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Examining Concordant and Discordant Sexual and Romantic Attraction in American Adults: Implications for Counselors

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined self-reported sexual and romantic attractions in a sample of 414 American adults. Forty-four (10.6%) participants reported discordant sexual and romantic orientations. The most commonly reported type of discordant attraction was bisexual sexual attraction but romantic attraction to only one sex, followed by romantic attraction to both sexes but sexual attraction to either one or neither sex. There were no significant gender, age, or relationship status differences between individuals with concordant and discordant orientation. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Asexuality; romantic attraction; romantic orientation; sexual attraction; sexual minority; sexual orientation

Most current conceptualizations of sexual and romantic attraction assume that the two go hand-in-hand (Diamond, 2003). For example, it is assumed that someone sexually attracted solely to the opposite sex will also be romantically attracted solely to that sex. Similarly, it is assumed that people who are sexually attracted to both sexes will also be romantically attracted to both sexes. For this reason, studies typically do not ask about or report sexual and romantic attraction separately (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). However, some researchers have argued that sexual attraction is not necessarily a prerequisite for romantic bonds (Diamond, 2003). Similarly, sexual attraction can occur without romantic attraction (Priebe & Svedin, 2013). In a review of the literature on "mostly heterosexual" women, Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) found that many women who identified as such reported same-sex "sexual attraction"—that is, sexual fantasies, desires, and/or sexual encounters—but were much less likely to report same-sex "romantic attraction"—that is, romantic desires, fantasies, and relationships. Thus, many of these women could potentially be classified as bisexual (i.e., attracted to both

sexes sexually) and heteroromantic (i.e., romantically attracted only to the opposite sex). Conversely, some “mostly heterosexual” woman reported romantic but not sexual attraction to other women (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). As Thompson and Morgan (2008) note, people who experience sexual attraction and romantic attraction to different sexes may struggle to identify their orientation; for example, a woman who experiences sexual and romantic attraction to men and sexual but not romantic attraction to other women may feel uncomfortable labeling herself as “bisexual” because she would not want to enter a romantic relationship with another woman (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Indeed, bisexuality researchers have long acknowledged that many individuals identifying as bisexual may experience different levels of sexual and emotional attraction to different sexes (Klein, 1978, 2014).

However, even models of attraction that acknowledge the possibility of distinct sexual and romantic attraction generally assume that one’s sexual orientation also dictates one’s romantic orientation and vice versa (e.g., Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013) or that sexual attraction is equivalent with emotional attraction (e.g., Priebe & Svedin, 2013). In other words, someone who identifies as bisexual is typically assumed to develop some degree of sexual and romantic attractions to individuals of both sexes, even though the term itself refers only to sexual orientation, and someone who identifies as heterosexual is expected to be sexually and romantically attracted solely to individuals of the opposite sex. As Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) note, most questionnaires regarding orientation address only sexual attraction, with only a few addressing romantic feelings and behavior, like “crushes,” “love,” or “infatuation.”

Some individuals are starting to question this blended conceptualization of sexual and romantic attraction, particularly within the asexual community. People identifying as asexual are generally defined as individuals who do not experience sexual attraction to people of any sex (Bogaert, 2004; Brotto, Knudson, Inskip, Rhodes, & Erskine, 2010; Chasin, 2011). Despite their lack of sexual attraction, however, many self-identified people identifying as asexual also identify with a specific romantic orientation, such as homoromantic, heteroromantic, biromantic, or aromantic (see Chasin, 2011; Lund & Johnson, 2014). A 2008 survey of 247 people self-identifying as asexual conducted by the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network ([AVEN]; 2008) found that more than 90% believed that sexual and romantic orientation could be distinct concepts. Furthermore, 82.5% identified with a romantic orientation other than aromantic. The most commonly reported active romantic orientations were heteroromantic (31.4%), biromantic or panromantic (17.5%), questioning/unsure (13.5%), and homoromantic (6.5%). In a large study of 526 participants identifying as asexual, Van Houdenhove, Gijs, T’Sjoen, and Enzlin (2015) found that approximately 80% of participants reported experiencing romantic attraction, with female participants more likely to report experiencing romantic attraction than male participants.

