

# Then and Now: Recruitment, Definition, Diversity, and Positive Attributes of Same-Sex Populations

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It is not my intent to critique individual contributions in this special issue but to assess scholarly progress since the last special issue devoted to sexual orientation in *Developmental Psychology* (Patterson, 1995). Because not all steps forward can be catalogued in this limited forum, I focus on several long-standing challenges faced by developmental scientists as they investigate same-sex sexuality: recruitment and definition of same-sex populations, developmental diversity of same-sex oriented individuals, and “clinical traps” created by early research on same-sex populations.

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Since 1995, when the first special issue of *Developmental Psychology* dedicated to sexual orientation was published, the American public has been transformed in its understandings, attitudes, and beliefs about same-sex sexuality. Has developmental psychology kept pace with the American public? First, the public progress: During the 13-year interval between then and now, endorsement of “homosexual relations among consenting adults” has risen 15 points to 59% and the right of same-sex couples to marry has risen 20 points to 46% (Saad, 2007). In 1995, 6% of the Fortune 500 companies offered same-sex domestic partner benefits to their employees and fewer than 50% had sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies; today, these proportions are 53% and 92%, respectively (Graham, 2005; Gunther, 2006; Weinstein, 2007). Presently, a clear majority of the American public believes that homosexuality “should be sanctioned as an acceptable alternative lifestyle” (Saad, 2007) and openly out gays should be allowed to serve in the military, including 73% of combat troops in Iraq and Afghanistan (Advocate Report, 2005; Gandossy, 2007; PlanetOut News, 2006). Indeed, gay people have become so ubiquitous that 4 in 10 Americans report having a close friend or a family member who is gay (Neidorf & Morin, 2007).

In terms of developmental issues, 30 years ago only about 1 in 10 Americans believed that an individual is born gay. By 1995, the majority of Americans still believed that babies become gay gradually over time, usually because of bad parenting (Gandossy, 2007). Today, more Americans (42%) believe that homosexuality is something a person is born with than believe it is the consequence of upbringing or the environment (35%; Saad, 2007). As a result, the majority of the American public (56%) believes that sexual orientation cannot be changed; 10 years ago that proportion was 36% (Gandossy, 2007). The presence of gay people in the daily lives of children and adolescents also appears to be less frightening in 2008 than in 1995—and, if young people maintain their more liberal views toward the normalization of sexual diver-

sity into adulthood, this acceptability will only increase (Savin-Williams, 2005). For example, although support for adoption by same-sex couples has increased among adults from a distinct minority (about one in four) to a majority, among high school seniors the level of support is now two in three (Broverman, 2006; Buchanan, 2006; Gandossy, 2007). Fully three of four 2006 high school seniors were in favor of legalized same-sex marriage or civil unions (Broverman, 2006).

These poll data are, of course, only one means to capture the cultural transformation that has taken place. Many other examples abound, and I simply point out one of these: In 1995 fewer than 100 gay/straight alliances existed in the nation’s secondary schools. Today, despite strong vocal opposition from some religious and political groups, the number is over 3,000 (glsen.org, 2007). As one cultural observer noted, “During the course of the ‘90s homosexuality went from being largely invisible to shockingly visible to fairly pedestrian” (Doig, 2007, p. 49).

To answer the question of whether developmental scientists have made similar progress during the past 13 years, I revisit several issues raised in an earlier critique (Savin-Williams, 2001): the recruitment and definition of same-sex populations, the diversity of same-sex populations, and the positive attributes of same-sex oriented populations.

## Recruitment and Definitions of Same-Sex Populations

Historically, the most persistent methodological problems in developmental research on same-sex sexuality were how to recruit and define same-sex populations. Regarding the first, the recent proliferation of same-sex oriented questions in large-scale, “non-gay” oriented surveys is probably one of the most significant advancements for gay research during the past decade. This was likely brought about by the dramatic decrease in sexual prejudice and stigma associated with homosexuality in the culture at large (see polling data above). Several of these large-scale investigations are included in this special issue—a Canadian investigation of youth resilience and lifestyle choices (Busseri, Willoughby, Chalmers, & Bogaert, 2008), a Texas longitudinal study of alcohol and risk behavior (Hatzenbuehler, Corbin, & Fromme, 2008), and

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an Amsterdam study of school outcomes (Bos, Sandfort, de Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008).

