8 Developmental Trajectories and Milestones of Sexual-Minority Youth

Ritch C. Savin-Williams

Overview

It was not until the early 1970s that scientists – spearheaded by clinical and public health professionals – recognized and, in a sense created, a unique sexual population that was labeled gay youth. To find these youth, researchers recruited from locations and organizations that served the needs of compromised youth. Although the methodology was flawed, conclusions from these convenience samples were instrumental in founding a field of study. Not surprisingly, gay youth were perceived as having an exceptional developmental profile and consequently to be in dire need of immediate medical, psychiatric, and social interventions (Roesler & Deisher, 1972).

By contrast, over the past two decades an increasingly broad array of biological, social, and behavioral scientists has produced data on which to build a developmental perspective on sexual-minority youth.¹ This was possible primarily through social media recruitment and the inclusion of sexual status measures in large-scale surveys, giving researchers access to diverse and likely more representative populations of sexual-minority youth. A major consequence of the improved methodology was that many initial clinical findings were challenged, modulated, or, in some cases, repudiated (e.g., that one-third to half of sexual-minority youths attempt suicide, see Remafedi, 1987 vs. Savin-Williams, 2001a).

Although the early research has limited relevance for understanding contemporary sexual-minority youth, especially during their child and adolescent years, few social scientists produced data-based research that illuminated the developmental processes of same-sex sexual and romantic growth prior to adulthood. Presented in this chapter is this limited literature, which must, by its very nature, be suggestive rather than confirmatory regarding the qualities and experiences of millennial sexual-minority youths as they navigate from their first memories of same-sex sexuality to their self-acceptance, expression, and integration of that sexuality. It is

¹ Sexual-minority youth is used in this chapter to refer to all youths who have some degree of sexual and/or romantic attraction to the same sex – that is, are not exclusively heterosexual. They may not necessarily identify or behave as such, or even be aware that their sexual and romantic feelings, fantasies, crushes, and desires have meaning regarding who they are as an individual.
frequently a lengthy, nuanced process consisting of multiple developmental milestones that vary in order, intensity, timing, content, and significance across individuals. Relatively unknown are the critical casual agents that guide or determine the homoerotic life course and how that development varies across ethnicity, social class, region, and culture.

A differential developmental trajectories (DDTs) perspective is presented as a framework for understanding what is known regarding the timing and sequence of contemporary sexual-minority children and adolescents. This perspective does not assume that all sexual-minority youths follow a uniform developmental pathway as they progress from feeling different to self-acceptance and synthesis.

**Differential Developmental Trajectories**

**Overview**

A DDT framework remains faithful to the real-life experiences of sexual-minority children and adolescents, including their common and unique milestones, transitional incidents, fluidity, positive development, and pathways. More specifically, *differential* refers to the variability that is inherent within and across sexual-minority individuals in terms of their sexual and romantic orientations and identities. *Developmental* signifies sexual and romantic milestones and processes manifest during the life course. *Trajectories* indicate various sexual and romantic pathways occurring across time, both within and across individuals. Four critical assumptions are inherent in a DDT perspective.

**First Tenet: Sexual-Minority Youths Are Foremost Youths**

Sexual-minority youths share with other adolescents, regardless of their sexuality, basic developmental processes and outcomes. A central developmental principle seldom considered when the population includes sexual-minority youths is the degree to which such children and adolescents do not vary from heterosexual youths in their sexual and romantic development. They, too, live within similar historic and cultural contexts and within basic biological systems and constraints. During their childhood and adolescence, most experience and negotiate age-appropriate developmental transitions and milestones.

The anticipated conclusion of adolescence includes not only full physical and sexual maturity but also the cultivation of novel ways of thinking, the accumulation of knowledge, and the evolution of a system of ethical values and conduct. Educational and occupational futures are concerns they share with those who love and support them. More dynamically, youths of all sexualities must negotiate their interpersonal and social relationships, especially with family members and peers. And, although the gender of the fantasies and objects of desire differs, teens of all sexualities think about – perhaps obsess about – and explore arenas of sexual...
and emotional intimacy (asexuals may be the exception, to varying degrees). The desire to find friends, to locate dates, to engage with sex partners, and to meet others “just like me” or the “opposite of me” is not dependent on sexuality. Although these outcomes might well vary in form and substance depending on underlying sexual and romantic orientations, the basic goals and processes are similar.

Because most research paradigms assume a straight-versus-gay contrast, these fundamental developmental similarities are either ignored or minimized, and are thus unknown. To best understand how sexual and romantic orientations influence basic developmental milestones and trajectories, it is critical to understand the commonalities. The result is a greater appreciation for how sexual and romantic attractions matter in the lives of children and adolescents.

**Second Tenet: Sexual-Minority Youths Are Unique**

Sexual-minority youths are also unlike heterosexual youths in some aspects of their developmental trajectories. The presumed casual agents that separate sexualities could reside in the developing pre- and post-natal neuroendocrine systems and/or in the proximate and remote social and cultural environments that sexual minorities encounter during their childhood and adolescence. In particular, cultural heterocentrism (the assumption of heterosexuality) is manifested in the treatment of youths who display early signs of gayness. Thus, same-sex-attracted children and teens might well undergo psychological development in a manner at variance from other youths – both for biological and socialization reasons to varying degrees. The extent to which this is true and worthy of attention likely varies by race, class, ethnicity, geographical region, sex, and cohort – but at this point little is known about these intersections.