The differentiation of sexual and romantic attraction has been largely ignored in the general population (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013), though some research

has examined sexual orientation as a multidimensional construct. For example, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (American Institute of Bisexuality, 2014; Klein, 1978, 2014) has been used in research on bisexuality to gather information on an individual's attraction and behavior across multiple categories. The grid asks individuals to rate their sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle, and identity on a 7-point scale. This scale ranges from 1 (*Other sex only/Completely heterosexual*) to 7 (*Same sex only/Completely homosexual*) and includes options for past, present, and ideal attraction and identity patterns. The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid defines *emotional preference* for the same, other, or both sexes as follows: "Emotions influence, if not define, the actual physical act of love. Do you love and like only members of the same sex, only members of the other sex, or members of both sexes?" (American Institute of Bisexuality, 2014). Although it acknowledges emotional attraction as a component of orientation, it does not specify romantic versus platonic emotional attraction, and it assumes that emotion attraction is fundamentally intertwined with physical love (i.e., sexual behavior). Similarly, researchers often use only the sexual items of the grid (i.e., sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identification, sexual fantasies) to determine a respondent's orientation (Weinrich, Klein, McCutchan, Grant, & HNRC Group, 2014). Thus, though multidimensional approaches to measuring sexual orientation exist and provide more information than simple self-identification items, they typically do not directly allow participants to differentiate sexual and romantic attraction in their identification.

The issue of discordant sexual and romantic orientations and the characteristics of individuals who experience them is relatively unexplored in the empirical literature. Research has found that there may be gender differences in sexual and romantic attraction; for example, women are consistently more likely than men to report bisexual attraction (Priebe & Svedin, 2013; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Weinrich et al., 2014) and to identify as "mostly heterosexual" (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013). However, Priebe and Svedin (2013) found that older adolescent females were much less likely than older adolescent males to report exclusively heterosexual "sexual or emotional attraction" but were equally as likely as males to report exclusively heterosexual romantic attraction. This suggests that there may be gender differences in the prevalence or nature of discordant sexual and romantic attraction. Similarly, Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013) found that younger cohorts were more likely to identify as "mostly heterosexual"—an orientation sometimes associated with discordant sexual and romantic attractions (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008)—than were older cohorts in longitudinal samples, suggesting that openness and recognition of less straightforward sexual and romantic identities may be more common among younger individuals in the current generation. Finally, there may be differences in partnership status in individuals with discordant sexual and romantic attractions. For example, Van Houdenhove and colleagues (2015) found that only 20% of respondents identifying as asexual were in a relationship at the time of the survey. It may be that individuals who experience discordant sexual and romantic attraction may have more difficulty

finding a romantic partner, especially if they experience romantic attraction to that person without experiencing sexual desire.

Relevance to counselors

Counselors are tasked with developing competencies for working with individuals who are nonheterosexual or who are questioning their sexual orientation (Harper et al., 2013). However, there may be limited resources on or knowledge of smaller or less frequently discussed sexual orientation issues among counselors. For example, Pinto (2014) wrote on the importance of being a knowledgeable and accepting ally to clients who identify as or may be coming to identify as asexual, a small and newly recognized nonheterosexual group. Within her article, Pinto discusses the idea of differing sexual and romantic orientations as they relate to asexuality. Within this, she also touches on the importance of understanding the ways in which having romantic attraction and romantic relationships in the absence of sexual attraction may create unique issues of which counselors need to be aware. Similarly, the small body of existing research that touches on differentiated sexual and romantic attraction in non-heterosexual individuals has underscored that conflicting sexual and romantic feelings may create confusion about one's sexual orientation or sexual identity (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Some of this confusion may be related to the general belief that sexual and romantic attraction must be concordant (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). By understanding how often and in what patterns sexual and romantic orientation differ among adults in the general population, counselors can better understand the likelihood of these issues coming up in their work with clients and what client populations are more likely to experience issues related to differing sexual and romantic orientations.

