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Defining Sexual Orientation

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Sexual Configurations Theory (SCT) has been proposed as a theory for understanding diverse partnered sexuality by extending the concept of sexual orientation (van Anders, 2015). Unfortunately, the concept of sexual orientation is not well defined and a clear definition of sexual orientation is needed before extending the concept. The present commentary will focus on defining sexual orientation, expanding the concept of sexual orientation, and distinguishing sexual orientation from related concepts. It is meant to support and expand SCT. So to start, a few definitions are necessary.

Definitions

- *Sexual identity* refers to how individuals define themselves sexually. It may or may not describe their actual sexual behavior, fantasy content, or to which sexual stimuli they respond.
- *Sexual interests* describe what individuals want to do, whether or not they actually do it. By definition, sexual interests imply that they provoke sexual arousal in the individual.
- *Sexual behavior* is what individuals actually do, whether or not their behavior is consistent with their sexual identity or their sexual interests. The sexual behavior may or may not be desired and may or may not be arousing to the individual. Sexual behavior can be an expression of one's own sexual interests, used to arouse one's partner, done at the request of a partner, to explore one's (or one's partner's) response to the behavior, or as a prelude to other sex acts.

- *Sexual orientation* is a distinct type of an intense sexual interest. It will be defined further below.

Sexual Orientation

There are only two sexual orientations which everyone seems to agree exist, homosexuality and heterosexuality (though these are actually identities as I have defined them). In recent years, other sexual orientations have been proposed, including asexuality (Bogaert, 2015), pedophilia (Seto, 2012), and polyamory (Tweedy, 2011), among others. Bailey (2009) suggested that women (or at least some women) may not have an orientation. The lack of a consistent sexual orientation definition impedes the assessment of these proposals.

It is not clear whether bisexuality is its own unique sexual orientation, whether bisexuality constitutes the coexistence of both heterosexual and homosexual orientations in the same person, or bisexuality comprises a sexual orientation and a sexual interest which is inconsistent with that orientation. It is possible that each of these possibilities can describe a subset of "bisexual" individuals. It also has been suggested that the homosexual–heterosexual continuum could be further subdivided into other discrete orientations (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012).

Some individuals (professionals, lay persons, but especially activists) bristle at the suggestion that sexual orientations, other than homosexual and heterosexual, can exist. The reasons for this are multifactorial and beyond the scope of this commentary. Others suggest that heterosexual or homosexual orientations take precedence over other sexual interests/orientations, but, from my observations, that is not always the case. Examples will be discussed below.

When contemplating the nature of sexual orientations, it appears that there are certain characteristics which distinguish a sexual orientation from other kinds of sexual interests. The

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following list of characteristics is not meant to be exhaustive; further research may identify other characteristics or invalidate the ones mentioned below. When distinguishing a sexual orientation from a sexual interest, it is *not* essential that all the following characteristics be present. Nevertheless, the more characteristics identified the probability that the sexual interest is actually a sexual orientation increases.

Sexual Orientation Characteristics

Throughout history, at least some individuals have seemed driven to engage in certain sex acts or seek out a certain type of partner. These individuals may spend significant time searching for partners, developing social relationships with individuals with similar interests, and pursuing media that depicts these interests. These individuals may risk loss of established relationships, ridicule, discrimination, sexually transmitted infections, being labeled as mentally ill, incarcerated, and even death (in some jurisdictions) to engage in the desired behavior. This appears to be different from other sexual interests, which are pleasurable and even sought after, but do not provoke this level of interest. In my professional and research experience, the following characteristics for homosexual and heterosexual orientations, were identified which did not include the sex of the partner.

Lust

Lust is a strong and persistent sexual attraction to an attribute (or a class) of potential partners or a specific act (see Moser, 1992). Its persistent intensity distinguishes lust from other sexually arousing stimuli. Lust is different from desire, which is an unfocused interest in pursuing sexual arousal and orgasm, dependent on hormones and other factors (both physical and psychological). Lust appears to continue even if hormones or one's physical state prevents sexual arousal or orgasm. Desire is not dependent on any person, imagery, or object.

