Running Head: Sexual Identity

What the Research Tells Us about Sexual Identity and Being a Christian

Mark A. Yarhouse, Psy.D.
Regent University

CCCU Consultation on Human Sexuality,
Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan,
November 19, 2004

What the Research Tells Us about Sexual Identity and Being a Christian

Introduction

Sexual identity is an important construct in the discussions centering on same-sex attraction, behavior, and orientation. In one sense, it is quite simply the act of self-labeling based on what society recognizes as communicating something meaningful about one's sexual preferences (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2004). Common labels are gay, straight and bi (or homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual).

One's sexual identity develops both publicly and privately (e.g., Worthington et al., 2003). *Public* identity refers to how one identifies oneself to others, and it may include common assumptions about sexual identity based on the vast majority of members in America identifying as heterosexual. *Private* identity refers to how one thinks of oneself. It is possible to "pass" as majority sexual identity (i.e., heterosexual) while thinking of oneself as having a minority sexual identity (e.g., "gay").

In addition to the public/private dimension of sexual identity development, the act of self-labeling in contemporary Western culture cannot be fully appreciated apart from identifying the many facets of sexual identity. Theorists today recognize that these include: *biological sex* (as male or female), *gender identity* (one's sense of being masculine or feminine, as defined by contemporary culture and the subcultures within which one lives), the *persistence and direction of sexual attraction* (toward the same-sex, opposite-sex, or both, which is what we commonly refer to as sexual "orientation"), *intention* (what one intends to do with the attractions one has), *volition/behavior* (what one actually does with the attractions one has), and one's *valuative framework* (beliefs and values about same-sex attraction and behavior) (Yarhouse, 2001).

The act of self-labeling can be shaped by all of the many aspects of one's sexual identity, as well as the fact that this process occurs both publicly and privately. The relative weight given to the various aspects of sexual identity differs from person to person. For some, their biological sex will carry great weight in their sexual identity. For others, the fact that they experience persistent same-sex attractions will figure more prominently than the fact that their biological sex is male or female. Still for others, their experience of being masculine or feminine as prescribed by culture will carry more weight in their sexual identity.

Sexual Identity Confusion

It is difficult to say with great certainty how many people – particularly adolescents or young adults – experience confusion about their sexual identity. In one of the largest studies on this topic it was reported that 1.1% of adolescents identified themselves as having a homosexual or bisexual orientation, and 10.7% of adolescents indicated that they were "unsure" of their sexual orientation (Remafedi et al., 1992). It is interesting that, in a separate study, only 2.0% of men and 0.9% of women identified themselves as having a homosexual orientation (while 6.2% of men and 4.4% of women reported feeling attracted to the same sex) (Laumann et al., 1994).[1]

Among adolescents, females tend to question their sexual identity because of same-sex attraction, exposure to the topic in class or in movies, and close relationships with friends, whereas males tend to question based on same-sex attraction and behavior, which more often occurs in sexual "encounters" rather than relationships (Savin-Williams, 1999; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2004). The self-labeling that sometimes occurs tends to take place at age 15, on average, and this is much younger than it was thirty years ago, when the average age for self-labeling as gay or lesbian was 20 (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2004).

Explanatory Frameworks

There is no shortage today of models of sexual identity development. They include – but are not limited to – models of general homosexual identity development, gay male sexual identity development, lesbian sexual identity development, and bisexual identity development. We have also witnessed emerging trends in sexual identity theory that include models of heterosexual identity development and ethnic minority sexual identity development (for a complete review, see Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). Each new model and direction for consideration was added as the existing models failed to reflect the interests and experiences of a new group. For example, models of lesbian identity development emerged out of dissatisfaction with existing models of general homosexual and gay male identity development. Likewise, models of bisexual identity development emerged out of dissatisfaction with models of general homosexual, gay male, and lesbian sexual identity development. As those who were disenfranchised could not find themselves in existing models, new models were developed to account for these experiential "gaps".

What the models hold in common, however, is the assumption that experiences of same-sex attraction signal who the person "really is". In this sense, the proper developmental pathway is toward the integration of same-sex attraction into a gay or lesbian (or bisexual) sexual identity. This is what we refer to as a *gay explanatory framework*. It caries with it a number of assumptions about personal identity that are not argued for but assumed to be true. Part of our work has led to documenting alternative experiences in which the person who reports same-sex attraction does not integrate those experiences into a gay identity – they do not, as it were, subscribe to the existing gay explanatory framework (Yarhouse & Tan, 2004).

Sexual Identity and Being a Christian

Although have not been a lot of studies conducted specifically on the meaning of sexual identity to the Christian, there has been research conducted comparing those who identify with a gay explanatory framework and integrate their experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity, and those who dis-identify with a gay explanatory framework (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, in press; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004).

