

Sexual behavior and the non-construction of sexual identity: Implications for the analysis of men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women.

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The postindustrial era has brought with it geographical mobility, the influences of distant cultures whether through migration, the media, or global commerce, and the co-existence of traditional, modern, and postmodern worldviews, even within single social units. As a result, the geographic communities within which most people establish and maintain their identities are crumbling, and individuals must continuously negotiate and renegotiate multiple and often competing personal identities within and among many diverse and changing contexts. Communities now tend to be larger and more fragmented, and they rarely provide the stable "holding" environment for their members' identities that they once did. As more and more people find themselves living between different cultures, sexualities, social classes, gender interpretations, races, ethnicities, and social mores public health professionals find themselves needing to make sense of and predict the health needs of this panoply of shifting and frequently contradictory beliefs and behaviors. Making generalizations about categories of people has become more apparently difficult as the uniqueness of individuals within any single grouping grows to be more patent. The dilemma for researchers has been the limitations of ethnographic and qualitative types of research methodologies in contributing to generalized knowledge and of statistical and quantitative forms of inquiry in taking context and complex uniqueness into account. This dilemma is at the heart of the essentialist/constructionist debate, which permeates not only the discourse on research methodology, but that of sexuality, too.

Sexual identity as “essential”

While the dominant sexual orientation in this culture is heterosexuality, the discourse surrounding sexual identity is almost exclusively associated with the minority position of the heterosexual-homosexual binary and refers to some aspect of marginalized sexual behavior such as that of people with gay, lesbian, and/or bisexual sexual identities. Since the 1970's, identity scholars and activists have worked from a critical position to elaborate and popularize these terms as distinct categories in order to fight for political rights and against discrimination and hate crimes. Thus, terms such as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, similar to ethnic and race categories, have evolved as categorical labels appropriate to attaining the solidarity needed to achieve political and economic goals. A recent achievement of scholars working from this position has been to distinguish transgendered from gay and lesbian individuals as more related to gender than sexuality. This has had significant impact on the way medical, psychological and other helping professionals approach working with transgendered individuals.

To bring public attention to sexual identities has been important to changing social attitudes. As is the case with most dominant social positions, the U.S. dominant institutional culture has generally taken heterosexuality for granted. Heteronormativity has historically been unreflectively assumed and all other sexualities thought of as deviant (Frable, 1997). The assumptions of heteronormativity are still so strong that Michelle Eliason (1993) found in a study of heterosexual students that a majority of them had simply “never thought about” their sexual identity. Since then, the proliferation of television and cinema with gay and lesbian individuals in lead parts may have inspired more young adults to reflect on their sexuality, increased acceptance of same sex oriented attractions and sexual behavior, and improved public knowledge about all aspects of human sexuality.

An additional force pushing toward the conceptualization of homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual as distinct identity categories has been the “gay gene” and “lesbian neural anomalies”. Both this recent biological approach and gay/lesbian/bisexual identity politics have led to an assumption that these are distinct and enduring categories of sexual “being” rather than behavior. This has led to a serious flaw in the methodological structure of both statistical and narrative forms of research, resulting in flawed and misleading conclusions.

Queer Theory And The Construction of Sexuality

In spite of the essentialization of sexual identity in the popular vernacular, few scholars today disagree that human sexuality is historically, culturally, socially, and psychologically constructed. However, sexual identity as a construct is primarily a product of twentieth century Western thought. Even though people of all cultures in all centuries developed as sexual beings and participated in a wide range of sexual activity and sexual relationships, the term has come into common usage only in the second half of this century. Nevertheless, little consensus exists on the definition of sexual identity. Ritch Savin-Williams (1995) defines it in a way that is relevant to this study: "Sexual identity is the enduring sense of oneself as a sexual being which fits a culturally created category and accounts for one's sexual fantasies, attractions, and behaviors. Self-definition need not be static or publicly declared, although there are developmental pressures in North American culture toward consistency in sexual impulses, images, attractions, and activities" (p. 166). Savin-Williams makes the important point that sexuality cannot be considered apart from social and cultural context. However, the postmodern turn that has occurred in many parts of the North American academy throughout the past two decades has ushered in a perspective on "the self" as an entity that is not monolithic and unitary, but is multiple, fluid, and indeed, fractured.