Purpose of the present study

Despite the growing acceptance of the idea of distinct sexual and romantic orientations within the self-identified asexual community and research on the complexity of orientation within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and mostly heterosexual communities, we are not aware of any published research examining the prevalence or nature of discordant sexual and romantic attraction within the general community. Thus, the present study reports the results of asking individuals in the general population about their sexual and romantic orientations separately. Our research questions are as follows:

1. What is the prevalence and nature of discordant sexual and romantic attractions in an adult online sample?
2. Do individuals with discordant sexual and romantic attractions differ from those with concordant attractions in terms of gender distribution or age?

3. Do individuals with discordant sexual and romantic attractions differ from those with concordant attractions in terms of relationship status?
4. Are there gender differences in self-reported sexual and romantic attractions, regardless of concordance or discordance of these attractions?

Method

Recruitment

Participants were drawn from a sample of 422 American adults recruited for a study on rape myth acceptance that focused on young adults. As such, the study recruitment materials did not discuss issues related to sexual or romantic orientation or attraction and thus were unlikely to draw individuals with a special interest in issues related to sexual orientation. All items included in the present analyses were asked in the demographic section, before any other items or measures were seen or answered. Of the 422 participants, eight participants (1.9%) did not answer the item on sexual attraction and thus were excluded from the present analyses, for a final sample size of 414. Of these 414 participants, one did not provide information on gender, and another two identified gender as “other.” Of these two, one participant who chose the “other” option for gender identified as “transmale”; the other did not specify a gender identity. Because of the small sample sizes for “other” or nonspecified gender, these three participants were excluded from analyses involving gender. Thus, the sample size for the broader study is 414 while the sample size for analyses involving gender is 411.

Participants were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online worker recruitment system in which participants receive nominal pay for completing online surveys and other tasks. Studies have demonstrated that workers recruited from MTurk generally produce valid and reliable data (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Lund, Nadorff, Winer, & Seader, 2016; Mason & Suri, 2012). MTurk samples are demographically similar to other online samples and are more diverse than many college student samples, with a mean age of about 32 years and 55%–45% female-male gender distribution (e.g., Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Lund, Nadorff, Winer, & Seader, 2016; Thomas, Lund, & Bradley, 2015). Participants were compensated \$0.25 (USD) for their participation, a standard compensation rate for MTurk (e.g., Lund, Nadorff, Winer, & Seader, 2016). Data collection took place off-site via a secure university-based Qualtrics server to better ensure security and anonymity of data, and the study was approved and overseen by a university Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Although the main population of interest for the present study was young adults as stated in recruitment materials, the sample covered a broader age range. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 65 years ($M = 27.08$, $SD = 8.18$), with four

participants not providing information of their age. The mean age of our sample was only slightly lower than that reported in other MTurk samples (e.g., Buhrmester et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2015), and so we chose to include all participants in the current analysis, regardless of age.

The sample was fairly equally split between male (53.6%, $n = 222$) and female (45.8%, $n = 189$) participants, with one participant (.2%) not answering the question and two participants (.5%) identifying their gender as “other.” The sample was generally well educated, with 333 participants (80.4%) reporting some college education and 238 (57.5%) reporting current or previous enrollment in a 4-year college or university. Participants who had attended college reported a mean of 3.79 years of college education ($SD = 1.30$, range = 1–5, $n = 330$ reporting data). About one third of participants were single (37.9%, $n = 157$), 35.2% ($n = 148$) were dating or cohabitating, 23.5% ($n = 97$) were engaged or married/partnered, and 3.4% ($n = 14$) were divorced, separated, or widowed.

Measures

Data for the present analyses were taken from demographic items in the study. In addition to demographic questions on sexual and romantic attraction, participants also completed items on their age, gender (male, female, or other, with an option to specify), relationship status (single, dating, living with significant other, engaged, married/partnered, divorced/separated, or widowed/widower), post-high school college attendance (classified as none, 2-year or community college, or 4-year college or university), and years of college attended.

