



The dynamic association between same-sex contact and educational attainment

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ABSTRACT

Previous studies have shown that sexual minorities and heterosexuals differ in the level of success in educational attainment. Because these studies treated sexual orientation as a static trait, they could not address how the dynamic aspect of sexual orientation impacts educational attainment. This study seeks to answer this question while focusing on sexual contact as an indicator of sexual orientation and highest educational degree obtained by young adulthood as an attainment outcome. Ordered logistic regression analysis was conducted using US data (the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health or “Add Health,” Waves 1–4). Among women, those who report same-sex contact obtain lower educational degrees than those without such contact regardless of its timing and continuity. Among men, those who report their first same-sex contact in young adulthood obtain higher degrees than others. These associations are explained by self-exploratory attitudes, depressive symptoms, and academic performance and expectations. These results help understand how same-sex sexual development creates opportunities and constraints in the educational attainment process, thereby extending the existing attainment literature, which concentrates on implications of heterosexual development.

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Previous research has shown that sexual minorities and heterosexuals differ in the level of success in educational attainment. In the US, adults who report same-sex contact hold higher educational degrees than others, as reported in previous analyses of the General Social Survey and the National Health and Social Life Survey (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Turner, Villarreal, Chromy, Eggleston, & Rogers, 2005). Census studies reported similar results using resident partner as a measure of sexual orientation (Baumle, Compton, & Poston, 2009; Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000). Adolescent studies generally show the opposite pattern. For example, using attraction as a sexual orientation measure, Add Health studies reported that sexual minority

students, especially boys, perform more poorly than other students (e.g., Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). These studies treated sexual orientation as a static trait, and they left unexamined how the dynamic aspect of sexual orientation is associated with educational attainment. Although only a small number of people report same-sex sexual experience in their lifetime, they vary to a great extent in the timing and order of “sexual milestones” such as first same-sex attraction and the development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). The degree of continuity in same-sex sexual experience also varies across individuals; some people report continuous experience across life stages while others report temporary experience (Ueno, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to examine how the dynamic aspect of sexual orientation is associated with educational attainment while focusing on sexual contact as an indicator of sexual orientation and highest educational degree obtained by young adulthood as an attainment outcome.

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The study draws from the life course framework, which helps explain how the dynamic aspect of sexual orientation creates opportunities and constraints in the educational attainment process. Special attention will be paid to gender differences to address the unique meaning of same-sex sexuality for women and men. The analysis uses the Add Health data—the first national study in the US that includes adolescent and young adulthood measures of sexual orientation as well as outcome measures of educational attainment.

1. Sexual development and status attainment

Status attainment is a process in which people obtain their positions in the status hierarchy. Education is an important component of status attainment, along with occupation, income, and marriage (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell & Hauser, 1980). Highest educational degree obtained is frequently used as an outcome measure of educational attainment as it specifies employment eligibility and strongly affects wage trajectories (Murnane, Willett, & Levy, 1995; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Sewell & Hauser, 1980). Scholars have documented that social background such as race, gender, and family socioeconomic position influences the educational attainment process by shaping schooling opportunity, resource availability, and socialization experiences in early life stages (Elman & O'Rand, 2004; Pallas, 2003; Portes & Wilson, 1976; Powers & Wojtkiewicz, 2004).

Implications of sexual development for status attainment have been studied, although most previous research focused on the timing of first heterosexual intercourse. People who have their first heterosexual intercourse at young ages are less likely to graduate from high school, enroll in postsecondary programs, and graduate from college (Frisco, 2008; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008; Steward, Farkas, & Bingenheimer, 2009). These negative consequences have been attributed to several factors including a lack of fully developed social and cognitive skills necessary for sexual relationships, distractions from academic work, and an increased chance of early parenthood. However, it is not clear whether these arguments apply to first same-sex experience. In one sense, early sexual transition may require emotional and social skills beyond a typical adolescent's maturity level and cause distractions regardless of the partner's sex. At the same time, same-sex sexuality is viewed as unconventional regardless of its timing, and the demand for emotional and social skills and the distractions from academic work may not be limited to early transitions. In addition, early pregnancy as a negative consequence of early transition does not apply to same-sex sexuality, further blurring the implications for status attainment. In the following section, we will develop arguments about whether and how same-sex sexual development may impact the educational attainment process.

2. Considering individual variations in same-sex sexual development

Sexual orientation is a multifaceted concept measured by attraction, relationships, contact, and identity (Badgett,

2009; Laumann et al., 1994). Scholars recommend that these dimensions should be separately analyzed because timing of first experience and degree of fluidity vary across these dimensions (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Among these dimensions, the present paper focuses on sexual contact to facilitate comparisons with previous attainment studies that examined consequences of heterosexual contact (e.g., Frisco, 2008; Spriggs & Halpern, 2008; Steward et al., 2009). Using a sexual contact measure also helps define the sexual minority population broadly, instead of limiting it to those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

There are many possible ways to classify patterns of same-sex contact over time, but this study uses Ueno's (Ueno, 2010; Ueno, Peña-Talamantes, & Roach, *in press*) scheme, which makes the best use of the sexual contact measure in Add Health while maintaining sufficient cell sizes in the analysis. We sort people into the following four groups, depending on their reporting of same-sex contact in adolescence and young adulthood:

1. No Same-Sex Contact.
2. Early Development (same-sex contact in both adolescence and young adulthood).
3. Late Development (first same-sex contact in young adulthood).
4. Adolescence Only.

Although a large majority of people are in the No Same-Sex Contact group, a visible number of individuals report each of the other patterns (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007; Ueno, 2010). Below we treat No Same-Sex Contact as the reference group and develop expectations regarding whether each of the remaining groups should obtain higher or lower educational degrees and what factors should account for the differences.

2.1. Early Development

People who have same-sex contact in adolescence may face various challenges at school and at home including relational strains with peers and parents, poor academic performance, and mental health problems (Barrett, Pollack, & Tilden, 2002; Pearson et al., 2007). Everyday challenges often present a lack of fit between individuals and social contexts unique to each life stage (Schulenberg, Maggs, & O'Malley, 2003), and sexual minority adolescents' stigma may be viewed as a consequence of the incompatibility between their sexual orientation and the heteronormative school, peer, and family contexts (Pascoe, 2007; Peña-Talamantes, 2013). Life course research shows that disadvantages in early life stages are difficult to reverse and tend to accumulate over the life course (O'Rand, 1996; Pearlin, Schieman, Fazio, & Meersman, 2005). This perspective suggests that sexuality stigma in adolescence will have enduring effects and limit the ability to earn high educational degrees for this group compared to the No Same-Sex Contact group. Other research suggests, however, that the impact of sexuality stigma in adolescence should be

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