Queer theory has evolved from the postmodernist project of deconstructing grand narratives of dominant social thought and theory in order to create linguistic and social space for a "polyphony" of voices. Some are using poststructuralist thought to challenge traditionally bound binaries such as male/female. Queer theory's original purpose was to problematize the heterosexual/homosexual binary of sexuality. In her book on Queer theory (1996), Alison Jagose notes that "queer is less an identity than a critique of identity [original italics]" (p. 131). David Halperin (1995) writes, "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant [original italics]" (p. 62). Alan Seidman (1996) hopes that queer theory will continue to disrupt the normal: "Queer theory has accrued multiple meanings, from a merely useful shorthand way to speak of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered experiences to a theoretical sensibility that pivots on transgression or permanent rebellion. We take as central to Queer theory its challenge to what has been the dominant foundational concept of both homophobic and affirmative homosexual theory: the assumption of a unified homosexual identity.

I interpret Queer theory as contesting this foundation and therefore the very telos of Western homosexual politics.” (p. 11)

Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler (1993) are two scholars that have emerged as strong voices in queer theory. Obviously, not every gay and lesbian social justice advocate and scholar is pleased with the twists postmodernism and queer theory have put on gay and lesbian identity issues. Lesbian feminists in particular question this new theorizing. As Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope (1993) complain: “We live in the postmodernist, poststructuralist (and, some would say, postfeminist) era during a period when the term Lesbian is problematic, even when used nonpejoratively by a self-declared Lesbian. ... In one hundred short years, German sexologists have ‘appeared’ Lesbians in order to pathologize us and French poststructuralists have ‘disappeared’ us in order to deconstruct sex and gender categories and to ‘interrogate’ ‘the’ subject. (p. 1) Sheila Jeffreys (1994) echoes Penelope when she writes, “The appearance of queer theory and queer studies threatens to mean the disappearance of lesbians” (p. 269). The fear of Jeffreys and others such as Jacquelyn Zita (1998) and Nancy Goldstein and Jennifer Manlowe (1997) is that queer will be equated with gay and male, and lesbian and women’s issues will be lost in the translation from gay and lesbian identity to queer.

Nevertheless, queer theory has the potential to disrupt and challenge our cultural assumptions about identity, self, sexuality, and sexual identity, and this critical leverage, in itself, makes queer theory a worthwhile tool; particularly germane here is the challenge to the notion that no identity, even sexual, can be considered apart from other identities or unaffected by context or history. Individuals negotiate their sexuality in relationship with their racial and ethnic, class, work, and gender identities. They enact their sexualities in accord with specific situations, as an outgrowth of personal histories, and as part of a unique matrix of personal relationships. The resulting instability of sexual identity and behavior presents researchers with considerable challenges. Leonore Tiefer (2000) has critiqued those considered authorities in sex research for promoting constructions of sexuality according to their discipline's frame of reference. She points out that most research highlights biological and psychological factors as universal while diminishing the parts played by diverse motivations, culture as a determinant of sex roles and scripts, power, and the commercialization of sexuality. She proposes a model that emphasizes cultural and political realities and their effect on bodily and psychological experience.

Frable (1997) points to the work of several researchers of color for examples of what a more holistic research could look like noting that a powerful vision such empirical work on identity exists in the narrative writings of feminists, particularly those who are women of color. “These accounts capture excluded groups, excluded dimensions, and excluded relationships. They attend to sociohistorical contexts, family niches, and on-going milieus. They see identity as a continuously re-created, personalized social construction that includes multiple social categories and that functions to keep people whole. These narratives are focused, detailed, and individualized; they come from people traditionally labeled as ‘Other’ on multiple dimensions. Thus, they are first-hand accounts of how the important social category systems actually work together. Integrating the insights of these narratives into carefully designed empirical studies may lead to an identity literature that sees people as whole” (p. 155).

Contributions to a more complex understanding of sexual identity, both theoretically and in the lives of individuals, are prototypically made by researchers in the narrative tradition. Nevertheless, measurement of sexual behavior and sexual orientation (homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual) is an important variable in the design and targeting of STD/HIV prevention projects and in provision of descriptions of populations infected or at risk of STD infection as well as in clinical case management and partner notification.

