Patterns of Sexual Identity Development Over Time Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youths: Implications for Mental Health

Margaret Rosario, Ph.D.   Eric W. Schrimshaw, M.A.

The City University of New York

Joyce Hunter, D.S.W.

New York State Psychiatric Institute

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association, Washington DC, November 2007

Acknowledgements

- Collaborators:
  - Eric W. Schrimshaw
  - Joyce Hunter
  - Heino F. L. Meyer-Bahlburg
  - Marya Gwadz
  - Raymond Smith
- National Institute of Mental Health
  - Center Grant P50-MH43520 (M. Rosario, study PI; A. Ehrhardt, center PI)

- Recruitment Sites:
  - Hetrick-Martin Institute
  - Lesbian and Gay Services Center
  - The Neutral Zone
  - LGB Student Organizations of two public colleges in New York City
- Participants:
  - The repeated cooperation and dedication of our LGB youths who participated in the study

Sexual Identity Development

- The development of a lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) identity – a.k.a., the "coming-out process" – has long been of interest in the literature.

- We conceptualize sexual identity development as having two related and overlapping meta-constructs:
  - Identity Formation
  - Identity Integration

- Identity formation involves the initiation of the process of self-discovery and exploration (Cass, 1979; Chapman & Brannock, 1987; Troiden, 1989).

- Identity integration entails a process of acceptance and commitment to one's sexual identity (Morris, 1997; Rosario et al., 2001).

Variability in Identity Development

- Several recent studies have documented different patterns or pathways through the coming-out process (e.g., Dubé, 2000; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

- Floyd and Stein (2002) found that LGB youths' sexual developmental milestones followed 5 patterns.

- However, all the studies are limited by their use of retrospective data, which are prone to distortions.

- Studies have also tended to focus on patterns in identity <u>formation</u>, disregarding identity integration.

- Longitudinal studies of the coming-out process have not examined potential patterns or variability.

Mental Health Implications

- Although documenting the patterns of development is important, equally critical are the <u>implications</u> of the different patterns for the mental health of LGB youths.

- Given that some youths have difficulty accepting and integrating their sexual identity, it is reasonable to hypothesize that different patterns of identity development may result in differences in mental health.

- Of particular concern are youths who initiate development early and those whose integration either is delayed or remains consistently low.

- Indeed, studies have found aspects of identity integration to be linked to indicators of mental health (D'Augelli, 2002; Morris et al., 2001; Rosario et al., 2001).

- However, studies to date have been cross-sectional.

The Current Report

- The current study is the first to longitudinally examine the association between sexual identity development and mental health.

- Specifically, this report examines whether different patterns of sexual identity formation and integration are associated with concurrent and subsequent mental health indicators.

- Further, it examines whether identity development accounts for mental health beyond that accounted for by other important correlates of LGB mental health (e.g., supportive friends and family, gay-related stress)

Participants and Procedure

- 156 LGB youths recruited from gay-focused community organizations and LGB student groups in New York City

- Mean age of 18.3 years ($SD = 1.7$)

