

Social Context and Sexual Identity

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In this paper we use data from four waves of the 1994-2008 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a large and nationally-representative sample of adolescents. We examine changes in stated patterns of sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual identity as respondents move from adolescence (average age 16 at the initial interview) to young adulthood (average age 28 at the fourth interview). Whereas prior researchers have tended to focus only on sexuality, we consider the broader social relational context in which sexual behavior occurs and sexual identities are developed and renegotiated. In doing so, we address the intersection of social class and sexual identity, highlighting the class-dependent nature of sexual meanings and opportunities. For example, we find that educational attainment increases women's chances of identifying as heterosexual but has the reverse effect for men.

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