Both groups of Christians reported common early experiences of confusion and a shared regard for truth and perseverance as they attempted to synthesize their sexual identity. Truth was defined more as not denying one's gay identity by those Christians who integrated same-sex feelings into a gay identity. For those who dis-identified with a gay explanatory framework, truth centered more on rejecting a gay identity as contrary to that truth.

Also, both groups found their religious faith as Christians to be a resource in their coping, with faith, words of Scripture, corporate worship, and prayer identified as important among the gay-identified group (Yarhouse et al., in press). The gay-dis-identified group identified a similar list: prayer, scripture, faith, and corporate worship.

Religious faith was not entirely beneficial, however. A somewhat surprisingly low 20% of the gay-identified and about 27% of the gay-dis-identified reported not been accepted by their church (Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). Both groups also offered suggestions for how religious communities could help. These included, from the gay-identified participants, accurate interpretation of scripture, unconditional love and acceptance, and concerted efforts to reach out to homosexuals. Among the dis-identified participants, mentoring, support groups, education, and accountability were all suggested.

Not surprisingly, the gay-identified group saw their sociocultural identity as "gay" as part of God's plan – a plan characterized by diversity. The dis-identified individuals tended to see God as the creator of heterosexual relationships, and that these relationships reflected something of the image of God. Both groups scored high on religious commitment and on intrinsic religiosity, with the gay-dis-identified participants reflecting greater intrinsic religiosity.

Practical Application

Secrecy & Isolation

As we turn our attention to practical application, it should be noted that secrecy and isolation is a common theme, and that this can be especially challenging for the Christian who does not see the gay community as an ally. One female interviewee stated:

> At the youth group retreat, I shared that I struggled with these feelings (in the past tense). The counselors didn't know what to do. No one asked anything, no one wanted to address the issues. I felt isolated an alone. No one in the youth group would talk to me after that.

Similarly, another female interviewee shared her concern that she did not know what to make of her sexual identity in part because of the negative messages she heard in her faith community:

> I think part of the reason I didn't label my homosexual feelings 'cause I grew up in the church and they said that homosexuals were the worst people on earth. When I did recognize my homosexual feelings, I went to a church that was very negative, 'People are going straight to hell.' I told a member of leadership who told me to never tell anyone. It really helped to solidify my identity. These people didn't care about me. They said gays hated God.

The important practical consideration is that Christians who experience same-sex attraction will often feel marginalized, especially within their faith community. If the person does not see the gay community as a resource (for religious reasons), nor feels safe in the

Christian community (because of same-sex attraction), they may be especially isolated. This results in secrecy and stigma that may make it difficult to open up in therapy.

Harsh Delivery

Interviewees also discussed how information was delivered to them and ways in which this complicated matters further. For example, the following is from a female interviewee:

My pastor delivered a strong message against homosexuality. I brought my lesbian friend who left the service and tried to commit suicide. I went looking for her and talked her into coming back to the church. We talked and prayed. I stopped going to that church. I was split on the message. I knew that what he said was biblically correct but he didn't deliver it well.

Another female stated the following:

[My religious community] complicated things. I stopped acting out because [my religious community] contributed to self-hatred in their way of dealing with homosexuality… It was ironic. The struggle has brought me closer to the Lord. This struggle has brought me to the end of myself. But as for organized church … blech!

The practical take-home point is that the isolation and stigma we discussed above can be further complicated by messages that may be theologically correct but fall short of a full and sympathetic pastoral response. This may lead not only to negative feelings toward oneself, but also toward other believers, the church, and God. These feelings will most likely need to be processed in the context of a sustained supportive relationship.

Explanatory Frameworks

An additional theme had to do with limited options among those who faced a forced choice between identifying as gay or rejecting themselves. An interviewee shared: "The church's influence was to be quick to put labels on people. I took them for myself. Homosexual or not. There were no options at times, and I felt very stuck in that." This suggests the potential benefits of staying descriptive when working with clients. It can be very helpful to individuals to separate out same-sex attractions, sexual orientation, and gay identity. A gay explanatory framework tends to collapse these three into one, so that experiences of same-sex attraction signals that a person "really is" gay, if only they would come to terms with that reality. By staying descriptive – by referring to "experiences of same-sex attraction" rather than a homosexual orientation or gay identity – the clinician gives clients more room to maneuver in terms of sexual identity by resisting the urge to limit the person to a sociocultural label that might lead that person to foreclose prematurely on their perceived sexual identity options.

There is a need today for alternative explanatory frameworks – alternatives to the current privileged status given the gay explanatory framework. It is important to remember that there is data from the research that is being published today (often from convenience samples, including the studies discussed in this paper), and there are explanatory frameworks for interpreting the

data. Psychologists risk having some of the most influential data misinterpreted through existing gay explanatory frameworks.

