

Are Teens “Post-Gay”? Contemporary Adolescents’ Sexual Identity Labels

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Abstract Recent reports suggest that historically typical sexual identity labels—“gay,” “lesbian” and “bisexual”—have lost meaning and relevance for contemporary adolescents. Yet there is little empirical evidence that contemporary teenagers are “post-gay.” In this brief study we investigate youths’ sexual identity labels. The Preventing School Harassment survey included 2,560 California secondary school students administered over 3 years: 2003–2005. We examined adolescents’ responses to a closed-ended survey question that asked for self-reports of sexual identity, including an option to write-in a response; we content analyzed the write-in responses. Results suggest that historically typical sexual identity labels are endorsed by the majority (71%) of non-heterosexual youth. Some non-heterosexual youth report that they are “questioning” (13%) their sexual identities or that they are “queer” (5%); a small proportion (9%) provided alternative labels that describe ambivalence or resistance to sexual identity labels, or fluidity in sexual identities. Our results show that lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities remain relevant for contemporary adolescents.

Keywords Sexual identity · Sexual orientation · Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of exploration and self-discovery, and is the time during which young people develop awareness and understanding of the self. Erikson (1968) argued that paramount in adolescence is identity exploration, the optimal end result of which an assumption of a stable and enduring identity. Over 30 years ago, developmental models were introduced to explain the development of sexual identities. These stage models were based on the assumption that the desirable outcome of sexual identity exploration is the development of a stable “gay” or “lesbian” identity (Cass 1979, 1983; Troiden 1989). These models have been critiqued on multiple grounds (see Diamond 2005), with recent attention focused on diversity and fluidity in adolescents’ sexual identity labels. Savin-Williams wrote: “teenagers are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is practically meaningless” (2005: 1). This sentiment is compelling, particularly in light of anecdotal evidence of the rise in non-traditional youth identities such as “queer” and “questioning” (Horner 2007), and reports that many youth simply refuse any sexual identity label (Savin-Williams 2005, 2008). Yet, little research has directly examined whether historically typical sexual identity labels of “gay,” “lesbian” or “bisexual” remain meaningful for contemporary young people. Are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identities irrelevant to contemporary youth? Are contemporary teenagers “post-gay?”

The classic models of sexuality identity development describe movement in a linear progression from

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sensitization or awareness of sexual attraction, which may lead to sexual identity confusion as well as engagement in sexual behavior, to disclosure of sexual identity to others, and ultimately to integration of sexual identity into the broader identity (Cass 1979, 1983; Troiden 1989; Fox 1996). These stage models are useful in proposing developmental understandings of sexual identity, and because they identify common dimensions or challenges associated with sexual identity development (Cass 1996); however, the notion of linear progression through stages has been rejected (Diamond 2005). Further, these models are limited in that they do not incorporate the possibility of alternatives to historically typical sexual identities (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual or “straight”).

Contemporary understandings of adolescent sexual identities suggest the possibility for fluidity (Diamond 1998) and diversity across dimensions of sexuality: attraction, behavior, and identity (Savin-Williams 2008). The ability to study that diversity is dependent on method (Doll 1997; Sandfort 1997). Survey studies have employed a range of measures, including same-sex sexual behavior (e.g., Faulkner and Cranston 1998), romantic attractions (e.g., Russell and Joyner 2001) and romantic relationships (e.g., Udry and Chantala 2002), as well as sexual identity. The most common approach to measuring sexual identity through surveys is to directly ask individuals how they identify (Chung and Katayama 1996; Saewyc et al. 2004). Self-reports of sexual identity are not fully consistent with reports of sexual behavior or attractions; fewer identify with sexual identity categories than indicate that they have had same-sex fantasies and behaviors (Laumann et al. 1994; Remafedi et al. 1998; Savin-Williams 2001). Longitudinal survey studies also indicate the possibility for fluidity (or change); studies have shown that among youth who report same-sex sexual identities, some change their identities and report being heterosexual at a later time in life (Garofalo et al. 1999; Laumann et al. 1994). Thus, fluidity and change are important possibilities when understanding sexual identities.

