

Calling Oneself “Straight” Can Be Stressful: Insights from a Large Multinational Study of Sexual Orientation

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SUMMARY

In a follow-up to a study with 17,785 subjects published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012), the scores of 354,373 people in 107 countries (mean age 22.4, 49.9% male, 48.2% female) who took a test of sexual orientation (SO) over the Internet were analyzed. The test measured self-reports of sexual attraction, fantasy, and behavior. Supporting Kinsey’s views, scores fell fairly smoothly along a continuum from straight to gay, and self-labels of “straight,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “other,” and “unsure” corresponded to broad, skewed distributions of scores. Notably, self-labeled gays and bisexuals reported little distress when their sexual inclinations deviated from their SO labels; for self-labeled straights, however, the greater the deviation, the more distress people reported regarding their SO, presumably because of social pressures to be straight (heteronormativity). The distress was especially great for self-labeled straight males. The different patterns of distress are predictable from cognitive dissonance theory. The new study, which we believe is the largest sexual orientation study ever conducted, also found new evidence to support the validity of a construct called “sexual orientation range” (SOR), a numeric estimate of flexibility or “choice” in the expression of SO. SOR varied systematically for different demographic groups, with females having a larger average SOR than males. In general, the new data suggest that (a) SO is better described by two continuous numerical values than by conventional labels, (b) relatively few people are exclusively straight or gay throughout their lives (see Figure 1 below), and (c) variability in SO is far greater than people generally believe it to be. The results also support the fluid-continuum model of SO proposed by Epstein et al. (2012), according to which genetic and environmental factors determine both the size of the SOR and the point at which an individual’s SO is centered on the SO continuum (mean sexual orientation, or MSO). Demographic and country differences are also reported. The results also support Freud’s assertion that bisexuality is natural for humans – that strong cultural pressures shift the vast majority of people into living their lives, unnaturally, as heterosexuals, causing distress for many. The English version of the test employed in the study can be accessed at <http://MySexualOrientation.com>.

Figure 1. How Mean Sexual Orientation Scores Were Distributed Across the Sexual Orientation Continuum. A score of 0 indicates exclusive opposite-sex attraction throughout one's life, and a score of 13 indicates exclusive same-sex attraction throughout one's life.

