

Processes of Sexual Orientation Questioning among Heterosexual Men

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Male heterosexual identity development has received little empirical attention. The current study examines sexual orientation questioning processes of heterosexual-identified men and offers a comparison of these processes with those employed by their sexual-minority counterparts. Participants included 184 male college students (ages 18 to 23, $M = 19.6$), 149 primarily identified as “exclusively straight or heterosexual” and 35 as sexual minority. Of exclusively straight respondents, 53 percent ($n = 79$) and all of the sexual-minority respondents indicated having questioned their sexual orientation. Heterosexual men’s questioning processes included five categories: unelaborated questioning, other-sex exploration, the social context as informants or sites of knowledge, hypothetical thinking and perspective taking, and attraction comparisons between men and women. Several unifying and differentiating themes emerged between sexual orientation groups. Results suggest that conventional notions of a “standardized” heterosexual identity appear simplistic and reveal ways in which men’s identification with a majority heterosexual sexual identity can be purposeful.

Keywords: *sexual identity development; male sexuality; compulsory heterosexuality; emerging adulthood*

There is no proverbial “coming out” experience for heterosexual individuals, no moment of identity confrontation whereupon they declare to the world, “I am a heterosexual!” In addition to being exempt from coming out, heterosexual individuals are not frequently asked to describe how they established their sexual orientation. Instead, heterosexual desires are expected to spontaneously emerge without much thought or exploration. The invisibility of heterosexuality is particularly notable for men, for whom heterosexuality is typically mandated from a young age through rigid masculine gender roles (Frankel 2004; Kimmel 1996; Kimmel and Messner 2004).

In stark contrast, same-sex identities are viewed as deliberate deviations from the heterosexual majority with highly visible antecedents. To better understand these antecedents, the field of psychology has developed a systematic body of theory and research examining sexual-minority identity development. Contributions from a

number of researchers (Cass 1979, 1984; Fassinger 2000; Fassinger and Miller 1996; Herdt 1992; Savin-Williams 1995; Troiden 1989) have shaped the study of sexual orientation, focusing chiefly on the developmental processes that lead to the adoption and synthesis of gay or lesbian identities.

Research and theories have outlined several common developmental trajectories for sexual-minority individuals. Before settling on a sexual-minority identity, research suggests that men first recognize same-sex attraction and thus question their a priori commitments to a heterosexual identity. Among gay men, individual sexual identity questioning processes are usually precluded by a profound sense of difference, a realization that one's sexual desires are incongruent with those of the heterosexual majority (Fassinger and Miller 1996; Troiden 1989). Awareness of difference impels questioning men to learn about sexual-minority groups and to explore their burgeoning sexual desires. After becoming aware of potential differences in sexual orientation, sexual-minority men frequently engage in goal-directed questioning behaviors that help affirm same-sex attractions (Fassinger and Miller 1996). Specific examples of exploration and deepening processes include having same-sex fantasies, having sexual experiences with members of the same sex and opposite sex, engaging in gender-atypical behaviors or activities, and building relationships with sexual-minority individuals and/or communities (Herdt 1992; Fassinger 2000; Fassinger and Miller 1996).

In comparison to the methodical research on sexual-minority groups' processes of questioning, heterosexual identity development among men has received much less attention (Frankel 2004). The invisibility of questioning processes among heterosexual men may be explained in large part through the sociological concepts of hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality, both of which naturalize heterosexuality. Within the context of compulsory heterosexuality, a heterosexual identity is not only viewed as the only option but also considered inherent and uniform. Within a culture of heteronormativity, a (male) heterosexual identity is central but not salient, and thus is "unmarked" or invisible (Frankel 2004). In addition, heterosexual men are assumed to foreclose on a heterosexual identity without exploration, while sexual-minority men are condemned for their divergence from unmodified heterosexuality. Also reinforcing the invisibility of heterosexuality are patterns of hegemonic masculinity, which can include global, regional, and local privileging of traditionally masculine qualities over femininity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Masculinity is upheld through heterosexual expression; as a consequence, questioning processes can be misconstrued as socially transgressive acts—suggesting femininity and evidencing homosexuality (Heasley 2005). Because of these social norms, it has been suggested that a heterosexual identity is not salient, and thus questioning processes must occur only among sexual minorities (Frankel 2004). And indeed while research indicates this is frequently true (Boratav 2006; Eliason 1995; Heasley 2005; Lucente 1996), these studies also suggest that compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity do not completely nullify

the potential for questioning and that heterosexual development may mirror sexual-minority development in several important ways.

