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

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Abstract

The conceptualisation and development of a sexual identity has been debated in the literature. Whether identity is conceptualised as categorical or on a continuum, people with same sex experiences, such as those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning and other (LGBQ+), demonstrate lower psychological well-being than their heterosexually-identified counterparts. Some have argued this is a result of the stress associated with minority status; others comment on the influence of the development of a sexual identity divergent of the heterosexist norm. Literature supports both claims, yet inconsistencies exist in the study of the psychological outcomes of those with LGBQ+ identities. The current research intended to alleviate some of these debates with three foundational aims: to explore the placement of the sexual identity categories along the continuum, and incorporate more sexual identity categories in sexual identity assessment, demonstrating respect for diversity; to examine the differences in psychological well-being between people with different sexual identities and in different phases of development; and to investigate how dimensions associated with sexual identity, such as identity disclosure, influence these differences. To do this, the study utilized an online survey incorporating a number of measures. People with different sexual identities were significantly different along the sexual identity continuum. In addition, as suspected, non-binary identities (defined in this research as people not ascribing to either heterosexual or lesbian/gay identities) reported lower levels of well-being. When accounting for differences in identity-related factors, such as identity uncertainty and disclosure, several of the significant differences were eliminated, and all but one of the remaining significant findings demonstrated reduced effect sizes. Those in the Synthesis phase of individual and group identity development generally reported greater levels of psychological well-being. Once again, when controlling for identity-related factors these differences were reduced or eliminated. Future research should investigate a universal model of sexual identity formation, and should assess identity dimensions in those identifying as heterosexual. Gaining greater understandings in the experiences of people with LGBQ+ identities demonstrates areas to target for interventions in order to decrease the disparities which exist between people with these and heterosexual identities.
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Contents

Abstract ....................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................... v

List of Tables ........................................................................................................... xi

List of Figures ......................................................................................................... xiii

Chapter 1: Introduction ..............................................................................................1

Limitations of Past Research ....................................................................................5

Summary of the Current Research ..........................................................................6

Thesis Outline ...........................................................................................................6

Chapter 2: Literature Review ......................................................................................8

Back to Basics: Defining Psychological Well-Being and Identity .................................8

“I feel so good!”: Defining Psychological Well-Being ...............................................8

“Who am I?”: Defining Identity ..............................................................................9

Sexual Identity: Definitions and Disparities ............................................................10

“Gay? Straight? Bi? Identity or Orientation?”: A Problem in Definition .................10

“Is it Greener on the Other Side of the Fence?”: Disparities between Sexual Identities ...........................................................................................................16

Sexual Identity Development and Psychological Well-Being ...................................21

“Presumed straight until demonstrated otherwise”: Heterosexism, heteronormativity and happiness ..............................................................................21

“How did I get here?”: A Path to Discovery ............................................................23

“The only true happiness lies in knowing who you are ... and making peace with it” (Hamilton, 2001): Sexual Identity Development and Psychological Well-being ..............................................................................32

Research Hypotheses .............................................................................................35

Sexual Identity Continuum .....................................................................................36

Sexual Identity and Identity-Specific Dimensions ..................................................38

Sexual Identity and Psychological Well-Being .......................................................40
Chapter 3: Methodology .......................................................................................... 44
Recruitment of Participants ..................................................................................... 44
Measures .................................................................................................................. 45
Procedure ................................................................................................................. 55
Data Analysis .......................................................................................................... 57

Chapter 4: Results ..................................................................................................... 59
Data Cleaning .......................................................................................................... 59
Participants .............................................................................................................. 60
Data Analysis .......................................................................................................... 63
Sexual Identity Continuum ...................................................................................... 63
  Hypothesis 1: MSO was predicted to differ by the self-reported sexual identity category .............................................................................................................. 63
  Hypothesis 2: SOR was hypothesised to differ by self-reported sexual identity category .............................................................................................................. 67
Sexual Identity and Identity-Specific Dimensions .................................................. 69
  Hypothesis 3: Self-reported sexual identities were expected to differ in terms of their identity uncertainty, internalised homonegativity and identity disclosure .............................................................................................................. 69
  Hypothesis 4: Self-reported sexual identities were predicted to differ in regards to the remaining identity-specific dimensions .............................................. 72
Sexual Identity, Continuum and Psychological Well-Being ................................... 75
  Hypothesis 5: Self-reported sexual identities were hypothesised to differ in levels of psychological well-being ................................................................. 75
  Hypothesis 6: Same sex experiences and SOR are expected to be associated with psychological well-being ................................................................. 78
Hypothesis 7: Controlling for identity-specific dimensions was predicted to eliminate difference in well-being between the self-reported sexual identity categories ..............................................................80

Sexual Identity Development, Identity-Specific Factors, and Psychological Well-Being...............................................................83

Hypothesis 8: Individuals in different phases of development were expected to differ in their levels of psychological well-being .................83

Hypothesis 9: Phases of development were hypothesized to differ in their levels of sexual identity-specific dimensions ........................................88