The magnitude of biological and socialization effects and whether they consist of creating one of a kind (separate sexual categories) or one of degree (a sexual/romantic continuum) is largely unknown because these issues are seldom systematically explored (Savin-Williams, 2016a). Related to this larger issue is whether the ways in which sexual and romantic development are similar or different vary among sexual-minority and straight youths.

**Third Tenet: Sexual-Minority Youths Vary among Themselves**

The presumptions of the first two tenets, of child/adolescent universals and sexual-minority variations, frequently conceal the degree to which individuals vary from others of their sexual/romantic status but are like others of a dissimilar sexual/romantic status. Here, the fundamental developmental issue is whether sexual-minority youths differ from each other in accordance with heterosexual teens – based on commonalities such as sex, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geography, and cohort – specific developmental milestones and processes that overwhelm potential orientation differences.
The result is distinctive trajectories that cut across sexual/romantic status. For example, growing up African American might align a sexual-minority youth more with African-American heterosexual youth in aspects of their developmental trajectories than with White, European sexual-minority youth. Thus, an African-American gay youth shares commonalities and differences with both White gay youth and Black straight youth and these, of course, interact with other confounds such as gender, social class, and immigration status. For example, young Mexican men who recently immigrated to the United States were more likely than those whose parents immigrated before they were born or as young children to have their first sexual contact with a same-sex cousin or friend rather than a member of the gay community (Carrillo & Fontdevila, 2011).

Most likely, the ways in which same-sex-oriented teens vary among themselves mirror to some degree divisions observed in the developmental histories of heterosexual teens. The range of shared subpopulation characteristics is boundless in scope and include factors that may be so pronounced as to trivialize differences across sexual and romantic orientations.

**Fourth Tenet: Each Sexual-Minority Youth Is Exceptional**

Because of orientation and background (both macro and micro, e.g., personality, temperament, family, community), every same-sex-attracted youth has distinctive developmental processes and milestones that are not shared by any other youth of any sexuality who has ever lived. This recognition implies that independent of scientific research each sexual-minority youth is an exception to preconceived categories and current data.

It is thus imprudent to characterize same-sex romantic and sexual desires as resulting in monolithic outcomes, for any orientation. It is the interaction between sexual and romantic orientations and personal and social variables that prevents easy characterizations. This level of analysis rarely exists but might well be the most promising approach to generate future hypotheses and research on sexual and romantic status. Relevant data are the life narratives and qualitative data provided by both scientific research and social media. Each sexual-minority youth is one of a kind.

**Research Conundrums**

Although youth usually experience their same-sex sexuality as newly energized with the onset of puberty, many have been aware of their same-sex attractions since their first memories (Savin-Williams, 2016b). This implies that the development of same-sex-attracted individuals is based on genetics and prenatal factors (LeVay, 2016). Yet, little research has been conducted on the postnatal, childhood *genesis* of same-sex sexual attractions, infatuations, erotic arousals, sexual behaviors, and crushes. This is not surprising, largely because it is consistent
with the unstated perspective that sexuality during childhood is deemed “off-limits” to investigators, another consequence of the shroud of silence and denial regarding the sex lives of all children (Levine, 2002). It is considerably more acceptable to fathom a gay adolescent than a gay child. However, there is no sexual latency and no postnatal creation of a sexual-minority orientation. It is already present.

Thus, we know little about the first manifestations of homoeroticism except from the recalled memories of young adults who currently identify as a sexual minority and have disclosed this information to others. As such, our knowledge is subject to the problematic bias of retrospective recall. Although we have average ages of some milestones, the content, meaning, and significance of each remains mysterious. Even with the possibility of present-day research strategies, few scholars ask sexual minorities about their childhood sexuality. What is their earliest sexual memory? When did they first experience sexual desire? As a child, did they have sexual contact? In terms of early crushes, was it a boy, a girl, or both?

Of the many methodological shortcomings characteristic of nearly all research reported in this chapter, the most consequential is the recruitment of biased samples of sexual minorities – those sufficiently out to feel comfortable or motivated to volunteer for sex-oriented research. Whether these individuals represent the much larger number of non-volunteers is difficult to assess, but highly unlikely (Kuyper et al., 2016; Savin-Williams, 2001b). For example, they might well differ in their greater degree of atypical gender expression: it would have been more difficult for such youth to hide their sexuality and thus they were more likely to label themselves as “not straight” at an early age, making them eligible for sexual-minority research. Although, on average, sexual-minority individuals are more gender nonconforming, frequently neglected are the millions who are more-or-less gender typical.

Indeed, findings largely depend on where researchers recruit their population (e.g., gay community groups versus general population, see Kuyper et al., 2016); whether the sample is defined by sexual attraction or sexual identity (Bostwick et al., 2010; Savin-Williams, 2001b); and whether bisexuals and mostly straights are included as sexual minorities (Beaver et al., 2016; Doyle & Molix, 2016; Lea et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2016; Thomeer & Reczek, 2016; Wadsworth & Hayes-Skelton, 2015).

### Feeling Different

#### Overview

Many, but not all, same-sex-attracted youth recall growing up feeling different from peers. This sense of divergence from other children can begin as early as first memories and usually intensifies with increased social contact. Children’s first awareness of their same-sex sexuality is likely rooted in this differentness, linked to two aspects of their life that may or may not be distinctive: an awareness of being...
sexually/romantically attracted to same-sex others and having characteristics of the other sex (gender nonconformity).

