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It Takes a Village: Promoting the Social Ecologies of Resilience among Queer and Trans Youth

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Research Partners: Thank You!
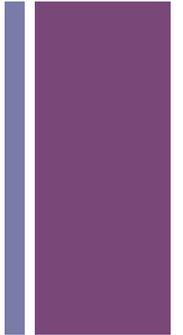
- Pride & Prejudice program, Central Toronto Youth Services

- Supporting Our Youth program, Sherbourne Health Centre

- The Studio, Delisle Youth Services

- Youthlink

- Planned Parenthood Toronto
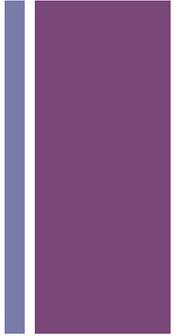
BACKGROUND

&

STUDY PURPOSE

Pathways to Resilience among Queer & Trans Youth Project
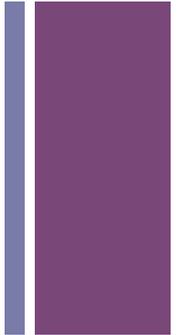
Overall Study Purpose

- To understand how queer and trans youth navigate adversities to maintain or achieve wellbeing

Resilience

- "The dynamic *processes* encompassing positive adaptation in the face of significant adversities" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543)

Integrating a Resilience Framework in Studying Queer & Trans Youth
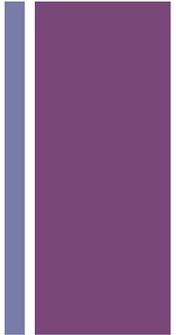
- Youths' sexual and gender diversity has been overlooked in the 5 decades of resilience science

- Research on queer and trans youth has focused historically on documenting risk and vulnerabilities

- My research sought to **integrate a resilience framework** in studying queer and trans youth

Resilience Science

Researching Queer & Trans Youth
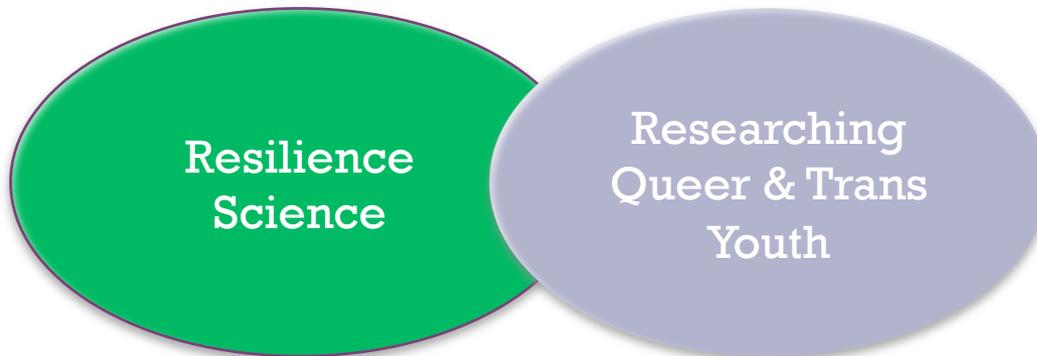
Queer & Trans Youth & Resilience
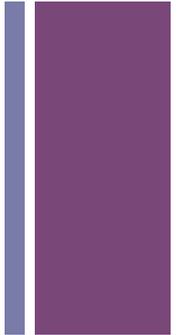
- *Variable-focused analysis* (Masten, 2014) as the predominant methodology to identify resilience factors

- Common (or general) factors:
  - Family support
  - Caring or supportive adults
  - General social support
  - School connectedness

  (e.g., Craig & Smith, 2014; Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Gastic & Johnson, 2009; Grossman et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2011; Simons et al., 2013; Veale et al., 2015)

- Unique factors:
  - Family acceptance of LGBTQ identities (Ryan et al., 2010; Travers et al., 2012)
  - Friendship with other LGBTQ youth (e.g., Ueno, 2005)
  - Schools with anti-bullying policies (e.g., Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013) and Gay-Straight Alliance groups (e.g., Goodenow et al., 2006)
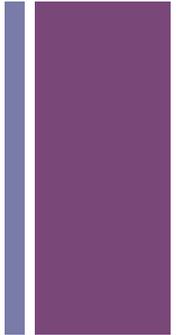
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical Framework

Social ecological theory of resilience (Ungar, 2011, 2012) as a *sensitizing concept* (Bowen, 2006)

- Resilience occurs within the interaction between youths' capacity and the capacity of their social ecologies
- Resilience process is culture- or context-specific
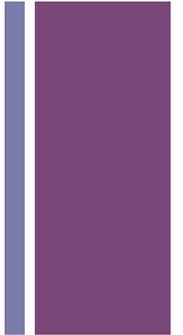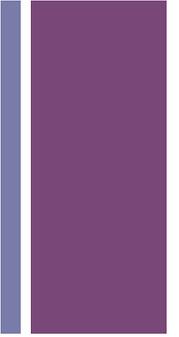
METHODOLOGY

Methods
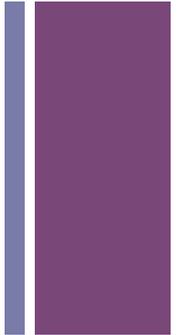
- Person-centered analysis (Masten, 2014)

- Nomination of "resilient" youth as a sampling strategy

- Grounded Theory methodologies (Charmaz, 2006, 2008, 2011)

+ Participants
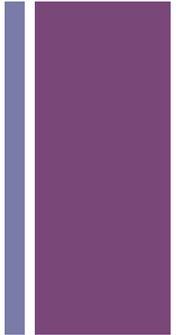
- Individual interviews (n = 35)

