



## Adolescents' sociosexual orientation is related to attachment to their same-sex parent



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### ABSTRACT

We set out to show that sociosexual orientation (SSO) and erotophilia are two different traits that can be evidenced as early as middle adolescence, and to examine their associations with attachment to parents. Self-report scales measuring SSO, erotophilia, and attachment to the mother and the father were administered to 289 12- to 17-year-olds. Based on an exploratory factor analysis, SSO and erotophilia are two different, consistent dimensions in this age range. A six-month test-retest revealed a moderate-to-high rank-order stability of the two traits, which were positively and moderately correlated. Boys scored higher than girls on both traits. During the six-month interval between T1 and T2, erotophilia increased whereas SSO did not change. Regression analyses showed that a positive perception of attachment to the same-sex parent among boys accounted for SSO, regardless of perceived attachment to the other-sex parent. This held true for girls also, but to a lesser extent. In the discussion, we emphasize the differences between boys' and girls' mating behavior, and the differences between attachment to same-sex vs other-sex parents as possible influences on SSO.

### 1. Introduction

Individual differences in willingness to engage in uncommitted sexual relations, or restricted vs unrestricted “sociosexual orientation” (SSO) (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991) have consistently been found in adults across sexes and cultures (Lippa, 2009). Fisher, Byrne, White, and Kelley (1988) summarized similar findings on affective-evaluative responses to sexual cues along an “erotophilia vs erotophobia” dimension. Knowledge of the motivational and functional components of human sexuality before adulthood is surprisingly scarce (Fortenberry, 2013). Regardless of their affective-evaluative response to sexual cues, adolescents can be expected to differ in their need for love before having sex. Our first aim was to find out whether SSO and erotophilia are two different traits in middle adolescence, that is, in youths who have recently started to engage in sexual behavior or will do so in the near future. Another aim was to examine the associations between these hypothesized traits and adolescents' sex, age, and attachments to parents.

#### 1.1. SSO and attachment to parents in middle adolescence

Restricted SSO refers to a need to have sex in the context of a close and loving relationship; unrestricted SSO indicates a willingness to

engage in sexual behavior without emotional commitment (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). From the standpoint of evolutionary theory (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), individual differences in SSO can be viewed as resulting from sexual recombination and genetic mutation, providing resources from which better adaptations can be selected in order to maximize the representation of the genetic material of the individual in a given environment. According to Chisholm (1996), “when resources are limited or unpredictable it may pay to increase fertility and decrease investment in particular offspring” (Buss, 1999), p. 392), making short-term mating an adaptive tactic.

Gangestad and Simpson (2000) view restricted and unrestricted SSO as indicative of long- and short-term mating tactics, respectively. Accordingly, adults with unrestricted SSO have reported having more short-term sex partners (e.g., Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). However, SSO is not a dimension with short-term and long-term mating tactics as two opposing poles. Jackson and Kirkpatrick (2007) found that motivation for long-term mating and motivation for short-term mating were largely independent. SSO indicates a low versus high motivation for short-term mating, but even a highly restricted SSO cannot be interpreted as motivation for long-term mating. This is in line with evolutionary theories (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993), according to which a given individual can enact long- and short-term tactics. As a trait that is relatively persistent over time and is influenced by inheritance and ontogenetic experiences

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(Bailey, Kirk, Zhu, Dunne, & Martin, 2000), SSO leaves some leeway for behavioral adaptation based on biological and contextual factors.

According to Belsky, Steinberg, and Draper's (1991) evolution-based lifespan model, individuals who experience early social stress in the family during the first five to seven years of their life, and who did not learn that relationships are enduring and rewarding, are thought to be more likely to adopt a short-term mating strategy, which tends to increase the number of offspring. A large body of research has explored the relationship between stress during childhood and adult sexual restrictedness, generally using retrospective reporting. Bailey et al. (2000), among others, found that divorce was associated with less sexual restrictedness, and Herzog and Hill-Chapman (2013) reported a negative correlation between an early composite risk-exposure score and a self-report measure of sexual restraint in emerging adults. Unrestricted SSO was found to be negatively correlated with several measures of love for one's romantic partner (Neto, 2015), and with dismissing romantic attachment (Schmitt, 2005). When adults belonging to one of the four general (i.e., not specifically romantic) attachment types were compared, dismissive male students appeared to be more unrestricted than the other groups (Sprecher, 2013). Schmitt and Jonason (2015) reported similar results. A dismissive attachment style is known to reflect a history of ecologically stressful environments (Schmitt, 2008).