Several early studies addressed this sense of differentness, the first conducted nearly four decades ago with San Francisco adults from diverse sexual backgrounds: “In grade school, to what extent did you think that you were different from others your age?” (Bell et al., 1981). About 20 percent of sexual-minority adults reported that they were “not at all” different from their peers. More telling, they were three times more likely than heterosexuals to feel “very much” different as children – and their gender-related reasons were considerably at odds from heterosexuals. For example, as girls, sexual-minority adults felt their interest in sports made them different from other girls; as boys, it was their lack of interest in sports. This sexual identity distinction was proportional rather than absolute as some heterosexual children also felt different because of their gender nonconformity. A second reason for feeling different, reported by 20 percent, was an awareness of having same-sex sexual interest but not opposite-sex sexual interest. Only 2 percent of heterosexuals reported this memory.

Similarly, Troiden (1979, 1989) noted that the initial stage of sensitization for pre-gay children was feeling marginalized, especially in gender terms – not acting or feeling like a typical girl or boy. At this age, they were only dimly aware that these feelings had relevance for their sexuality; as children, they usually became aware of how members of their sex were supposed to act earlier than they became aware about what it means to be sexually attracted to someone. Among men, Troiden found that the primary reasons for feeling different were gender inadequacies, effeminacy, lack of masculine interests, feeling alienated, and experiencing a warmth and excitement in the presence of other males. Feeling sexually attracted to the “wrong” sex was not initially felt as unnatural or bad, and was considerably less important than gender inappropriateness for feeling different. By adolescence, however, nearly all boys felt sexually different because of their prominent sexual interest in other boys, waning or non-existent sexual interest in girls, and sexual contact with boys.

Although other research conducted with those coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s reported similar results (Saghir & Robbins, 1973), investigators today seldom ask children and adolescents questions such as, “Did you feel different growing up?” and “How did you feel different?” Thus, whether these findings from a much older cohort characterize today’s children and adolescents is unknown.

Same-Sex Sexual and Romantic Attractions

Perhaps the most reliable, yet underappreciated, early indicator of sexual-minority status is the emergence of distinctive same-sex sexual and romantic attractions. Developmentally, the ages during which youth first recall experiencing same-sex attractions are broad, extending from first memories in early childhood through adolescence. McClelland et al. (2016) discovered two age groups among girls for first awareness of same-sex attractions, before the age of 10 and between the ages
of 16 and 22 years. If children experience same-sex attractions, it seldom disturbs them because the emotional component feels natural and exciting – that is until late childhood with the onset of adrenarche (McClintock & Herdt, 1996). This is when the adrenal glands increase their production of hormones, creating an upsurge in the intensity of sexual and romantic attractions. The resulting fascination with other girls or other boys is less a matter of the desire to emulate or act like them (gender nonconformity) but more the desire to want (or to be wanted by) same-sex others. How exactly this will happen usually waits for a later age.

After this enhancement of sexual and romantic eroticism during middle childhood, from a biological perspective, puberty and its dramatic escalation of hormones stamp passion onto these attractions (LeVay, 2016). With the infusion of pubertal hormones (gonadarche), denying the eroticism becomes more challenging. Previously defined friendships are converted into “something else” as the purity of infatuations is muddied with sexual desire. Crushes are energized and become more problematic as a youth inarticulately yearns for something more from others without knowing what that something is. “Puppy love” gives way to mini love affairs between two girls or two boys and curiosity intensifies about what another girl or boy “looks like naked.”

Relative to boys, girls more frequently remembered their first same-sex attraction as an emotional attachment or crush, and boys, as a sexual thought, arousal, or behavior (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). In part, this was confirmed and elaborated in a later qualitative study that reported three primary sources for first same-sex attraction among girls (McClelland et al., 2016, pp. 1384–1385):

1. Embodied self-experiences such as a fantasy, memory, or fleeting encounter or as visceral responses to other girls and women.
2. Relational memories emerging within a relationship with another girl that feels different from a friendship.
3. Social awareness of cultural meanings ascribed to how sexuality is supposed to be manifested through subtle cues delivered by social media, parents, and peers.

The degree to which these sex differences reflect biology or socialization is unknown. One usual explanation is based on the finding that women’s sexuality is more dependent on environmental and situational factors, such as passionate interpersonal relationships with women and university courses with strong pro-feminist assignments (Diamond, 2008; Peplau, 2003). However, boys might be similarly disposed but they have been socialized to restrain expressing their romantic crushes, just as girls have been socialized to minimize their sexual desires.

It is also critical to recognize that recalling attractions to one’s unpreferred sex is not solely the province of sexual-minority youth. At least 10 percent of straight-identified youth reports a small degree of same-sex sexuality and either maintains a self-label as straight or mostly straight (Savin-Williams, 2017; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010). Among boys, Silva (2018) labeled some of these activities as “bud sex.” Additionally, more than half
of sexual-minority youth experience opposite-sex attraction and/or sex (Rosario et al., 1996). Developmentally, sexual attraction consistent with one’s sexual orientation emerge earlier than attraction to the nonpreferred sex. Regardless, age of awareness of sexual and romantic attractions are inconsistently related to the timing of other developmental milestones, such as coming out to self and others. Acceptance of these attractions may be immediate or take years to enact (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Whereas several cross-sectional studies that relied on retrospective recounting of events that occurred a decade or more earlier indicated no secular trend in age of first same-sex attraction (Calzo et al., 2011; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006), other research reported that since the 1980s there has been a decline of about 4 years in the recalled age of first same-sex attraction. This observation is especially striking among girls, reflecting the growing recognition and acceptance of many aspects of their sexuality (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009; Maguen et al., 2002; Rosario et al., 1996).

