

New Research Sheds Light on Fluidity

Study has implications for legislative efforts to ban change-oriented therapy

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Conventional wisdom within the sexual orientation literature is that women experience changes in their sexual attractions and identities far more than men. However, new research is challenging the notion that such fluidity is rare in men.

Study Overview

Katz-Wise and Hyde (2014) surveyed a sample of young adults (ages 18-26; 118 females, 70 males) who reported a same-gender orientation. These researchers defined sexual fluidity as "a situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness which may manifest in changes in sexual orientation identity over time" (p. 2). They add to this definition their belief that change in sexual orientation identity follows from change in attractions.

The researchers asked participants about their experiences of sexual fluidity and sexual orientation identity change, as well as intriguing questions about their attitudes and beliefs regarding their sexuality. These included whether their sexuality was something they were born with or something influenced by their environment and how subject their sexuality was to change.

Findings revealed a lack of gender differences regarding change in attractions or sexual orientation identity. Change in attractions was reported by 63% of females and 50% of males. Among those who reported change in attractions, 48% of females and 34% of males reported experiencing a change in sexual orientation identity. Countering claims that this change simply reflected a coming out process, the researchers reported that 21% of females and 19% of males reported multiple changes in their attractions. Furthermore, age of reported initial change in sexual attractions averaged 17.5 years for females and 15.6 years for males. The results pertaining to fluidity in sexual attractions were similar to another study by Katz-Wise (2014), which found such fluidity to be reported by 64% of women and 52% of men in a sample of 199 non-heterosexual young adults. For this sample, sexual attraction changes led to sexual orientation identity changes for 49% of the fluid women and 36% of the fluid men.

Among the most interesting findings regarding the interplay of sexual fluidity status and beliefs about their sexuality, Katz-Wise and Hyde found that females were more likely than males to endorse the belief that sexuality is influenced by the environment, whether or not they reported the experience of fluidity. However, among males, non-sexually fluid individuals were more likely to report they were born with their sexuality than were males who reported sexual fluidity. There was no difference among fluid and non-fluid women regarding the belief of their sexuality as inborn. Regarding change, females were more likely than males to endorse the view that their sexuality is changeable and that a person can change their sexuality. In addition, sexually fluid women and men were more likely to believe that their sexuality could change than non-sexually fluid women and men.

Summarizing these findings, Katz-Wise and Hyde conclude:

In the current study, compared to females and sexually fluid males, non-sexually fluid males had the most entity-oriented views of sexuality, consistent with essentialist beliefs about the nature of homosexuality. Non-sexually fluid males were also more likely than sexually fluid males to endorse the belief that sexuality was something they were born with and males across both sexual fluidity groups were less likely than females to believe that sexuality was influenced by the environment. (p 10)

The authors opine that a key characteristic among non-heterosexual individuals who report sexual fluidity is that they are more likely than their non-fluid counterparts to believe sexuality is changeable.

Implications and Cautions

This research has some important implications for legislation prohibiting the professional care of individuals with unwanted same-sex attractions and behaviors and the therapists who provide such care. First, while it finds women tend to report more change-friendly beliefs about their sexual attractions and sexual orientation identities than men, the prevalence of reported actual fluidity in sexuality is roughly similar between women and men. It appears that the attitudes of non-sexually fluid non-heterosexual males may play a major role in the belief differences between non-heterosexual men and women regarding change. This may help explain the large overrepresentation of gay men in efforts to ban licensed therapists from assisting persons with unwanted same-sex attractions and behavior who freely wish to pursue change. These activists may be generalizing their experience of non-fluidity to all non-heterosexuals.

Second, in the current political climate where change-oriented therapy for minors is being debated and, in a few states, legally prohibited, it bears noting that Katz-Wise and Hyde's sample reported their first experience of change in attractions occurred on average before the age of 18. This finding alone makes it unconscionable for activists and politicians to ban professional change-oriented care for minors. It is as if their intention is to make the therapist's office the only setting where such change of sexual attractions, behaviors, and identities is not allowed to occur.

Another implication of this research is the acknowledgement that many non-heterosexual individuals do not experience fluidity in sexual attractions and identity. This fact should caution change-supportive clinicians from making universal promises of sexual attraction change to their clients. This research reported only on spontaneous change not facilitated by therapy. While therapy-assisted change

may well improve the possibility of change on a continuum of change for sexually non-fluid individuals, therapists would be wise to anticipate that some individuals may not experience change and allow for other outcomes consistent with the client's value system when this occurs.

A final caution that should be acknowledged is that even among sexually fluid individuals, they tended not to believe they had control over their sexuality changing. This research should therefore be only tentatively applied to the facilitation of change in a psychotherapy setting. However, it is hardly an argument against the reality of therapy-assisted change to point out that spontaneous change in sexual attractions and identities is happening with some frequency all around us. Change-oriented therapists engaged in clinical work with persons experiencing unwanted same-sex attractions and behavior should thus take heart from this research that a developing scientific basis for their work exists.

References

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