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Mostly heterosexual as a distinct sexual orientation group: A systematic review of the empirical evidence

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ABSTRACT

We reviewed empirical evidence regarding whether mostly heterosexual exists as a sexual orientation distinct from two adjacent groups on a sexual continuum—exclusively heterosexual and substantially bisexual. We addressed the question: Do mostly heterosexuals show a unique profile of sexual and romantic characteristics that distinguishes them as a separate sexual orientation group? We found sufficient data in four areas to support an affirmative answer. Individuals who acknowledged a mostly heterosexual orientation were distinct from adjacent sexual orientation groups in having a small degree of same-sex sexual and/or romantic attraction and, occasionally, same-sex behavior; constituted a substantial prevalence in the population; were relatively stable in their orientation over time; and reported that this sexual identity was subjectively meaningful to them. Findings suggested that self-identification as mostly heterosexual or an acknowledgment of slight same-sex sexuality increases during the teenage years, peaks around the early twenties (somewhat sooner for men than women), and remains relatively high during young adulthood. Limited evidence suggested that prevalence is lower among older participants. These findings have implications for our conceptualization of sexual orientation as a continuum, the nature of sex differences in sexuality, developmental changes in sexuality, biologically based assessments of sexual orientation, and an etiological theory of mostly heterosexuality.

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Introduction

Overview

Although sexual orientation is theoretically understood as existing along a continuum, in practice researchers usually place participants into three discrete categories: heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual (Sell, 1997). There is increasing evidence, however, that this tri-category system has outgrown its usefulness and that more groups are necessary to accurately describe the sexuality of current cohorts of adolescents and young adults. Specifically, both qualitative and quantitative data suggest the importance of considering a group that is located between heterosexuality and bisexuality, designating a heterosexual core with a *slight* amount of same-sex sexuality (Austin, Conron, Patel, & Freedner, 2007; Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005; Thompson & Morgan, 2008; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010, in preparation). For example, an 18-year old New England girl identified as mostly heterosexual because “I sort of like that it doesn’t just have a *completely* or just a *bisexual*, but it has in between. . . there isn’t always that black and white picture.” A boy in the same study explained, “I’m basically attracted to girls, but I’ve felt like kind of attracted to guys before, but not to like some great extent. . . I’ve never felt I was attracted enough to a guy to like go out with them or something like that or like having a relationship with a guy” (Austin et al., 2007 p. 60). A recent review found that “mostly heterosexuals” differ from both heterosexuals and bisexuals on a variety of risk taking behaviors, mental and physical health correlates, and risk and protective factors (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, in preparation).

In the scientific literature, those located between exclusive heterosexual and bisexual have been referred to as “Kinsey 1s” (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948), “primarily heterosexual” (Morrison & Bearden, 2007), “mainly heterosexual” (Hayes et al., 2011; McNair, Kavanagh, Agius, & Tong, 2005), “predominantly heterosexual” (Fergusson, Horwood, Ridder, & Beautrais, 2005; McConaghy et al., 2006), “mostly straight” (Thompson & Morgan, 2008), and “mostly heterosexual” (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). We adopt the term “mostly heterosexual” as it is the term most frequently used by researchers.

We reviewed empirical evidence to answer the question, does mostly heterosexuality exist as a sexual orientation group distinct from two adjacent groups—exclusively heterosexual and substantially bisexual? Specifically, do mostly heterosexuals show a unique pattern in their sexual orientation characteristics, population prevalence, temporal stability, and the meaning their sexuality has for them? If so, then findings have implications for our conceptualization and assessment of sexual orientation along a continuum, sex differences in sexuality, and developmental patterns in sexuality.

Sexual orientation and mostly heterosexuality: conceptual issues

Sexual orientation is an internal mechanism that directs a person’s sexuality to females, males, or both, perhaps to varying degrees (Bailey, 2009; LeVay & Baldwin, 2012). It is manifested in a variety of physiological, behavioral, and psychological characteristics, including sexual and romantic desire, attraction, arousal, fantasy, behavior, and public and private identity, all of which have been used as indicators of sexual orientation. Since the introduction of the 7-point Kinsey scale (Kinsey et al., 1948), each of these indicators has been theoretically understood as existing along a continuum from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality with degrees of nonexclusivity in between (Sell, 1997).

Theoretically, mostly heterosexuality is one of these degrees of nonexclusivity, distinguished from heterosexuality by the presence of some same-sex orientation and from bisexuality by the relative weakness of that same-sex orientation. Until recently, however, it was ignored in research practice. Sexual orientation was either assessed with 3-point scales that do not allow for a mostly heterosexual option, or it was assessed with more sensitive (5- or 7-point) scales, but researchers chose not to analyze this group separately. Instead, mostly heterosexuals were combined with bisexuals (Tucker, Ellickson, & Klein, 2008), exclusive heterosexuals (Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, & Zucker, 2008), or all other nonheterosexuals (Zietsch, Verweij, Bailey, Wright, & Martin, 2011), or they were

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