Conviction

Those who dis-identified with a gay explanatory framework also mentioned how they felt convicted by the Holy Spirit. The following is from a male interviewee:

> At the church I went to, I told them about my struggle. They never condemned me for it. They told me about Jesus. They just loved me and discipled me. The Holy Spirit convicted me of my sin. Eventually, I went to counseling… Once I found out there were people like me, my healing skyrocketed. I wanted to meet others who were also coming out of homosexuality.

Similarly, a female interviewee stated:

> I couldn't reconcile the discrepancy between the gay me and the straight me. I read literature that tried to reconcile this lifestyle and the Bible, but this didn't mesh for me. I couldn't get around the Truth.

A male interviewee had a similar experience with respect to conviction:

> The Holy Spirit started working on my life and initiated in my life. My friends who were Christian loved me. I came to the Lord in May 1992 because it made sense. I didn't come to Christ to escape homosexuality. The Lord reminded me of a verse in Leviticus one day… That day, God interrupted my prayer. He revealed to me his love. His word showed me that He is loving enough to tell me something isn't good enough. He told me that homosexuality wasn't good enough… His word was the key that turned my identity around. I knew I couldn't be the same after that prayer time.

Another practical recommendation is to stand alongside those who are distressed by their experience of same-sex attraction and to do so with an appreciation for how the Holy Spirit is also at work in their lives. The Christian does not always function as the voice of conviction, but we should not be surprised to see over time ways in which the Holy Spirit brings a person to a greater sense of who they are in Christ in the midst of their experiences.

Meaning & Hope

A related concern involves linking situational meaning to global meaning, following the model for coping and meaning-making developed by Park and Folkman (1997). In this model it is important to help people cope with stressors (e.g., same-sex attraction) by looking at the meaning of that experience in light of broader, global meanings. What does a Christian explanatory framework have to say about experiences of same-sex attraction? How might a Christian view of stewardship of one's body and one's attractions and one's struggles (in the context of sanctification) inform this discussion? Are there any pre-existing claims on human

sexuality, and, if so, what does this say about how Christians respond to the attractions they have?

Christians can provide one another realistic, biblical hope. We can clearly state what we know and do not know about same-sex attraction and sexual identity. We can then offer a pastoral presence and responses in the context of God's redemptive plan for an individual. In this, we think it can be helpful to caste a vision for what it means to be a steward of what God has given us. In the end, it is the client's decision regarding how they live, as well as how they identify to themselves (privately) and to others (publicly). Practically speaking, we want to bring them to a place where they can make a truly informed decision in a context that is free from the many constraints – including the prescriptive dimensions found in the existing gay explanatory framework – often placed on individuals who experience same-sex attraction.

References

Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4*, 219-235.

Fox, R. C. (1995). Bisexual identities. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 48-86). New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Laumann, E., Gagnon, J., Michael, R., & Michaels, S. (1994). *The social organization of sexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McDonald, G. J. (1982). Individual differences in the coming out process for gay men: Implications for theoretical models. *Journal of Homosexuality,* 8 (1), 47-60.

Park, C. L., & Folkman, S. (1997). Meaning in the context of stress and coping. *Review of General Psychology, 1* (2), 115-144.

Remafedi, G., Resnick, M., Blum, R. & Harris, L. (1992). Demography of sexual Orientation in Adolescents. *Pediatrics,* 89 (4), 714-721.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (1999). *…And then I became gay*. New York: Routledge.

Savin-Williams, R. C. & Cohen, K. M. (2004). Homoerotic development during childhood and adolescence. In M. Diamond & A. Yates (Eds.), *Sex and gender: Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America* (pp. 529-550). Philadelphia: Saunders.

Troiden, R. R. (1979). Becoming homosexual: A model of gay identity acquisition. *Psychiatry, 42* (4), 362-373.

Worthington, R. L. Savoy, H. B., Dillon, F. R. & Vernaglia, E. R. (2002). Heterosexual identity development: A multidimensional model of individual and social identity. *The Counseling Psychologist,* 10 (4), 496-531.

Yarhouse, M. A. (2001). Sexual identity development: The influence of valuative frameworks on identity synthesis. *Psychotherapy, 38* (3), 331-341.

Yarhouse, M. A., Tan, E. S. N. & Pawlowski, L. M. (in press). Sexual identity development and synthesis among LGB-identified and LGB dis-identified persons. *Journal of Psychology and Theology.*

Yarhouse & Tan (2004). *Sexual identity synthesis: Attributions, meaning-making and the search for congruence*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Endnotes

[1] This may mean that many teens who experience same-sex attraction or some level of uncertainty about their sexual orientation will not identify themselves as homosexual as adults (this, despite the possibility of still having some degree of same-sex attraction). Of course, issues of design prevent us from making too much of these findings, but they are certainly interesting for speculation.