In an effort to better understand heterosexual identity development, Worthington et al. (2002) presented a model of heterosexual identity development derived from previous research on sexual-minority groups. Modeled after Marcia's (1980) identity statuses, Worthington et al. proposed that heterosexuals develop and question their sexual identities through a framework of five identity phases: unexplored commitment, active exploration, deepening and commitment, diffusion, and synthesis. Through questioning in ways that transcend socially mandated pathways of exploration (i.e., active exploration), "compulsory" understandings of sexual orientation are replaced by a posteriori commitments to a heterosexual identity. Though it is not supported with empirical evidence, according to this model active exploration of one's sexual orientation identity can take the form of cognitive or behavioral exploration as well as conscious experimentation with "symbolic or real sexual activities with same-sex partners" while reserving "the privileged status associated with identification as heterosexual" (Worthington et al. 2002, 517). Here, the emphasis is placed on both individual and social identity components, such that as the individual interprets his or her emerging heterosexual desires, he or she also discovers the sociocultural meanings attached to being a member of a distinct social group. Consequently, the realization of a heterosexual identity is contingent on the emergence and integration of both individual and group membership identities.

Despite having tremendous theoretical potential, empirical support for this model and heterosexual identity development in general is scant. Some studies have observed heterosexual individuals' attitudes toward sexual-minority individuals (e.g., Herek 2000; Herek and Capitanio 1996), but little research has elucidated the ways in which questioning actually occurs. In one study that did directly assess heterosexual identity development, Eliason (1995) analyzed heterosexual students' essays, finding that heterosexual men mainly indicated foreclosed sexual identities, such that they engaged in commitment with little to no exploration. Several participants did indicate having thought about and questioned their sexual orientation; however, descriptions of questioning processes were typically underdeveloped or absent from participant responses. In a similar questionnaire study by Boratav (2006), sexual identity questioning was left unreported among heterosexual students at a Turkish university. In fact, 94 percent of respondents viewed their heterosexual identities as "always being the same," which appears to confirm the notion of a standardized "unmarked" identity.

Because of the paucity of empirical research examining heterosexual identity development, heterosexual men's questioning processes are in need of further investigation and clarification. Unlike sexual-minority men, impetuses for questioning among heterosexual men probably have little to do with "feelings of difference" or transgressive sexual desires. In addition, the goals of questioning for heterosexual men include not the construction of a completely new sexual identity but instead the reification of an abstract, unexplored sense of identity. Despite these differences, both

heterosexual and sexual-minority men are susceptible to cultural constraints in their processes of sexual identity questioning (e.g., compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity). Similarly, both populations must risk stigmatization to explore, challenge, and substantiate their sexual identities through questioning experiences.

Present Study

To contribute to research on heterosexual male development, the current study is concerned with elucidating processes of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual-identified men. We had several goals in conducting this research. Given that little is known about processes involved in heterosexual men's sexual identity development, our first goal was to assess the frequency with which heterosexual men actually question their sexual orientation. Because of culturally mandated restrictions on sexual proclivity, we anticipated that some, but not many, of the participants would indicate having questioned their sexual orientation.

To ascertain differences between the heterosexual questioning population and the nonquestioning population, our second goal was to compare questioning and nonquestioning heterosexual men on quantitative measures of masculine gender ideology, sexual identity commitment and exploration, same-sex sexual experience, and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) individuals. These measures were chosen because they represent relevant aspects of sexual identity (Worthington et al. 2002), including personal values, attitudes, and behaviors as well as attitudes toward other groups (i.e., LGB individuals). On these measures, we anticipated some differences to emerge between the groups, but also similarities, as both groups primarily identify as heterosexual. We hypothesized that questioning men would indicate less endorsement of statements reflective of masculine gender ideology, greater sexual identity exploration and uncertainty, less sexual identity commitment and integration, and more positive attitudes toward LGB individuals. We also expected somewhat higher levels of same-sex behavior among questioning men than among nonquestioning men, as the literature has repeatedly shown that same-sex behavior precedes sexual questioning as well as sexual-minority identity development in men (Savin-Williams 1995; Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000).