- 51% male

- 66% Gay/lesbian, 31% Bisexual, 3% Other

- 3 structured interviews, six months apart

- Over 90% were re-interviewed at each of the two subsequent times
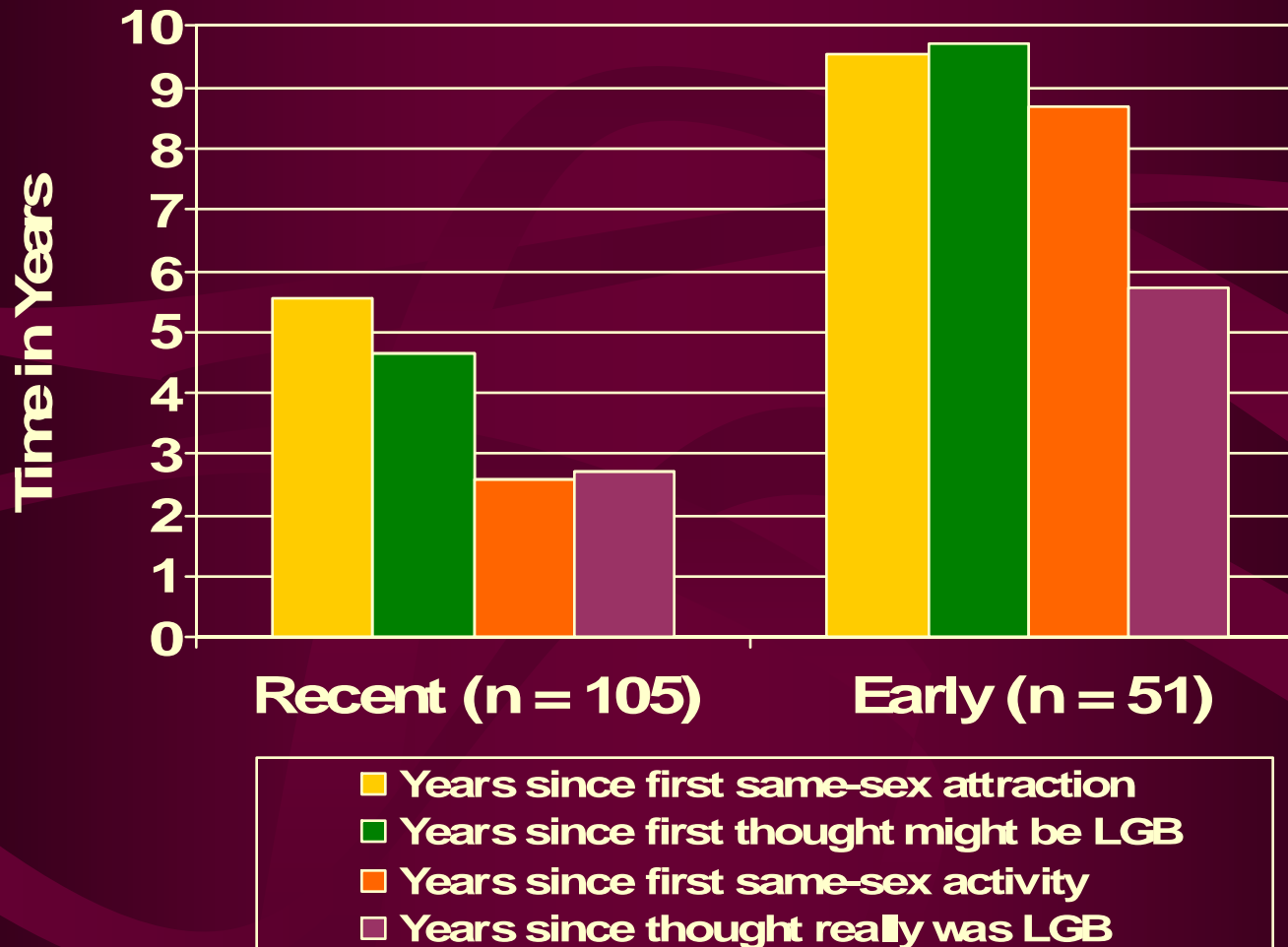
Measures