Sexual and romantic attraction

The demographic items also contained a pair of questions, one inquiring about sexual attraction and one inquiring about romantic attraction. These items were created in lieu of a typical demographic item that asks participants to identify their sexual orientation (e.g., heterosexual/straight, homosexual/gay/lesbian, bisexual, asexual). We decided to ask about sexual and romantic attraction separately in our demographics section as an exploratory question, given the emerging body of research on divergent sexual and romantic orientation in the asexual (AVEN, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015) and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (Diamond, 2003; Thompson & Morgan, 2008) communities. Thus, our brief questions were designed as an initial inquiry into the prevalence and nature of discordant sexual and romantic attraction among American adults in general. The two items regarding attraction had the question stems, respectively, of “Are you sexually attracted to the ...” and “Are you romantically attracted to the ...” Both items had the response options of “opposite sex,” “same sex,” “both sexes,” and “neither sex.” Participants could select one response for each item. Because the items were simple demographic items, there was no statistical method available to calculate reliability or validity. However, as described in the results, there were fairly consistent reporting patterns among participants, suggesting that they did understand the items.

We did not define the terms *sexual attraction* and *romantic attraction*, allowing participants to respond according to their own interpretations. This lack of definition is common in demographic items (e.g., terms like “sexual orientation” are rarely defined), and even surveys specifically targeting sexual orientation and attraction often do not provide definitions for terms like “attraction” or “sexual attraction” (Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013).

Analysis

First, we examined if individuals’ responses to the sexual and romantic orientation items were concordant (the same) or discordant (different in any way), using simple participant-level comparisons. We examined the gender distribution of concordant and discordant attraction via chi-square tests and the mean ages of the two groups via independent samples *t* tests. Additionally, we examined the percentage of partnered (i.e., dating, cohabituating, or engaged/married) versus unpartnered (i.e., single, divorced/separated, or widowed) participants by concordant versus discordant orientation status using chi-square tests. Finally, we examined the gender distribution of each type of sexual and romantic attraction via chi-square tests.

Results

Discordant sexual and romantic attraction

Of the 414 participants, 370 (89.4%) reported concordant sexual and romantic attractions whereas 44 (10.6%) reported discordant sexual and romantic attractions. Of the 370 participants reporting concordant sexual and romantic attractions, 293 (79.2%) were attracted only to the opposite sex, 39 (10.5%) were attracted only the same sex, 37 (10.0%), were attracted to both sexes, and one (.3%) was attracted to neither sex. Overall, 29.2% of the sample ($n = 121$) reported something other than heterosexual, heteroromantic attraction. These results are further broken down in Table 1.

Table 1. Sexual and romantic attractions by discordant and concordant attraction profiles.

Response	Romantic Attraction (% , <i>n</i>)	Sexual Attraction (% , <i>n</i>)
Concordant (<i>n</i>=370)		
Same sex	10.5% (39)	10.5% (39)
Opposite sex	79.2% (293)	79.2% (293)
Both sexes	10 (37)	10% (37)
Neither sex	.3% (1)	.3% (1)
Discordant (<i>n</i>=44)		
Same sex	15.9% (7)	4.5% (2)
Opposite sex	59.1% (26)	22.7% (10)
Both sexes	18.2% (8)	68.2% (30)
Neither sex	6.8% (3)	4.5% (2)

Table 2. Attraction combinations among participants reporting discordant attraction profiles ($n = 44$).

Sexual-Romantic Attraction Profile	Percent (n) Endorsing
Asexual-biromantic	2.3% (1)
Asexual-heteroromantic	2.3% (1)
Bisexual-heteroromantic	56.8% (25)
Bisexual-homoromantic	11.4% (5)
Heterosexual-aromantic	6.8% (3)
Heterosexual-biromantic	11.4% (5)
Heterosexual-homoromantic	4.5% (2)
Homosexual-biromantic	4.5% (2)

Discordant attraction

Information on patterns of attraction among participants with discordant attraction can be seen in **Table 2**. Of the 44 participants who reported discordant sexual and romantic orientations, most ($n = 30$; 68.2%) reported sexual attraction to both sexes but romantic attraction to only one sex. Most of these participants ($n = 25$; 83.3%) reported romantic attraction to only the opposite sex; the remaining five (17.6%) reported romantic attraction to the same sex only. An additional eight participants (18.2% of those with discordant attractions) reported romantic attraction to both sexes but sexual attraction to only the opposite ($n = 5$, 62.5%), same ($n = 2$, 25.0%), or neither ($n = 1$, 12.5%) sex. Three participants (6.8%) were sexually attracted to the opposite sex but romantically attracted to neither sex. One participant (2.3%) was romantically attracted to the opposite sex but sexually attracted to neither sex, and two participants (4.5%) were sexually attracted to only the opposite sex but romantically attracted to only the same sex.