One result of these more normative, representative samples (i.e., not same-gendered challenged children, not support group adolescents, not adult prisoners/therapeutic clients) is that a wealth of developmentally relevant questions was now available that address the ways in which same-sex oriented individuals are similar to and unique from other-sex oriented individuals. Ironically, the impact of same-sex sexuality on developmental processes has proven to be less important than previously assumed, especially on the current cohort of same-sex attracted youth. For example, whether data eventually confirm that gay youth are at increased risk for suicidality, it is clear that the proportion of suicidal youth is far less than the 30% to 60% in previous generations who sought social service assistance and far closer to typical heterosexual incidences (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2007).

The second methodological conundrum, defining same-sex sexuality, has been amplified by these large-scale surveys. In most cases, space is allocated for only one question, but little agreement exists on what it should be or the proper response options. Who one has sex with? Who one is attracted to? How one identifies? Should options be categorical (gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual) or dimensional (1–7 scale from exclusively heterosexual to exclusively homosexual)? Sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual identity questions do not always solicit similar populations, and individuals might have aspects of one attribute but not exclusively so (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2006). Individuals might not yet be aware of their sexuality or its meaning, might never or belatedly disclose this information to others, might reject an identity but engage in the behavior, or might feel that they do not conform to images that they have of others in the category or have some but not all of the assumed relevant characteristics. Hidden to self and others, these individuals present an almost insurmountable hurdle to developmental researchers; fortunately, time is on our side. As same-sex sexuality becomes increasingly destigmatized and deemed routine by youth, it is likely that more representative populations will be available for sampling and hence developmental understanding. This will allow for a more nuanced demarcation of what it is, if indeed there is anything, about same-sex sexuality that developmentally matters.

Investigators included in this issue have used many creative and innovative techniques to recruit and define same-sex populations, ones that would have been nearly impossible in 1995. Same-sex oriented individuals have become more willing to participate in research, increasing the possibilities for longitudinal and prospective studies (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Diamond, 2008; Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Bedali, & Zucker, 2008; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008; Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, & Bailey, 2008). Innovative and respected research designs also become possible: home videos (Rieger et al., 2008); multimethod, multi-informant studies (Roisman et al., 2008); self-reports and interviews (Drummond et al., 2008); siblings as a control group (Balsam et al., 2008); a multistudy approach (Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008); and international studies (Bos et al., 2008; Busseri et al., 2008; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008).

One final methodological note: Still missing and most needed are unobtrusive, reliable objective measures that assess sexual orientation (whatever that might be) at an early developmental age and across multiple cultures.

## Diversity of Same-Sex Populations

Researchers frequently give lip service to the position that not all gays are alike. Yet, prototypical research paradigms pit non-heterosexuals against heterosexuals in a dichotomized *us* versus *them* contrast. Whether lumping is for statistical power or for theoretical reasons, the outcome is the same insofar that much is discovered about differences between the assumed two sexual orientations but little is revealed about commonalities between them. Furthermore and equally significant, this two category amalgamation negates the probe posed by Diamond (2003), "Whatever happened to within-group variation?" In real life, within the moment and across developmental time, individuals of all sexual orientations experience a spectrum of sexualities that represent a complexity of sexual desires, behaviors, attractions, and identities. Yet, people who identify as "mostly heterosexual" are frequently dismissed as heterosexuals who are merely making a political statement or simply experimenting (Morgan Thompson & Morgan, 2008), and bisexuals are combined with gays and lesbians, despite the evidence that bisexuals vary from gays on many domains, including experiences of victimization (Herek, in press) and mental health status (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2007). Grouping bisexuals with gays distorts what we know about both groups, leading us to conclude, for example, that gay-identified individuals are less healthy than they actually are and to minimize the many reasons individuals identify as bisexual or engage in sexual behavior with both sexes (Savin-Williams & Joyner, 2007). Thus, in contrast with prevailing biological and social models in which "pure homosexual types" are desired for control purposes (e.g., finding gay genes or discovering the effects of discrimination laws), developmental psychologists are best served by approaches that recognize multiple dimensions of same-sex sexuality.