The initial homoeroticism is seldom recognized as such, although, in retrospect, young adults realize it was a forbearer to their eventual romantic and sexual orientations. Same-sex crushes and arousals seldom dissipated but deepened over time and assumed new meanings. Thus, puberty does not create but merely strengthens preexisting sexual and romantic longings. Attempts to substitute hetererotic desires through opposite-sex dating and genital contact fail to cancel the homoeroticism. What is irrefutable is that sexual and romantic desires and, sometimes, behavior exist long before parents and sex education classes are willing to talk about them (Josephs, 2015).

**Gender Nonconformity**

A second basis for feeling different involves gender expression – having characteristics and behaviors more typical of the other than your own sex. At the outset, it is important to note that many communal features and activities are gender neutral with cross-cultural confirmation, such as reading and bicycling, and, in these, children rarely differ based on their sexuality (Golombok et al., 2012; Grellert et al., 1982; Yu et al., 2010). However, gender-biased behavior emerges early, prior to preschool, and persists throughout the life course, strengthening during middle childhood and adolescence. Despite attempts to appear and act traditionally masculine or feminine, concealing atypical gender expressions is seldom subject to conscious control (Rule & Alaei, 2016).

Initially, being gender atypical is not likely to be particularly alarming to children because their fascination with acting like the opposite sex feels natural, a genuine aspect of themselves (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b). Eventually, however, consciousness of differentness evolves such that children perceive something is not quite right, and often undesirable. This message is delivered by the distress expressed by parents and peers who often interpret the gender nonconformity as the first sign of a budding homosexuality (Bos & Sandfort, 2015). Parents can be
especially alarmed as they attempt to change their child’s gender presentation to reduce peer harassment and, perhaps, with the hope that the child’s sexuality will not solidify as gay (D’Augelli et al., 2008).

In attempting to recreate the childhood of same-sex-oriented individuals, a basic, cross-cultural research has longstanding support: “Homosexual individuals recall substantially more childhood cross-sex-typed behavior than do heterosexuals of the same sex” (Bailey & Zucker, 1995, p. 52). This covariation presumes that the same hormonal or genetic factors that alter the brain to create biologically atypical sexual attraction are also responsible for fashioning atypical feelings, perceptions, cognitions, temperaments, and play activities. Indeed, research has consistently found degrees of gender nonconformity in pre-gay children and gender conformity in pre-straight children to emerge relatively early (Rieger et al., 2008), likely in part because of early exposure to different levels of hormones that alter sexual differentiation of the brain (Cohen-Bendahan et al., 2005).

Across studies, relatively high levels of gender nonconformity during childhood predict high levels of gender nonconformity during adulthood and the link between homoeroticism and gender nonconformity has been documented not only for both sexes and at many ages but also in many cultures, including China, Brazil, India, Turkey, and Thailand (Stief, 2017), and among Asian and Hispanic Americans in the United States (Lippa & Tan, 2001). However, caution is necessary because what is considered gender atypical in the West does not always translate similarly across cultures. Gendered play activities and characteristics can be fluid, subject to change over time, such as girls playing rough-and-tumble team sports and boys engaging in artistic endeavors. Culturally, Stief (2017) noted in India, like the activo/pasivo distinction in Latin culture, panthi men are masculine in gender role and presentation but have same-sex sexual relations, as the insertive sex partner, with feminine-appearing hijra and kothi men, who are also sexually attracted to males.

These findings suggest that gender nonconformity is a stable trait, girls are predictably more gender atypical than boys, and the link between sexual orientation and gender nonconformity is more robust in men than women (Bailey & Zucker, 1995). Because Western society overvalues masculinity, girls are granted greater leeway in expressing masculinity and are thus less disparaged for engaging in sex or falling in love with other girls. This may be unfortunate for boys, with resulting detrimental consequences. Alanko and colleagues (2010, p. 89) noted “the gender atypical boys will to a greater extent stick out from other boys as peculiar and much more effort will be made to correct the behavior of gender atypical boys than girls.”

Although the correlation between sexual and gender inversion is strong and significant, it is not perfect. Homoeroticism and gender expression differ by degree among sexual-minority youths, even to the point where many have heteroerotic desires and appear no different from heterosexual youths. For example, bisexuels and mostly straights are less likely than gays/lesbians to be gender atypical (Cohen, 2002; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). In addition, not all sexual-minority children are more gender nonconforming than all heterosexual children; a wide range of gender expressions exists within all populations. Some lesbian girls are as
feminine as straight girls and some gay boys are as masculine as straight boys (Rieger et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2016b). In addition, throughout their life course lesbians and gays show greater variability in gender nonconformity than heterosexuals (Rieger et al., 2008). Thus, there is considerable overlap in the distributions of gender behavior among heterosexual and sexual-minority children and adolescents.

**Sexual Behavior**

The average age of first post-childhood same-sex sexual activities is shortly after pubertal onset for boys and slightly later for girls (Savin-Williams, 2005). Usually ignored in the literature is specifying the types of sexual activities that transpire, the emotional reactions of the individuals to “having sex,” the meanings of the sexual experiences for the individuals, and whether prepubertal “sex play” counts as first sex. Thus, little is known about the first sexual encounters other than the average age at which they occur.