New understandings of sexual identities emphasize developmental milestones rather than stages (D’Augelli 1996; Floyd and Stein 2002) and incorporate the potential for fluidity and diversity in labels and meanings associated with sexual identities (Horner 2007). Drawing from the life course perspective, Cohler and Hammack (2007) argue that our understandings of sexual identity are grounded in cultural and socio-historical understandings of sexuality. Sexual identity is connected to the cultural and historical context; changes in language and cultural discourse may inform sexual orientation development, as well as the labels that individual choose to describe their sexual identities (Cohler and Hammack 2007). At the same time, for some adolescents, claiming a same-sex sexual identity may be delayed for a variety of reasons, including a lack of

available role models, concerns for safety, or the belief that their sexual identity is not tolerable in their family, school, or faith environment (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2004). On the other hand, recent changes in the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people and issues may allow youth to understand and self-label same-sex sexual identities at younger ages than was true for prior cohorts. For example, the number and visibility of high school Gay-Straight Alliance clubs (GSAs) has grown dramatically during the past decade (Herdt et al. 2007; Russell 2002). The presence of or participation in a GSA is a new possibility for youth that may provide a context for self-awareness and adoption of LGBTQ sexual identities.

Adolescents’ sexual identifications may also vary based on other personal characteristics. Sexual identity fluidity may be particularly relevant for women (Diamond 1998, 2003; Savin-Williams 2005). Studies of adolescents have shown that only a minority of sexual minority females will identify as lesbian and most will instead prefer terms that are broader, such as bisexual (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000). Further, Diamond (2003) found that young women changed their sexual identity at least once, and nearly 50% gave up their lesbian identity over an 8 year period. Others suggest that the coming out process may be complicated for ethnic or racial minority adolescents, who must navigate cultural pressures that may discourage homosexuality as well as ethnic or racial prejudice within predominantly White LGBTQ communities. Due to these completing factors, an adolescent’s acceptance and integration of same-sex sexual identity may take longer, or be delayed (Rosario et al. 2004). However, the empirical evidence from existing studies has not supported this hypothesis; two studies that compared White, Black, and Latino LGB youth find no differences in reports of sexual orientation or sexual identity (Rosario et al. 1996, 2004).

The Current Study

In this exploratory study, we examine adolescents’ responses to a survey question about sexual identity. Recruitment for the study focused on attracting participants who might have been likely to be identified as LGB or transgender, or who were allies. We examine the distribution of sexual identities within the sample, and we content analyze write-in responses for participants who chose an alternative sexual identity. Based on our review, we anticipated that, among respondents who report non-heterosexual identities, a large proportion would endorse identities that were alternative to the traditional (LGB) identity labels.

Sexual identities may differ by age, by gender (Diamond 2000, 2003), for youth from different ethnic or cultural

groups (Rosario et al. 2004), or, in the case of a school-based study, for youth who are members of school organizations such as GSAs. We test the possibilities of these group differences between students who wrote-in sexual identity responses and those who did not. We view these analyses as exploratory because prior research does not provide a clear basis for the development of specific hypotheses. For example, regarding age, the classic sexual identity development models imply a maturational process for the development of sexual identity, and thereby suggest that, under similar conditions of exposure to and awareness of same-sex sexualities, older youth would be more likely to endorse solidified, traditional sexual identities. On the other hand, the contemporary argument—that same-sex attracted youth may not desire traditional identities (Savin-Williams 2005)—calls these developmental hypotheses into question. It may be that older youth will have had more time to become exposed to sexual identity alternatives, and thus may be more likely to endorse alternative sexual identity labels. Regarding possible gender differences, although there is ample prior research to suggest that women may endorse more fluidity in sexual identity labels (Diamond 2000, 2003), there is no existing research on alternative definitions of sexual identities in the short age span of the school-aged adolescent years. Regarding race and ethnicity, others have articulated a rationale for racial or ethnic differences in the development of sexual identities (Rosario et al. 2004). For same-sex attracted youth of color, the implication could be less likelihood of endorsing any non-heterosexual sexual identity; on the other hand, it could mean that, rather than identify with the traditional categories of “lesbian” or “gay,” they might prefer alternative sexual identities. Finally, student participation in GSA clubs might serve the role of integrating youth into “mainstream” LGB communities; on the other hand, GSAs may be venues where youth can try out alternative identities, including alternative sexual identities (Russell 2002).