From a "differential developmental trajectories" perspective (Savin-Williams, 1998), in many ways same-sex attracted individuals share developmental characteristics and experiences with heterosexuals; vary among themselves in significant and developmentally predictable ways based on variables such as sex, age, ethnicity, personality, and social class; and are distinct from heterosexuals because of their biology (e.g., having prenatal hormones that influence brain structure) and their environment (e.g., growing up in a particular stigmatizing societal milieu). Same-sex attracted individuals traverse a diversity of developmental trajectories, many of which are remarkably similar to heterosexuals. Thus, for example, same-sex attracted women may be more similar in their developmental histories to other women than they are to same-sex attracted men (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

It is difficult, however, for readers of this special issue to gain insight into the ways in which variations within same-sex populations matter. Although nearly all investigators consider sex differences, other sources of population variations are either controlled or neglected. Unfortunately, even when multiple components or dimensions of sexuality are assessed, there remains a strong tendency to collapse subjects into two categories (Bos et al., 2008; Drummond et al., 2008; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008). More promising is the work of Busseri and colleagues (2008), who found striking differences among four sexual attraction groups regarding risk behaviors, psychological functioning, academic orientation, and neighborhood qualities. Others consider the unique lives of individuals routinely ignored in developmental research.

Diamond (2008) explores the diversity and complexity of same-sex sexuality and the possibility that change in sexuality is far greater than stability for many women. Morgan Thompson and Morgan (2008) bring attention to the unique women who are “mostly heterosexual” with clear same-sex attractions (see also, for both sexes but to a lesser degree, Busseri et al., 2008).

If the range of same-sex sexuality were to be thoroughly and systematically explored, investigators could address the most vexing of developmental questions: What is it about same-sex sexuality that matters (Diamond, 2003)? Indeed, most researchers assume that it is not same-sex sexuality per se that impacts development but the victimization, discrimination, and stigmatization that it engenders. If so, what is it about sexual prejudice that is developmentally more deleterious to the recipients than other forms of social ostracism to their recipients, such as that meted out to women, ethnic minorities, the poor, the unattractive, the overweight, or the disabled? Alternatively, one might argue (but few do) that because of their possibly altered hormonal and anatomical constitution, same-sex attracted individuals navigate a unique developmental trajectory throughout their life course characterized by developmental instability or fluctuation across a range of personal attributes (sex object choice, cognitive skills, physical features, hobbies, career choices). The sex atypicality of same-sex populations (Rieger et al., 2008) suggests that some same-sex attracted individuals have a different brain structure, physiology, or hormonal status than others of their biological sex. Whether these potential biological differences make same-sex oriented individuals unique and, if so, to what degree are unknown, largely because the biologic data are so preliminary that few direct or indirect pathways have been established. Future investigations should explore the extent to which an altered prenatal environment or genetic markers create distinctive anatomical or neurological structures/functions (e.g., muscle mass, body shape, cerebral asymmetry, handedness, otoacoustic emissions) that affect development in physical, personal, and social realms.

If same-sex oriented individuals are by definition biologically different, then of critical consideration is the interaction of this biology with the environment in which it is expressed. For example, a rather extensive empirical literature documents the significance of fraternal birth order—having multiple older brothers predicts a later-born right-handed male child’s homosexuality (Blanchard, 2004). The explanatory evidence lies not with the developmental impact of growing up in a heavily dominated male context but with possibly having a prenatal environment that has become progressively immunized to “Y-linked antigens by each succeeding male fetus, and the concomitantly increasing effects of anti-male antibodies on the sexual differentiation of the brain in each succeeding male fetus” (p. 179). It would be valuable for developmental researchers to weigh in, not to propose a counter environmental etiology, but to explore the developmental context of having older brothers for the same-sex oriented child/adolescent. Does having older brothers pose a developmental hazard for the same-sex oriented boy as he tries to live up to their masculinity? Or, conceivably, the youngest older brother has “some” same-sex attractions, maybe insufficient to make him gay (maybe bisexual?) but sufficient to make him an ally. As developmental researchers, we would do well to engage in the conversation.