Following the comparative quantitative analyses, our third goal was to qualitatively examine questioning men's narratives to ascertain the ways in which questioning has occurred (i.e., "questioning processes"). Emerging themes are discussed in light of potential impetuses and goals for questioning among heterosexual men. Because questioning is paramount to both heterosexual and sexual-minority identity development models, the present study also uses sexual-minority group questioning as a comparative point of departure for investigating heterosexual questioning processes. Differences and similarities in questioning styles are discussed in regard to existing models of heterosexual identity development.

Method

Participants

The initial sample of participants consisted of 575 undergraduate college students; however, only male-identified participants were analyzed for this study ($n = 184$). As with many college samples, participants were mostly emerging adults (ages ranged from 18 to 23; $M = 19.6$) and mostly white. Participants' racial backgrounds included European American or white ($n = 123$), Asian or Pacific Islander ($n = 34$), Mexican American or Latino ($n = 13$), biracial ($n = 9$) and other ($n = 5$). Fifty-five participants were first-year students, seventy-five were sophomores, thirty-five were juniors, and nineteen were seniors.

In response to the question "When you think about your sexual orientation, what term do you *most* identify with?," 149 men (81 percent) indicated "exclusively straight/heterosexual." Thirty-five men were placed in the "sexual-minority" group for comparative analyses, which included men who primarily identified as "mostly straight with some bisexual tendencies" ($n = 15$), "bisexual" ($n = 5$), "mostly gay/homosexual" ($n = 3$), "exclusively gay/homosexual" ($n = 9$), and "I prefer not to label myself" ($n = 3$). "Mostly straight" identifying men were included in the sexual-minority group because in previous studies with women this group distinguished itself from exclusively heterosexual participants regarding same-sex experiences (Morgan and Thompson 2006; Thompson and Morgan 2008), and similar distinctions are anticipated within male populations.

Procedure

All participants were college students enrolled in a lower-division psychology course at a public university in Northern California and participated to fulfill a course requirement. Participants were given information about the survey and chose to participate in this study through an online educational experiment system. The title of the study was Sexual Identity Study, and participants were instructed to complete the survey via a secure online survey Web site (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>). The procedure, including consent, debriefing, and credit allocation, took place entirely online. After giving consent, participants completed a demographics section and two open-ended questions about sexual orientation development. Following these questions, participants completed several additional measures of sexual attitudes and experiences, some of which were not analyzed in this study. The entire questionnaire took approximately ninety minutes to complete.

Measures

In addition to a demographic questionnaire, participants completed the following measures: sexual orientation questioning, the Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in

Relationships Scale (AMIRS), a measure of same-sex sexual behavior, the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals (LGB-KASH), and the Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment (MoSIEC).

Sexual orientation questioning. Narrative responses from two open-ended questions were used to assess sexual orientation questioning. The first question inquired, “Have you thought much about and/or questioned your sexual orientation? If yes, when do you first remember thinking about your sexual orientation? If no, why do you think you have never thought about this?” The second question asked, “What has been important in developing your sexual orientation? Please be as specific as possible.” Participants were provided with unlimited text space to answer these questions.

AMIRS. Participants completed the twelve-item AMIRS (Chu, Porche, and Tolman 2005). This scale assesses personal endorsement of items that relate to traditional masculinity ideologies (e.g., “If a guy tells people his worries, he will look weak” and “It’s embarrassing for a guy when he needs to ask for help”). Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was .86.

LGB-KASH. Participants completed the thirty-four-item LGB-KASH (Worthington, Dillon, and Becker-Schutte 2005). This scale assesses personal attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals written from a heterosexual perspective. Three of the five subscales were analyzed for this study: Endorsement of Hate Crimes (e.g., “It is important for me to avoid LGB individuals”), Internalized Affirmativeness (e.g., “I would display a symbol of gay pride (pink triangle, rainbow, etc.) to show my support of the LGB community”), and Support for Civil Rights (e.g., “Health benefits should be available equally to same-sex partners as to any other couple”). Responses were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha for each subscale ranged from .82 to .90.