Relative Immutability

There is a consensus among mental health professionals that no psychotherapeutic process can change an individual's sexual orientation and it is unethical to try. There is no consensus on the use of psychotherapeutic processes designed to intensify or add new sexual interests. One may explore a new sexual interest to please a partner, because other options are not available or to enhance/explore one's own sexuality. It appears to be rare for these new sexual interests to rise to the level of an orientation. Although an individual can choose not to engage in certain sexual behaviors that does not change the individual's sexual orientation. Relative immutability should not be construed to imply that a sexual orientation does not evolve. Individuals report a fluidity of their sexual interests (including lusts). It is not rare for homosexuals to

engage in sexual behavior with the other sex (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Heterosexuals often report some interest and response to same sex interactions (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). Whether changing the relative strength of different components of one's sexual interests is truly a change in sexual orientation is debatable.

Fluidity

Despite the relative immutability of sexual orientations, they can change. Diamond (2008) demonstrated that in some women, their sexual identity, behavior, and orientation did change over time. She now believes that sexual orientation fluidity is common among men as well (see Diamond, 2013). A simpler example of sexual fluidity is how our arousal to individuals of different ages evolves. Many adults are aroused by those relatively close to their own age and have minimal arousal to adults who are significantly older or younger. In general (and with clear exceptions), when we are in our 20s, 20-year-olds are our sexual focus and 50-year-olds are much less interesting. In our 50s, 50-year-olds are a more common sexual focus than 20-year-olds, especially as enduring sexual partners, though maybe not as esthetic objects. It appears to be true that we cannot control the direction of the fluidity or if and when it will happen.

Early Onset

Sexual orientations seem to appear at or prior to puberty, suggesting that sexual orientations are the result of a process (or processes) completed before adulthood and before they are fueled by the hormonal changes of puberty. Even if the person is not initially aware of his or her orientation, the individual often can recognize retrospectively that the sexual focus was present at or prior to puberty. Maybe the individual tried to deny the focus of the orientation (to him or herself, or to others), but it was there for many individuals. Others may report feeling that something was missing throughout their earlier lives, but not knowing what it was. After some experimentation, or by happenstance, the discovery and exploration of the focus of the sexual orientation (lust) leads to feelings of having found what was missing.

Consequences

The decision, and subsequent acts, to explore (or not to explore) the behavior has consequences. The news media is full of stories of individuals who risked everything important to them to explore and experience these sexual acts. Despite the risks, there is value in feeling sexually fulfilled. There are personal, emotional, and social consequences for denying one's sexual orientation. Some individuals can deny or repress a sexual interest with little difficulty, while others have great difficulty not "acting out." Giving up or never allowing oneself to have sexually fulfilling experiences can have a profound impact on an individual's life. Conversely, feeling sexually fulfilled also has significant impact on an

individual's well-being and satisfaction. Due to the varied societal sanctions and affirmations, the consequences of either experiencing or not experiencing sexual fulfillment in one's life are not purely positive or negative.

Life-Long

As discussed above, most individuals can trace their sexual interests from before or at puberty. While attempts at suppressing the interest are often noted, with varying degrees of success, most can remember the interest from at least adolescence and often earlier. On occasion, a sexual orientation can be “discovered” as an adult, but it often continues from that point through the rest of the individual's life supplanting the previous sexual identity/orientation. The aging process, with its subsequent hormonal and physical changes, may cause variations in how one's sexual orientation is experienced. These changes may make it easier to ignore sexual impulses that conflict with other lifestyle choices. Conversely, these changes may spur explorations of one's sexual identity and behavior, which may be another manifestation of fluidity. It is possible that exploring one's sexual orientation decreases the need to explore other sexual interests.

