



Bisexuality is associated with elevated sexual sensation seeking, sexual curiosity, and sexual excitability



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ABSTRACT

Sexual orientation is typically assumed to be independent of factors such as personality. Although this is probably accurate for heterosexual and homosexual orientations, personality may play a role in bisexuality. It was hypothesized that bisexuality is potentiated by personality traits that allow sexual behavior to occur independently of sexual response systems that are specifically “oriented” to male or female sexual stimuli. If so, such traits should be elevated in bisexual women and men. Because female sexual response is relatively independent of the sex of the partner it was also hypothesized that such relationships would be stronger for bisexual women than bisexual men. This was tested in two online studies. Study 1 ($N = 828$) tested for elevated levels of two relevant personality traits; sexual sensation seeking and sexual excitability. Study 2 ($N = 655$) assessed sexual curiosity, and tested whether the relationship between sexual curiosity and bisexuality was independent of the Big Five. Elevated levels of sexual sensation seeking and sexual curiosity were found for bisexual women and men; only bisexual women reported elevated levels of sexual excitability. The predicted sex difference was found for each trait, and sexual curiosity was elevated independently of the Big Five.

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1. Introduction

Although correlations between sexual orientation and personality have been found, researchers have usually presumed that such correlations were caused by prenatal hormones (Lippa, 2005). This is probably accurate for heterosexuality and homosexuality, which a large body of evidence suggests are determined prenatally (for a review, see Hines, 2011). Bisexuality, however, introduces a continuous dimension of variability that may be susceptible to personality influences, although little is known about what determines this variation. One possibility is that personality traits that influence the relative dominance of “oriented” and “unoriented” sexual response systems (Diamond & Wallen, 2011) may move people toward or away from exclusive sexual orientations. In particular, personality traits associated with sexual novelty-seeking motivate bisexual behavior independently of an oriented erotic response. Elevated levels of such traits, therefore, may push people toward the bisexuality.

1.1. Oriented and unoriented systems

Oriented systems are those that are sensitive to information about the sex of potential mates in sexual stimuli, and that generate an excitatory response only to males or females. Such systems are particularly involved in approach motivation and behavior, and are called *proceptive* (Beach, 1976). Unoriented systems generate an excitatory response to sexual stimuli regardless of the sex of the potential mate. Such systems are primarily involved in preparing the body for sexual intercourse, and are called *arousability* (Diamond, 2006). The two systems are neurologically and physiologically distinct (Agmo, 1999). Sexual orientation is most relevant to approach motivation in that initial approach is the first point at which the sex of potential mates is determined (Diamond, 2006). The arousability system primarily operates after sexual contact has been initiated, and therefore need not strongly distinguish between sexes (Diamond, 2011). Anything that promotes sexual contact independently of the proceptive system should, therefore, increase the likelihood of bisexual behavior.

Personality traits related to sexual novelty seeking may provide proceptivity-independent motivation for sexual contact. For those whose proceptive systems are primarily oriented toward one sex, sexual contact with the non-preferred sex is novel. Supporting this possibility, heterosexual men with the long form of the dopamine

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D4 receptor gene, associated with novelty seeking, were five times more likely to have had sex with both men and women than those with the short form, and homosexual men with the long form had six times as many female sex partners (Hamer, 2002). Research on sexual novelty seeking has centered on a measure of sensation seeking adapted for research on sexuality termed sexual sensation seeking (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995). General sensation seeking is theorized to predict novel sexual behavior and sexually permissive attitudes (Zuckerman, 1994), and is correlated with number of unfamiliar sexual partners (Fisher & Misovich, 1990). Sexual sensation seeking successfully predicts behaviors related to sexual novelty-seeking such as extra-dyadic sexual behavior (Wiederman & Hurd, 1999) and number of one-night-stands (Gaither & Sellbom, 2003).

Another approach to sexual novelty seeking is derived from Eysenck's system of attitudinal predispositions to sexuality, two factors of which (sexual curiosity and promiscuity) are relevant (Eysenck, 1970). Rieger et al. (2013) recently developed a "sexual curiosity" scale based on items from factors similar to sexual sensation seeking but uses attitudinal rather than behavioral items. Despite this difference, Rieger et al. (2013) found that they were highly correlated (.72), and concluded that they likely tap the same underlying trait from complementary behavioral and attitudinal perspectives. Critically, both scales contain no items referring to the sex of potential mates, ensuring the non-triviality of any potential relationship with bisexuality.