Same-sex sexual behavior. Same-sex sexual behavior was assessed through a series of eighteen questions assessing the (1) frequency of engagement with and (2) number of partners regarding a variety of different same-sex sexual activities (e.g., hand holding, light kissing, received oral sex, performed anal penetration). Responses for the frequency of occurrence items were given on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never*, 4 = *three to five times*, 6 = *ten or more times*). Responses for the number of partners items were also given on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *no one*, 4 = *three to five people*, 6 = *ten or more people*). Two composite scores were calculated by summing responses for each set of nine questions. This yielded a “frequency of same-sex behavior” score potentially ranging from 9 (no experience) to 54 (highest possible frequency of same-sex experience) and a “number of same-sex partners”

score potentially ranging from 9 (no partners) to 54 (highest number of same-sex partners possible).

MoSIEC. The MoSIEC, developed by Worthington et al. (2008), applies Marcia's (1966) identity framework to sexual identity. This twenty-two-item scale has four distinct factors that are common across all sexual identities: exploration, sexual orientation uncertainty, commitment, and synthesis–integration. Sample items include “I am actively trying to learn more about my own sexual needs” (exploration; eight items), “I sometimes feel uncertain about my sexual orientation” (uncertainty; three items), “I have a clear sense of the types of sexual activities I prefer” (sexual orientation commitment; six items), and “My understanding of my sexual needs coincides with my overall sense of sexual self” (synthesis–integration; six items). Responses options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), with a midpoint of 3 (*neither disagree nor agree*). Cronbach's alpha for each subscale ranged from .75 to .84.

Analysis and Preliminary Coding

Preliminary analyses classified heterosexual men's open-ended responses about sexual questioning into two categories: questioning and nonquestioning. Questioning narratives included those in which the participant indicated explicitly, or implicitly, that he had thought about and/or questioned his sexual orientation in the past or was currently questioning his sexual orientation. While “thinking about” one's sexual orientation can be different than “questioning” one's sexual orientation, participants who specifically alluded to “thinking about” their sexual orientation ($n = 36$, 46 percent) provided similar narratives, examples, and explanations as those who specifically noted “questioning” ($n = 18$, 22 percent) their sexual orientation. In addition, twenty-five participants (32 percent) noted having both thought about and questioned their sexual orientation. Thus, all participants who indicated either or both of these processes were combined into one coding category, which for convenience we labeled *questioning*. Nonquestioning narratives were those in which the participant explicitly or implicitly indicated having never questioned his sexual orientation.

Results indicated that seventy-nine (53 percent) of “exclusively straight” men had or were currently questioning their sexual orientation and seventy (49 percent) of “exclusively straight” men had not questioned their sexual orientation. We also examined the thirty five “sexual-minority” men's narratives; all of these participants indicated that they had questioned or were currently questioning their sexual orientation. Thus, the preliminary coding process yielded three groups that were used for further analyses: heterosexual questioning men (HQ; $n = 79$), heterosexual nonquestioning men (HNQ; $n = 70$), and sexual-minority men ($n = 35$). No significant differences were found among these three groups regarding age or racial/ethnic background (all p values $> .20$).

Further analyses included a qualitative review of the questioning and nonquestioning men's narratives, which was conducted using a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). We followed a process of inductive development for our analytic categories; thus, the first step in the coding process involved closely reading narratives for emergent themes. We then grouped emergent themes into categories and re-read all of the narratives, identifying whether categories were present or absent. Narrative responses were coded by the first two authors with adequate reliability; percentage agreement was at least 80 percent on all coding categories. Discrepant narratives were discussed to reach a consensus. Excerpts were selected for presentation as exemplars of the thematic patterns observed across the responses.

Results

Comparisons between HQ and HNQ Men

Because little information is available regarding heterosexual-identified men who report having questioned their sexual orientation, we examined masculine gender ideology, same-sex behavioral experiences, attitudes toward LGB individuals, and sexual identity development in our sample. To offer a comparison point, we contrasted HQ men's responses with those of HNQ men. Table 1 presents means, standard deviations, and *t* tests assessing differences between HQ and HNQ men for each of these variables.