Overall, these findings suggest that unrestricted SSO can be influenced by a history of insecure attachment to parents, among other stressful life events. Because SSO is an individual adaptive tendency, it should be in a position to orient sexual behavior once it is made possible by pubertal maturation. We therefore hypothesized that SSO would turn out to be a consistent and stable individual trait in 15-year-olds. In addition, based on Belsky et al.'s (1991) evolution-based lifespan model, we hypothesized that the more securely attached adolescents are to their parents, the more they will report a restricted SSO.

Schmitt (2005) showed that men display higher unrestricted SSO than do women across 48 nations. This difference is in line with Trivers' (1972) parental investment theory, according to which short-term mating provides higher benefits at a lower cost for men than for women. Compared to human males, human females try more to select mating partners who are emotionally committed to the relationship, because they can be expected to invest in parenting. In accordance with Buss and Schmitt's (1993) sexual strategies theory, we viewed this gender difference as a phylogenetic consequence of different degrees of reproductive success in ancestral short-term mating by men and women. Therefore, we hypothesized that this sex difference would be present as soon as boys and girls can become sexually active.

### 1.2. Erotophilia as a trait likely to increase during adolescence

To provide discriminant validity for SSO in middle adolescence, we measured erotophilia as another basic trait involved in sexual behavior. It was theorized by Fisher et al. (1988) as the affective-evaluative portion of a person's disposition that mediates the effect of sexual stimulation on sexual behavior. Simpson and Gangestad (1991) assumed that erotophilia and SSO could result from different selective pressures. In Fisher et al.'s (1988) theory, erotophilia is related to a broad range of socialization experiences, not just early stress and family experiences. However, the different ultimate and proximal origins of erotophilia and SSO have not been elucidated. In several studies on adults, SSO and erotophilia were found to be positively but only moderately correlated (e.g. Wright & Reise, 1997). Here, we expected to find a similar, relative independence between these traits in adolescence.

Fisher et al. (1988) reported that adult men were more erotophilic than adult women. Rise, Traeen, and Kraft (1992) found the same difference in 17- to 19-year-olds. Nevertheless, this was not found consistently in previous research (e.g., Macapagal & Janssen, 2011). An explanation for the stronger positive reaction of males to sexual stimuli could lie in Trivers's (1972) parental investment theory, according to

which, at least in our ancestral times, males could not be sure that their children were their biological offsprings. Consequently, males evolved toward investing more than females in mating efforts. We hypothesized that boys would display higher erotophilia than girls.

There is no reason to expect erotophilia to be associated with attachment to parents. However, we hypothesized that erotophilia would increase with age as a consequence of pubertal maturation and the subsequent changes in the social expectations elicited by physical appearance.

### 1.3. Current study

Based on evolutionary psychology, we tested four hypotheses. First, we predicted that SSO and erotophilia would turn out to be two different dimensions in middle adolescence, with high internal consistency and high individual rank-order test-retest stability. Second, we expected boys to score higher than girls on unrestricted SSO and erotophilia. Third, we hypothesized that erotophilia, but not SSO, would increase with age during middle adolescence. Fourth, unrestricted SSO, but not erotophilia, was expected to be negatively associated with attachment to mother and father.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The participants were 136 male and 153 female French students ranging in age from 12 years 10 months to 17 years 9 months. The mean age of the participants at the beginning of the study was 14 years 7 months, and the standard deviation was 9 months, with no significant sex difference. Participants were of middle-to-high socioeconomic status. They filled in the questionnaires during class time. Participants and their parents were given information about the study, but no incentives. The sample included 96% of the pupils who were asked to participate. Parental consent was given, and the ethical review board of the Department of Student Health of the school district approved the study. The first session was held in the fall (T1) and the second, six months later in the spring (T2).

### 2.2. Materials

Most of the items were derived from English questionnaires. First, the original questionnaires were translated, and the French version was translated back into English by a native English speaker. The back-translated items were found to be very close to the original version. Second, the items about sex deemed appropriate for young adolescents were selected in accordance with a team of physicians and teachers involved in sex education. Some changes in wording had to be made to conform to ethical requirements (see below).

#### 2.2.1. Sociosexual orientation measure

Simpson and Gangestad (1991) devised the seven-item attitudinal and behavioral Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI). Only the three attitudinal items (9, 10, and 11 of the SOI) were relevant for early adolescents, because many young teenagers are likely to have little or no sexual experience. Interviews with young adolescents suggested that they had trouble understanding item 11 (probably because of its length and the parentheses): "I would have to be closely attached to someone (both emotionally and psychologically) before I could feel comfortable and fully enjoy having sex with him or her". We replaced it by a shorter and straightforward item (item 3 in Table 1; items 1 and 6 come also from SOI). We devised five new attitudinal items (see Table 1).

#### 2.2.2. Erotophilia measure

Fisher et al. (1988) devised the Sexual Opinion Survey (SOS), a 21-item scale for adults, which they presented as a single bipolar

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