Solving the Definitional Dilemma of Sexuality

Tyler Lefevor & Jen Williams

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

	Males			Females		
	Attraction	Behavior	Identity	Attraction	Behavior	Identity
New Zealand Adults[1]	7.1	7.6	5.0	12.4	9.1	4.8
Australian Adults[2]	7.1	9.3	2.6	13.5	11.7	2.3
American Adults[3]	6.0	5.2	4.1	17.0	13.0	4.6
Canadian Adolescents[4]	5.0	2.9	2.2	13.1	4.9	4.2
Swedish Adolescents[5]	16.6	2.9	2.3	38.0	5.6	5.3

[1]Dickson et al., 2013
[2]Smith et al., 2003
[3]Chandra et al., 2011
[4]Igartua et al., 2009
[5]Priebe & 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
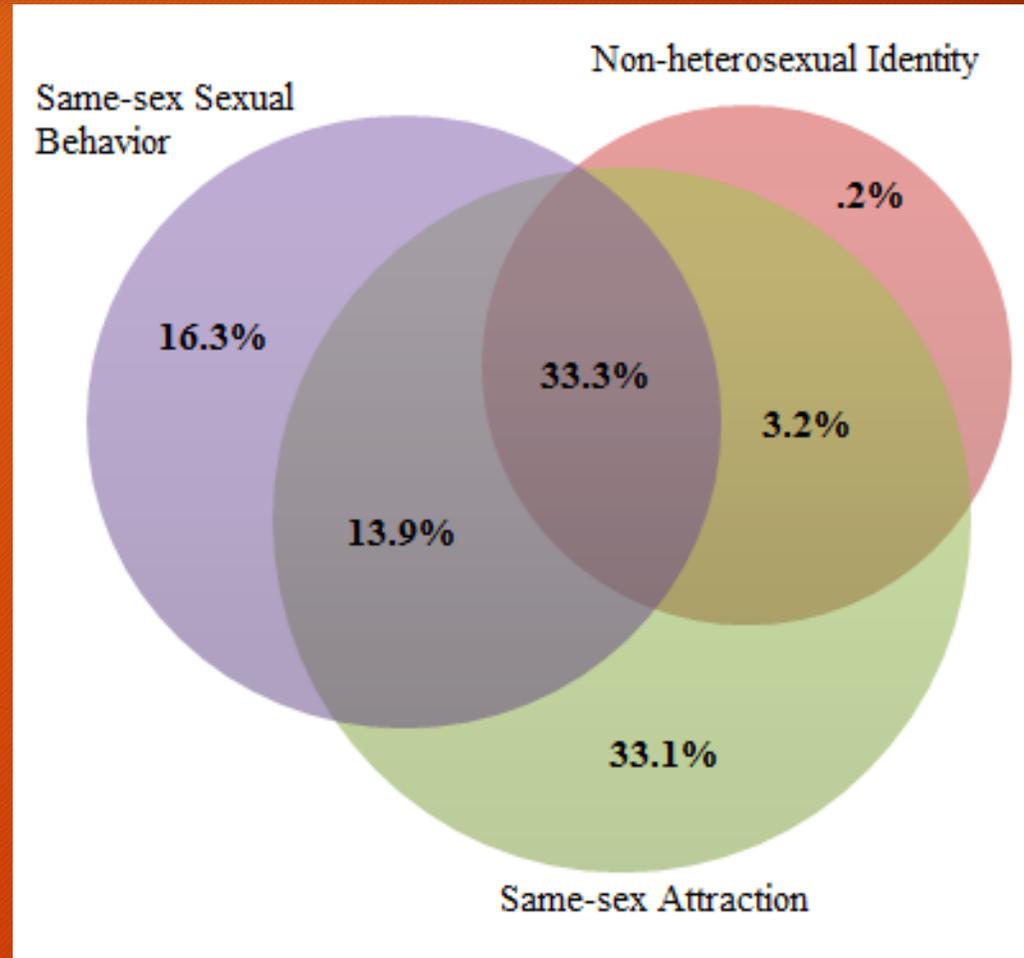
Outcomes by Sexual Orientation

Effect Sizes (η^2) of Sexual Orientation Measures.

Outcome	Women			Men		
	Sexual Attraction	Sexual Behavior	Sexual Identity	Sexual Attraction	Sexual Behavior	Sexual Identity
Self-injury	.042	.035	.041	.007	.007	.003
Suicidal ideation	.031	.019	.030	.011	.010	.008
Suicide attempts	.010	.018	.014	.006	.003	.010
Rape	.027	.045	.021	.003	.020	.005
Harassment	.024	.021	.008	.006	.008	.003
Trauma	.026	.022	.008	.001	.005	.002
Marijuana use	.020	.029	.005	.009	.003	.000
Depression	.007	.005	.005	.012	.010	.006
Anxiety	.009	.005	.009	.004	.004	.002
Social Anxiety	.009	.003	.007	.008	.006	.007
Academic Distress	.008	.006	.002	.003	.002	.000
Eating Concerns	.005	.007	.002	.020	.016	.018
Hostility	.014	.016	.008	.002	.002	.001
Alcohol use	.005	.017	.002	.001	.001	.000
Distress Index	.015	.011	.010	.010	.010	.005

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