

Adolescent Family Structure, Family Stability and Young Adult Sexual Orientation

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Children growing up in single-parent families generally have an earlier sexual debut and engage in more risky sexual behaviors than those from intact two-parent families (Davis & Friel, 2001; Moore, 2001; Newcomer & Udry, 1987; Pearson et al., 2006). However, other than a Danish study that found that boys who did not know their fathers were more likely to have homosexual marriages and children whose parents had very short marriage trended towards having homosexual marriages, there are virtual no recent studies looking at how adolescents family structure or stability relates to their later sexual orientation (Frisch & Hviid, 2006). In this paper, I address this gap. I examine the relationship between family structure and family stability in adolescence and reported attraction to and sexual experience with same and different-sex partners 14 years later in young adulthood.

Sexual orientation is an important dimension of one's self-identity and affects how people interaction with one another. However, sexual orientation is not easy to define. As Gates (2012) illustrates, not everyone who reports past same-sex sexual experience identifies as being homosexual or bisexual. If adolescent family structure and stability is not related to sexual orientation, it would indicate that this aspect of identity is not based on early life experiences. If family structure and stability relate only to sexual behavior but not sexual attraction, this would add to past research by showing that children from unstable and single-parent families experiment more sexually. However, if family structure and stability is related to sexual attraction, this would tell a very different story. It would indicate either that family structure and stability lead different-sex attractions or children with non-hetero orientations cause family strain and thereby influence their parents relationship causing instability and changing the family's structure. In this paper, I hope to provide a deeper understanding the relationship I between family of origin and later sexual orientation.

DATA AND METHODS

I used Wave 1 and Wave 4 data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) to create variables for family structure, family transitions/stability, sexual attraction and sexual behaviors. I used mother's report of family structure to classify children as living in two-parent biological families, step-families, or single-mother families. Family transitions are measure as a tally of each time the biological mother of a respondent indicated that she started or ended a marriage or marriage-like relationship. Based on adolescents' self-reported attractions to men and women, I classified adolescent respondents as having homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual attraction. Based on self-reported past sexual activity with men and women, I classified adolescents as having homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual behaviors. I used gender, race/ethnicity, mother's income, mother's educational attainment, child's age at Wave 4, and mother's age at child's birth as control variables.

First, I examined the descriptive statistics for the percentages of men and women who reported heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual attractions and behaviors by family structure and stability (Table 1). Second, I developed a multinomial logistic regression model for sexual attraction and a second for sexual behavior. I incorporated family structure, family transitions, and the control variables specified above.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Both men and women were much more likely to report heterosexual than bisexual or homosexual attractions and behaviors, with women more likely to say they had some same-sex attractions or past same-sex partners (either homosexual or bisexual) (See Table 1).

When other factors were not controlled, children who experienced many family transitions were more likely to report bisexual attractions and women whose mothers transitioned frequently were more likely to report bisexual behavior. Men from single mother families were more likely to report non-heterosexual behaviors and attraction, as were women from step families. When race, income, child age, and mother's age at child's birth were controlled in a multinomial logistic regression, most of the relationship between family structure and family transitions and sexual attraction and behavior disappeared. However, women whose mothers had more than three marital transitions were still more likely than those whose mothers never transitioned to report bisexual behavior as were women who lived with single mothers at Wave 1 of the survey. (See Table 2)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Differences in sexual orientation could be causally related to family structure and family transitions or they may have to do with one's comfort with identifying as bisexual or homosexual -- which may indirectly relate to family upbringing. Additionally, it is possible that in some families, the difficult period during which an adolescent wrestles with his/her personal sexual orientation may, itself, influence the family structure or number of family transitions.

However, as this study finds no relationship between family structure and sexual orientation for men and for women family structure and stability are related to sexual behavior, but not sexual attraction there may be an alternative explanation. Sexual behavior is a relatively fixed measure, once someone has had even one sexual experience with a same-sex partner and one experience with a different sex partner, he or she will always be defined as bisexual. Sexual attraction is more fluid, with people able to identify their current attraction. It may simply be that women from unstable or single mother families are more sexually adventurous and experimental and therefore engage in sexual behaviors with both men and women. This is in-line with past research finding relationships between family structure and early sexual debut and sexual risk taking (Davis & Friel, 2001; Moore, 2001; Newcomer & Udry, 1987; Pearson et al., 2006). Future research will include examinations the number of male and female partners and lengths of these relationship to further explore the relationship between family structure and various dimensions of sexual orientation.

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Table 1. Sexual Attraction and Behaviors for Men and Women by Family Structure and Family Transitions.