Methods

Data for the present analysis came from a larger community-based anonymous survey designed to determine knowledge, misconceptions, and sources of information in minority populations regarding HIV transmission. The study relied on self-administered questionnaires and respondents were recruited from public parks, mass transit locations, malls and shopping centers in southwest and downtown areas of Houston, Texas. These neighborhoods have substantial minority populations. Data were collected in January 1997 and June 1998. Inclusion criteria were age above 18 and ability to fill out a questionnaire in English. Trained interviewers asked for participation in the study and all participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any questions and that participation was both voluntary and anonymous. Those who agreed to participate were given the questionnaire to complete and deposit in a sealed box: those who declined to participate were counted as non-responders. Lack of time was the excuse given by the great majority of non-responders, followed by lack of facility in English. Return of the questionnaire was taken as evidence of consent. More detail on the study is provided by Essien et

al. (2000). The study was approved by the relevant university human subjects review board.

The two variables reported in this study, were sexual identity and sexual behavior, measured by the questions on the last page of the questionnaire: “What was your frequency of sexual intercourse with partners of the opposite sex during the last 3 months?” (circle one: never, less than 3 times a month, 1-6 times a week, once a day), and “What was your frequency of sexual intercourse with partners of the same sex during the last 3 months?” (same response scale as the previous question). The sexual identity question was “How do you identify yourself?” (circle one: heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual). Data analysis consisted of crosstabulating the reported sexual behavior, divided into no sex in the past 3 months (“none”), sex only with same sex partners (“homosexual”), sex only with opposite sex partners (heterosexual), and sex with both same-sex and opposite-sex partners (“bisexual”). For the purposes of measuring concordance, the individual reporting a behavior was compared with their reported sexual identity, and considered concordant if the labeled behavioral category and self-reported identity matched. For analysis of primary source of income, respondents were grouped into those with legal employment, welfare or social security (legal employment); trading sex for money, sex for drugs, or sex for gifts/favors (sex work); and drug dealing or theft/hustle (illegal employment). Data were analyzed using calculation of percentages and by chi-square (with Yates correction for discontinuity where appropriate, significance $p < .05$) using SPSS 10.0.

Results

Demographic data ($n=1,494$) are presented in Appendix 1. With the exception of Asian males, between a fifth and a quarter of respondents reported they had not had sex in the past three months. There were considerable differences between racial/ethnic samples in reported sexual identity, with higher proportions of white and Hispanic males describing themselves as homosexual, and high proportions (20-38%) of both males and females describing themselves as bisexual. Concordance between reported sexual behavior in the past 3 months and sexual identity are reported in Table 2. Refusal rates were for African Americans 48%, Hispanics 44%, Whites 42%, and Asians 43%. The rankings of the four racial/ethnic groups for discordance were identical to those for the proportion of the sample population indicating that they engaged in sex for money, drugs or gifts (African American 19.7%, Asian 10%, Hispanic 27.5%, white 51.4%).

Crosstabulation between reported behavior and identity concordance rates (concordant *vs* discordant) and occupational status indicated that combining racial/ethnic groups, for those legally employed or on welfare or social security, concordance was 59.9%; for those involved in sex for money, drugs or gifts, it was 50.4%; and for those involved in drug dealing or theft/hustling, 52.1% ($\chi^2=12.6$, $DF=3$, $P=.006$). Computation of concordance rates just for those legally employed or on welfare or social security revealed reported behavior/identity concordance rates (males and females combined) of African American 49.7%, Asian 75%, Hispanic 67.7%, and white respondents 33.3%.

In all racial/ethnic and gender categories but one, the largest discordant group was those who described their sexual identity as “heterosexual”, but reported sexual contact with both males and females in the past 3 months. These figures as a percentage of those who were sexually active in the past 3 months are reported in parentheses in Appendix 2. The exception was Hispanic men, for whom the largest discordant group was those who described themselves as bisexual but had sex only with women in the past 3 months (35% of those who reported themselves as bisexual). Some of these data have been reported in another context by Ross et al. (2003).