Attraction to both sexes

When combining participants with discordant and concordant sexual and romantic orientations, some interesting patterns emerged. First of all, slightly more participants reported either bisexual romantic or sexual attraction ($n = 38$) than reported bisexual sexual attraction and bisexual romantic attraction ($n = 37$). If all participants reporting bisexual sexual attraction ($n = 67$) were classified as “bisexual,” regardless of romantic attraction, they would make up 16.2% of the total sample. If all participants reporting bisexual romantic attraction ($n = 45$) were classified as “bisexual” regardless of sexual orientation, they would make up 10.9% of the total sample. If all participants reporting bisexual sexual attraction, romantic attraction, or both were classified as “bisexual,” participants identifying as bisexual ($n = 75$) would make up 18.1% of the total sample. Participants with discordant orientations were significantly more likely to report bisexual sexual attraction (68.2%) than bisexual romantic attraction (18.2%) $\chi^2(1) = 22.42$, $p < .001$.

Attraction to only the opposite sex

Of the 44 participants reporting discordant sexual and romantic orientations, 26 (59.1%) were romantically attracted only to the opposite sex but sexually attracted to either both sexes ($n = 25$) or neither sex ($n = 1$). Thus, if romantic attraction

was assumed to equate to sexual attraction, a majority of participants who reported discordant sexual and romantic orientations would possibly be considered heterosexual, despite their nonheterosexual romantic orientations. If all participants reporting opposite-sex only romantic attraction were classified as "heterosexual," the percentage of heterosexual participants in the overall sample would be 77.1% ($n = 319$).

Ten participants (22.7%) with discordant attractions reported sexual attraction to the opposite sex only despite reporting romantic attraction to either both sexes ($n = 5$), neither sex ($n = 3$), or the same sex ($n = 2$), potentially leading them to be classified as "heterosexual" if only sexual attraction was considered in classifying one's sexual orientation. If all participants reporting opposite-sex only sexual attraction were counted as "heterosexual," 73.2% ($n = 303$) of the total sample would be classified as heterosexual. If all participants reporting either opposite-sex only sexual attraction, romantic attraction, or both were classified as "heterosexual," 79.5% ($n = 329$) of the total sample would be classified as heterosexual. Participants with discordant orientations were significantly more likely to report exclusively heterosexual romantic attraction than exclusively heterosexual sexual attraction, $\chi^2(1) = 12.03, p < .001$.

Attraction to only the same sex

Seven participants with discordant sexual and romantic orientations (15.9%) reported same-sex only romantic attraction but sexual attraction to either both sexes ($n = 5$) or the opposite sex only ($n = 2$). If all participants reporting same-sex only romantic attraction were classified as "homosexual," the percentage of homosexual participants in the total sample would be 11.1% ($n = 46$).

Five participants with discordant sexual and romantic orientations (11.4%) reported same-sexual only sexual attraction but bisexual romantic attraction. If all participants same-sex only sexual attraction were counted as "homosexual," the percentage of respondents in the total sample who were classified as homosexual would be 10.7% ($n = 44$). If all participants with same-sex only romantic attraction, sexual attraction, or both were classified as "homosexual," 12.3% ($n = 51$) of the total sample would be classified as homosexual. The proportion of participants with discordant attractions reporting homosexual romantic attraction was not significantly different from the proportion of those with discordant attractions reporting homosexual sexual attraction ($\chi^2(1) = .386, p = .534$).

Attraction to neither sex

Finally, participants who were sexually attracted to neither sex ($n = 2$) made up 4.5% of participants with discordant attractions. Of our total sample, three participants (.7%) would be potentially classified asexual based on sexual attraction (i.e., reporting sexual attraction to neither sex). Of these three, one was also romantically attracted to neither sex (i.e., potentially aromantic), one was romantically attracted to both sexes, and one was romantically attracted to only the opposite sex.