Historically, the average age of first sex has not changed for sexual-minority boys but has decreased slightly for girls (Drasin et al., 2008; Maguen et al., 2002), and is nearly identical to that of heterosexual youths (Smiler, 2016). The onset of sexual activity precedes, co-occurs, or follows self-identification as a sexual minority and may be consistent with or contrary to that sexual identity. Regardless of sexuality, youth engage in early sex or delay sexual activity for various reasons, including not feeling ready, not liking the person, not emotionally attached to the person, and limited opportunities for sex (Heywood et al., 2016). Gay-identified virgins exist as do straight-identified youths, for similar reasons (Savin-Williams, 2016b).

First sex among contemporary sexual-minority youths typically occurs after, not before, the recognition that they are not totally straight. This might be due to an early awareness that same-sex attractions are paramount, independent of sexual encounters or crushes. In addition, cultural mores against adolescents of any sexuality having early sex (early dating is less stigmatized) and the shortage of readily available same-sex partners in middle and high school also influence the timing of sex. This developmental pattern has been characterized as identity-centric rather than sex-centric – embracing a same-sex awareness prior to experiencing same-sex behavior (Calzo et al., 2011; Drasin et al., 2008; Dubé, 2000; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Calzo et al. (2011) reported about one-quarter of gay youth had a same-sex experience prior to self-identification; typically, there was a 1-year gap between the two. Furthermore, across cohorts an identity-centric trajectory was more common among those who began their developmental milestones during adolescence rather than adulthood (Calzo et al., 2011; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Thus, early conceptual models of coming out (Troiden 1979) that viewed adolescent same-sex sexual experiences as serving to test or confirm a nonheterosexual identity, if true, then are apparently less accurate now. In this,
contemporary sexual-minority youth are like heterosexual youth who seldom engage in sex as the basis for confirming their straight identity.

Most same-sex-oriented adolescents do not participate exclusively in same-sex behavior but have instances of sex with opposite-sex peers – usually prior to same-sex encounters. Reasons vary, including the desire to experiment or have fun, giving in to pressure while dating the nonpreferred sex, alcohol intoxication or substance use, and genuine heteroerotic desire (Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b). Although sexual fluidity among same-sex-oriented young women may explain their greater participation in heterosexual encounters, they are also frequently exposed to opposite-sex invitations. Nonetheless, most sexual-minority youth of both sexes engage in heterosexual sex, typically within a dating or friendship relationship (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2009).

For youths who are exclusively same-sex oriented, the earlier they identify as lesbian or gay, the less likely they are to have heterosexual sex (Drasin et al., 2008). Although some straight-identified youth participate in same-sex encounters, those who are primarily homoerotic pursue such interactions with greater regularity and zeal and reportedly derive greater physical and emotional satisfaction from them (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010).

Reflecting heterosexual patterns of sexual behavior, same-sex-oriented young men are more likely than young women to report same-sex behavior, to have a greater number of sex partners, and to engage in such activities prior to heterosexual experiences. The first same-sex encounter among both sexes typically occurs with a friend or someone they are dating, although young men are more likely to have first sex within the context of a purely sexual encounter – this despite stated preferences, both before and after first sex, for relationship sex (Savin-Williams, 2016b; Smiler, 2016).

Self-Identification

Coming out to oneself – that is, recognizing one’s same-sex attractions, crushes, fantasies, and sexual activities are meaningful statements about themselves – is a milestone most sexual-minority youths vividly recall. This is especially true for those who experience the realization as either terrifying or gratifying, and is less so for youths who have always known what their homoeroticism means for their sexuality and personal identity. The latter trajectory is becoming increasingly common as contemporary cohorts appreciate and name their sexuality, sometimes while still in middle school or, in some instances, in elementary school (Savin-Williams, 2016b).

Whereas boys may take years to process the meaning of their same-sex attraction and progress from comprehension to self-identification as a sexual minority, girls typically make the transition to self-recognition as a sexual minority far more quickly, although at a slightly older age (Maguen et al., 2002). It is not uncommon for girls to recognize, name, and disclose their homoeroticism within a few days or
months, or even shortly after developing their first crush on another girl (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

One reason why gay boys take longer to identify as gay is that roughly half go through a “bisexual phase” (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b; Semon et al., 2017). A recent study indicated the reasons: it was “easier to think of themselves as bisexual than as completely homosexual,” “They thought that others would accept them more readily as bisexual than as homosexual,” and “They wanted a future with a wife and children” (Semon et al., 2017, p. 240). Both lesbian and gay young adults have genuine subjectively and objectively assessed sexual and romantic attractions and these individuals identify as “mostly gay/lesbian” (Savin-Williams et al., 2017; Semon et al., 2017). Young women differed from young men in two significant ways: far more identified as mostly lesbian or bisexual and far fewer assumed a bisexual identity as a passageway to a lesbian identity (Copen et al., 2016; Diamond, 2008).

Bisexual youths frequently take longer to reach developmental milestones. Perhaps because their sexual identity is more fluid over time and context or is dependent on person rather than sexual characteristics, naming their sexuality is less certain. They may question themselves more, have fewer sources of support from largely invisible sexual communities, and face greater disbelief from others who question the veracity of their neither straight nor gay claims (Rust, 2002). Calzo et al. (2011) found bisexuals were more likely than gays and lesbians to have a teenage—rather than a child-onset profile in their developmental trajectories. Self-identification averaged 1 year later than gays and lesbians (also see Maguen et al., 2002). Calzo and associates (2011, p. 1659) attributed the later bisexual developmental patterns “to the complexities of understanding and integrating attractions to both same- and other sex partners.” They proposed the “recent increase in the visibility of bisexuality as a stable identity may mean that contemporary bisexual youth are more likely to self-identify as bisexual at younger ages, rather than adopt gay/lesbian or heterosexual identity labels first” (Calzo et al., 2011, p. 1669). Data supporting this hypothesis have not been reported.