- Two, concurrent study phases

  - Phase 1: Service providers (n = 16)
  - Phase 2: Nominated "resilient" LGBTQ youth ages 16-24 (n = 19)

Service Providers ($n = 16$)

Experience: 12.5 yr (3 – 33)

Cis-female (11)
Cis-male (2)
Trans-male (2)
Gender queer (1)

Age: 44.5 (25-69)

White (12)
POC (4)

LGBTQ (16)

Youth (*n* = 19)

White (8)
Mixed (6)
Asian (3)
Black (2)

Cis-female (4)
Cis-male (3)
Gender queer (6)
Trans-female (1)
Trans-male (5)

Age: 20.5
(16-24)

In post-secondary (9)
In high school (5)

Born in
Canada (17)
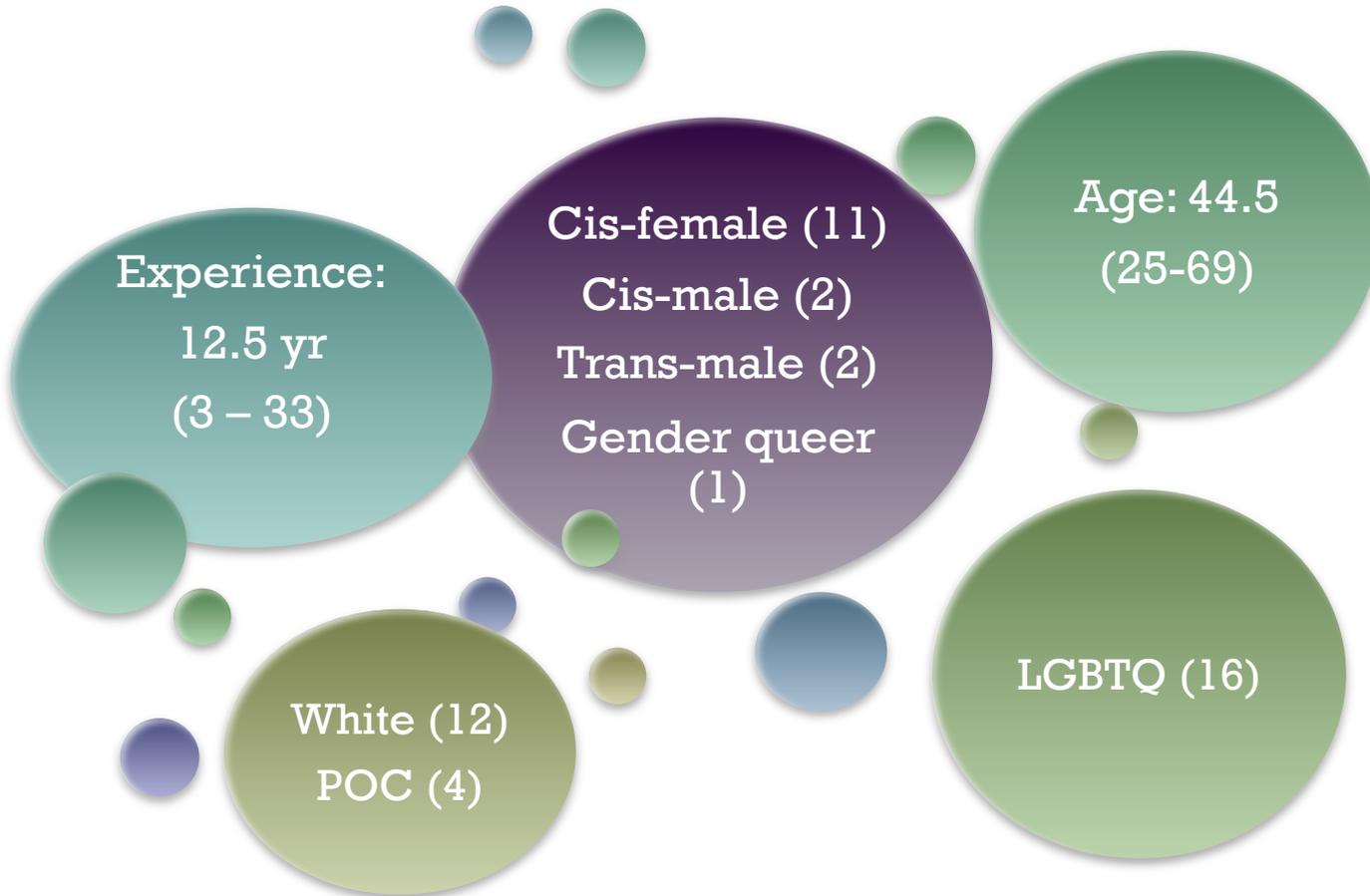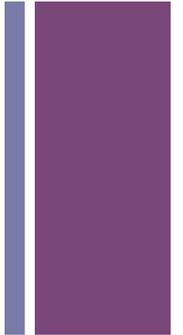
Immigrant
family (9)
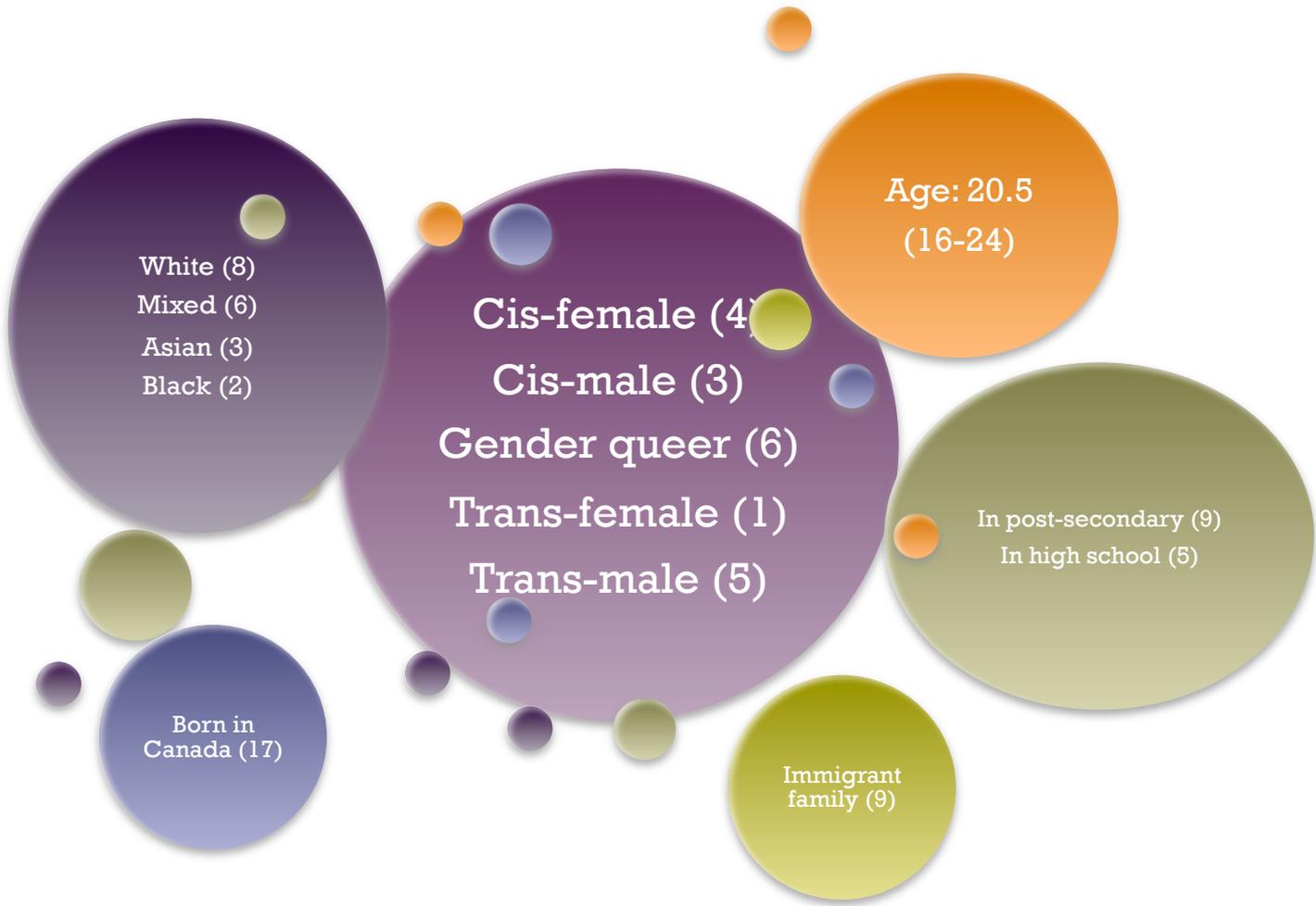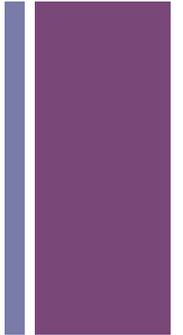
+ Data Analysis