Participants with romantic attraction to neither sex ($n = 3$) made up 6.8% of participants with discordant attractions, and four participants (1.0%) in the total sample could potentially be classified as aromantic (i.e., romantically attracted to neither sex) based on their responses. Of these four participants, one was also sexually attracted to neither sex whereas three were sexually attracted only to the opposite sex. If all participants who reported sexual and/romantic attraction to neither sex were classified as “asexual,” they would make up 1.4% ($n = 6$) of the total sample. The proportion of participants with discordant attractions reporting romantic attraction neither sex was not significantly different from the proportion of participants with discordant orientations reporting sexual attraction to neither sex, $\chi^2(1) = .212, p = .645$.

Demographic differences between those with discordant and concordant attractions

Gender

Of those reporting concordant sexual and romantic attraction, 55.0% ($n = 203$) were male, 44.4% ($n = 164$) were female, and two (.5%) reported their gender as “other.” Among those with discordant sexual and romantic attractions, 43.2% ($n = 19$) were male and 56.8% ($n = 25$) were female. A chi-square test showed no significant difference in male/female gender distribution among those with concordant and discordant sexual and romantic attractions, $\chi^2(1) = 2.33, p = .127$.

Age

The mean age among participants reporting concordant sexual and romantic orientations ($n = 367$) was 27.13 years ($SD = 8.28$, range = 18–65). The mean age among those reporting discordant sexual and romantic orientations ($n = 43$) was 26.70 years ($SD = 7.33$, range = 19–60). This difference was not significant, $t(408) = .326, p = .745$.

Relationship status

Among the 370 participants who reported concordant sexual and romantic orientations, a majority (57.6%, $n = 213$) reported being in a romantic relationship. Participants who reported discordant sexual and romantic orientations were slightly more likely to report being in a current romantic relationship, with 30 of the 44 participants (68.2%) reporting that they were dating, cohabitating, married, or engaged. This difference was not significant, $\chi^2(1) = 1.83, p = .176$.

Gender and attraction

Romantic attraction

With regards to romantic attraction, 84.7% ($n = 188$) of male participants were attracted only to the opposite sex, compared to 68.3% ($n = 129$) of female participants. Around 10% of male (9.9%; $n = 22$) and female participants (12.7%, $n = 24$)

reported romantic attraction only to the same sex. A higher portion of female participants reported romantic attraction to both sexes (17.5%; $n = 33$) than did male participants (5.0%; $n = 11$). Romantic attraction to neither sex was uncommon in male (.5%, $n = 1$) and female (1.6%, $n = 3$) participants. Females were significantly more likely than males to report romantic attraction to both sexes, $\chi^2(1) = 16.70$, $p < .001$. On the other hand, males were significantly more likely to report romantic attraction to the opposite sex only, $\chi^2(1) = 15.62$, $p < .001$.

Sexual attraction

Similar patterns were observed for sexual attraction. About four fifths of male participants (80.6%, $n = 179$), and two thirds of female participants (64.6%, $n = 122$) were sexually attracted to the opposite sex only. Around 10% of male (9.5%, $n = 21$) and female (10.6%, $n = 20$) participants were sexually attracted to the same-sex only. Ten percent of male (9.9%, $n = 22$) participants and nearly one fourth of female (23.3%, $n = 44$) participants were sexually attracted to both sexes. Three female (1.6%) and no male participants reported sexual attraction to neither sex. The proportion of female participants reporting sexual attraction to both sexes was significantly higher than the proportion of male participants who did likewise, $\chi^2(1) = 13.54$, $p < .001$. Likewise, the proportion of males who reported opposite-sex only romantic attraction was significantly greater than the proportion of females who did so, $\chi^2(1) = 13.47$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

This is the first empirical study of which we are aware that inquired about and reported on sexual and romantic attraction separately and without combining sexual and emotional attraction. We found that just over 10% of our adult, American online sample reported discordant sexual and romantic orientations. Most respondents who reported discordant orientations reported sexual attraction to both sexes but romantic attraction to only one sex, typically the opposite sex. However, the sub-sample of individuals with discordant orientations also included individuals with romantic attractions to both sexes but sexual attractions to one—or neither—sex; individuals with no romantic interest in either sex but sexual attraction to one sex and vice versa; and two individuals with completely opposing sexual and romantic orientations. There were no significant gender, age, or relationship status differences between those with discordant and concordant sexual and romantic orientations. However, in the sample as a whole, female participants were more likely to report sexual and romantic attraction to both sexes. Conversely, male participants were more likely to report opposite-sex attraction only, both sexually and romantically. The tendency of females to report more bisexual sexual and romantic attraction than males corresponds with the findings of other studies (e.g., Priebe & Svedin, 2013; Savin-Williams & Vrangalova, 2013; Weinrich et al., 2014).

