

Bisexuality and Mental Health: Research Gaps and Opportunities

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May 20, 2010



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1. Some things we know about bisexuality
 - a) Hidden nature of bisexuality
 - b) Cultural context of bi-negativity
 - c) Mental health of bisexual people (risk and protective factors)
 - d) Mental health services for bisexual people
2. Research gaps and opportunities
 - a) How we conduct LGBT research
 - b) Research questions particularly salient for bisexual individuals and communities

Bisexuals: The Hidden Population

- Discrepancies among attraction, identity, and behavior
- Monosexual assumption
- Tendency to assume or adopt identity based on sex of partner
- Bisexual research participants are not identified within sample, and separate analyses are not conducted (...and bisexual)
- Providers do not necessarily realize their clients are bisexual

Cultural Context of Bi-negativity

- Heterosexual college students
 - viewed bisexuals in mixed sex relationships as less monogamous, more likely to cheat, and more likely to give their partner an STD than heterosexuals; viewed bisexuals in same-sex relationships as more likely to give their partner an STD and less likely to satisfy their partner sexually than a lesbian or gay man (Spaulding & Peplau, 1997)
 - felt more disapproval and disgust toward bisexual men compared to lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual women; and they thought it unlikely that they would have a sexual relationship with a bisexual partner (Eliason, 1997, 2001)
- 1283 heterosexual phone survey participants rated feelings toward a variety of groups (Herek, 2002)
 - Bisexuals were rated lower than all other groups (including religious denominations, ethnic groups, pro-choice and pro-life individuals, and lesbians and gay men) except injection drug users
- 346 lesbian women (primarily White) (Rust, 1993)
 - believed it was more likely for bisexuality than for lesbianism to be a transitional sexual orientation
 - believed bisexual women were more likely than lesbian women to deny their true sexuality

Mental Health of Bisexual People

- Unique mental health stressors for bisexual people
 - Bisexuality dismissed or degraded
 - Need to disclose identity repeatedly
 - Lack of acceptance in mixed-orientation relationships
 - (Ross, et al., 2010)

Mental Health of Bisexual People

- Self-identified bisexual individuals
 - Highest anxiety, depression, negative affect, suicidality, current adverse life events, childhood adversity, negative support from friends, frequency of financial problems; and less positive support from family compared to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual (Jorm, et al., 2002)
 - Highest prevalence of suicide attempts among MSM (Paul, et al., 2002)
 - Bisexual men were higher than gay men on presence and severity of low mood, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, compulsive behaviors, and obsessions. No significant differences between bisexual and lesbian women. (Warner et al., 2004)
- People who engage in sex with both women and men
 - Highest suicide attempts, serious harassment, engagement in violence, alcohol and other drug use, unhealthy weight control practices compared to non-bisexual high school students (Robin, et al., 2002)
 - Adolescent females and males were the highest risk category for cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, illegal drug use, selling sex for drugs or money, and delinquency. In addition, adolescent females were at highest risk for suicidality, depression, and victimization.

Protective Factors for Bisexual People

- Prevalence of typical protective factors for bisexual adolescents (Saewyc, et al., 2009)
 - Lower levels of connection to family and school than non-bisexual peers
 - Disparities in protective factors greater for girls than for boys
- Protective factors identified by bisexual individuals (Ross, et al., 2010)
 - Support from family, friends, colleagues, LGBT community, bisexual community
 - Self-acceptance and self-care
 - Empowerment and education, advocacy and activism
- Benefits of community for bisexual women (Heath & Mulligan, 2008)
 - Reduce isolation, especially during early coming out
 - Spaces in which they don't need to explain or justify bisexuality
 - Challenging for bisexual women to find supportive community

Mental Health Services for Bisexual People

- 62 bisexual individuals in PAR study
 - reported feeling misunderstood by their providers in terms of issues related to bisexuality
 - participant reactions included feeling like therapy wasn't helpful and premature termination
 - (Dobinson, et al., 2005)
- 217 bisexual individuals completed questionnaire
 - 2/3 experienced moderate stress related to sexual orientation, but only 20% sought services primarily for issues related to bisexuality
 - Problematic experiences included therapist invalidating or pathologizing sexual orientation
 - (Page, 2004)

Therapist Attitudes Regarding Bisexuality

- Therapist attitudes (Mohr, Weiner, Chopp, & Wong, 2009)
 - Therapists are likely to view clinical issues related to bisexual stereotypes (such as sexual identity problems and confusion) as relevant to client problems
 - Therapists' beliefs about their ability to avoid bias do not accurately reflect their risk for developing biased perceptions of their clients
- 242 substance abuse treatment counselors in Iowa were surveyed regarding their attitudes toward LGBT clients (Eliason, 2000)
 - the most negative attitudes were held toward bisexual and transgender individuals

Research Opportunities

- Find the "B" in LGBT research
- Broaden the focus of research on bisexuality beyond HIV risk and drug use among MSM
- Potentially fruitful and significant topics
 - Bisexual youth
 - Mental health services
 - Interventions beyond traditional mental health services

Find the “B” in LGBT Research

- Separate description and analyses for bisexual participants
- Include items on same-sex attraction and behavior rather than relying only on identity
- Participant recruitment beyond traditional gay spaces in order to reach bisexual individuals who are not part of LGBT communities or are in mixed-sex relationships
- Precision of language (e.g., “same-sex” v. “LGBT” parents or couples)

Bisexual Youth

- Why are the risk factors so high for bisexual youth?
- What interventions are effective in reducing risk and promoting protective factors for bisexual youth?
- What does bisexuality mean for young men and women?
- How is increasing acceptance and visibility of bisexuality among youth affecting mental health risks?

Mental Health Services

- Are providers aware that they are working with bisexual clients?
- Are lesbian- and gay-affirming therapists also bi-affirming?
- What are effective ways of training providers to to be more aware of, accepting of, and effective in working with bisexual clients?

Expand Interventions

- How can we help develop community connection for bisexual individuals?
- How can bisexual individuals in mixed-sex relationships best receive support?
- How can we change attitudes to create more bi-affirming environmental contexts (family, school, community)?