

Sexual Orientation Across the Life Span: Introduction to the Special Section

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What impact does sexual orientation have on human development over the life span? As questions related to sexual orientation have become increasingly topics of public discussion and debate in recent years, psychological study of the issues has also burgeoned. What was once a new frontier for research has matured into a large, complex, and rapidly growing area of knowledge. Important research is being conducted on many issues, by diverse investigators, from a number of theoretical perspectives, in many parts of the world. The articles in this special section provide only a sampling of current research, but they begin to suggest the vitality and excitement of a field that is coming into its own.

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The overall visibility of issues related to sexual orientation and human development has never been greater than it is today. Voters are casting ballots, litigants are bringing suits, judges are handing down rulings, legislators are proposing new laws, and candidates are staking out positions on issues related to sexual orientation. What was once unspeakable and invisible has become very much a part of public discourse.

Research on sexual orientation and human development has likewise burgeoned in recent years (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003; Omoto & Kurtzman, 2006). A great deal of excellent research, across a broad array of topical areas, is now available. Many creative methodological approaches are being employed. A diverse array of theoretical positions is under study. What was once a new frontier for research has matured into a large, complex, and rapidly growing area of knowledge.

As a result of these trends, selecting articles on sexual orientation across the life span for this special section has involved difficult choices. This special section presents examples of the high quality research that is ongoing around the world. Though only a sampling, the articles in this special section may nevertheless begin to suggest the vitality and excitement of a field that is coming into its own.

Contemporary Research on Sexual Orientation Across the Life Span

The variety of research on sexual orientation being conducted today is well represented in this special section. Research focuses on issues across the life span, from childhood (Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, & Bailey, 2008) to adolescence (Bos, Sandfort, de Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008) and adulthood (Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, Hu, & Elieff, 2008). Methodologies range from survey techniques (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon,

2008) to peer reports (Wainright & Patterson, 2008) and observational methods (Rieger et al., 2008). Some authors are studying the impact of unusual events such as victimization (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2008), whereas others are concerned with the influence of everyday legal and policy environments on the experiences of lesbians and gay men (Balsam et al., 2008).

As in previous years, the background against which nonheterosexual lives should be understood continues to be one of widespread prejudice and discrimination (Herek, 2003). In the United States today, discrimination based on sexual orientation is evident in many areas, from education and employment (D'Augelli, 2006; Sandfort, Bos, & Vet, 2006) to romantic relationships (Herek, 2006) and family concerns (Patterson, 2006a, 2006b). Many of the articles in this special section concern these issues.

Against the background of antigay prejudice, individuals work to create nonheterosexual identities and lives. From these efforts, a variety of identities has emerged; in addition to lesbian, gay, and bisexual, these include queer, mostly straight, and other identities. In this special section, the formidable challenges of assessment presented by the psychological study of sexual orientation are tackled by Worthington and his colleagues (Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008), who suggest that sexual orientation, though diverse, can be clearly conceptualized and reliably assessed. The meanings of varied identities over time are explored by Morgan Thompson and Morgan (2008), who propose a “mostly straight” identity to describe the position of women who fall between bisexuality, on the one hand, and heterosexuality, on the other. The meanings of bisexuality over time are explored by Diamond (2008). Her 10-year longitudinal study reveals both stability and change in sexual desires, behaviors, and identities among a group of nonheterosexual women over time, and she proposes that the distinction between lesbian and bisexual identities is more a matter of degree than of kind.

Among the varied identities explored here are also those of gender variant individuals. Well-known findings from a study by Green (1986), reporting that boys who showed substantial amounts of gender variant behavior in childhood were likely to adopt gay

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identities as adults, have had no female counterpart for many years. In this special section, Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, and Zucker (2008) report a 12-year follow-up of gender-dysphoric girls showing that they too are more likely than average to report same-sex sexual behavior in adulthood. In a similar vein, Rieger and his colleagues (2008) examine childhood home movies of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adults and rate them for children's gender nonconformity. Their findings suggest that filmed behavior of children who grew up to identify as lesbian or gay is seen as more gender nonconforming by contemporary observers than is that of children who grew up to identify as heterosexual. These observational data confirm the findings of research based on retrospective reports, and they serve to highlight the many ways in which sexual identity and gendered behaviors are intertwined throughout the life span.

As the salience of sexuality increases during transitions to adolescence, the issues of nonheterosexual youth emerge as particularly important (D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001). Youths who identify as nonheterosexual are more likely than their peers to experience a variety of mental health problems (Cochran & Mays, 2006), most serious among which are elevated probabilities of suicidality (Russell, 2006). At the same time, even though risks are elevated, not every nonheterosexual youth is at risk (Savin-Williams, 2006).

In this area as in others (Luthar, 2003), the challenge for research on lesbian, gay and bisexual youth today is thus to identify pathways that are associated with risk and resilience. This challenge is taken up by a number of authors in this special section. In a Dutch study, Bos and her colleagues (Bos et al., 2008) report that, among teenagers with same-sex desires, decreased psychosocial functioning is associated with lower quality relationships with fathers and peers. In a similar vein, Busseri and colleagues (2008) found that youth trajectories toward and away from risk behaviors are affected by intrapersonal factors such as attitudes, interpersonal factors such as victimization, and environmental factors such as the availability of illegal substances in their everyday environments. Results of both of these two studies point to the qualities of interpersonal relationships as critical to youth resilience.

Environmental contributors to mental health are also highlighted in research by Hatzenbuehler, Corbin, and Fromme (2008). Greater alcohol use among lesbian than among heterosexual women has been reported by many investigators (Cochran & Mays, 2006), but the reasons for this finding have remained unclear. Hatzenbuehler and his colleagues (2008) report that positive expectations about alcohol use, coupled with social norms that encourage drinking, help to explain greater alcohol consumption among both lesbian and gay adolescents and young adults.

