Same-Sex Sexuality and Sexual Fluidity

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Previous Views of Sexual Orientation

- Sexual orientation is a trait you are born with, and it emerges by adolescence.
- Sexual orientation targets one’s desires to the other sex OR to the same sex.
- Sexual orientation is stable over time, such that individuals with a particular orientation represent distinct, permanent groups.
New Views of Sexual Orientation

- Sexual orientation is a trait, *sometimes* present in early development, that may emerge at any stage of life.
- Sexual orientation targets one’s desires to the other gender OR to the same gender OR to both genders OR to neither (and by the way, we’re not sure anymore what we mean by “gender”).
- Sexual orientation is *relatively* stable over time, in some people, but sexual attractions do change.
So it’s Time for an Update

- How common are different forms of same-sex sexuality (i.e., exclusive same-sex attractions versus bisexuality versus “heteroflexibility”)?

- What do we know about change over time in sexual attractions?

- What are the implications for clinical practice?
So it’s Time for an Update

- How common are different forms of same-sex sexuality (i.e., exclusive same-sex attractions versus bisexuality versus “heteroflexibility”)?
Prevalence of Different Types

- Historically, models of sexual orientation have assumed two and only two categories:
  - Exclusively homosexual and exclusively heterosexual
  - Anything else is “transitional,” “confusion,” “experimental,” etc.

- As a result, researchers routinely used to eliminate bisexual individuals from research samples!

- Big mistake…….
What We Used to Think

% of American Adults

Men  Women

- Mostly other-sex
- Both sexes
- Most same-sex
- Only same-sex
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Men

Women
What We Used to Think

But guess what? This model is WRONG WRONG WRONG. Here’s nationally representative data on attractions (NOT identity or behavior) from the National Survey of Family Growth.
And individuals with EXCLUSIVE same-sex attractions are the very smallest group. Again, especially among women.

Note that the pink bars – the “mostly-but-not-completely heterosexuals” – are the most common group!!! Especially in women!! And individuals with EXCLUSIVE same-sex attractions are the very smallest group. Again, especially among women.
Nat’l Survey of Family Growth, 2008

% of American Adults

Men

- Mostly other-sex
- Both sexes
- Most same-sex
- Only same-sex

Women

- Mostly other-sex
- Both sexes
- Most same-sex
- Only same-sex

- Men: 20%
- Women: 5%
This is not a fluke. Every single large-sample, population study that has specifically asked about sexual attractions (separate from identity or behavior) has found that among sexual-minority individuals, mixed attractions are as common as exclusive same-sex attractions.
Bisexual v. Gay/Les Attns

Adult Males

Adult Females

% of sexual-minority population

ABCDFGHJKLMNABCDFGHJKLMN
What about the issue of change over time in sexual attractions?
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What about the issue of change over time in sexual attractions? Among the large scale longitudinal studies that have been conducted, how commonly do individuals shift from exclusive same-sex attractions to bisexual or other-sex attractions, OR shift from bisexual attractions to exclusive same-sex or other-sex attractions?
% of sexual-minority population showing change
% of sexual-minority population showing change

- NLSAH W2-W3
- NLSAH W3-W4
- DMHD W1-W2
- DMHD W2-W3
- DMHD W3-W4
- GUTS
- NSMD
Wow......

- Change in attractions is a routine aspect of same-sex sexuality!
- Doesn’t this contradict all the evidence for genetic influences on sexual orientation?
- No, because genetic influences are probabilistic and not deterministic
  - Genotypes MUST interact with the environment to produce phenotypes, and so phenotypes are relatively plastic
Genetic Influences

- Heritability of sexual orientation? Between 30% and 40%
- Larger in men than women
- Smoking? Alcohol Use? ~60%
- Personality? 45%-60%
- Job satisfaction? ~45%
- With all of these phenomena, expression of genetic influences varies
Sexual Fluidity

- When it comes to sexuality, this variability is called sexual fluidity
  - A capacity for flexibility in erotic response
- Doesn’t mean that sexual orientation doesn’t exist, simply means that it doesn’t provide the last word on every sexual attraction you might experience
- Some people appear to be more fluid than others – change may not be equally likely for everyone
Implications

- Assumptions about the previous experiences, identities, and relationships of women in your clinical practice (and your social network!!)

- Creating assessment materials that are open to all

- Preparing for the challenges that sexual fluidity might create for patients
  - Normalizing this experience is critical
The Challenge Ahead

- Studying the full spectrum of gender and sexuality
  - Newsflash…. Gender is fluid, too
- Moving toward perspectives that represent a true respect for sexual diversity
  - I.e., no matter HOW you “got this way” or WHEN or WHY, you have the right to autonomy, safety, respect, health, and well-being