- **Identity Formation (assessed only at Time 1):**
    - Age first attracted to/fantasized about the same sex
    - Age first though "might be" LGB
    - Age first thought "really were" LGB
    - Age first same-sex sexual activity
- **Identity Integration (assessed Times 1-3):**
    - Involvement in gay-related social activities
    - Positive attitudes toward homosexuality
    - Comfort with others knowing about one's sexuality
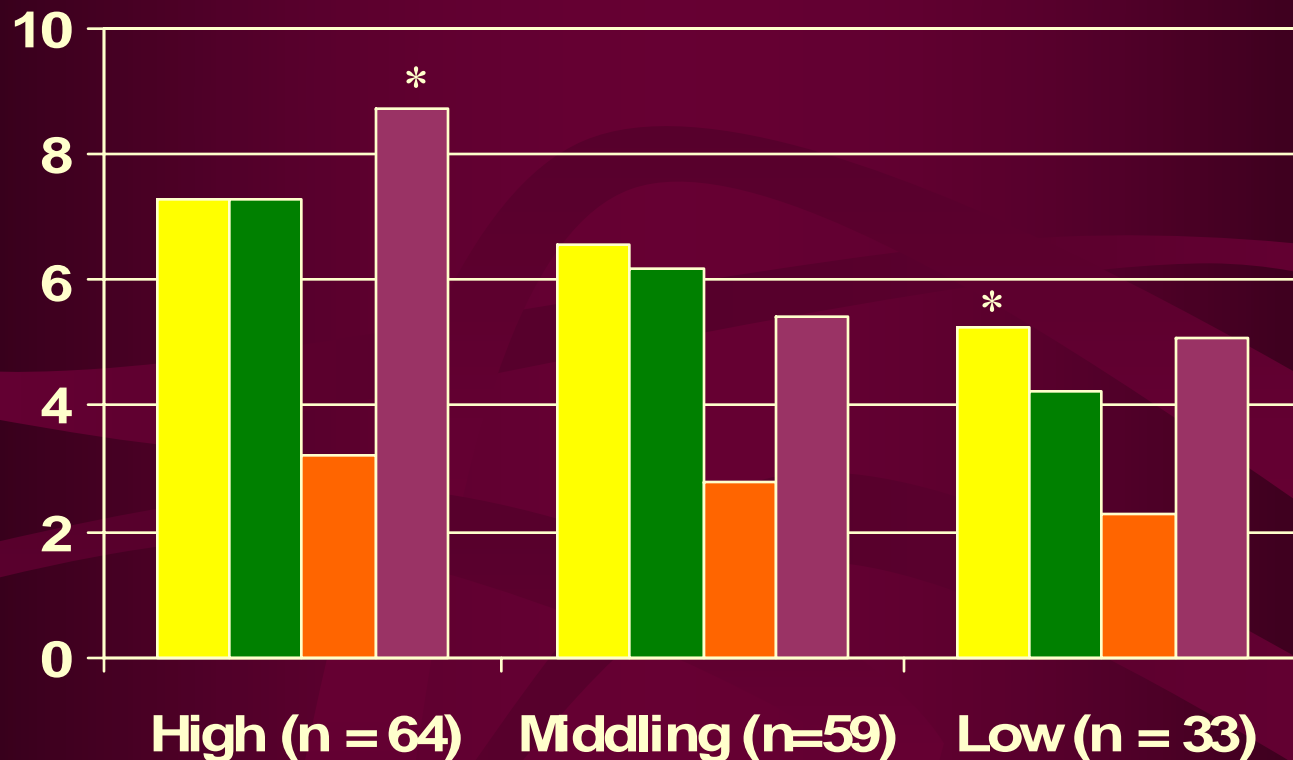   - Disclosure to others

Cluster Analysis

- Cluster analysis was used to identify different patterns of identity formation and identity integration.

- Cluster analysis is an inductive statistical method that identifies naturally occurring groups on the specified variables of interest.

- We conducted 2 cluster analyses:
  - One on the 4 indicators of identity formation.
  - The other on the 4 indicators of identity integration.

Patterns of Identity Formation

Patterns of Identity Integration

Correlates of Identity Formation

- Patterns of identity formation were not associated with mental health at Time 1 or Time 2.

Time 1:	Recent Development (n = 105)	Early Development (n = 51)	F
Depressive Symptoms	1.04	1.15	ns
Anxious Symptoms	1.17	1.32	ns
Conduct Problems	1.92	1.82	ns
Self-Esteem	3.36	3.28	ns

Correlates of Identity Integration

- Patterns of identity integration at Time 1 were related to mental health at Time 1 and Time 2.

