

Special Issue Introduction: New Research on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: Studying Lives in Context

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In the past three decades there has been growing attention to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth among adolescence researchers. Beginning with a few seminal studies on the risk-factors, particularly suicide, faced by lesbian and gay youth (Martin and Hetrick 1988), research on these populations has emerged over the past 30 years as an important and critical area within the study of adolescence. Despite the proliferation of research, investigations of LGBT youth still remain largely oriented toward studying deficits such as the role of victimization on mental and physical health, academic achievement, and identity development (Espelage and Swearer 2008). In recent years, researchers have begun to criticize research paradigms that focus on sexual minority youth as “at-risk” and suggest that these paradigms contribute to a social context that views these youth as deficient (Savin-Williams 2005; Russell 2005). While it is necessary to continue examining of risks and challenges faced by these youth, as with any population of youth, it is important to acknowledge these criticisms and to incorporate additional perspectives of LGBT youths lives and to view these youth as resilient and thriving rather than simply “at-risk”. Yet much of the work from this “new” paradigm continues to treat sexual minority youth as a monolithic or homogeneous group and fails to examine the

ways in which the social contexts that shape the lives of LGBT youth influence the persistent inequalities in health risk behavior, mental health, and long-term psychosocial adjustment of LGBT youth and adults.

With this special issue we propose a paradigm that moves beyond studying LGBT youth as either at-risk OR resilient, but rather that focuses on understanding the ways in which LGBT youth negotiate their development within various social contexts. By expanding the paradigm to consider the role of context in the lives of LGBT youth, we can begin to understand not only the complex and nuanced ways that individuals’ lives are shaped by their social contexts, but also the ways that individual characteristics (such as temperament or gender) impact the ways that LGBT youth engage with and experience their social world. For example, while it is likely the case that homophobic and heterosexist schools have a negative impact on all LGBT youth, this type of negative or hostile climate may be particularly salient for young people questioning their sexual orientation or for those young people who do not have support systems in other arenas of their lives (such as families or peer groups). As a whole, the papers in this volume attempt to move the field beyond the “at-risk” or “resilient” paradigms by exploring the complex ways young people construct an understanding of their identities, their experiences, and the social contexts in which they are engaged, as well as the varied ways that context matters in the health and development of LGBT youth.

In this collection of articles, authors cover a range of topics that contribute to our understanding of the lives of LGBT youth in context. Not surprisingly, several studies focus on the experience of harassment and victimization (e.g., Almeida et al. 2009). The last decades have seen notable attention to concerns for LGBT students; several of the articles included here focus on understanding and

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explaining the elevated rates of victimization and bullying that LGBT youth experience at school. Of these studies, the articles here extend work in this area by exploring the context within the school environment that may systemically support anti-LGBT behaviors to occur. Kosciw et al. (2009) examine key community and school characteristics that may predict (or even foster) a hostile school climate for LGBT students. Birkett et al. (2009) and Chesir-Teran and Hughes (2009) examined school-based, ecological factors that affect the school experience for LGBT students. In addition to these articles that aim to understand the context of victimization, another describes the ways that student participation and activism through gay-straight alliance school clubs can be a proactive response to a context that may be characterized by hostility, but through which empowerment can be achieved (Russell et al. 2009).

Two of the papers in this issue provide a counterpoint to the papers on victimization by examining the context of school environment for LGBT students through understanding sexual prejudice among heterosexual students (Heinze and Horn 2009; Poteat 2009). Poteat's paper provides startling results regarding heterosexual students' willingness to go to school or remain friends with a lesbian or gay peer. Similarly, Heinze and Horn examined the relationship between intergroup contact and levels of school-based sexual prejudice among heterosexual adolescents and found that intimate contact (having a lesbian or gay friend) related to lower levels of sexual prejudice among heterosexual adolescents but casual contact (simply knowing lesbian or gay students at school) did not. Taken as a group, these papers provide a much richer picture of the social context of school and how issues of victimization and prejudice get enacted within this context.

Several papers move beyond the school context. The article by Kvalanka and Goldberg (2009) is the first known analysis of "second generation" queer youth. Their analyses challenge assumptions about queer family life, and in some ways illustrate that the challenges of queer sexual identity awareness may be similar regardless of a parents' sexual identity. Friedman and Morgan (2009) also focus on supportive family relationships, and compare them to relationships with friends for understanding the social support systems for sexuality concerns among lesbian and bisexual young women. The collection also includes a study of adolescent romantic relationships, and identifies possible differences in the person–relationship emotion dynamics based on same-sex couple status and gender (Darling and Clarke 2009). This study highlights the potential of work that both looks outwardly, to contexts of LGBT youths' lives, as well as inwardly to person-based characteristics and psycho-physiological processes that may be distinctive for LGBT young people.

Notable Gaps and Future Directions

This collection of articles also provides clues about contexts of LGBT youth's lives that remain under-studied. For example, it is also notable that in studies of LGBT youth, family relationships are a backdrop that is under-examined, particularly in light of the extensive and rich literature(s) on parenting and parent-adolescent relationships. Recent work points out the dramatic undermining effects that family acceptance and rejection have on the health and well-being of LGBT youth (Rosario et al. 2009; Ryan et al. 2008). Negative parental reactions are often assumed in studies of LGBT youth; a new generation of research is needed to understand not only parental rejection—and acceptance—but the subtleties of family life that are distinctive in the lives of LGBT youth and that are linked to adjustment over time.

