growing up in supportive community contexts [41]. That is, contemporary SGD youth are being confronted by efforts to reify Western hetero- and cis-normative beliefs regarding sexuality and gender that reinforce binaries (of maleness and femaleness, or of “gay” versus “straight”). As we understand the complexity and diversity among sexual and gender diverse people, we are confronted with findings that highlight that those who fall outside these binaries are uniquely susceptible to erasure, violence, victimization, and poor health [42–46]. Political efforts that promulgate stigma toward sexual and gender diversity are especially undermining to the positive development and health of today’s young people.

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Annotated references:

* Of special interest

** Of outstanding interest

- ** [1] Authors propose a theoretical explanation for the paradox of social change toward LGBTQ+ acceptance coupled with increasing disparities in adolescence based on sexual and gender diversity – a developmental collision between younger ages of coming out during the normative challenges of adolescence.
- * [2] Documents persistent link between minority stress and health among sexual minorities, even for young cohorts who have grown up in more equal and accepting social and political climates.
- * [14] Examines experiences of minority stress and health of adolescents identifying outside the gender binary, documenting that they experience more discrimination, victimization, poor mental health outcomes, and suicidality than do both trans- and cisgender men and women.
- * [16] Documents adolescent reports of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity categories (26 distinct categories), which varied across racial and ethnic groups.
- * [32] Documents the association between laws that restricted rights for sexual and gender minority people and less frequent use of the correct name and correct pronouns for transgender youth, and less gender affirmation for transgender youth that live in the southern region of the U.S.
- * [40] Examines regional differences in community climate for sexual and gender diverse youth, showing that despite notable objective community differences, youth reported heightened levels of minority stress and depressive symptoms even in supportive community settings.