Transcending conventional labels, sexual-minority individuals may redefine or create distinctive sexual identity categories or reject them altogether. Compared to baby boomers and Generation Xers, Vaccaro (2009, p. 131) found millennials “negotiate multiple identities instead of developing one singular identity.” The cohort effect is clear: a growing constituency of youth is refusing categorical sex-based labels by embracing broadly defined notions of sexuality, gender, and romance (e.g., pansexual, gender fluid, bisexual homoromantic) and by describing their sexuality as an interaction between their erotic preferences and gender expression (Walton et al., 2016). Youths eschew traditional labels because they fear negative family or social repercussions, or they simply prefer to emphasize other aspects of their life that are more personally meaningful, such as their favorite video games. Still others dismiss traditional sexual classifications because they embody inaccurate or oppressive stereotypes (e.g., lesbians as butch; gay men as sissies; bisexuals as promiscuous) that they find abhorrent. Consequently,
millennial youth might acknowledge their same-sex attraction and behavior but deny that they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Whether this is a passing historic phase or the beginning of a general trend of broadening recognized sexual identities is unknown, but likely the latter.

Another recent development is the visibility of youth who acknowledge, in addition to their predominant heterosexuality, a slight degree of same-sex sexuality. These individuals now have a heightened visibility and identity – mostly straight (Savin-Williams, 2017). Evidence for the validity of mostly straight as a sexual and romantic point along a spectrum is derived from five sources (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). First, it has a unique sexual/romantic profile with youth reporting a small degree of same-sex sexuality. Second, mostly straights (males) have a distinctive physiological arousal pattern (a slight level of arousal to same-sex stimuli). Third, a significant number of individuals identify as mostly straight, especially women. The prevalence of mostly straights exceeds those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual combined. Fourth, the identification is moderately stable over time. Fifth, a mostly straight identity has subjective relevance for young men and women.

A third recent trend is youth who consider their sexuality to be fluid, especially women and those who identify as bisexual or nonexclusive at some point in their lives (Dickson et al., 2013; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Savin-Williams et al., 2012). Diamond (2008) reported that most young women in her longitudinal study experienced several changes in their sexual identity, behavior, attraction, or relationships since childhood. Many felt sexual labels were limiting and individual characteristics trumped biological sex in determining romantic interest. Although some young women with same-sex interest or activity eventually embraced a straight label, they insisted their same-sex sexuality persisted. The same pattern is surfacing among young men who report fluidity in their sexual and romantic lives (Savin-Williams, 2017).

Finally, a growing number of nonheterosexual youth reject cultural mandates to label their sexuality. Because sexual identity labels do not correspond with or encompass the complexity and diversity of their sexual and romantic lives, they are “unlabeled.” The mere construction of sexual identities reifies the labels across time and place and, most importantly, exaggerates artificial differences between them and their straight friends (Diamond, 2008; Muehlenhard, 2000; Savin-Williams, 2014). If mainstream straight youth are not required to assume a sexual identity, why should they be obligated to adopt one?

**Disclosure**

Coming out to others can be a protracted process with many disclosures to make, sometimes stretching throughout one’s lifetime. During these times, youths face ongoing decisions regarding whether, when, and how to reveal their sexuality. Although a single-item question that assesses an overall degree of outness has been
developed (Wilkerson et al., 2016), the potential audiences and the order in which friends, various family members, new acquaintances, and the “world” are told elicits varying degrees of considerations and techniques, with differential repercussions for the adolescent (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b). Should the individual be told face-to-face or by text? Will the person laugh, cry, celebrate, or abuse? Did the person already know or was it a shock?

For most sexual-minority youths, first disclosure occurs several years after coming out to self, although the two can be linked closely in time, even occurring simultaneously. The gap for girls is usually somewhat less than it is for boys. There is also a cohort effect: age of first disclosure – now averaging prior to high school graduation – is several years earlier than in previous generations (Calzo et al., 2011; Drasin et al., 2008; Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Lucassen et al., 2014; Maguen et al., 2002). This earlier age is likely due to a more inviting, positive cultural context and supportive friendship networks for millennial youth not encountered by previous generations.

The advantages and disadvantages of being in or out of the closet can be profound and likely differ based on a host of factors, including personality characteristics, coping style, mental health, and the immediate environment. For example, Pachankis et al. (2015, p. 897) found that being open was associated with high levels of depression for men but not for women. Once men come out, they “experience discrimination that accompanies gender role violations,” causing them increased anxiety and depression. Because women are given more leeway in their gender role expression, being out was not associated with depression. Rather, it was closeted women who were most anxious and depressed. Why? Perhaps because those not out were more likely to be in a heterosexual relationship, which was associated with negative mental health issues. Another explanation, not considered by the authors, is that boys acted out their depression by coming out about their sexuality, whereas depressed girls coped by internalizing their sexuality, keeping it to themselves.

The most common recipient of a first disclosure for both sexes was a best female friend. Next came another gay person, which is now more likely given the larger numbers who are out and hence available to receive a disclosure. A favorite sibling and a straight male best friend were also not uncommon. Parents, extended family members, school counselors, and religious leaders were rarely the first person told. When the object of first disclosure was carefully chosen, the reaction was nearly always positive, even celebratory. Again, there is a cohort effect: today’s generation of Internet-consuming young adults routinely considers sexual diversity to be normative and thus typically nonplussed when friends come out to them (Savin-Williams 2005, 2016b). Friends frequently progress quickly from mild surprise or amused confirmation to support – perhaps with resolute determination to find a sexual or romantic partner for their friend.

