

**A Review of Sexual Identity, Attraction, and Behavior Development in Adolescents**

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## **A Review of Sexual Identity, Attraction, and Behavior Development in Adolescents**

The study by Stewart et al. (2019) examines how adolescents' sexual identities, romantic attractions, and sexual behaviors change over time. The researchers focused on two primary goals. The first being to assess developmental trends in the self-described sexual identities and romantic attraction in adolescents over three years. The second goal is to examine whether those changes align with their eventual sexual behavior (Stewart et al., 2019). This study is significant because it aims to challenge the traditional idea that sexual orientation is concrete during adolescence. Instead, it explores sexuality as a fluid developmental process.

There are three components that define someone's sexual orientation. Identity (how individuals label themselves), attraction (who they are romantically or sexually drawn to), and behavior (their sexual experiences). Past research shows that these components don't always align in adolescence (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2015; Institute of Medicine, 2011). Adolescence is also the developmental stage when identity formation becomes the primary psychological task according to Erikson's theory.

Previous models of sexual identity development, such as Cass's (1979) sexual identity development model, describe a linear path from heterosexual attraction to identifying as a sexual minority identity. However, new research indicates that the sexual identity development process may be both non-linear and flexible (Stewart et al., 2019).

National data shows that 12-15% of adolescents identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning, compared to about 4% of adults (Gallup, 2017; Kann et al., 2018). Research has also documented greater levels of fluidity among girls and found an increasing use of labels such as "pansexual," "queer," or "bi-curious."

However, most studies were conducted in urban or socially liberal areas. Fewer studies examined adolescents living in rural areas with lower incomes or conservative environments, where stigma around sexual minorities may be stronger. Stewart et al. aimed to fill this gap by following adolescents from rural southeastern U.S. schools (Stewart et al., 2019, p. 3).

The information presented in Stewart et al.'s research aligns with concepts in *Discovering Human Sexuality* by LeVay et al. (2022), which describes sexual orientation including a person's identity, their sexual attraction, and sexual behaviors. These are often out of sync, especially during adolescence. The textbook also describes adolescence as a time of identity exploration, where sexual identity and attraction can shift due to developing self-awareness and social experience. Stewart et al.'s use of empirical data to show that sexual development is dynamic is consistent with the idea that adolescence is a period of identity formation and exploration.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The research sample consisted of 744 rural adolescents from three low-income public high schools in the rural southeastern region of the United States. On average, the participants were about 15 years old at the start of the study ( $M = 15.0$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). The participants were also racially and ethnically diverse; approximately 48% White, 24% Hispanic/Latinx, 21% Black/African American, 7% Multiracial/Other. There were slightly more girls in the sample with them making up 54.3% of the population. The participants were recruited from a larger longitudinal study of early adolescence and were followed for several years, but only the data collected over a span of three consecutive years (Time1-3) was analyzed for the study (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Procedures**

Prior to participation in the study researchers obtained active parental consent and student assent. Surveys were completed annually by students during regular school hours. At Time 1 and Time 2 the survey assessed students' self-labeled sexual orientation and romantic attraction, while the final surveys at Time 3 assessed student's lifetime sexual behavior. Each student was assigned a unique identification number to ensure confidentiality while being able to track responses across time points. The demographics of the school and surrounding areas reflected a largely conservative context, which provides an ideal environment for studying adolescent sexual development in social environments that reinforce heteronormativity. (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Measures**

Student's sexual identity was assessed through their selection of an identity label that they felt best described themselves (e.g., heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, "not sure yet," "do not identify with any of these" and/or write in another label). To simplify analysis the identities bisexual, pansexual, and polysexual were grouped into a single category. Similarly the categories of "not labeled" and "another" were placed into a single category. Romantic attraction was measured on a five-point scale ranging from "100% attracted to boys" to "100% attracted to girls." Sexual behavior was only assessed at the final collection point. Students were asked to report any lifetime sexual experiences (e.g., kissing, touching, or intercourse) with boys or girls (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Analysis Plan**

The researchers examined how student's identities and attractions had changed over the three year period. First, the researchers identified the percentage of students who showed "fluidity," which is defined by changes in either identity or attraction patterns between any two

time points. Then they compared those patterns by gender and examined if the other aspects like, identity or sexual behavior aligned or differed at the end of the study (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Results**

The study found that many adolescents experienced change in how they described their sexual orientation over time. About 26% of girls and 11% of boys reported changing identity labels, while 31% of girls and 10% of boys showed changes in romantic attraction. Roughly three quarters of the students with “fluid” identities reported moving between heterosexual and sexual minority labels, suggesting that adolescent sexual orientation labeling isn’t stable during this stage of development (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Gender Differences**

Girls demonstrated greater fluidity in both identity and attraction than boys. Approximately 20% of girls identified with a sexual minority label at some point compared to only 6% of boys. These results support past research that finds young women are more likely to explore or change their orientation over time. The percentage of boys that reported changes in attraction or identity challenge the stereotype that male orientation is entirely fixed throughout adolescence (Stewart et al., 2019).