The formation of sexual and romantic relationships is an important part of adult life for lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, just as it is for others (Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Spalding, 2003). Although many issues have been studied, work in this area has been rendered more challenging by lack of legal recognition for same-sex couple relationships. Recognizing this, Roisman and his colleagues (Roisman et al., 2008) utilized a research design that compared committed lesbian and gay couples with dating, engaged, and married heterosexual couples across a wide array of physiological, self-report, partner-report, and observational measures. Results showed that same-sex couple relationships were

similar to those of other-sex couples in many ways, with the sole exception being that lesbian couples were more adept than others at working together on laboratory tasks in a harmonious fashion. In a 3-year follow-up of same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont, Balsam and her colleagues (Balsam et al., 2008) compared these couples with same-sex couples not in civil unions and to their heterosexual married siblings. Again, a picture of remarkable similarity among couple types emerged. One striking difference that emerged in the study by Balsam and her colleagues (2008), however, served to suggest the likely significance of legal recognition for same-sex couples. That finding was that, when compared with same-sex couples in civil unions, same-sex couples not in civil unions were more likely to have separated.

In addition to participating in couple relationships, many lesbians and gay men make parenting a significant priority in their adult lives (Patterson, 2006a). A substantial research literature now attests to similarities in development among children with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents (Patterson, 2006b), but relatively few studies have examined development among adolescent offspring of lesbian and gay parents. Two studies in the current special section address this relative dearth of research. Using data from the United States National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Wainright and Patterson (2008) report that peer relations among adolescent offspring of same-sex couples are not distinguishable from those of other youngsters on number or quality of friendships, on positions of centrality in peer networks, or on a host of related variables. Similarly in the United Kingdom, Rivers, Poteat, and Noret (2008) report that teenagers with same-sex parents are similar to their peers on measures of victimization and of psychological functioning. When coupled with earlier findings in this area (Patterson, 2006a, 2006b), the notion that adolescents with same-sex parents can be expected to experience overwhelming difficulties at school or in their peer groups appears to be without empirical foundation.

Other areas of adult development and aging are also receiving increased research attention. Study of the employment issues of lesbian and gay adults is yielding greater understanding of the ways in which sexual orientation shapes careers (Badgett, 2003; Sandfort et al., 2006), as is the examination of midlife more generally (Grossman, D'Augelli, & O'Connell, 2003; Kimmel & Sang, 2003). Research on sexual orientation and aging is expanding rapidly (Kimmel, Rose, & David, 2006). In many areas, important contributions to understanding lesbian and gay lives in particular, and human development more generally, are being made.

Recognition of varieties of nonheterosexual experience is also on the rise. This is particularly true with respect to the role of race and ethnicity (Harper & Zea, 2004). Significant work relevant to many lesbian and gay communities of color has documented both similarities and differences across groups (e.g., Balsam, Huang, Fieland, Simoni, & Walters, 2004; Diaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2006; Rosario, Scrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). The study of nonheterosexual experience is also increasingly international in character (e.g., Graziano, 2004; Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, deVaus, & Pitts, 2006; Riggs, 2004). Work on migrant and on immigrant experiences is also expanding (e.g., Espin, 2006). This increasing recognition of diversity among ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, religious, and other groups is a welcome trend.

The Future of Research on Sexual Orientation Across the Life Span

Even as research on sexual orientation across the life span matures, much remains to be done. Many areas are as yet little studied, and many issues remain unresolved. There are many avenues for future study.

Understanding of sexual orientation itself has evolved considerably over the years, but many issues surrounding it remain controversial. For example, the stability versus fluidity of sexual desire, behavior, and identity over time, and the role of gender and culture in such variation, are in need of further study. Both continuous and categorical approaches to conceptualizing sexual orientation should be explored. Despite recent progress, many fundamental questions in this area remain unanswered.

As understanding of human development increasingly benefits from work in neuroscience, new insights about sexual orientation may also emerge from such research. In the past, public attention has been riveted by reports of differences between the neuroanatomy of gay and heterosexual men (LeVay, 1994) and by reports of distinctive genetic linkages among gay but not heterosexual brothers (Hamer, 1995). Application of biological techniques such as genetic linkage studies and of brain imaging techniques such as functional magnetic resonance imaging may well yield new insights about the development of sexual orientation.

Developmental psychologists increasingly recognize the importance of culture and community in shaping human experience (Schweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 2006), and this perspective is also valuable in the study of sexual orientation. Across the life course, nonheterosexual individuals, like their heterosexual counterparts, are deeply affected by the many contexts in which they live. As the study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual lives becomes more international, and as it focuses increasingly on multiple subgroups within cultures, greater appreciation of the diversity of nonheterosexual experience is likely to emerge.

Another dimension that must be considered in future research is that of historical time (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Dramatic changes in the experiences of nonheterosexual adolescents and adults have occurred both in the United States and in many other countries over recent years. For this reason, to study sexual orientation across the life span is to study a moving target. Clearly, some authors are already examining questions about how social change affects the experiences of sexual minority individuals (e.g., Balsam et al., 2008). Overall, however, recognition and understanding of secular changes in the status and life experiences of nonheterosexual people around the world is an important challenge for future research.

In summary, knowledge about sexual orientation and psychological development is expanding at a rapid rate. Exciting work is being undertaken by many different investigators in various parts of the world, with valuable results. As can be seen in the articles for this special section, research on sexual orientation across the life span has much to offer to our understanding of human development across the life span.

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