There were about equal numbers of participants reporting discordant orientations with either bisexual sexual or romantic attractions as there were participants

reporting concordant bisexual romantic and sexual attractions. This provides preliminary evidence that suggests that many people who experience bisexual attraction may only do so in either the sexual or romantic domain whereas others may experience bisexual attraction across both domains. Additionally, more than one half of those with discordant sexual and romantic attractions reported opposite-sex only romantic attraction. This suggests that discordant same-sex or bisexual sexual attraction may be more common than discordant same-sex or bisexual romantic attraction. This is similar to the findings of Priebe and Svedin (2013) and the conclusions of Savin-Williams and Vrangalova (2013).

Although most of the existing research and scholarship on acknowledged discordant sexual and romantic attraction has involved only people who identify as asexual (e.g., AVEN, 2008; Chasin, 2011; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015), our sample included only a small number of asexual or aromantic participants (i.e., those who reported being sexually or romantically attracted to neither sex), making it difficult to draw conclusion or comparisons to previous research with regards to their romantic attractions and other demographic characteristics. Interestingly, about 1% of the participants in our sample were sexually attracted to neither sex, which is in line with estimates that approximately 1% of the general population is asexual (Bogaert, 2004). Additionally, about 1% of our sample was potentially aromantic (i.e., romantically attracted to neither sex), though only one of these four participants also reported not experiencing sexual attraction toward either sex. Similarly, two of the three participants who were not sexually attracted to either sex were romantically attracted to at least one sex, which is in line with previous findings that many asexual people experience romantic attraction (AVEN, 2008; Van Houdenhove et al., 2015).

Also of note is the fact that 84.1% with discordant sexual and romantic attractions endorsed sexual and romantic attraction to one sex (e.g., endorsing bisexual sexual attraction and heterosexual romantic attraction and thus indicating sexual and romantic attraction to the opposite sex). This may help explain the high rate of partnership among those with discordant orientations in our sample. Participants with attraction to both sexes in one domains and attraction to a single sex in the other domain can potentially find a partner to whom they are sexually and romantically attracted. For example, a woman with bisexual sexual attraction and opposite-sex only romantic attraction could find sexual and romantic compatibility with a male partner. They may also potentially find satisfaction in open or polyamorous relationships, though not all bisexual individuals may be open to or comfortable with such arrangements (van Anders, 2015).

For participants who do not experience sexual and romantic attraction to one sex, finding a compatible partner may be more difficult, as seen in the high rates of unpartnered status among individuals identifying as romantic asexual in Van Houdenhove and colleagues' (2015) study. For instance, someone without sexual attraction to either sex but romantic attraction to one or more sexes may need to find a compatible romantic partner in someone who is romantically attracted to them and does not experience sexual attraction. This may significantly decrease

their number of potential romantic partners. The same principle could be true for people who experience sexual but not romantic attraction and thus need to find sexual partners who are satisfied with having a sexual but nonromantic relationship. Furthermore, two participants reported completely exclusive sexual and romantic attractions, with both participants reporting opposite-sex only sexual attraction but same-sex only romantic attraction. It may be possible that individuals with exclusive discordant attractions could also find satisfaction in polyamorous or open relationships that allow them, their partners, or both to seek other sexual or romantic partners. However, it should also be noted openness to polyamory is not exclusive or synonymous to any particular sexual or romantic orientation (van Anders, 2015). Thus, not all individuals with these attraction profiles may be open to polyamorous relationships.