## **Attraction-Behavior Relationships**

The study also revealed partial mismatches between attraction, identity, and behavior. Of heterosexual adolescents who simultaneously reported same sex attraction, about two thirds of girls and one tenth of boys reported homosexual behavior by the final survey. In contrast most adolescents who consistently identified as heterosexual and reported heterosexual attraction rarely reported homosexual behavior. This demonstrates that sexual behavior does not always

match self reported identity or attraction, supporting the argument that sexual orientation is composed of multiple aspects (Stewart et al., 2019).

### **Authors' Interpretations**

Stewart et al. concluded that sexual orientation during adolescence is complex and dynamic. They emphasized that identity, attraction, and behavior are all distinct but related aspects of development and cannot be considered interchangeable. The authors further note that despite the conservative environment, adolescents in the sample still showed notable diversity and fluidity in their orientation patterns. They also suggested that it would be beneficial for future researchers to compare results from this study with adolescents in more urban or progressive areas to examine how environmental influences contribute to the identity explorations of adolescents (Stewart et al., 2019).

### **Conclusions**

#### **Textbook Integration**

The findings of Stewart et al., (2019), are consistent with the framework presented in *Discovering Human Sexuality* by LeVay et al. (2022). The textbook explains that sexual orientation includes three aspects: identity, attraction, and behavior, and these aspects may not always align during development. Adolescence is described as a period of significant biological and psychological change, during which young people begin to experiment and assess their sexuality. Stewart et al.'s longitudinal data supports this view, showing that many adolescents, especially girls, experience fluidity in how they labeled their sexuality and orientation across the study.

LeVay et al. also emphasize that sexual development takes place within a larger social and cultural context that can restrict or enable self expression. Generally, supportive environments

help young people feel comfortable expressing their sexuality openly, and in contrast stigmatizing environments can lead to a lack of self expression or alter sexual orientation labels. Stewart et al.'s study expands on this idea by showing that adolescents can experience diversity and change in sexual orientation even in environments that are not stereotypically supportive. Together these sources give evidence to the idea that the formation of sexual identity is dynamic and context specific (Stewart et al., 2019, ; LeVay et al., 2022, pp. 336-339).

### **Key Findings and Implications**

This study brings evidence that adolescent sexual orientation should be understood as an evolving process rather than a fixed trait. The longitudinal design allowed researchers to assess natural changes over time that illustrated how social experiences and personal growth can shape one's sexual identity. This concept of fluidity is supported by the textbook's depiction of sexual orientation existing on a spectrum of attraction, rather than a binary system. This spectrum could help explain why some adolescents move between labels or experience feelings that don't fit neatly into the hetero or homosexual categories.

The findings of this study have important implications for education and mental health practices. Recognizing that adolescents are likely to move through different stages of exploration and self labeling can help adults provide environments that allow for self expression without it being seen as a problematic behavior. Both the textbook and Stewart et al., emphasize that both validation and openness are essential for healthy development and can reduce stigma around sexual diversity (Stewart et al., 2019, ; LeVay et al., 2022, pp. 339-342).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although this study provides contributions to understanding the development of sexual orientation development, there are some methodological limitations. First, the measure of

romantic attraction was limited to “boys” or “girls”, excluding participants who might experience attraction outside of the gender binary. The authors acknowledge that the design may oversimplify gender and overlook trans or nonbinary youth (Stewart et al., 2019). Second, the surveys used in this study did not ask for the participants gender identity, preventing the ability to identify gender diverse students. Third, all data was self reported, which could potentially be influenced by social desirability or privacy concerns. Finally, the study’s sample of students from three rural schools in the southeastern United States limits generalizability.

Stewart et al. recommend that future research includes more inclusive measures of attraction and identity, include gender diversity, and examine adolescents with different social environments to better understand the effects of acceptance, social pressure, and media exposure affect orientation development. These recommendations are consistent with how the textbook calls for comprehensive frameworks that recognize sexual and gender diversity across the lifespan (Stewart et al., 2019, ; LeVay et al., 2022, pp. 339-342)



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