### Positive Attributes of Same-Sex Oriented Populations

An emerging paradigm in psychology emphasizes not what goes wrong but what goes right in development (Myers, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Because preadult sexual activity is generally unobserved or tenored as a risk variable, developmental psychology has largely ceded to medical and clinical scientists the developmental study of sexuality (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004). One consequence has been the irresistible and overpowering attention to the problematic nature of same-sex oriented populations rather than a focus on their capacities to adjust, thrive, and lead exceptionally ordinary lives. It is as if same-sex oriented populations are only interesting to the extent that they differ in the negative. Indeed, reading the clinical literature, one would be amazed that any same-sex oriented child or adolescent survives into adulthood! I am hard pressed to identify any data-based positive attribute that characterizes the lives of same-sex oriented preadults relative to heterosexuals. Can this possibly be true? Although considerable empirical data document gay youth as depressed, suicidal, victimized, homeless, and HIV+, might it be possible, as suggested by Luthar (2001), that experiences with adversity may precipitate not only suicide but also significant personal growth through increasing the depth and complexity in one’s life? Accentuating the assets, resiliency, and complexity of same-sex oriented youth as creative, artistic, versatile, assertive, stylish, witty, sensitive, and athletic does not exist.

One perplexing contradiction partially counters this analysis. Although gay youth are purported to be severely disturbed, once adulthood is reached they somehow become good partners and parents. How can it be that young lesbians, who reportedly have high levels of nearly every risk behavior imaginable, grow up to be such good partners and parents? One pessimistic perspective is that disturbed lesbian youth are eliminated through their pathology, with suicide being the most obvious. Alternatively, as they age, broader and more representative subgroups of same-sex attracted women come out, establish relationships, and identify some aspect of their same-sex sexuality on research surveys. Another explanation is political in nature. Highlighting “bad” gay youth and “good” gay adults garners resources: community support services and school-based gay/straight alliances for youth and legal rights in legal same-sex parenting and marriage court cases for adults.

Investigations included in this special issue represent several significant steps in the “positive” direction. There is an explicit recognition that not all members of same-sex oriented populations have an investigated negative characteristic. Not all gays are sex atypical (Rieger et al., 2008), nor are all sex-atypical individuals gay (Drummond et al., 2008). Relatively few gay college students abuse alcohol (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2008) or are involved in high-risk behavior (Busseri et al., 2008). Same-sex oriented individuals are at least adequate in raising children (Rivers et al., 2008; Wainright & Patterson, 2008), negotiating romantic relationships (Balsam et al., 2008; Roisman et al., 2008), and exploring their sexual identity (Worthington et al., 2008).

### Conclusion

Attention to the healthy lives of same-sex attracted populations as a counterweight to the usual doom-and-gloom fare is long overdue. Indeed, a shift from atypical development, whether pos-

itive or negative, to a broad exploration of the normative development of same-sex oriented individuals is now timely as increasing numbers of youth proclaim their nonheterosexual status. Perhaps same-sex sexuality has negligible impact on development because its diminution effect parallels recent cultural reductions in sexual prejudice (see poll data that began this commentary). If true that developmentally same-sex sexuality matters little, then we should cancel in 13 years the 2021 special sexual orientation issue of *Developmental Psychology*—it will not be needed.

If, however, same-sex sexuality maintains a developmental effect due to a downturn in public attitudes or to provocative genetic and hormonal discoveries regarding the ways in which same-sex oriented individuals differ in both positive and negative ways from other-sex oriented individuals, then I look forward to addressing the research priorities raised in this special issue within the ongoing pages of *Developmental Psychology*.

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