- Conducted data collection and analysis simultaneously: December 2013 – September 2014

- Initial coding (n = 70) → Focused and axial coding, using **constant comparative method** → Categories (n = 8)

- Hand coding → *Dedoose* software → Hand coding

- Abductive process: Began with inductive and ended with deductive analysis

- Participants in a later part of data collection were asked to comment and further elaborate on the preliminary results

    → Served as a form of member checking
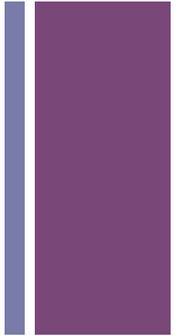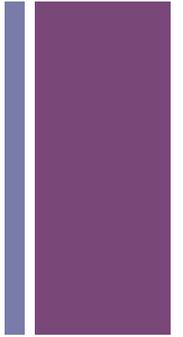
KEY RESULTS

+ Resilience Processes
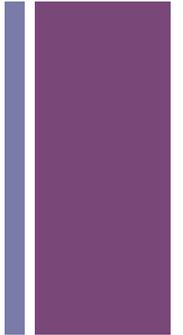
- Navigating safety across contexts

- Asserting personal agency

- Seeking and cultivating meaning relationships

- Un-silencing queer/trans and other marginalized social identities

- Engaging in collective healing and action

Resilience Processes

- All youth participants made use of all of these five processes

- The degree to which and the ways in which youth made use of each process varied
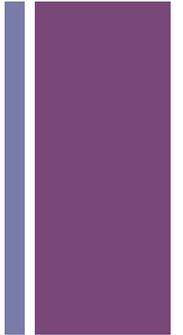
Resilience Process
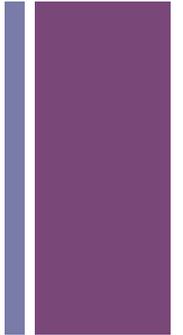
- Each youth carved out personalized pathways by turning their experiences of emotional pain into an opportunity for survival and growth
  - → **Paving Pathways through the Pain**
    (Core category)

- Resilience as a process: Importance of both the availabilities of resources *and* youths' capacity to make use of them

(1) *Code-Switch*:
Navigating safety across contexts
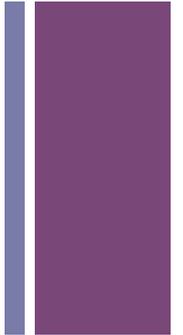
"I thought about coming out to my parents two years ago. But it wasn't a possibility because they would disown me… **I would have to be able to sustain myself financially before telling them**. I talked to a financial officer. I chose to come out at my neighbour's house because I was afraid that my dad was going to get violent."