A Few Examples

As individuals explore their sexuality, they are often presented with options that they can choose to experience. A woman may decide to investigate BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadism and Masochism) at the urging of her current partner. The woman may like the attention her partner gives her, enjoy the newness of the experience, and find the new sexual acts exciting. If BDSM is not an orientation for her and she separates from the partner who urged her participation, she may stop engaging in BDSM with minimal sequelae. BDSM was a sexual interest, not an orientation. If BDSM was an orientation, she may choose to continue and seek new BDSM partners. In retrospect, she may recognize that she has had an interest in BDSM since puberty and that she feels more sexually fulfilled since exploring it.

A “heterosexual” man, who enjoys BDSM in the submissive role, may enjoy sexual interactions with other men, not because he is aroused by other men, but because he enjoys being “forced” or “commanded” to participate. Outside of dominant/submissive interactions, he may not have any interest in pursuing a sexual interaction with another man.

It is not uncommon in the BDSM subculture for the BDSM role or an interest in specific BDSM behaviors/roles to have more importance than the gender or genitals of a prospective partner. Personal advertisements for a partner may focus on a specific role or behavior interests, regardless of gender. This is an example of a sexual orientation that takes precedence over a heterosexual or homosexual orientation.

One individual vividly remembers at age 8 seeing the bare feet of his next-door neighbor as she was getting out of a car. Thus began a life-long interest focused on women's feet. In the same way that many heterosexual men in the dominant culture focus on breasts or buttocks as part of their arousal, this individual focuses on his partners' feet. Over the years, he has developed interests in both shoes and stockings, but his primary interest in feet has endured. At several points in his life, he has attempted to give up the interest, throwing away his media collection of foot imagery. Each time, he became depressed, had more difficulty with erections, and decreased sexual desire, until he began to focus sexually on feet again. Over the years, he has noted that the attraction to the specific type of foot has changed, but he cannot explain why. He admits that his sexual attraction to a specific woman is dependent on her feet.

Whatever the process is that leads to the creation of one's sexual orientation, consider the possibility that nothing is created. These individuals might be described as asexual and could fit all the sexual orientation criteria, except possibly lust.

What Does This Mean?

This perspective clearly allows for sexual orientations that are not based on the genital configurations of both the individual and partner. It is probable that applying these criteria will suggest that asexuality, BDSM, fetishism (which now includes partialism), hebephilia, pedophilia, transvestism, etc. can be sexual orientations for some individuals. There are individuals who may take part in the behavior repeatedly, but not be classified as having that orientation. For example, there are some men have sex with men due to the relatively ease of finding same sex partners and lack of availability of other sex partners.

While this commentary and van Anders' article were primarily concerned with sexual orientation, this approach can be applied to other types of orientations (i.e., gender, romantic, relationship structure). I agree with van Anders that these different types of orientations, when taken together, describe an individual's unique sexual pattern. These different orientations are connected and probably interact with each other. It is possible that “fluidity” explains the process by which transvestism as a sexual orientation can evolve into transsexualism as a gender orientation.

In BDSM, the activities and role may be more important than the sex of one's partner. Reading the BDSM personals, many advertisements clearly indicate that the advertiser has no preference for male or female partners. Obviously, the activities may vary, but the role and activities are more important than the genital configuration of a prospective partner.

This approach to sexual orientation quickly gets more complicated because a person can have negative, neutral, or positive responses to the same individual based on several characteristics (weight, age, race, specific sex acts or roles, etc.). It also prompts

us think about orientation differently, as we must ask what the core sexual attraction is.

Using these criteria, it may be possible to distinguish which sexual interests may be enhanced, which can be modified by psychotherapy techniques, and which cannot or should not. It may help researchers understand and question the current nosology of sexual interests.

A Final Word

SCT and the current attempt to define and expand the concept of sexual orientation are first steps in understanding how we develop our unique sexual patterns. Both of these attempts begin to question the primacy of genital configuration in defining and classifying sex orientation.

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