It is also possible that the sensitivity of the arousability system allows it to operate independently of proceptivity. Self-report scales for the sensitivity of the arousability system have been developed to assess the sources of sexual dysfunction (Janssen, Vorst, Finn, & Bancroft, 2002). Sexual sensation seeking/sexual curiosity and sexual excitability, therefore, were hypothesized to be elevated in bisexual men and women.

1.2. Sex differences

Female sexual response has been shown to be relatively independent of the partner's sex (Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004). Consistent with this, on average women's proceptivity levels are lower than men's, and are driven by cyclical ovulation-driven hormone release (Diamond, 2011). Additionally, women report higher rates of bisexual behaviors and sexual attractions, and self-identify as bisexual at a greater rate than men (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007). Women's sexuality is also more likely to change over time (Diamond, 2008). These data suggest that female sexual orientation is more open to the potential influence of personality. Therefore, sexual sensation seeking/sexual curiosity and sexual excitability were hypothesized to be more elevated in women than in men.

1.3. The present research

The present research consists of two studies using two independent Internet-based samples. Study 1 focused on sexual sensation seeking (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995), and Study 2 attempted to replicate these results using sexual curiosity, which is closely related (Rieger et al., 2013). Additionally, Study 1 included a self-report measure of sexual arousability (Janssen et al., 2002). Both studies focus on traits that are sexuality domain-specific because such traits tend to have stronger relationships with sexuality than the Big Five (Barnes, Malamuth, & Check, 1984; Schmitt & Buss, 2000). However, because domain-specific traits are nevertheless related to the domain-general personality dimensions (Gaither, 2003), Study 2 includes the Big Five as covariates (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003).

Both studies adopt the analytical strategy of modeling sexual orientation using a quadratic "U-shaped" curve (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), which is used to predict the personality trait of interest. This is accomplished by adding a squared sexual orientation coefficient to the model, which results in a curved line that can open downward or upward. If bisexuality is associated with elevated levels of the predicted trait relative to heterosexuality and homosexuality the curve will have an "inverted-U" shape, and the squared sexual orientation coefficient will be significant and negative. This approach has the advantage of making it unnecessary to create arbitrary categories of sexual orientation that conceal theoretically important variation (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012). All analyses were conducted in R.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 934 participants completed an online questionnaire. While such Internet-based samples have disadvantages, they also have substantial advantages, including access to a more diverse population than is typical of university undergraduates, which is critical for research on sexual minority populations (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Eleven participants were removed for inconsistent answers and 95 did not complete items used in the analyses, resulting in a sample of 828. Participants were recruited through the websites Facebook and Craigslist in Fall 2011. Sexual minority participants were also recruited through mailing lists for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Recruitment targeted sexual minorities in order to obtain an adequate sample size across the sexual orientation continuum. Participants could win one \$100 or one of ten \$10 prizes.

Half (48%) of participants were women, and ages ranged from 18 to 39 years (mean = 23.47, $SD = 5.06$). The most common ethnicities were Caucasian (65%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9%), Hispanic (9%), Mixed/Multi-racial (9%), and African American/Black (6%). Regarding sexual orientation identity, participants were asked "Which of the following best describes you?" Possible responses were "exclusively straight," "mostly straight," "bisexual," "mostly gay/lesbian," and "exclusively gay/lesbian." Percentages for each response were, respectively, 48%, 17%, 19%, 8%, 8% for women and 41%, 11%, 11%, 9%, 28% for men.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Sexual orientation. Sexual orientation was measured using degrees of other-sex versus same-sex sexual attraction and fantasy. Participants indicated the percentage of current sexual attraction and fantasy currently directed at males or females. Female and male percentages were forced to sum to 100. Same-sex attraction and fantasy were highly correlated for both men, $r(430) = .97$, $p < .001$, and women, $r(386) = .89$, $p < .001$. Sexual orientation was computed as the mean of same-sex attraction and fantasy percentages, resulting in a sexual orientation score ranging from zero (*exclusively heterosexual*) to 100 (*exclusively homosexual*). This measure correlated strongly with sexual orientation identity for both men, $r(410) = .96$, $p < .001$, and women, $r(367) = .90$, $p < .001$.

2.1.2.2. Sexual sensation seeking. Sexual sensation seeking was measured using a 10-item scale (Kalichman & Rompa, 1995). Items are answered along a 4-point Likert scale from 1 ("not at all like me") to 4 ("very much like me"). An example item is, "I like to have new and exciting sexual experiences and sensations." Scores were computed as the mean response. Cronbach's α was .81 for men and .84 for women.

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