(Youth 02)

(2) *Honoring me, myself, & I:* Asserting personal agency

"Over the years, I refused to tell [my mother] that I go to [a queer agency]. I told her I was out volunteering or was out in choir practice. And that was **power I was taking back**.

I was **taking back agency**. I started learning how to explore haircuts, shopping my own clothes, becoming independent of her"

(Youth 08)

(3) *Do you 'see' me?:* Seeking and cultivating meaningful relationships

"[My mentor] and I joke in the first year of our relationship that I was constantly waiting for the other shoe to drop. I was like, 'she's a really cool person. But when is she going to hurt me?'

It took me about a year to be like, 'this person isn't gonna let me down. She was always there. I realized that **this person is going to be there for me.**"

(Youth 06)
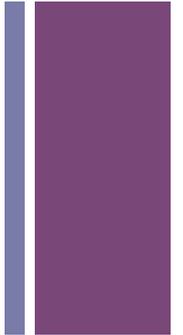
(4) *Coming into my own*: Un-silencing marginalized social identities

"Youth come to a process of accepting their sexuality or gender and get to a place where they're comfortable with it. I've seen that happen for a number of youth who... **suddenly seem to be doing better**... Their reaction to people is different because they're referred to in a way that makes sense for them."

(Service Provider 03)
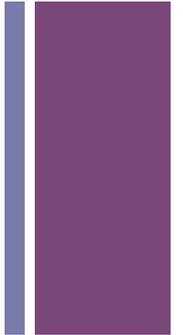
(5) *Becoming me, us, & we:* Engaging in collective healing & action
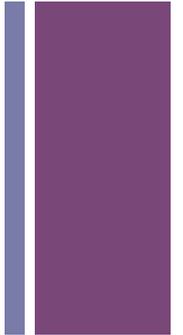
"I didn't have language to think more critically about what was going on. [Learning about oppression] was really helpful… I was able to stop blaming myself for everything that happened with my family… **I could start recognizing it as part of a systemic oppression** towards trans and queer folks."

(Youth 10)

Unique Resilience Resources for Queer & Trans Youth

- Access to safer spaces

- Relationships with queer & trans adults and peers

- Involvement with counterculture communities

- Intentional use of social media

- Critical consciousness building
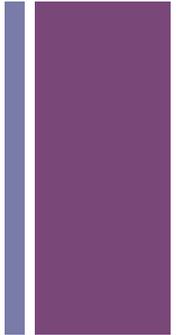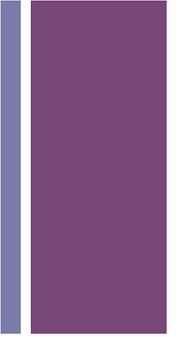
DISCUSSION

Study Limitations
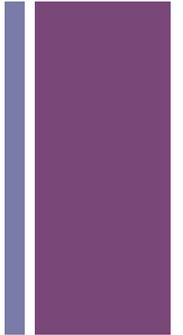
- Small, context-specific sampling

    - Cautions re: transferability

- The use of "nomination" sampling

    - A diversity of adversities and access to resources among youth

    - Excluded youth from certain demographics

- Choice of theory and methods

    - Individual, interpersonal, and community-level resources domains VS the policy- and structural-level resources

Implications for Research
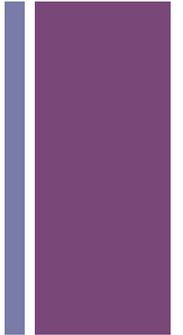
- Need for simultaneous research foci on risk and resilience in advancing social workers' knowledge-base on queer and trans youth

- Continued research on the specific mechanisms of various resilience resources (e.g., the role queer and trans affirming legislation, greater media representations)

- Continued research on exploring similarities and differences in the resilience processes among queer and trans youth across demographic groups and contexts
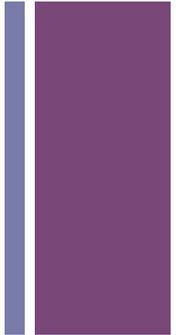
Conceptualizing Resilience

# as a Social Ecological Process

Case study: Alex (pseudonym)
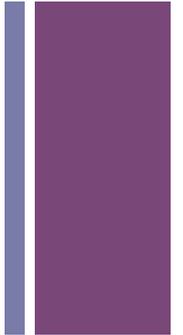
- Designed to show an example of resilience as a **social ecological process**

