Solving the Definitional Dilemma of Sexuality

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Sexual Orientation

• Sexual attraction
  • Physiological response

• Sexual behavior
  • Sexual acts

• Sexual identity
  • “The label we attach to ourselves to indicate to others our sexual orientation” (Gordon & Silva, 2015)
Measuring Sexual Orientation

• Time frame (Brogan et al., 2001)
  • Present or lifetime

• Categorical vs. continuous measures (Clarke et al., 2015))

• Other aspects of sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2014)
  • Meaning
  • Frequency
  • Intensity
  • Quality
Current Practice

• Single-shot measures of sexual orientation, usually identity (Savin-Williams, 2006)

• Investigation of dimensions of sexual orientation with specific outcomes (e.g., drug/alcohol use; Gattis et al., 2012)

• Recommendation to investigate more than one dimension of sexuality (Laumann et al., 1994)
Problems with the Current Practice

• Sexual fluidity
• Sexual discordance
• Differential prevalence
Sexual Fluidity

- In the course of a 2-year study of 80 sexual minority women, one third of participants changed identities (Diamond, 2000)
- Among 400 sexual minority women, 75% of bisexual women formerly identified as lesbian and 40% of lesbian women formerly identified as bisexual (Rust, 1992)
- In a nationally representative sample, 1.4% of men and 2.6% of women changed sexual identity labels in a 6-year period (Dickson et al., 2013)
Sexual Discordance

• Many individuals’ ratings of sexual attraction, behavior, and identity are not concordant (Clarke et al., 2015)

• In a sample, 4.2% of men and 8.2% of women reported discordant sexual attraction and behavior (Smith et al., 2003)

• Potential motivating factors (Schick et al., 2012)
  • Social stigma preventing sexual minority identification
  • Sexual inactivity
  • Current relationship parameters (i.e., bisexuality)
## Differential Prevalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attraction</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand Adults¹</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Adults²</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Adults³</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Adolescents⁴</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swedish Adolescents⁵</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Dickson et al., 2013  
²Smith et al., 2003  
³Chandra et al., 2011  
⁴Igartua et al., 2009  
⁵Priebe & Svedin, 2013—note their attraction variables included emotional and sexual attraction
Implications

• Individuals classified as sexual minorities in one study may not be classified as such in another (Savin-Williams, 2006)
  • Gay or lesbian individuals who are virgins or in mixed-orientation relationships
  • Individuals experimenting with same-sex behavior who are other-sex attracted
  • Same-sex attracted individuals who do not identify as LGB
Sexual Orientation and Outcomes

- Psychological distress (Smith et al., 2003)
- Depression (Bostwick et al., 2010; Herek & Garents, 2007; Lhomond et al., 2014)
- Suicidal ideation and attempts (Balsam et al., 2005)
- Substance use (McCabe et al., 2009; Midanik et al., 2007; Talley et al., 2014)
- Hostility (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998)
Research Question

• What are the relationships between varying measures of sexual orientation and outcomes?
Sample/Instrumentation

- Collegiate Center for Mental Health (CCMH) 2013-2014 database
- 101,027 clients at 140 college counseling centers
- Information gathered at first session
  - Standardized Data Set
    - Demographic information
    - Sexual attraction (5-point scale)
    - Sexual behavior (5-point scale)
    - Sexual identity (heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual)
  - CCAPS-34
    - Multidimensional assessment of psychological symptoms
Variation within Sexual Orientation
### Outcomes by Sexual Orientation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual Attraction</td>
<td>Sexual Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-injury</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.035</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicidal ideation</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>.019</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suicide attempts</td>
<td>.010</td>
<td>.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>.027</td>
<td>.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana use</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>.007</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Anxiety</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Distress</td>
<td>.008</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eating Concerns</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostility</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>.016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol use</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distress Index</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td>.011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Findings: Sexual Attraction

• Typically the best predictor of psychological variables
  • Depression
  • Anxiety
  • Social anxiety
  • Psychological distress

• Predicts equally well as sexual identity for safety variables
  • Self-injury
  • Suicidal ideation
  • Suicide attempts
Key Findings: Sexual Behavior

• Best predictor of drug/alcohol and rape variables
  • Marijuana use
  • Alcohol use
  • Rape

• Predicts as well as sexual attraction for trauma-related variables and hostility
  • Harassment
  • Trauma
  • Hostility
Key Findings: Sexual Identity

- Rarely the best predictor
- Decent predictor of
  - Self-injury
  - Suicidal ideation
  - Suicide attempts
  - Psychological distress
Key Findings: Gender Differences

• For women, the relationships between most outcome variables and at least one measure of sexual orientation was small-medium.

• All relationships were stronger for women than men except:
  • Depression
  • Eating concerns
Key Findings: Instrumentation

• Lifetime indicators typically had stronger relationships than non-lifetime indicators with measure of sexual orientation
  • Sexual attraction was a trait measure
  • Sexual behavior was a lifetime measure
  • Sexual identity was an identity measure
Implications

• Sexual attraction, behavior, and identity each represent unique facets in sexual orientation

• Using measures of all three best accounts for the variation

• If you can only use one it appears:
  • Choose attraction for psychological variables
  • Choose behavior for substance issues or studying rape
  • Choose attraction or behavior to study trauma
  • Identity is rarely the best choice
Future Directions

• Understanding of why each variable relates better or worse
• Additional studies that pay greater attention to lifetime and non-lifetime measures