Regarding masculine gender ideology, both HQ men's scores ($M = 2.05$) and HNQ men's scores ($M = 2.18$) were similarly below the midpoint of the scale, suggesting that both groups of men had equally low endorsement of statements representing masculine gender ideology. Participants also completed a measure assessing attitudes toward LGB individuals with three subscales: Endorsement of Hate Crimes, Support of LGB Civil Rights, and Internalized Affirmativeness. Both HQ and HNQ men indicated low support of hate crimes and high support of LGB civil rights; no significant differences between groups were found on either of these subscales. However, as expected, HQ men ($M = 2.87$) did indicate greater internalized affirmativeness than did HNQ men ($M = 2.49$), $t(146) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, though both groups' means were below the midpoint on this scale.

Regarding same-sex behavior, there were significant differences between the groups as expected, such that HQ men reported higher frequency of engagement with same-sex behavior ($M = 10.99$) than did HNQ men ($M = 9.60$), $t(146) = 3.49$, $p < .001$, and HQ men reported having more same-sex partners ($M = 10.49$) than did HNQ men ($M = 9.51$), $t(144) = 3.33$, $p < .001$. Overall, though, it is important to note that HQ men reported very little same-sex experience and HNQ men reported almost no same-sex experience. More specifically, half of HQ men indicated having held hands with another male, whereas 20 percent of HNQ men reported having held hands with another male. Of HQ men, 20 percent indicated they had engaged in light

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Tests of Differences between
Questioning and Nonquestioning Heterosexual Men

Variable	Questioning			Nonquestioning			<i>t</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Masculine Ideology (AMIRS)	78	2.05	0.43	69	2.18	0.58	-1.52
LGB-KASH							
Hate crimes	78	1.59	0.62	69	1.72	0.58	-1.25
Civil rights	78	4.23	0.74	69	4.07	0.75	1.31
Internalized affirmativeness	78	2.87	0.57	69	2.49	0.72	3.53***
Same-sex sexual behavior							
Frequency of activity	78	10.99	2.99	70	9.60	1.74	3.49***
Number of partners	78	10.49	2.21	68	9.51	1.24	3.33***
Sexual Identity (MoSIEC)							
Exploration	78	3.35	0.56	68	3.29	0.70	0.61
Uncertainty	78	2.67	0.36	68	2.45	0.30	3.99***
Commitment	78	3.12	0.68	68	3.43	0.72	-2.65**
Integration or synthesis	78	3.05	0.48	68	3.20	0.43	-1.83*

Note: AMIRS = Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale; LGB-KASH = Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals; MoSIEC = Measure of Sexual Identity Exploration and Commitment. Responses for masculine ideology and LGB-KASH subscales ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Responses for frequency of same-sex sexual behavior ranged from 1 = *never* to 5 = *ten or more times*, and responses for number of same-sex partners ranged from 1 = *none* to 5 = *ten or more*. Responses for sexual identity subscales ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The *t* statistic provides tests of the differences in means between the questioning and nonquestioning men's responses.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

same-sex kissing, and 7 percent of HNQ men reported this behavior. Of HQ men, 7 percent indicated having "made out" (close body contact with hugging and prolonged kissing) with another male, as opposed to 4 percent of HNQ men. Also, 7 percent of HQ men indicated having received and/or given oral sex, and 3 percent of HNQ reported these behaviors. For both HQ and HNQ men, all these experiences generally happened only one or two times with one or two people.

Last, groups were assessed regarding sexual identity development, including levels of exploration, uncertainty, commitment, and integration or synthesis. HQ and HNQ men did not differ on exploration but did differ on the other three subscales. As expected, HQ men indicated higher levels of uncertainty ($M = 2.67$) than did HNQ men ($M = 2.45$), $t(146) = 3.99$, $p < .001$; though different, both groups generally indicated low levels of uncertainty. HQ men also indicated lower levels of commitment ($M = 3.12$) than did HNQ men ($M = 3.43$) $t(146) = -2.65$, $p < .01$, and lower levels of integration or synthesis ($M = 3.05$) than did HNQ men ($M = 3.20$), $t(146) = -1.83$, $p < .05$.