Methods

Data for this study came from the California Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey, a survey administered on paper and online to middle and high school students in California in the spring school terms of 2003, 2004, and 2005. The surveys were mailed to high school Gay straight alliances (GSAs), community organizations that serve LGB youth, and LGB youth groups in California. A link to an online version of the survey was distributed through electronic mail listservs that targeted the same population. The hard copy surveys were returned to the California safe schools coalition for data entry and combined with the online surveys for analysis. The PSH survey was designed

to explore the connections between harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, school climate, and school policies and practices (author citation). The goal of the survey was to reach sexual minority youth and their heterosexual allies; the multiple strategies employed for recruitment procedures preclude the possibility of calculating a response rate. A total of 2,560 students completed surveys in the 3 year period.

Measures

Items for the survey were pre-tested in the winter of 2002–2003 with student GSA leaders contacted through a state LGB youth advocacy organization. Students gave input on the wording and response options for survey questions. The students preferred to have a category through which to indicate a sexual, gender, or ethnic identity that was not presented among the response options. They rejected the category of “other” for sexual and gender identities, and suggested the neutral language of “write in.” The students advocated for the inclusion of “queer” and “questioning” as distinct sexual orientation categories (see Diamond 1998; Horner 2007), in addition to the historically typical categories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight/heterosexual.

For sexual identity, participants were asked: “What is your sexual orientation?” (“Sexual orientation” was deemed by students who participated in the pre-test to be language that would be most understood by their peers. We acknowledge the distinction between sexual “orientation” and “identity” (Laumann et al. 1994); however, to be consistent with the survey text we use “sexual orientation” in our discussion of results). Responses included: “Gay/Lesbian”, “Straight/heterosexual”, “Bisexual”, “Queer”, “Questioning”, and “Write-In” (with a blank space for written text). Multiple response options were possible.

For gender, participants were asked: “What is your gender?” Responses included: “Male”, “Female”, “Transgender”, “Questioning”, and “Write-in” (for statistical calculations, the categories transgender, questioning, and write-in were combined). For race/ethnicity, participants were asked: “How do you describe yourself? (Please check all that apply).” Possible responses included: “American Indian or Alaska Native”, “Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander”, “Asian”, “Black or African American (non-Hispanic)”, “Hispanic or Latino/Latina”, “White or Caucasian (non-Hispanic)”, “Other.” Students also reported their age.

Participants

The composition of the PSH survey included a majority of female (62.7% female; 34.6% male; 2.7% transgender/questioning/write-in) and heterosexual (see Table 1) participants; over 80% of the participants were in the

Table 1 Frequency and proportion of students' reports of sexual orientation for the full sample and among non-heterosexuals

Response	Frequency	% of full sample, <i>n</i> = 2,558	% of non-heterosexuals, <i>n</i> = 858
Missing	119	4.7	–
Straight	1,581	61.8	–
Gay/ Lesbian	290	11.3	33.7
Bisexual	320	12.5	37.3
Queer	45	1.8	5.2
Questioning	115	4.5	13.4
Write-in	73	2.9	8.5
Multiple	15	.6	1.7

10th–12th grades. The ethnic composition was majority White (50.5%); representation from other ethnic groups included Asian/Pacific Islander (24.2%), Latino/a (21.3%), Black (7.5%), and American Indian (4.8%); 15.4% endorsed more than one ethnicity (a multi-ethnicity group was coded for use in categorical analyses). This ethnic composition is roughly equivalent to the youth ethnic composition of the state of California, with the exception of an under-representation of Latinos. The survey was conducted only in English, and the proportional under-representation of Latinos corresponds to estimates of Latino adolescents whose first language is Spanish (author citation).

Analysis Plan

We present frequency distributions of the measure of sexual orientation. Following content analysis procedures (Weber 1990), data from the write-in responses was coded into categories based on common themes. The benefit of content analysis is that it allows interpretation of written data by coding text into smaller meaningful portions; these portions are categories that can be used to conceptually summarize the content. Categories were developed based on words or phrases in participants' write-in responses, which were coded by consensus by the research team (Weber 1990). Two cases were excluded because their write-in responses were not relevant to sexual orientation or identity (i.e., they were not legitimate responses). Finally, we compared those who wrote in alternative sexual orientations to the other sexual orientation categories. We tested differences based on gender, race/ethnicity, GSA membership (Chi-square), and age (ANOVA).

Results

Frequencies of sexual orientation responses are presented in Table 1. Nearly 5% of the sample did not complete the

question. Over 11% reported that they were “gay/lesbian”, nearly 62% were “straight/heterosexual”, over 12% were “bisexual”, nearly 2% were “queer”, and nearly 5% reported that they were “questioning.” Less than 1% checked multiple sexual orientation categories; of these, none wrote in an alternative sexual orientation. Just less than 3% checked the write-in category. In total, 858 were non-heterosexual.

