

The changeability of adolescent same-sex attraction

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There is substantial literature that the sexual orientation of adolescents is notoriously unstable, and this has been known since at the least the time of Kinsey. It is one of the basic facts that most people in this field know.

Kinsey (Pomeroy, 1972) found about 2% of his sample although homosexual at one time had made a "satisfactory heterosexual adjustment". The degree of change in this varied. This should be compared with modern estimates that 2-3% of the population is gay or bisexual, which is the standard estimate, based mainly on about 30 surveys from the '90s. This means a substantial fraction experience changes of various sorts. Kinsey found many of these changes were even as adults.

It was the standard psychological opinion even in the middle of the 20th century that adolescent sexuality was fluid, as shown by the following forthright comment from (Barnhouse, 1977)

"It is impossible for me to state strongly enough that to present this model to young people, or to allow them - as often happens in the contemporary climate of open discussion - to imagine that their transitory adolescent experiments are truly indicative of a settled homosexual disposition, is not only evidence of psychiatric ignorance, but is specifically wicked as well." (p153-154)

The work of (Bell & Weinberg, 1978) showed very similarly to Kinsey that substantial numbers of people made changes in orientation and approximately half of those initially thinking themselves homosexual declared themselves heterosexual as adult. There was also similar movement in the opposite direction, but only about 2% of those initially thinking themselves heterosexual changed to homosexual.

This essentially has become a rule of thumb in the field at least when considering adults. As given by Sandfort (Sandfort, 1997) and (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1999,2010) half of those initially thinking themselves homosexual become heterosexual when adult.

However work specifically on adolescent's gives higher changeability.

The quoted work of Remafedi looked at 12 year-olds who would be expected to be even more unstable than adolescents. An estimate that 85% changed orientation, or perhaps more accurately attractions, is inherently reasonable.

The most detailed study to date is a very large longitudinal study by (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2007) who found changes in attraction so great even between ages 16 and 17 that they queried whether the concept of sexual orientation had any meaning for those with

same-sex attractions. In considerable contrast those with opposite sex attractions overwhelmingly retained them from year to year. From ages 17-21 those with some initial same sex attraction (this includes those with concurrent opposite-sex attraction) 75% changed to opposite sex attraction only. This is within error the same as the 85% figure which is the current object of debate.

The authors of the cited 85% calculation do not seem to have known of the existence of the 2007 study.

It can of course be queried whether adolescent attraction has any meaning at all, but the adolescents in these surveys certainly experienced them as real for them. But for the question “are they stable?” The conclusion from the above survey is that the answer is overwhelmingly yes for opposite sex attraction and overwhelmingly no for same sex attraction.

It is obviously a matter deserving serious consideration whether it makes sense to give permanent legal status to something so changeable.

A survey of these and further related references is found in chapter 12 of *My Genes Made Me Do It*, which has been freely downloadable on the web (www.mygenes.co.nz) for many years.

Reference List

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4. Sandfort, T. G. M. (1997). Sampling male homosexuality. J. Bancroft ((ed.)), Researching Sexual Behavior: Methodological Issues (pp. 261-275). Bloomington, Indiana. Indiana University Press.
5. Savin-Williams, R. C., & Ream, G. L. (2007). Prevalence and Stability of Sexual Orientation Components During Adolescence and Young Adulthood. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 36, 385-394.
6. Whitehead, N. E., & Whitehead, B. K. (1999). My Genes Made Me Do It! Lafayette, Louisiana: Huntington House. 2nd edition (2010), available at www.mygenes.co.nz.