

Summary of results for

Presumed straight until demonstrated otherwise: The relationships between sexual identity, heteronormativity, sexual identity development and psychological well-being

Tamara Bejakovich.

This thesis was completed in partial requirement for completing a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. People with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other identities deviate from compulsory heterosexuality, experiencing many stressors, such as internalised homonegativity, identity confusion and acceptance concerns. Resolving these identity stressors is associated with a secure identity and well-being. The aim of this research was to investigate the connections between sexual identity and its definitions, development and how it is related to psychological well-being. The research survey used to investigate this was online between April and September 2015. It was open to people from all walks of life who were 16 and over, and were proficient in English. The following is a summary of research findings. If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to email me at bejakovichresearch@gmail.com.

Sexual Identity

Traditionally, research and media have spoken about sexual identity in three categories: heterosexual (or more colloquially straight), bisexual and gay/lesbian. More recently, newer categories are arising, such as pansexual and asexual, suggesting the current tri-chotomy is insufficient to capture the diversity sexual identity has. Thus, this research aimed to explore assessment of sexual identity beyond the current tri-chotomy. The online survey offered several additional categories, including mostly heterosexual, mostly gay/lesbian, questioning and others, yet the participants demonstrated that people utilise even more categories, such as asexual and pansexual. There were more categories than those analysed by this research due to fewer numbers of participants identifying in this manner. The results demonstrated there were clear differences between people identifying as heterosexual, mostly heterosexual, bisexual, mostly gay/lesbian, and gay/lesbian. The differences between people identified as bisexual, pansexual, asexual and other were less clear. It is possible that the measure used to differentiate between these categories was limited, not including romantic attraction and the attractions toward people with gender identities that are neither man nor woman (e.g. people with gender-fluid, non-gendered, trans-gender). Future research should update measures examining sexual identity and the aspects that differentiate how people identify.

Sexual Identity and Well-Being

Past research demonstrates that the differences in well-being between heterosexually-identified individuals and those with LGB+ identities typically shows people identifying as heterosexual report higher levels of well-being than the remaining sexual identities. In the current research a similar trend was found; however, this was when comparing

heterosexually-identified participants to identities who demonstrate sexual and/or romantic attraction toward both men and women (labelled in the research as non-binary defined as not fitting in two categories – heterosexual or gay/lesbian). Heterosexually-identified participants reported more positive affect and happiness, and less negative affect than several non-binary identities. Furthermore, men identifying as gay also reported more happiness than those identifying as heterosexual. The lack of significant differences found between heterosexually-identified participants and those identifying as gay/lesbian may be due to statistical analysis. It may also be possible positive media at the time of data collection (2015, e.g. legalisation of same sex marriage in the USA, celebrities coming out publically, such as Cara Delevingne) had a positive influence on people with same sex attractions and self-reported identities. More research is required on emerging self-reported identities and how their reported well-being compares to other sexual identities. Additionally, future research should aim to explain the factors affecting these differences in well-being

This study was also interested in how these differences would change if specific sexual identity related variables were taken into account. The variables considered included Acceptance Concerns, Concealment Motivation, Identity Uncertainty, Internalised Homonegativity, Difficult Process, Identity Superiority, Identity Affirmation, Identity Centrality, Identity Disclosure and the Presumption of Heterosexuality. Minority Stress theory suggests that stressors associated with the minority status affect people's reported well-being. Thus, it was expected when controlling for these variables the significant finding would be reduced or eliminated. The results demonstrated that half of the significant findings were eliminated and all but one of the remaining findings demonstrated reduced effect sizes. However, in one finding the effect sizes increased, demonstrating after controlling for the above variables heterosexually-identified men reported more life satisfaction than those identify as gay or other, and those identifying as other reported greater life satisfaction than asexually-identified men. It is possible that some of the identity variables (e.g. identity disclosure) had buffering effects on well-being, and so when taking these into account other variables (e.g. discrimination, stigma, prejudice) were no longer being buffered. Further research needs to be completed to help explain the differences in well-being seen between various sexual identities.

Sexual Identity Development and Well-Being

Sexual identity development reportedly has an influence on psychological well-being. The McCarn and Fassinger model of LGB+ identity development describes individual and group identity development. This study investigated the differences in well-being that exist between phases of development. In general people in the Synthesis phase of sexual identity development (the phase characterised by an integration of one's individual or group identity into their identity as a whole) reported higher levels of psychological well-being than the other phases of development. It was hypothesised that the differences in well-being are likely to be due to variables associated with sexual identity and its development. Thus, controlling for these variables would theoretically reduce or eliminate the differences in well-being found between the phases of sexual identity development. Previous research had not explored this. For this reason, the current research investigated whether controlling for the above variables reduced or eliminated the differences that existed. Of the 21 significant findings, only four remained significant after controlling for the identity variables. Of the four remaining significant findings, one of the findings (differences in self-esteem between men in different phases of the group developmental branch) increased in effect size. Similarly as

above, its possible that once controlling for the variables associated with sexual identity some positive variables (e.g. identity disclosure) which may have had buffering effects were removed, and so other variables may have been influencing the differences (e.g. discrimination). Future research needs to examine external stressors associated with LGB+ identity alongside internal stressors in order to better explain these differences.