Limitations and implications for research

Because we did not ask participants to label or name their orientation(s), we do not know how individuals with discordant orientations might have labelled themselves had they been presented with a typical question about sexual orientation with typical response options (e.g., heterosexual/straight, gay/lesbian, bisexual, etc.). Thus, future research should examine if and how these individuals choose to label themselves and the relative weight given to their sexual and romantic attractions in their identity formation. Similarly, researchers should also examine sexual and romantic behavior and its correspondence to self-reported sexual and romantic attraction, especially when the two are discordant. Third, future studies could examine attraction to intersex individuals or individuals who identify as having a nonbinary (i.e., neither male nor female) gender. Finally, researchers should also examine how individuals define and delineate sexual and romantic attraction and how certain definitions may suppress or increase reporting of certain sexual or romantic attractions or of discordant attractions. It is possible that participants in our study may have had different interpretations of “sexual attraction” and “romantic attraction.” However, it is also possible that research participants may also have varying interpretations of other terms that are commonly used in demographic questions, such as the terms *sexual orientation* or *bisexual* (Klein, 2014).

Implications for counselors

This study suggests that a significant portion of American adults identify as having discordant sexual and romantic orientations. Thus, counselors should be aware of the fact that their clients may have different sexual and romantic attractions and that these may affect their identity and relationships. Knowing the notable prevalence and nature of these discordant orientations allows counselors to be aware that clients may in fact experience different patterns of sexual attraction and romantic attractions and thus better prepared to these issues with clients who are questioning their orientation. Additionally, knowing the patterns of discordant

attraction, such as the relatively high number of individuals endorsing either bisexual sexual attraction or bisexual romantic attraction allows counselors to be aware that issues of discordant sexual and romantic attraction may be more likely to present in these ways. Conversely, recognizing the diversity in discordant attraction patterns presented here highlights the possibility that discordant sexual and romantic attraction may present in a wide variety of patterns. By recognizing that such diversity is experienced within the general population, counselors should thus be better prepared to be affirming of these identities and attraction profiles.

When working with clients who are questioning their sexual orientation, counselors should be open to the idea of discussing that one's sexual and romantic attractions may differ from each other and what implications that may have for the clients' identity and sexual and romantic relationships. For example, a female client who is sexually attracted to men and women but romantically attracted only to men may have a different experience in the formation of their identity as a nonheterosexual individual than a client who is sexually and romantically attracted to men and women, and she may need assistance in processing that discordance and its implications for her self-concept (Thomas & Morgan, 2008). Likewise, individuals who do not experience sexual attraction but do experience romantic attraction may need assistance in navigating what they are and are not comfortable with in a romantic relationship and the implications of that for their current or future relationships (Pinto, 2014). Thus, counselors who are working with individuals who are questioning their sexual or romantic orientations or both may want to start a conversation by asking participants to define or describe sexual and romantic attraction. The counselor may then want to introduce the idea that sexual and romantic attraction may not necessarily align and normalize the experience of having discordant sexual and romantic attractions and allow the client to explore their feelings toward different sexes or genders in each of these domains, perhaps by using a tool such as a modified version of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (American Institute of Bisexuality, 2014; Klein, 1978, 2014). The counselor should also discuss what an ideal and acceptable relationship might look like for the client, such as a monogamous asexual romantic relationship, a monogamous heterosexual or homosexual relationship, a polyamorous homoromantic asexual relationship, or a polyamorous heterosexual aromantic relationship (van Anders, 2015).

Counselors should be aware that they may have clients of any gender, age, or relationship status who may have discordant sexual and romantic orientations and thus should not assume that this is simply a new phenomenon or way of identifying, just a relatively unknown one. Similarly, counselors should not assume that partnered clients do not experience divergent sexual and romantic attractions, given that the participants with discordant sexual attractions in our sample were equally as likely as those with concordant attractions to be in a romantic relationship.



Conclusion

This study lends credence to the idea that sexual and romantic attraction can be distinct constructs in a sizable minority of the population. Similarly, it also supports the conceptualization of romantic orientation as a distinct, although interwoven, construct from sexual orientation. Researchers should further investigate this phenomenon in the general (e.g., predominantly cisgender and straight-identifying) population as well as in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and asexual communities. Counselors should consider the possibility of their clients having discordant sexual and romantic orientations and may want to consider asking about sexual and romantic orientation separately, particularly if the client identifies with having different sexual or romantic orientations or may be questioning or both orientations.

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