Among the respondents who were non-heterosexual, one-third were “gay/lesbian” (34%), over one-third were “bisexual” (37%), 5% were “queer” and just over 13% were “questioning.” Participants who selected to write-in their sexual orientation represent just less than 9% of the non-heterosexual group. In five cases, the write-in category was checked by respondents who also checked one of the pre-defined orientation categories. Among those who checked the write-in response, the majority (69 out of 73) provided a handwritten explanation of their sexual orientation.

Sexual Orientation Alternatives

Among the 69 participants who provided write-in responses, the largest category of responses included fourteen who identified as *pansexual*. Examples of responses in this category included: “pansexual,” “everything,” “open,” and “anything.” The second most frequent category included ten respondents who were *reticent to label*. Examples of responses in this category included: “no-label... gender doesn't matter,” “I don't really feel I need to explain this,” “I don't like labels,” and “no comment.” The *ambivalent* and *curious/flexible* categories each included nine responses. The ambivalent group included the following write-in responses: “still deciding,” “don't know,” “not thinking about it,” “no idea” and “I wish I knew.” Although several of these youth might be understood to be questioning their sexual identities, we retained them in this ambivalent category because of their choice to write in these responses rather than endorse a “questioning” sexual orientation. In contrast, those who were curious/flexible provided sexual identity labels that were defined by fluidity or experimentation. They wrote: “hetero-flexible,” “bisexually gay,” and “Bi-Curious.” Eight respondents were *declarative* of their sexual orientations, including the comments: “supergay,” and “extremely black and very very gay.” Like the ambivalent group, one could argue that these youth are “gay;” however, we describe their identities as “declarative” because they opted to provide this as an alternative to the “gay/lesbian” closed-ended category. Finally, seven wrote “normal,” and six wrote “straight” (these respondents did not also check the category for “straight/heterosexual”). Four participants wrote in “asexual,” one wrote “abstinent”, and a single youth wrote “androgynous.”

Differences Based on Ethnicity, Gender, Age, and GSA Membership

We compared differences between those who wrote-in an alternative sexual orientation and each of the other non-heterosexual identity categories (gay/lesbian, bisexual, queer, and questioning). We found no ethnic differences. There was, however, a significant overall gender difference ($\chi^2_{(8)} = 164.7, p < .0001$). Post hoc analyses were conducted to identify gender differences between respondents who provided an alternative sexual orientation and those who endorsed one of the categories on the survey (the small number of youth who reported transgender, questioning, or an alternative genders were excluded from these analyses). There were significant gender differences between write-in responses and those who endorsed gay/lesbian and bisexual sexual orientations, but no gender differences between the write-in group and the queer and questioning categories. Specifically, there were significantly more females in the write-in group (70.8%) compared to the gay/lesbian group (41.0%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 18.7, p < .0001$), yet there were significantly fewer females in the write-in group compared to the bisexual group (82.6%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 4.7, p < .05$).

Using ANOVA, we found age differences in write-in responses ($F_{(4)} = 13.7, p < .0001$). The mean age for respondents who chose to write in an alternative sexual orientation was 15.5 compared to a mean age of 16.5 for gay/lesbian youth, 16.2 for bisexual youth, 16.8 for queer youth, and 15.8 for questioning youth (Tukey post hoc tests were significant ($p < .05$) for comparisons with all but the questioning group). Thus, those who provided an alternative sexual orientation were younger than respondents who identified as LGB.

Finally, considering GSA membership, fewer youth who wrote in alternative sexual orientations were members of their high school GSAs (63.2%) compared to gay/lesbian youth (82.9%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.2, p < .001$), bisexual (83.0%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 12.9, p < .001$), and queer (88.9%; $\chi^2_{(1)} = 9.1, p < .01$) youth. There were no differences in GSA membership between questioning youth and those who wrote in an alternative sexual orientation.

Discussion

Given the rapidly changing social climate for LGBTQ youth, Savin-Williams (2005, 2008) has argued that sexual minority teenagers are redefining sexual orientations, and that they eschew the historically typical sexual identity categories. However, there has been little empirical evidence that contemporary teenagers are “post-gay.” Our findings indicate that, among the non-heterosexual youth in

this study, 13% were questioning, 5% identified as queer, and less than 10% chose to provide their own label. A total of 70% of non-heterosexual youth in this study identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; over half reported a bisexual identity. The high proportion of youth who reported bisexual identity has been documented in other studies (French et al. 1996), and consistent with prior reports, females are more likely to endorse bisexual identity (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000). In summary, although we find some diversity in sexual identities, it does not appear that youth in this study “find it difficult to relate to” being gay (Savin-Williams 2005: 5). Our results suggest that it is wrong to conclude that gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities are irrelevant to contemporary youth.