Qualitative Analyses of HQ's Narratives

To better understand the questioning processes of HQ men, their narratives were analyzed for prominent themes. Five themes emerged along a continuum of unelaborated exploration to elaborated exploration. Below is a discussion of the five themes and how they represent increasingly elaborated sexual identity exploration. Themes are presented in the order in which they were determined to fall on the continuum: unelaborated questioning, commitment following other-sex exploration, interpersonal communication about sexual orientation, hypothetical thinking or perspective taking, and attraction comparisons. Themes were coded as present or not present in participant responses. The “unelaborated questioning” category excluded multiple themes because participant responses were either nondescript or equivocal. All narratives contained at least one theme.

Unelaborated questioning. Though the prompt requested that participants expand on their responses with specific examples, twenty-seven participants (34 percent) simply noted having questioned or thought about their sexual orientation without elaboration. Despite a clear articulation of having questioned, these narratives contained little to no detail. Examples of unelaborated questioning include “Yes, I have questioned my sexual orientation,” “Yes, I remember thinking about my sexual orientation since I was about 14,” and “Yes, but I know that I am straight.” Although these narratives lacked significant detail, participants within this category explicitly indicated having questioned their sexual orientation. For example, counterexamples from HNQ men include “No, I know what I am and I have no doubts,” “No, I like women,” and “No, because I just don’t.” Though it is possible that participants in this category engaged in more elaborated exploration, they did not choose to include it in their responses. Thus, this theme embodies unelaborated exploration because participant responses did not include any indication of active questioning or exploration.

Commitment following other-sex exploration. A second theme that emerged occurred in thirty-four narratives (43 percent) was a commitment to a heterosexual orientation following the realization of other-sex desires, relationships with women, or sexual activity with women. For example, one man explained, “I think the relationships I have had have been the most important thing in developing my sexual orientation. I have found that I like women a lot and have found girls/women who I really get along with and love.” Another young man stated, “I guess I’ve always been straight since I’ve only ever had crushes on women and have only dated women.” Here, other-sex desire, crushes, and relationships form the crux of a heterosexual identity; thus, same-sex exploration is not deemed necessary prior to settling on a heterosexual identity.

Nonetheless, participants suggested that by noting their other-sex desire, they did indeed think about and/or question their sexual orientation, making their heterosexuality purposeful. For example, a man explained, “I used to think to myself ‘if I was

gay I wouldn't even know it yet because I'm still so young.' But now I know that I am not gay because I feel a strong sexual attraction to women." This theme represented exploration low in elaboration because participants were not required to adopt (either realistically or hypothetically) a sexual-minority perspective, thus not actively engaging in questioning or exploration that necessarily involved consideration of a sexual-minority identity.

Interpersonal communication about sexual orientation. The third theme that emerged represented both an impetus to questioning as well as a process of questioning. In this theme, participants reported that they explored and questioned their sexual orientation through dialoguing with others. Put another way, members of the participant's social context served as informants or sites of knowledge for heterosexuality and/or sexual-minority experience. This theme occurred in nineteen narratives (24 percent). An example of this theme includes the following narrative: "I have some gay friends and I was always curious what led them to living their specific life style. Having an open mind has allowed me to talk with them and find out their motives." Here, the participant finds answers to questions about sexual orientation identity through tapping into the knowledge and experiences of others. Another participant explained, "I grew up in a very diverse and liberal environment, and my parents had a couple gay/lesbian friends. I learned about homosexuality early on, and I probably questioned my sexuality at a young age, to make sure that I indeed was attracted to members of the opposite sex." Several participants explained that their questioning began with other people's questioning of their sexual orientation. For example, one man wrote, "I have been called gay by friends before simply because I am probably a feminist and I also don't buy into the whole 'mans man' bullshit."

Participants reported both negative and positive biases in the information that social contextual influences conveyed, such that some dialogues with others were open to homosexuality (e.g., "My mother asked if I thought that maybe I was homosexual or heterosexual. [She] made it quite clear that she and my father would love me no matter what."), while others were negative (e.g., "I guess I first thought about my sexual orientation when I was with my dad and he said the worst thing you can do is be gay or do drugs."). This theme indicates a movement toward greater elaboration in exploration, such that participants were engaging with the possibility of alternative options to heterosexuality through discussions or interactions with individuals regarding sexual-minority identities and communities and applying these experiences to their personal views of their own sexual orientation.