Discussion

These data must be interpreted with the caveats that they are based on a nonrandom convenience sample, an English questionnaire, and that this is a sample collected from public places with a refusal rate approaching half. Those not fluent in English would be underrepresented, and those who regularly frequent public places would be strongly over-represented. This latter point would inflate the proportion of unemployed and probably of those seeking sexual contact or dealing drugs. Since the analyses of concordance rates excluded those with no reported sexual behavior in the past three months, it may represent an over-estimate of discordance. Discordance may also be over-estimated by including bisexuals who had partners of only one gender in the past three months. On the other hand, limiting behavior to the past three months may significantly underestimate discordance.

This study raises significant sexual minority sampling issues, as the proportions of reported homosexual and bisexual respondents are an order of magnitude higher than those reported by population-based studies (Laumann et al., 1994). As the study was based on street outreach to obtain responses on HIV/AIDS knowledge, and questions about sexual identity and behavior were asked toward the end of the questionnaire, we might assume that street outreach sampling in

places of public congregation is likely to recruit a much higher proportion of homosexual/bisexual people, and those engaged in sex work and illegal activities, and that surveys relating to HIV/AIDS preferentially recruit more sexual minorities. However, our purpose was to determine concordance between self-reported sexual identity and sexual behavior, not prevalence of such reported behaviors.

These data suggest that there is relatively low concordance between reported sexual behavior and sexual identity, and that it varies by race/ethnicity. The concordance is, contrary to previous speculation, lowest among the white respondents, and highest among Asian respondents. In all cases except the African American sample, concordance is close between males and females in each racial/ethnic group. While the nature of this sample overemphasizes people spending more time in public places, including those with illegal activities or exchanging sex for drugs or money, even if those involved in commercial sex and illegal activities, are excluded, the proportions of concordance still range between 66% and 25%. The ranks of the four racial/ethnic groups remain the same, although concordance rates rise markedly for African American and Hispanic populations when just those with legal employment or income are considered. As might be expected, concordance is lowest among those in some form of sex work and those involved in illegal activities as a primary source of income.

These data confirm that sexual identity is not closely associated with sexual behavior, and that sexual behavior is not necessarily linked to sexual identity. In fact, it would appear that there is a high degree of **“queerness” in the sexual identity of both [non-construction of sexual identity for both]** men who have sex with men and women who have sex with women, and that with the exception of the Asian sample, this degree of **queerness [non-construction]** is consistent across race and ethnicity. The assumption of a unified homosexual identity here appears to be rejected, and the foundation of queer theory that a homosexual identity will not be equated with homosexual behavior, and homosexual behavior with a homo- or bisexual identity, is confirmed.

These data are also consistent with Tiefer’s (2000) argument that culture, as a determinant of sex roles and scripts, may play a significant part in whether there is a linkage between sexual identity and sexual behavior. In these data, the culture may refer not so much to the classical definition of it as encompassing race/ethnicity, but the culture of the streets – the individuals who are represented in public place samples. In these data, identity does not appear to strongly correlate with sexual behavior. While the context may be sufficiently

rich to enable participants to realize an identity, it is clearly not always based on sexual activities. One might argue that how one stands in relation to others sexually is not a salient dimension for a large number of these research participants. Chou (2000) notes in his analysis of the lack of applicability of western concepts of sexual identity in China, just because a person has a particular taste for a specific food doesn't mean that we label them in terms of the food that they prefer. A similar approach to sexual appetite as not conferring identity may be operating in this sample. McIntosh (1968) has previously noted that people who do not identify with the classic western, white gay/lesbian role may not necessarily identify their behavior as homosexual: the development of the nomenclature "MSM (men who have sex with men)" and "WSW" (women who have sex with women) has underscored this point.

These data are consistent with Queer Theory: there does not appear to be a unified homosexual identity, based on sexual behavior. They are also consistent with Savin-Williams' (1995) view that sexuality cannot be considered outside a social and cultural context and, we would add in terms of the income and source of this sample, a class context. O'Connell's (2001) argument that sufficient "richness" is required to realize an identity may in fact extend to richness in a socioeconomic context too. The implications for research are also important – that we cannot assume a "construction" of sexual identity given homosexual behaviors, or indeed a consistent construction across class, gender, or race/ethnicity.

