Sexual & Gender Diversity among California Teens

How Communities Shape Identity & Mental Health in Politically Conservative & Progressive Regions
Goals of today's talk

1. Place gender & sexual identity development for today’s adolescents in CULTURAL & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2. Share THREE BIG STORIES from my research with LGBTQ+ teens in politically diverse regions of California

3. Suggest some concrete ACTIONS that might benefit the health and development of California teens
Sexual & Gender Diversity in the 21st Century

Key Events:
- 1999: Asexual Visibility & Education Network (AVEN) founded
- 2001: Birth years of today's adolescents & early emerging adults
- 2003: MA: Marriage equality
- 2005: Trans Day of Remembrance
- 2008: SCOTUS: Lawrence v. Texas
- 2010: CA: Prop 8 overturned
- 2012: "Don't ask, don't tell" repealed
- 2013: "Gender identity disorder" removed from DSM
- 2014: "Gender identity disorder" removed from DSM
- 2015: First Gallup poll to find a majority support marriage equality
- 2016: 2015: First Gallup poll to find a majority support marriage equality
- 2018: OR: Non-binary recognition
- 2019: Transgender military ban
- 2020: COVID-19 pandemic
- 2021: "They/them" added to Merriam-Webster as gender-neutral pronoun
- 2022: Data collection for research presented

Significant Changes:
- "Pansexual" and "polyamory" updated or added to OED (2005-2006)
- CA domestic partner law
- CA: Prop 8 overturned
- MA: Marriage equality
- SCOTUS: Lawrence v. Texas
- "Don't ask, don't tell" repealed
- "Gender identity disorder" removed from DSM
- SCOTUS: Obergefell v. Hodges
- OR: Non-binary recognition
- Transgender military ban
- "They/them" added to Merriam-Webster as gender-neutral pronoun

Notes:
- Uptick in Google search for "cisgender"
- Increased censorship
- Anti-trans legislation in various states
- Gallup poll finds uptick in LGBT identification for Gen Z
Three big stories

1. There is a revolution in gender and sexuality, but it’s not affecting all teens equally.

2. LGBTQ+ youth struggle in the midst of stigma, regardless of where they live.

3. The role of community is complex and expansive. What we do in schools & communities CAN make a difference in their lives.
The California Community Climates Project on Gender & Sexual Diversity (C3)
WHAT WE DID

1. Are these communities that different?

Community Climate Assessment

2. How do communities shape the identity labeling process?

20 months of ethnographic fieldwork, including 52 informant interviews

3. How do communities impact mental health?

Survey of 314 teens
WHAT WE FOUND: Community variability

[Diagram showing GSD scores for various counties in different regions.]
WHAT WE FOUND: Identity labeling

PATTERN 1: Adolescents used nonbinary gender identity labels frequently

- 24%

- High-support communities & higher parental ed

PATTERN 2: AFAB adolescents more comfortable w/ diverse gender expression

- 79% AFAB

- Twice the number of out trans boys than trans girls

PATTERN 3: Adolescents used plurisexual & asexual labels frequently

- 61% use a plurisexual label

- 10% use an asexual spectrum label

- More common among AFAB

AFAB = assigned female at birth

“I was about 12 years old, I think. …The way I found the label [pansexual] was the Internet, which is really helpful, actually. I spent a lot of time online, messed around with a couple of labels until I found one that I felt fit me cause gender wasn’t the thing that I cared about.”
“Masculinity, especially at my school, is very important. I feel like a lot of guys, when it comes to if they want to name call or something like that, usually attacks masculinity, attacks their manhood.”
Three big stories

1. There is a revolution in gender and sexuality, but it’s not affecting all teens equally.

2. LGBTQ+ youth struggle in the midst of stigma, regardless of where they live.

3. The role of community is complex and expansive. What we do in schools & communities CAN make a difference in their lives.
WHAT WE FOUND: Stigma & mental health

Experiences of prejudice & stigma are common

- 41% SOGI-targeted victimization
- 59% SOGI everyday discrimination
  - Anti-LGBTQ remarks more common in conservative communities

Clinically significant levels of depressive symptoms are common

- 41% Our sample
- 10% California teens

SOGI = sexual orientation or gender identity

UC SANTA CRUZ
Three big stories

1. There is a **revolution** in gender and sexuality, but it’s not affecting all teens equally.

2. LGBTQ+ youth **struggle** in the midst of stigma, regardless of where they live.

3. The role of community is complex and expansive. **What we do in schools & communities CAN make a difference in their lives.**
WHAT WE FOUND: Community & mental health

Progressive communities are perceived as more supportive, but...

“Not as good as you might think or expect”

Social media/internet is the great equalizer in access to resources, but...

Endurance of heterosexism, cissexism, sex-negativity transcends communities

Conservative communities are perceived as less supportive, but...

“Better than you might think or expect, & getting better”

HOMOPHOBIC/TRANSPHOBIC BULLYING

INSUFFICIENT RESOURCES/EDUCATION
[My community is] conservative, definitely, and it’s more scary. It’s more of, like, you have to face all of this and you have to—you can’t be who you are. ...Because no one’s accepting. You’re kind of just trapped in your own little bubble and you’re keeping this secret in that’s pretty much eating you alive. ...You feel very trapped cause you can’t express yourself because it’s wrong.
I think that we benefit from being in the liberal Bay Area, but not quite as much as people would expect. ...Verbal bullying, physical bullying, mental health, suicide, self-harm, HIV infection, abuse, homelessness. Every single one of these affects a student at this school. ...It's very much every...every statistic, every problem that you imagine in schools is there. ...I think the homophobic environment and bullying is a big issue in that.
Sue
Age: 17 | She/Her | Girl | AFAB | Pansexual | Asian | Progressive Community

I wanna see it talked about more in classrooms. I want it to be a more integrated part of the curriculum cause I think it could be very easily integrated into the curriculum if we had the organization to achieve that. [I think there should be] the requirements for LGBTQ issues to be taught in schools, like in the social studies classrooms. ...I want people to have to learn about it. ...The way it is, there’s information available, but no one’s really motivated to get it if they’re not already part of the community or the ally community. What I want is for that information to be taught to all the people who would otherwise not get it.

“Sue” is a pseudonym. AFAB = Assigned Female at Birth.
Goals of today's talk

1. Place gender & sexual identity development for today’s adolescents in CULTURAL & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2. Share THREE BIG STORIES from my research with LGBTQ+ teens in politically diverse regions of California

3. Suggest some concrete ACTIONS that might benefit the health and development of California teens
WHAT COULD BE: A 21st century action agenda

1. Educate for diversity
2. Reduce stigma through policy
3. Recognize & enhance (FUND) empowering settings

Interrupt a culture of prejudice & stigma from ABOVE (i.e., adults)
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONSULTANTS & SCIENTIFIC ADVISORS
Doug Bonett, Jeremy Goldbach, Susan Kegeles, Ilan Meyer, Stephen Russell, Sheree Schrager

RESEARCH COORDINATORS
Richard Clark, Sam Hughes, David Pletta, Zeneva Schindler

FIELD RESEARCHERS
Julianne Atwood, Elliot Cohen

PROGRAM OFFICERS, WILLIAM T. GRANT FOUNDATION
Vivian Louie, Carola Suarez-Orozco