Nonetheless, some youths resist disclosing because they fear being known as gay and the length and intensity of this struggle likely depends on their ethnicity, immigrant status, social class, and geographic region. Or, they are capable of
concealing their sexuality because of their gender-conforming behavior or appearance; want to avoid hurting or disappointing friends, family, or former dating partners; or are unprepared to irrevocably box themselves in (“What if I later discover I’m not gay?”). The fear of losing friends is a critical argument for not disclosing. Although sexual-minority youths in Salt Lake City had smaller peer networks and some friendship loss, they were as connected with their remaining friends as their straight peers (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). Sexual-minority youths may expect, perhaps realistically or not, the detrimental effects of disclosure such as rejection, verbal harassment, and threats to physical safety (Huebner et al., 2004; Kosciw et al., 2010). This is less true today and indeed, among millennials, not being straight might draw friends, prestige, and hence “gay capital” (Morris, 2017).

Coming out to parents may be one of the last disclosures for sexual-minority youth, not because parents are deemed unimportant but precisely because of their importance. For example, parental disapproval of their son’s self-expression, especially if he is insufficiently masculine during his early development, might negatively impact the boy’s public self-consciousness. By highlighting their son’s failure to act like other boys, parents create greater daily anxiety for him (Pachankis & Bernstein, 2012).

Youths who believe they must be certain about their sexuality before they initiate this highly significant disclosure delay coming out to parents. Others fear emotional rejection or financial withdrawal (e.g., no financial support for college). Surprisingly, even gay-affirming parents with gay friends and progressive politics might be among the last to learn about their child’s sexuality. Their child might suspect that the parents believe that homosexuality is acceptable for others but not for their son or daughter.

Despite highly publicized instances of abuse, adolescents who disclosed to a parent (the mother was usually first) while living at home seldom faced an ongoing, severely negative response or expulsion – indeed, the clear majority received a neutral or positive response (Samarova et al., 2014; Savin-Williams, 2001c, 2016b). Parents were not always initially thrilled with having a gay child because they feared for the child’s physical and medical safety, were concerned about what neighbors would think, or worried that their dreams of grandchildren were dashed. Parental reactions varied from celebration to rejection, but with time most eventually accepted what they had long suspected (Savin-Williams 2001c). Contemporary parents are likely becoming more accepting due to media portrayals of healthy sexual-minority youth, as well as the coming out of media figures, relatives, and friends.

Another method to come out publicly is to openly date someone of one’s own sex – an occurrence that is dramatically increasing in today’s cohort (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b). Sexual-minority youths recruited from gay-oriented organizations did not differ from heterosexual youths in the number of romantic relationships, especially those most out and thus most able to attract potential dating partners (Diamond & Lucas, 2004; also, see review by Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Nonetheless, they were more likely to fear that
they would not find the relationship they wanted, and young men faced obstacles in developing highly intimate same-sex relationships during their teen years, claiming (falsely) that most gay youth want sex rather than relationships (Savin-Williams, 2016b).

Unique challenges, however, confront bisexual youth who, as a group, are more likely than gay/lesbian youth to conceal rather than disclose their sexual status and thus to come out at a later age. If dating a member of the other sex, they might do so as a true expression of their sexuality or to hide their orientation (Schrimshaw et al., 2012). Young adult bisexual men were more likely to conceal their sexuality, not because they were uncertain about their identity or because they failed to accept their identity but because they wanted to avoid the stigmatizing reactions from others (Schrimshaw et al., 2018). Compared to lesbians, bisexual young women were also less apt to disclose their sexuality to others (Rosario et al., 2009). Perhaps because of their young age (14–21 years old) compared to lesbian girls, they had a later onset of first same-sex sexual attractions, arousals, and fantasies; were lower in their certainty, acceptance, and comfort of their sexual identity; possessed less positive attitudes toward homosexuality; were less involved in lesbian social activities; and were less comfortable with others knowing their sexuality.

Other sexual-minority youths, such as foreign nationals, members of conservative racial/ethnic or social class groups, and religious members of orthodox or evangelic religious communities also have unique concerns. For cultural reasons, they may be unable or unwilling to come out to family members; have covert sexual or romantic relationships with same-sex others; and have as their most urgent priority avoiding real or feared social admonishment. Although little is known about these mostly invisible youths, they face unique stressors in coming out to self and others as they reconcile their unacceptable sexuality through the lens of their primary family and social community (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Fisher et al., 2014). Beleaguered, they may be left alone to navigate their sexuality within the context of mostly White, gay subcultures in which the challenges of racism and classism are not acknowledged. For others, having supportive families and communities outweighs the disadvantages of coming out, at least during adolescence and young adulthood.