Sexual Attraction – Men							
	Family Structure			Family Transitions			
	Bio-Parents	Step-Family	Single Mother	0	1	2	3+
Heterosexual	96.1%	96.5%	93.6%	91.5%	90.1%	89.5%	88.0%
Bisexual	1.7%	1.7%	3.1%	6.9%	7.6%	9.1%	10.5%
Homosexual	2.2%	1.8%	3.4%	1.5%	2.2%	1.4%	1.5%
Sexual Behavior – Men							
	Family Structure			Family Transitions			
	Bio-Parents	Step-Family	Single Mother	0	1	2	3+
Heterosexual	93.9%	93.4%	91.3%	93.2%	93.8%	91.4%	91.4%
Bisexual	4.5%	5.3%	6.2%	5.0%	3.9%	4.4%	7.3%
Homosexual	1.6%	1.3%	1.7%	1.8%	2.3%	1.7%	1.3%
Sexual Attraction – Women							
	Family Structure			Family Transitions			
	Bio-Parents	Step-Family	Single Mother	0	1	2	3+
Heterosexual	91.8%	88.6%	90.3%	91.7%	90.2%	89.7%	88.4%
Bisexual	6.9%	9.7%	7.6%	6.8%	7.6%	8.9%	10.2%
Homosexual	1.3%	1.7%	2.1%	1.5%	2.3%	1.4%	1.5%
Sexual Behavior – Women							
	Family Structure			Family Transitions			
	Bio-Parents	Step-Family	Single Mother	0	1	2	3+
Heterosexual	88.0%	84.0%	83.8%	87.7%	86.1%	83.3%	81.9%
Bisexual	11.3%	15.3%	15.8%	11.5%	13.4%	16.0%	17.4%
Homosexual	0.8%	0.8%	0.5%	0.8%	0.5%	0.6%	0.7%

Table 2a. Multinomial Logistic Relative Risk Model of Bisexual or Homosexual Attraction Relative to Heterosexual Attraction

	Men		Women		Total	
	Bisexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Homosexual
Family Structure (ref: two biological parents)						
Step Family	.87	.74	1.23	1.43	1.21	1.04
Single Mother	1.59	1.67	.994	1.19	1.14	1.41
Transition (ref: 0)						
1	1.19	1.03	1.12	1.25	1.13	1.15
2	.98	1.13	1.15	.86	1.07	.99
3+	1.22	1.29	1.54 [†]	.81	1.48*	1.05
Race (ref: white)						
Black	1.80*	1.04	.736*	1.32	.91	1.18
Hispanic	1.42	2.09**	1.00	1.65	1.04	1.90**
Other	.77	1.12	.547*	.705	.56*	.98
ln(income)	1.04	1.20	.87 [†]	.81	.91	.99
Mother's Education (ref: less than high school)						
High School	.88	.92	1.11	1.17	1.02	1.05
Some College	1.00	.92	1.21	.81	1.10	.90
College or more	.80	.72	1.44 [†]	.51	1.23	.67
Mother's age at child's birth	1.01	1.03 [†]	1.017 [†]	1.00	1.01	1.02
Child's age at Wave 4	.99	1.03	.90**	.96	.90**	1.00
N	4372		5172		9544	

Table 2b. Multinomial Logistic Relative Risk Model of Bisexual or Homosexual Behavior Relative to Heterosexual Behavior

	Men		Women		Total	
	Bisexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Homosexual	Bisexual	Homosexual
Family Structure (ref: two biological parents)						
Step Family	1.28	1.12	1.22	.88	1.26	1.07
Single Mother	1.27	2.08 [†]	1.45*	.48 [†]	1.45	1.35
Transition (ref: 0)						
1	.73	.90	1.02	.81	.94	.92
2	.82	.68	1.31	1.02	1.14	.77
3+	1.44	.57	1.45*	1.03	1.45**	.70
Race (ref: white)						
Black	1.26	1.25	.76*	1.90	.89	1.41
Hispanic	1.32	2.34**	.86	1.64	.96	2.14**
Other	.35*	1.55	.74	0	.63*	1.10
ln(income)	.96	1.12	1.03	.96	1.02	1.09
Mother's Education (ref: less than high school)						
High School	.91	.94	1.04	1.86	.97	1.23
Some College	.80	.82	1.11	.84	.96	.87
College or more	.86	.50	.93	.54	.87	.53
Mother's age at child's birth	1.04**	1.02	1.01	.99	1.02*	1.01
Child's age at Wave 4	.99	.99	.90**	1.01	.91**	1.00
N	4216		5016		9232	

p<.10[†] p<.05 * p<.05 **