It is also clear that, in spite of an early literature on developmental models of sexual identity (see Cass 1996), much remains to be known about the development of sexual identities. In this issue, Hammack et al. (2009) add to our understanding of identity by showing the ways that master narratives about sexual identity influence its understanding and meaning for some young people—however, we still know very little about developmental trajectories during adolescence. How do trajectories of development differ for someone who comes out at 13 versus 23, and are there differential implications for long-term well-being? Given extraordinary social-political changes related to LGBT people and issues, this is a rich area for study.

There is also a notable absence of focus on youth development programs or the extracurriculum (aside from the contribution on gay-straight alliances). Whereas there is a great deal of research on how such programs contribute to positive developmental outcomes for young people, this body of research is virtually silent on issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. It is particularly notable given that the study of LGBT youth was influenced by early research at the Hetrick Martin Institute in New York (Martin and Hetrick 1988) and the Horizons Social Services of Chicago (Herdt and Boxer 1993). LGBT youth often remain invisible in "mainstream" youth programs; additional research on the participation and experiences of LGBT youth in traditional community programs would help understand the potential unique contributions of these youth to those settings, as well as the role that those programs might play in shaping their development.

In addition to youth programs, the role of two other primary socializing contexts for young people have been notably absent in research on LGBT youth: religion and work. Research has documented the protective role that religion plays in the lives of adolescents (Smith and

Lundquist Denton 2005). For LGBT youth, however, this relationship is complicated by the fact that many religions condemn non-heterosexual sexual orientations as unnatural and sinful. For LGBT youth, religious affiliation or living within a religiously-oriented community may actually be related to increased risks of victimization and/or negative mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Conversely, not all religious affiliations hold negative positions regarding same-sex sexuality. For some young people, belonging to an affirming and supportive religious institution may provide a safe space that affirms one's identity and leads to the formation of positive peer and adult relationships. In addition to knowing very little about the context of religion in the lives of LGBT youth, we also know very little about how religiously identified LGBT young people negotiate these two identities within their overall sense of self.

Similar to religion, the context of work has been underexplored in research on LGBT youth. Research on the role of work/jobs in the lives of heterosexual adolescents presents mixed results suggesting that work, in some forms, is beneficial to the development of young people (Mortimer 2003). While this also may be the case for LGBT young people, the effects of work on this population of young people will likely be related to whether the young person has to hide their sexual orientation within this context. Work might also represent, however, a social context that provides LGBT young people with resources and skills that allow them to find increased autonomy and to better negotiate other social contexts that are hostile and oppressive (such as families and schools).

In summary, the absences in this volume point to new areas for future work. We believe this special issue is crucial for the field of adolescent development in that it highlights youth whose lives are often unexamined, yet we also hope that having a special focus on LGBT youth will become an obsolete tactic. Much of the mainstream literatures on adolescent and youth development—bullying, victimization, academic achievement, peer relations, mental health—are devoid of attention to marginalized youth in general, and LGBT youth in particular. Aside from research specifically focused on LGBT youth, sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are often invisible constructs in studies of adolescence. Thus, our knowledge of normative developmental issues among this population is limited, as is our understanding of these youths in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. In decades past, psychological and health research focused exclusively on males and Anglo Americans and assumed their findings applied to the overall population. Yet, research has shown that these findings do not fully generalize to females or non-Anglos, and in some cases, when applied indiscriminately have negative unintended

consequences for health and well-being. We maintain that we must take the same approach with sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Although studies based on samples of the general adolescent population undoubtedly have included LGBT individuals, they remain invisible because the questions are not asked. Until scholars in adolescent and youth development treat these identities as demographically important and include them in all work, we will never fully understand the richness and complexity of the lives of LGBT youth.

As a case in point, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) provides extremely important information on the prevalence and correlates of a multitude of risk and protective factors among adolescents in the United States. Sexual orientation, however, is an optional question within the YRBS left up to the discretion of the agency or institution administering the survey, while gender identity beyond the traditional binary of male/female is not included in the battery of questions at all. This discretionary inclusion of sexual orientation and the exclusion of acknowledging a transgender identity illustrate the missed opportunities to more fully understand the lives of LGBT youth by not including them as a critical demographic variable in general population research. Until questions about sexual orientation and gender identity are standard in studies of adolescents, we will never have a robust understanding of the prevalence and correlates of risk and protective factors among LGBT youth.

Similarly, if government research funding also maintains the invisibility of this population of youth by not requiring researchers to include these demographics, then programs developed to improve the lives of youth may not be meeting the needs of this population. For example, if “mainstream” bullying research continues to ignore actual and perceived sexual orientation or issues related to non-normative gender expression, then bullying prevention programs may be devoid of programming that could help the school experiences of LGBT youth and youth presumed to be LGBT. Particularly in younger grades, elementary and middle school, when sexual orientation may be less salient, it would be unconscionable for bullying programs not to consider how gender expression and gender non-conforming behaviors are key in bullying and harassment.

With this special issue, we have attempted a contextual focus on the lives of LGBT youth, while exploring differences within this population. Although we acknowledge the methodological challenges inherent in examining hard-to-find or “hidden” populations, we believe it is important to avoid reifying the belief that this group is impossible to study, or is a monolith. As scholars studying the lives of LGBT youth, we must acknowledge the differences as well as the shared experiences among them. We must strive to be intentional in our research rigor; in doing so, we will

allow for richer understandings of the experiences of LGBT youth.

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