The twenty-first century is characterized by the breakdown of homogenous geographic communities, the intermingling of cultures, the co-existence of traditional, modern, and postmodern mores and values, and individual lives in which options for sexual expression have become increasingly public and plentiful. Sean O'Connell (2001) writes, "To live a meaningful life requires a context, sufficiently rich to enable one to realize an identity, a coherent understanding of who one is and how one stands in relation to others... Curiously, contemporary American culture at once makes apparent the dangers of attempting to escape all cultural contexts or of embracing world-views that claim to offer comprehensive accounts of what it means to be. Despite the existence of a predominant culture, America is a pluralist society. [however], the very plurality of world-views tends to set the individual adrift, to constitute the atomized individual who is forced to choose between the various alternatives" (p. xi-xii).

A context in which people of all ethnicities, ages, and social classes could negotiate their identities, beliefs, and behaviors without the

constraints of tradition would seem to be appealing, particularly when many traditional settings have so profoundly oppressed women and sexual minorities. Studies such as this are an example of how research can be used to bring our understanding of human behavior in line with the cultural and social complexities that increasingly dominate our lives.

Appendix 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

	African Americans (n=441)	Hispanic Americans (n=456)	Whites (n=297)	Asians (n=300)
Sex				
Male	206 (46.7%)	252 (55.3%)	200 (67.3%)	148 (48.7%)
Female	235 (53.3%)	204 (44.7%)	97 (32.7%)	154 (51.3%)
Age (years)				
18-29	122 (27.7%)	208 (45.6%)	36 (12.1%)	126 (42.0%)
30-39	195 (44.2%)	162 (35.5%)	164 (55.2%)	120 (40.0%)
40-49	111 (25.2%)	77 (16.9%)	92 (31.0%)	39 (13.0%)
50+	11 (2.5%)	8 (1.8%)	5 (1.7%)	15 (5.0%)
	Missing n=2	Missing n=1		
Education				
High School/GED	236 (53.5%)	314 (68.9%)	89 (30.0%)	120 (40.5%)
Above high school	203 (46.0%)	131 (28.7%)	202 (68.0%)	176 (59.5%)
	Missing n=2	Missing n=11	Missing n=6	Missing n=4
Income				
Legally employed	249 (56.5%)	199 (43.6%)	188 (63.5%)	234 (78.0%)
Welfare	75 (17.0%)	80 (17.6%)	71 (24.0%)	30 (10.0%)
Illegal activities	117 (26.6%)	164 (36.0%)	34 (11.5%)	36 (12.0%)
		Missing n=13	Missing n=4	
No sexual activity past 3 months				
Males	42 (21.8%)	46 (20.5%)	34 (21.9%)	13 (9.4%)
Females	48 (22.9%)	49 (26.1%)	20 (27.4%)	36 (24.0%)
Reported sexual identity				
Males-Homosexual	24 (12.4%)	49 (21.9%)	41 (26.5%)	11 (8.0%)
Males-Bisexual	55 (28.5%)	84 (37.5%)	60 (38.7%)	38 (27.5%)
Males-Heterosexual	114 (59.1%)	91 (40.7%)	54 (34.8%)	89 (64.5%)
Female-Homosexual	10 (4.8%)	20 (10.6%)	5 (6.9%)	7 (4.7%)
Female-Bisexual	40 (19.1%)	50 (26.6%)	23 (31.5%)	30 (20%)
Female-Heterosexual	160 (76.2%)	118 (62.8%)	45 (61.6%)	113 (75.3%)

Note: as a result of missing data, some of the percentages do not sum to 100.

Appendix 2: Sexual identity and Behavior Concordance Rates in Four Racial/Ethnic Groups (and proportion of both-sex contact in “heterosexuals”)

Race/Ethnicity	Males % concordant	Females % concordant
African American (Γn=206, En=235)	43.1 (49.0)	33.4 (52.0)
Asian (Γn=148, En=154)	78.4 (17.3)	72.8 (13.8)
Hispanic (Γn=252, En=204)	56.2 (18.3)	57.6 (25.0)
White (Γn=200, En=97)	34.7 (46.5)	37.7 (48.6)

Figures in parentheses are percent of self-reported “heterosexuals” who reported sexual contact with both males and females in the past 3 months. Because proportion of self-reported “homosexuals” who reported sexual contact with both males and females in the past 3 months were largely based on ns of >10, percentages ranged from 0% to 100% and are not shown.

(These rates *exclude* those with no sexual contact in the past 3 months)

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