Among the small number of participants who provided an alternative sexual identity to describe themselves, content analyses revealed two notable themes consistent with prior work. First, some youth view their sexual identities as fluid, open, or flexible; these are typified in the categories of pansexual and curious/flexible. Second, some young people resisted identity labels, or if not actively resistant, were ambivalent about labels. Thus, although we find that some youth do not adopt the well-known labels, only 19 out of over 2,500 were resistant to or ambivalent about them, far fewer than one would expect if youth are indeed abandoning the notion of “gay” (Savin-Williams 2005) or resisting it (Savin-Williams 2008).

When comparing those who wrote in alternative responses for the question on sexual orientation to those who endorsed the provided categories, we found no differences based on race or ethnicity, consistent with prior research (Rosario et al. 1996, 2004). We also found that girls and boys were equally likely to write in responses, but youth who selected a gender that was neither female nor male were more likely to write in a sexual orientation. However, we found that youth who gave alternative labels to their sexual orientation were younger. Interpretations consistent with classic sexual identity development models would suggest that older youth may be more likely to have developed a stable and solidified LGB identity, and/or they may adapt to community norms and use traditional terms as they become integrated into LGB communities. Finally, we found that youth who wrote in alternative sexual orientations were less likely to be members of their high school GSAs. It may also be that youth who choose alternative sexual identities do not view the GSA as a relevant or desirable school activity. On the other hand, the social function of the GSA school club may promote the collective adoption of traditional sexual identity labels.

Our results have implications for studies of and programs for contemporary sexual minority young people. From a research perspective, scholars must be aware of diversity in sexual identities when designing studies, yet

traditional methods for eliciting information about sexual identities should not be dismissed as invalid: LGB identities still have relevance for the majority of the sexual minority youth population. There are similar implications for programs. Efforts to reach out to and support sexual minority youth should be attuned to alternative identities, but should not assume that the majority of contemporary youth are “post-gay.”

There are important limitations of our study. Most important is that we rely on a questionnaire; approaches that would allow young people to independently name and describe their sexual identities (or orientations) might yield more diversity and less consistency with the traditional sexual identity labels compared to our findings here. Indeed, qualitative methods such as interviews or narratives yield rich information about the potential complexities, fluidity, and diversity of sexual identities (Diamond 2003, 2005; Savin-Williams 2005). However, our results challenge the conclusion that the complexities and fluidity identified in prior research are evidence of a rejection of LGB identities by young people. As is true in all research in this field of study, our findings are also limited to students who were willing to disclose their sexual orientation status on a survey. The experiences of individuals who are not willing to acknowledge how they feel about their sexual orientation (Diamond 1998) are not reported. In addition, the sample may not represent students with same-sex sexual identities who do not participate in LGB-related programs or organizations.

Compelling questions about adolescent sexual identity have to do with its development; our study is cross-sectional and descriptive and cannot speak to the possibility and potential of development or change in sexual identities across adolescence. Diamond’s (2000, 2003) studies that document female same-sex sexual fluidity trace young women into young adulthood; it may be that the high school years are only the beginning of a period of awareness of sexual orientation fluidity, and that many youth in this study will change their sexual identifications or one day seek alternative identification labels.

Our study is based on students from California, and therefore has limited generalizability. However, given regional differences in possibilities for adolescent sexual identity expression (Savin-Williams 2005) one might expect that youth in California would be among those most likely to choose alternative sexual identities. Our finding that 70% of non-heterosexual youth endorse LGB labels may, in fact, be an underestimate of the degree to which “lesbian,” “gay,” and “bisexual” are meaningful labels for contemporary young people in other regions, at least in the United States.

Our results challenge the idea that diversity in sexual identities—or resistance to them—is now the norm among

adolescents (Savin-Williams 2005, 2008): the old labels appear to matter and have meaning for today’s youth. Adolescent sexual identity is a core component of adolescent development and deserves continued attention in light of significant public discourse about same-sex sexual identities and the changing realities of the lives of contemporary young people.

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