Time 2 Health	High (n = 64)	Middling (n = 59)	Low (n = 33)	F
Depressive Symptoms	0.49_a	1.00_b	0.79	$6.75**$
Anxious Symptoms	0.53_a	0.85_b	0.98_b	$4.62**$
Conduct Problems	1.11_a	1.34	1.77_b	$2.55†$
Self-Esteem	3.64_a	3.37_b	3.38_b	$6.52**$

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Consistency and Change Over Time in Individual Identity Integration

- Consistently High Integration: 28% (n = 39)
- Increased from Mid to High: 12% (n = 17)
- Decreased from High to Mid: 11% (n = 16)
- Consistently Middling: 20% (n = 28)
- Consistently Low: 13% (n = 18)

- Increased from Low to Mid: 8% (n = 11)
- Decreased from Mid to Low: 6% (n = 8)
- Increased from Low to High: 1% (n = 2)
- Decreased from High to Low: 1% (n = 2)

Predicting Consistency and Change in Identity Integration

Time 2:	Consistent High	Increased from Low/Mid to High	Decreased from High to Middling	Consistent Middling	Consistent Low
Depressive Symptoms	0.48_a	0.94_b	0.46_a	0.93_b	1.04_b
Anxious Symptoms	0.46_a	0.71_{ab}	0.68_{ab}	0.88_b	1.33_c
Conduct Problems	0.85_a	1.67_b	1.63_b	0.89_a	2.06_c
Self-Esteem	3.63_a	3.62_a	3.66_a	3.31_b	3.23_b

Note. Means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Multivariate Analyses

- Hierarchical linear regression was used to examine if identity change groups were associated with each mental health indicator, after

- Controlling for sex, sexual identity, and social desirability

- And for social context factors, specifically family support, friend support, negative social relationships, and gay-related stress.

Multivariate Results

- Consistent with the bivariate findings, changes in identity integration were significantly related to
  - fewer depressive symptoms ($\Delta R^2 = .06*$)
  - fewer anxious symptoms ($\Delta R^2 = .11**$),
  - fewer conduct problems ($\Delta R^2 = .11**$), and
  - higher self-esteem ($\Delta R^2 = .09**$).

- Specifically, youths with consistently high integration reported better mental health than youths who were consistently low in integration, even after accounting for other factors.

Discussion

- Although limited by the small urban convenience sample, the current study
  - Is the first prospective study of the coming-out process
  - Builds on earlier work identifying the diverse patterns of identity development and
  - Provides a number of new insights into the sexual identity development of LGB youths.

Discussion

- The current report found that LGB youths do not follow a single pattern in the coming-out process.

- Rather, we found 2 patterns of identity formation and 3 patterns of identity integration.

- These findings suggest that the coming-out process is variable and non-linear.

- Some LGB youths experience delays in their identity formation and integration.

Discussion

- Although identity formation was unrelated to subsequent mental health, both level of identity integration and individual change in integration were associated with multiple indicators of mental health one year later.

- This suggests that delays or stagnation in identity integration may result in mental health difficulties.

- It also suggests that not all LGB youths are at risk for mental health difficulties. Rather, it is those with low levels of integration who may be at particular risk.

- Further, these differences were found even after controlling for supportive relationships and gay-related stress.

Clinical Implications

- The findings have implications for clinical or supportive services for LGB youths.

- Because most LGB youths were found to have good mental health, these findings suggest that interventions and services might target youths with low levels of identity integration.

- The findings that identity integration was related to mental health, even after controlling for supportive relationships, suggest that clinical or supportive services that only promote a supportive environment may not be sufficient to promote mental health.

- The findings suggest the need to address identity integration in existing clinical and supportive services.

Thank You

Margaret Rosario, Ph.D.

Participants and Procedure

- 156 lesbian, gay, or bisexual youths
- Recruited from gay-focused community organizations and LGB student groups in New York City
- Ages 14 – 21 (M = 18.3, SD = 1.7)
- 51% Male, 49% Female
- 37% Latino, 35% Black, 22% White, 7% Other
- 34% had parents on public assistance
- 66% Gay/lesbian, 31% Bisexual, 3% Other
- 3 Structured Interviews, Six months apart
- 92% were re-interviewed at 6-month assessment
- 90% were re-interviewed at 12-month assessment

Cluster Analysis

- Cluster analysis was used to identify different patterns of identity formation and identity integration.
- Cluster analysis is an inductive statistical method that identifies the naturally occurring groups of participants on specified variables.
- We conducted 2 hierarchical cluster analyses:
  - One examined the natural groupings of youths on 4 identity-formation milestones.
  - The other examined the natural groupings of youths on 4 indicators of identity integration.
- The initial cluster groupings were then re-examined using K-means cluster analysis.