- Alex: 20-year-old trans male

- Chinese Canadian

- Parents immigrated from Hong Kong

- Only child

+ Alex

Extended Family in Hong Kong

Extended Family in Hong Kong

Came out as lesbian

15

Girl Friend

Best Friend

School
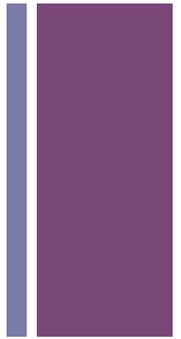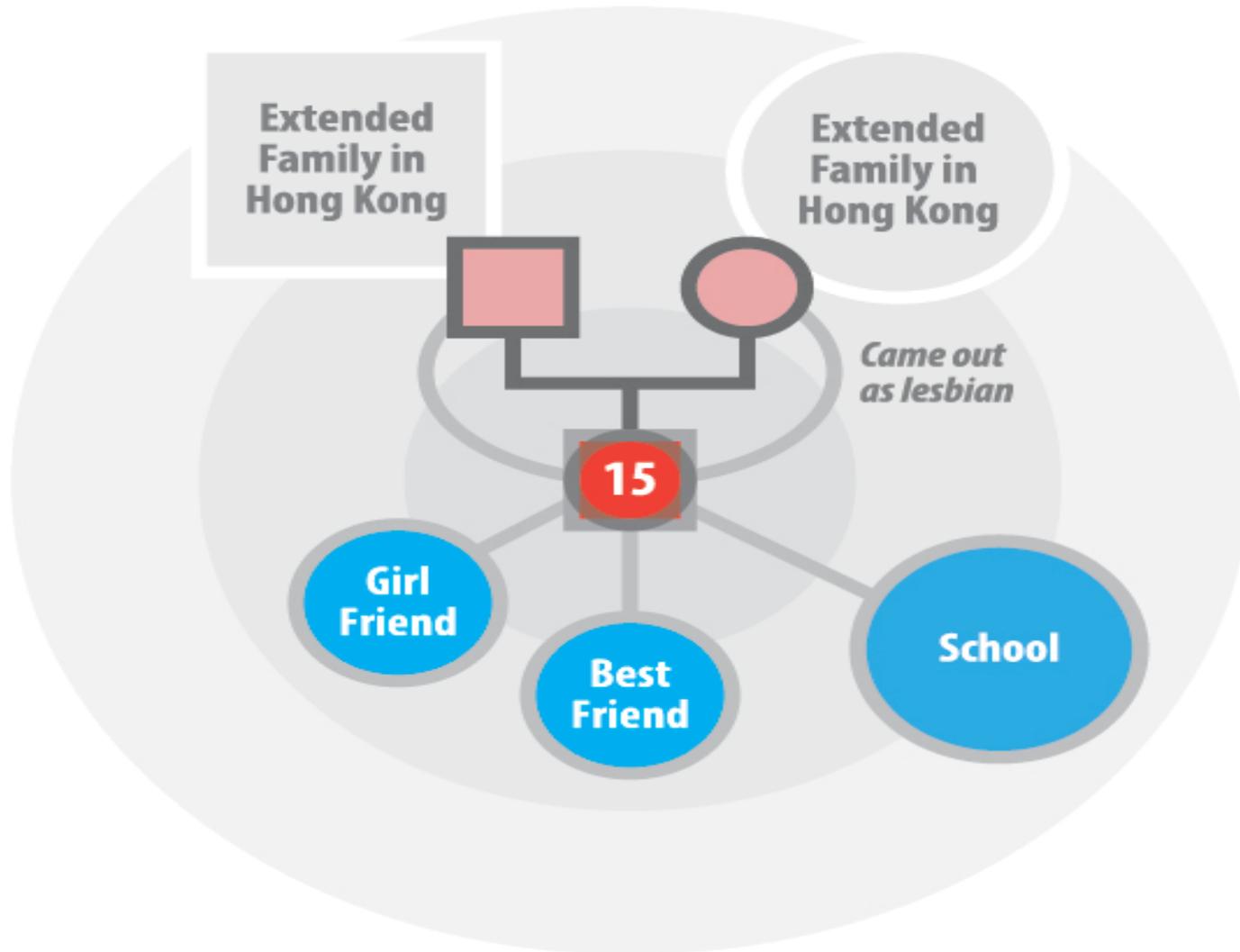
Adversities across Contexts
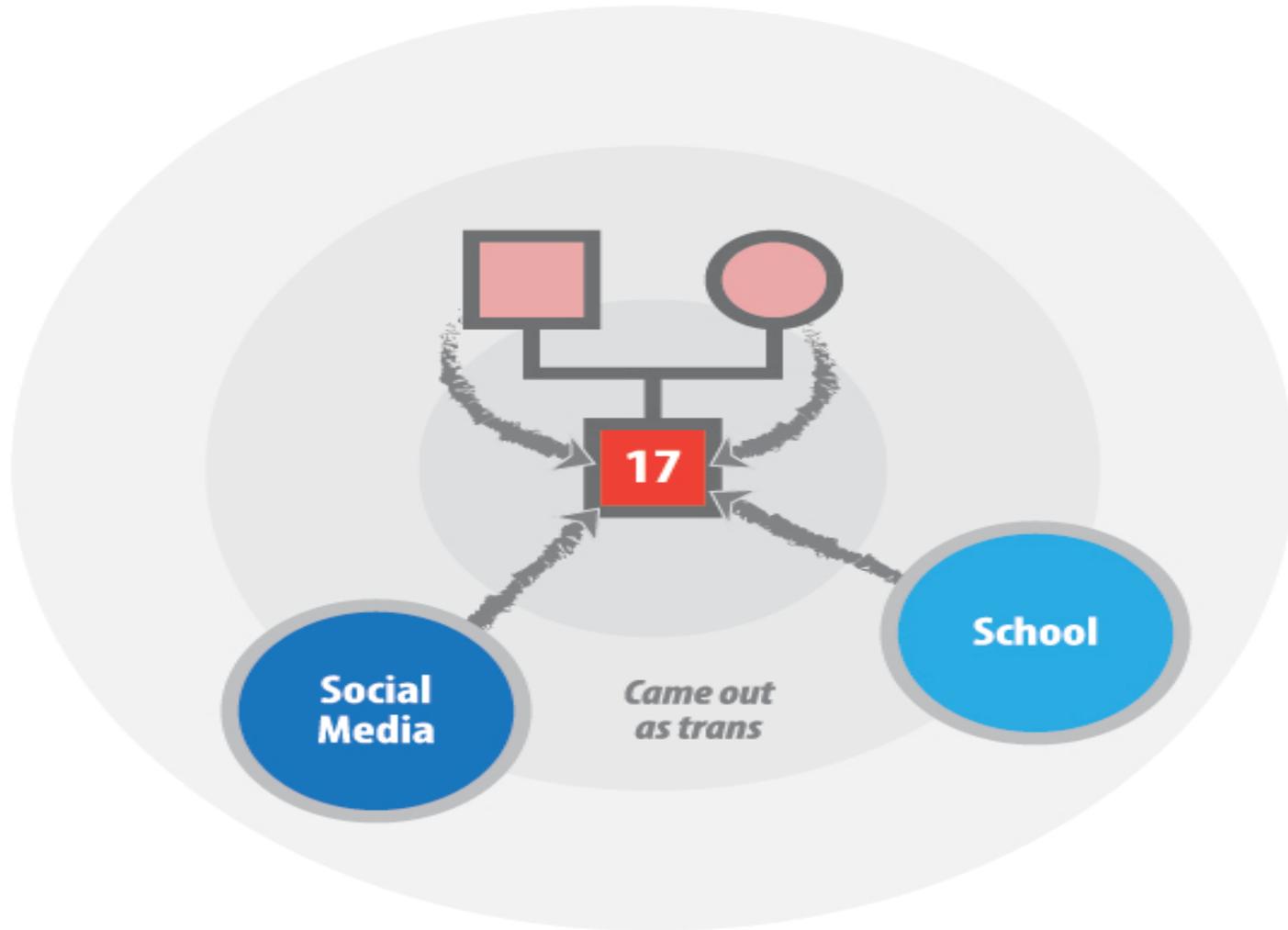
Adversities across Contexts
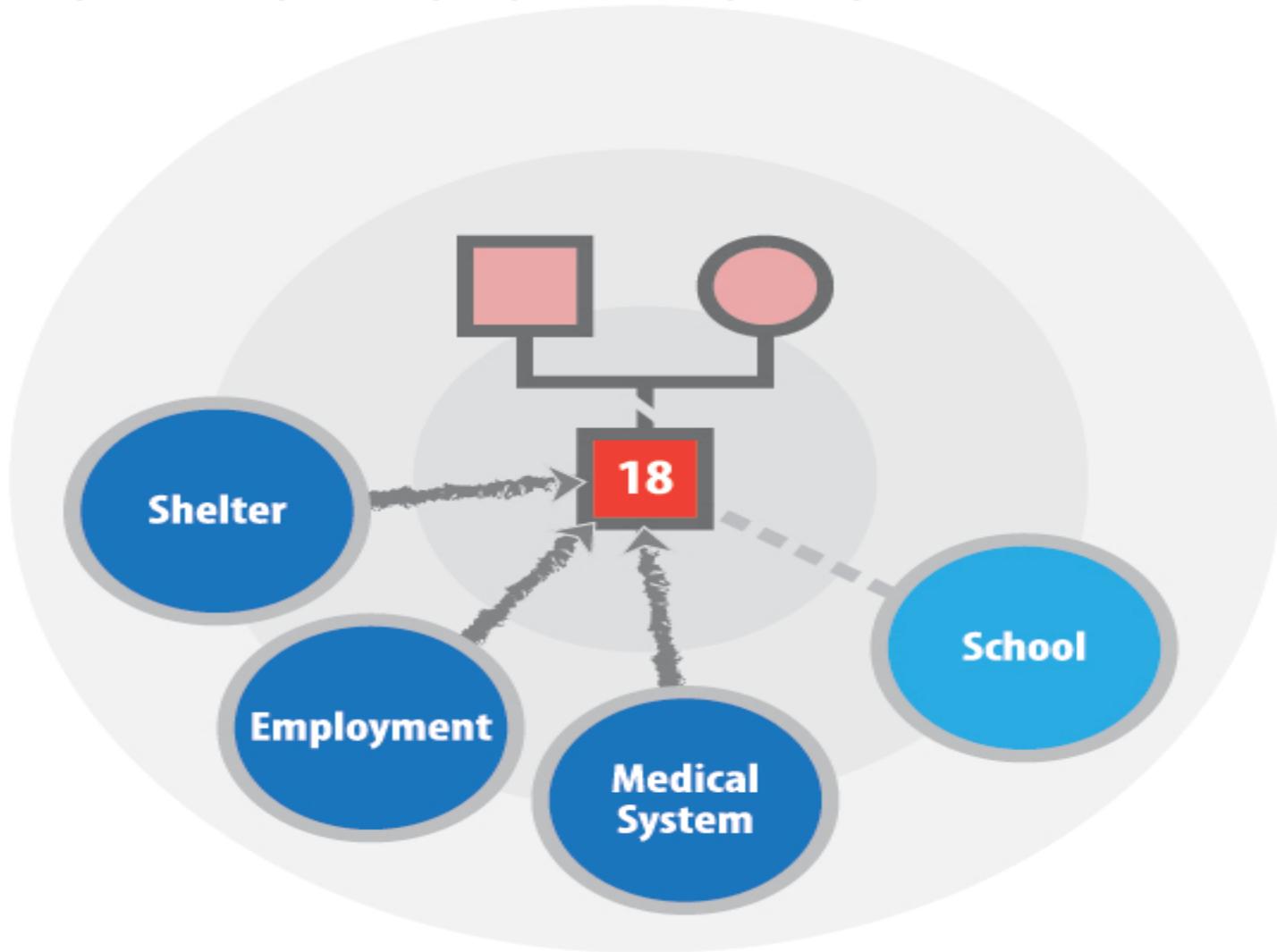
+ Pathways to Resilience