Despite limited empirical data, developmental psychologists generally believe that disclosing one’s sexuality, when appropriately delivered, facilitates personal integrity, identity synthesis, and psychological health and reduces distress, anxiety, depression, and burn out, for both sexes (Juster et al., 2013). It is an act of self-empowerment and authenticity, and is a means for obtaining social support and interpersonal closeness (Legate et al., 2012). Through coming out, sexual-minority youth learn stigma management and develop strategies for coping with stressful encounters related to a marginalized identity. The age and conditions under which the benefits of disclosure outweigh the dangers are unknown. If the context is one in which a youth feels autonomous and supported, then the potential value of coming out is enhanced, “as individuals who disclosed more tended to experience greater wellness” (Legate et al., 2012, p. 150).
Self-Acceptance and Synthesis

Considered by many to be the final developmental milestones, few studies assess either sexual-identity acceptance or its synthesis with other aspects of personal identity among sexual-minority youth. Most likely, they can be achieved at any point in the life course – or never. Those who achieve synthesis recognize the importance of their sexuality but do not experience it as all-consuming or over-arching; it is simply one of many aspects of the self.

Considerable research supports the perspective that contemporary sexual-minority youth are as content with their lives as are heterosexual youth. For example, the clear majority of sexual-minority youths felt anywhere from indifferent to very good about their sexuality and less than 10 percent expressed a desire to be straight. If given the option, most would not take a magical pill to turn them straight. Despite public attitudes, sexual orientation is not strongly or directly related to quality of life or positive health indicators such as self-esteem or life satisfaction (Becker et al., 2014; Bostwick et al., 2010; Diamond & Lucas, 2004; Horowitz et al., 2001; Juster et al., 2013 Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b). Most are content with their sexual and romantic orientations and do not define themselves solely in relationship to those orientations. Whether youth attach a sexual label to themselves is less important than acquiring the ability to accept and integrate their sexual and romantic selves with other essential elements of their life. Doing so enhances a sense of authenticity.

The Millennial Revolution

We have witnessed a proliferation of cultural recognition, positive social environments, and acceptance of sexual-minority youth (Dickson et al., 2013; Drasin et al., 2008; Savin-Williams, 2016b). One consequence has been an increase in the diversity and representative sampling of youth willing to participate in scientific research. This has allowed developmental scientists to investigate a plurality of young lives, a variety of developmental trajectories and outcomes, and nuanced snapshots of sexual-minority lives.

With these dramatic transformations, sexual-minority youth have been emancipated from their generational past (Cohler & Hammack, 2007). They have matured in a society that has become more accepting of sexual diversity and less tolerant of sexual prejudice (Pew Research Center, 2013; see Clements & Field, 2014, for UK data). For example, millennial youth frequently forego sexual confusion, know who they are prior to engaging in sex, and believe they are as “normal” as their straight friends (Savin-Williams, 2016b). Indeed, some have acquired “gay capital,” which “inverts traditional understandings of gay youth as vulnerable and victimized due to their sexual minority status by showing that having a gay identity can act as a form of privilege in social fields where homophobia has diminished or disappeared” (Morris, 2017, p. 19 online). From this perspective, sexual-minority
youth are not victims or survivors but victors. Indeed, some straight-identified youth now proclaim a “little bit of gayness” as a sign of identification with what they hold to be prestigious and advantageous (Savin-Williams, 2017).

Of course, not all sexual-minority youth have flourished as they continue to struggle with accepting their sexuality and its psychological and social burden well into adulthood. However, the proportion who experience a troubled life because of their same-sex sexuality is decreasing, almost certainly because their generation is far more comfortable with sexual and gender diversity (Savin-Williams, 2016b).

**Conclusion**

Although contemporary youth are at the vanguard in redefining themselves in capturing the essence of their sexual and romantic selves, academic research has not always kept pace. Researchers have been more conservative than sexual-minority youth in four critical ways.

1. Narrowly delineating sexual-minority youth by describing them solely based on their sexual attraction, sexual behavior, or sexual identity while ignoring other indicators such as sexual fantasy, nonintercourse sexual contact, infatuation, gender expressions, and romantic desires.
2. Defining sexual orientation categorically, labeling individuals as if there were only three types (straight, bisexual, gay/lesbian) rather than as points along a sexual/romantic spectrum. Sexual and romantic development is a continuously distributed individual characteristic.
3. Including research participants who are not representative or typical of sexual-minority youth and thus failing to recognize the inadequacy of prior research that characterized gay youth as a caricature progressing down a precarious and invariant developmental course (for critiques, see Savin-Williams, 2005 and Waidzunas, 2012). Whereas some youth navigate their lives with difficulty and, too often, tragically, others do so with remarkable “strength, courage, self-determination and the dignity with which they live their lives all-too-often in the setting of a disapproving culture or environment” (Garofalo, 2014, p. 200). That “disapproving culture” is shrinking rapidly.
4. Failing to collect data that highlights the normalization of sexual-minority youth, their positive attributes, and their diversity across populations and communities.

Developmental scientists are beginning to emphasize the *ordinariness* of sexual-minority youth as they discover that most are typical adolescents in their developmental trajectories, with positive as well as negative outcomes (Hammack, 2005; Harden, 2014; Morris, 2017; Morris et al., 2014; Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016b, 2017; Taulke-Johnson, 2008; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Although sexual-minority children and adolescents undoubtedly face unique challenges and opportunities, similar to heterosexuals, the key elements for successfully traversing their
lives include: “belonging to a community, creating families of choice, forging strong connections with others, serving as positive role models, developing empathy and compassion, living authentically and honestly, gaining personal insight and sense of self, involvement in social justice and activism, freedom from gender-specific roles, exploring sexuality and relationships, and enjoying egalitarian relationships” (Riggle et al., 2008, p. 210). That is, although sexual-minority youth have unique developmental trajectories, in large part because of their same-sex sexual and romantic selves, in most respects they are typical youth with similar developmental milestones and outcomes as straight youth.

References