Hypothesis 10: Controlling for identity-specific dimensions was predicted to eliminate difference in well-being between the phases of development....94

Chapter 5: Discussion .................................................................................................................................................97

Sexual Identity Continuum ........................................................................................................................................98

Sexual Identity and Identity-Specific Dimensions .................................................................................................102

Sexual Identity and Psychological Well-being .......................................................................................................108

Sexual Identity Development, Identity-Specific Dimensions and Psychological Well-being ...........................................113

Strengths, Weaknesses and Future Directions for Research .........................................................................................117

Researcher Reflections ...........................................................................................................................................121

References ...................................................................................................................................................................124

Appendix ..................................................................................................................................................................148

Appendix A: Advertising Materials .............................................................................................................................148

Appendix B: Online Survey ........................................................................................................................................152

Appendix C: Syntax for Placing Participants in the Phases of Development ..............................................................166

Appendix D: Low Risk Ethics Notification ..............................................................................................................169

Appendix E: Information Sheet ..................................................................................................................................170

Appendix F: Descriptive and inferential statistics of the differences between demographic details in terms of the dependent variables .........................................................173

Appendix G: Research Case Study ..................................................................................................................................179
List of Tables

Table 1. Sexual identity dimensions investigated in the doctoral research .........................39
Table 2. Items in the ESOI, their response options and their classification.........................46
Table 3. Example of the phase of individual and group developmental branch chosen for three participants.............................................................................................................51
Table 4. LGBIS subscales and their associated items..........................................................53
Table 5. Distribution of the demographic details.................................................................61
Table 6. Descriptive statistics of the sexual identity categories in terms of their MSO and SOR......................................................................................................................................65
Table 7. Effect sizes computed from Mann-Whitney tests for the pairwise comparisons between the sexual identity categories in terms of their MSO.............................................66
Table 8. Effect sizes computed from Mann-Whitney tests for the pairwise comparisons between the sexual identity categories in terms of their SOR..............................................69
Table 9. Descriptive statistics of the sexual identity categories in terms of their scores on the LGBIS subscales Identity Uncertainty, Internalised Homonegativity, and Identity Disclosure.............................................................................................................................71
Table 10. Descriptive statistics of the sexual identity categories in terms of their scores on the LGBIS subscales Acceptance Concerns, Concealment Motivation, Difficult Process, Identity Superiority, Identity Affirmation, and Identity Centrality.........................................................73
Table 11. Descriptive statistics of the sexual identity categories in terms of their Presumption of Heterosexuality.............................................................................................................75
Table 12. Descriptive statistics of the sexual identity categories in terms of their psychological well-being variables..........................................................................................................................77
Table 13. Spearman’s rho correlations between the same sex experiences and SOR and the psychological well-being variables of male and female participants.................................................80
Table 14. Pearson correlations between the psychological well-being variables and the identity-related factors for male and female participants.........................................................81
Table 15. Inferential statistics of ANCOVA analysis of the differences in psychological well-being variables between sexual identities.....................................................................................83
Table 16. Descriptive statistics of the phases of the individual developmental branch in terms of their psychological well-being variables.........................................................................................84
Table 17. Descriptive statistics of the phases of the group developmental branch in terms
of their psychological well-being variables.................................................................86
Table 18. Inferential statistics of ANCOVA analysis of the differences in psychological well-being variables between phases of individual and group developmental branches.................................................................88
Table 19. Descriptive statistics of the phases of the individual developmental branch in terms of their identity-specific factors....................................................................................................................90
Table 20. Descriptive statistics of the phases of the group developmental branch in terms of their identity-specific factors....................................................................................................................92
Table 21. Inferential statistics of ANCOVA analysis of the differences in identity-related variables between phases of individual and group developmental branches.................................94
Table 22. Inferential statistics of ANCOVA analysis of the differences in psychological well-being variables between the phases of sexual identity development.................96
List of Figures

Figure 1. Pictorial representation of the singular continuum and two continua descriptions of sexual identity, credited to Killermann (2015).........................................................................................14

Figure 2. Sexual identity continua presented in Epstein et al. (2012) and Bejakovich (2013).........................................................................................................................................................15

Figure 3. A depiction of minority stress theory as described by Meyer (2003), and potential external and internal stressors, as well as two stressors not included by Meyer (2003)...................................................................................................................................................19

Figure 4. McCarn and Fassinger's proposed model of sexual identity development with example statements appropriate for men; extracted from Fassinger and Miller (1997, p. 57).........................................................................................................................................................................29

Figure 5. Degree of same and opposite sex experiences present at each placement (MSO) on the sexual identity continuum and the presence of the range of one's sexuality (SOR).37

Figure 6. An example of the continua produced by the ESOI, based on a participant with an opposite sex scale of 13 and the same sex scale of an 8.................................................................48

Figure 7. Placement by MSO of the self-reported sexual identities along the sexual identity continuum. ..........................................................................................................................................................67