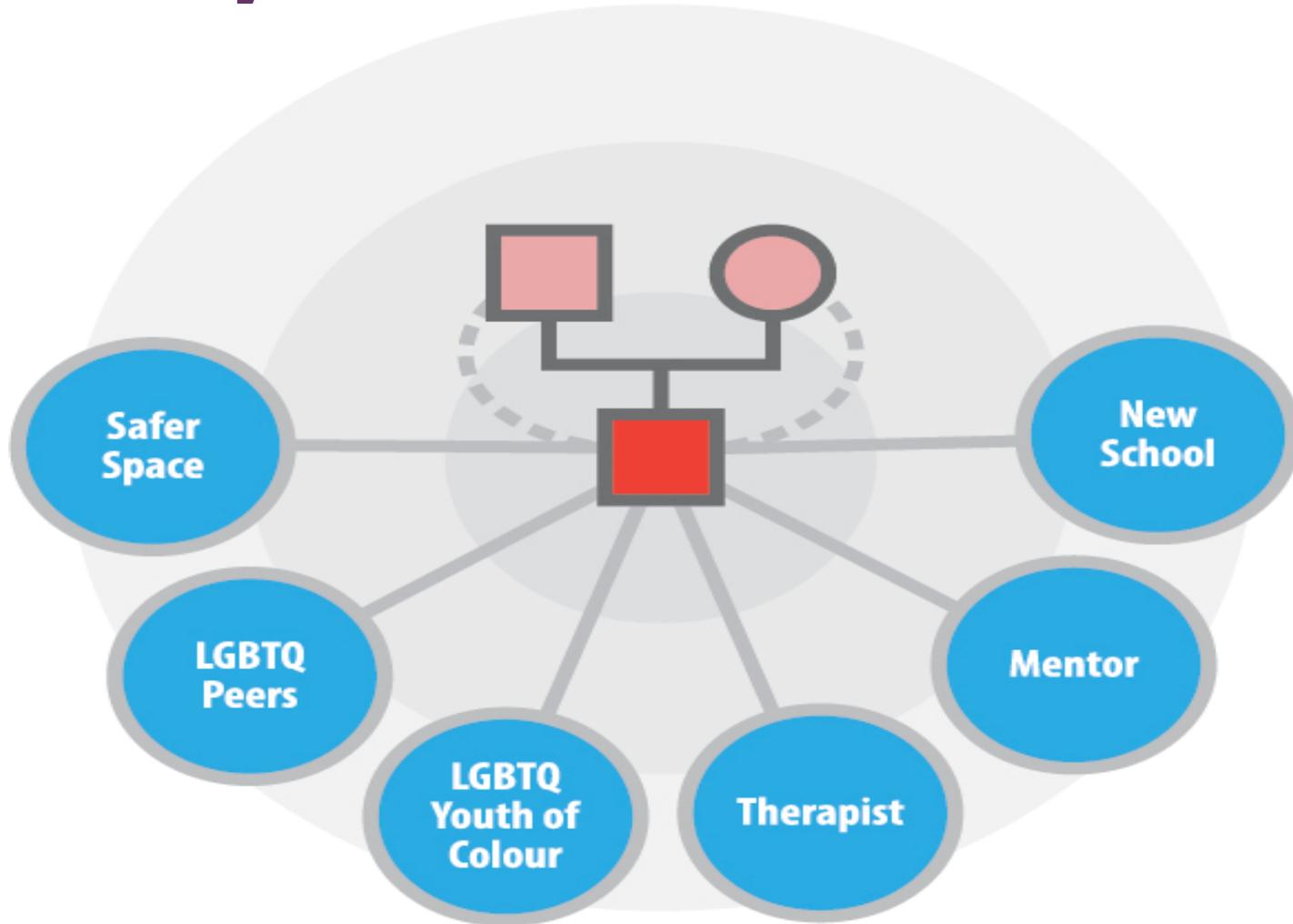
Social Ecologies of Resilience
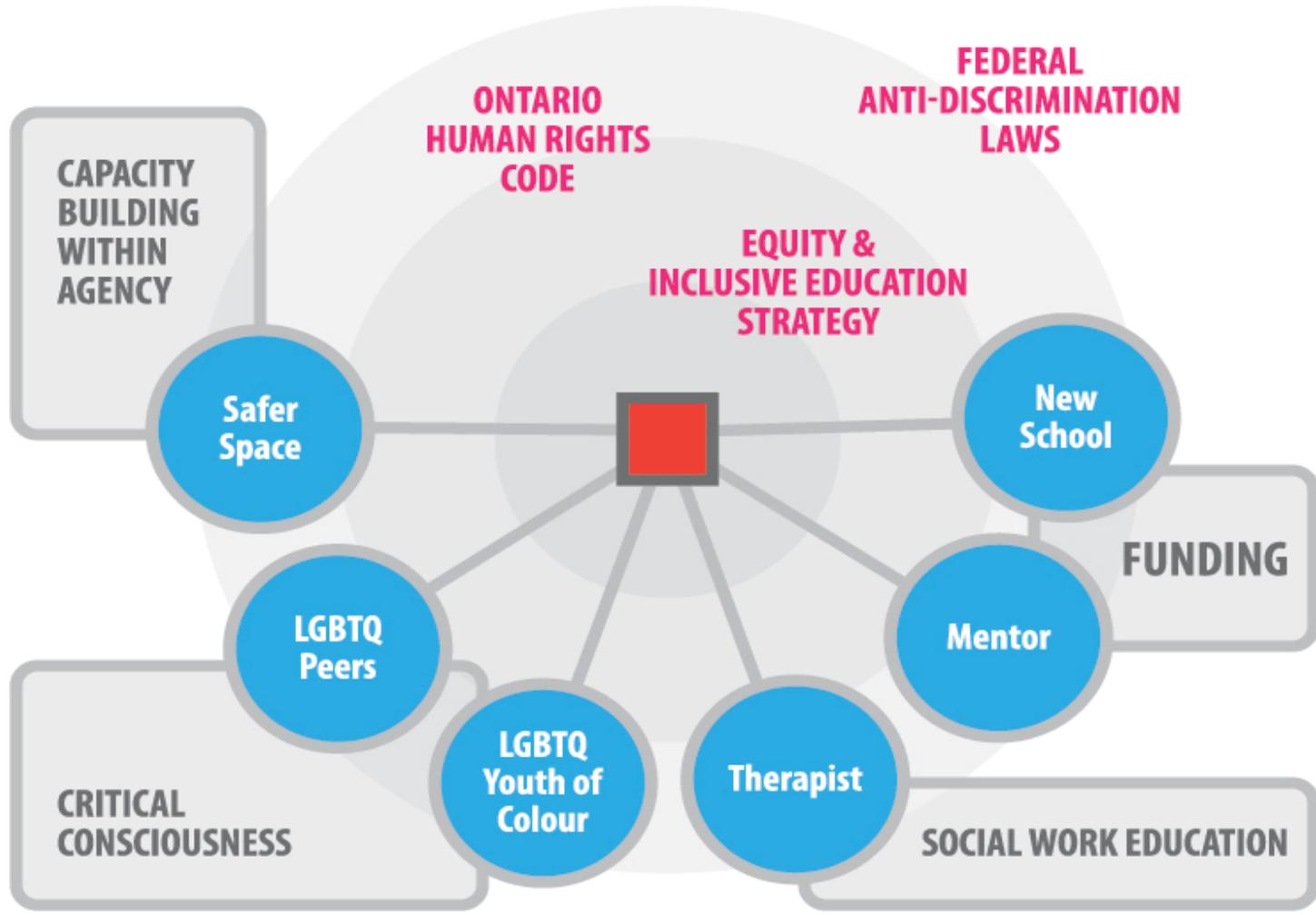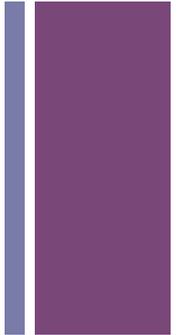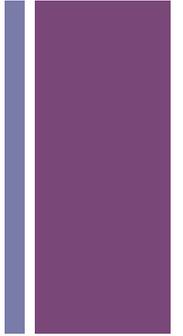
Working with Queer & Trans Youth:

A Social Ecological Framework of Resilience

Micro Practice: Working with Individuals

- To promote the capacity of queer and trans youth to navigate their way to wellbeing in the face of adversity

  - Assist youth in cultivating skills to assess and navigate safety across contexts
  - Empower youth to make use of their personal agency in identifying needs and goals and making life decisions
  - Support youth in navigating oppression related to their queer and trans as well as other marginal social identities
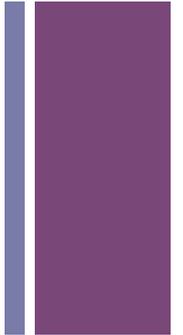
Mezzo Practice:
Working with families, schools, and other relevant systems
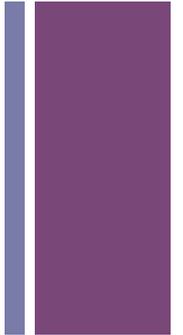
- To build or restore capacity of these systems to better support queer and trans youth

  - Engage families of queer and trans youth, teachers, peer, and other community groups in building or restoring their capacity to support youth
  - Engage social service agencies to build greater capacity to offer affirmative services to queer and trans youth

Macro Practice:
Working with institutions and systems
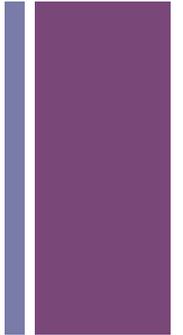
- To advocate for relevant social and policy-level changes to prevent system-level oppression that poses risks to queer and trans youth

    - Advocate for funding for LGBTQ-relevant resources
    - Advocate for legal rights and protection for queer and trans people as human rights concerns
    - Engage in social action to eradicate homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression

Limitations of the Practice Framework
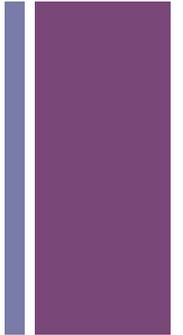
- How could one social worker engage in all scopes of practice?

- How about specialized knowledge and skills (e.g., clinical expertise)?

- Heuristic framework– Does not signal *the how*

+ Thank you!

Contact:

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