Hypothetical thinking or perspective taking. Another theme that emerged involves cognitive exploration and consideration of a sexual-minority orientation. This theme was present in twenty-three (29 percent) of the narratives. For example, one man wrote, "Until about a year ago I never really questioned that I was attracted

to women. However, more recently I've become a bit more curious as to what having sex with a man would be like. There is a mild desire to do so, but I am not attracted to men enough to act on that desire." In responses coded for this theme, participants frequently indicated having imagined "what it would be like" to engage in sexual activity with men or adopt a sexual-minority identity.

Negative or ambivalent reactions to this possibility provided a basis for rejecting a sexual-minority identity. For example, one participant explained, "I have thought about what it would be like to be with a man and feel disgusted at the thought of it." Another man wrote, "I've tried to imagine being attracted to other males, but I find it a hard thing to imagine. It just doesn't click with me." As evidenced by these two examples, homonegativity was sometimes embedded in these responses, as imagined sexual activity reportedly incited feelings of repugnancy ("I feel disgusted") or indifference ("It just doesn't click"). Because narratives coded for this theme suggested that participants did indeed personally engage with the possibility of holding a sexual orientation other than exclusively heterosexual, this theme represents a more elaborated sexual identity exploration than any of the prior themes.

Attraction comparisons. The fifth theme was characterized by narratives where participants discerned qualitative differences in attraction toward men and women, which would provide a basis for commitment to a heterosexual identity. Attraction comparisons occurred in twenty-six narratives (33 percent). Typically, in responses that exemplified attraction comparisons, participants platonically "admired" or "appreciated" other men, while they described women as realistic options for sexual or emotional fulfillment. For example, one man wrote, "I have and have had male friends who I love but not really in a sexual way. I can tell that they are attractive, but I'm not attracted to them." In another narrative, a participant explained, "I think the bodies of women and men are both very attractive. I have been attracted to the human form since about 8th grade. I am only emotionally attracted to women though." Neutral appraisals of the "human form" were prevalent among responses in this category.

However, unlike the hypothetical thinking or perspective taking category, few narratives indicated negativity toward the possibility of same-sex attraction. Participants also noted the possibility of their feelings or behaviors changing in the future. For example, one participant wrote, "There were many points throughout my life when I stopped and asked myself if I might be attracted to men. I have decided each time that I do not find men sexually attractive, but I am still open to the idea if my mind should change in the future." Another man explained, "I first remember questioning my sexuality in middle school. Since then I have come to terms with the fact that I do sometimes find men attractive. I have not engaged in sexual activity with men, but I will if it feels right." Similar to the hypothetical thinking or perspective taking category, attraction comparisons represent a higher form of elaborated exploration because participants were cognitively, and at times behaviorally,

engaging with the possibility of same-sex attraction and negotiating the meaning this may have for their personal sexual identities.

Qualitative Comparative Analyses between HQ and Sexual-Minority Men

In addition to descriptively exploring heterosexual men's questioning processes, we also conducted a qualitative comparison of HQ men's narratives and those provided by our smaller sample of sexual-minority men. In particular, we examined HQ and sexual-minority narratives for overlapping and divergent themes.

In regard to similarities between HQ and sexual-minority men's responses, both groups of participants frequently indicated beginning with the assumption that they are heterosexual. For example, a bisexual man wrote, "I first started to think about it during the summer between sixth and seventh grade when I first started to become attracted to the same sex. Before that I was only attracted to the opposite sex." Also, both HQ and sexual-minority participants reported influence from interpersonal communication about sexual orientation. For example, a mostly straight participant explained, "I began talking about sexual orientation with predominantly heterosexual males. Later I met some male friends that were attracted to males and some females attracted to other females. I began thinking about this orientation (intrinsically) around 10." A gay male also wrote, "An important aspect of my understanding is my ability to relate to and have gay/lesbian/transgendered friends."

In regard to differences between the HQ and sexual-minority participants' narratives, sexual-minority participants often indicated that same-sex behavioral exploration was integral to their questioning process, while this theme did not necessarily emerge for HQ men. In addition, social contexts became sites of information and support among sexual-minority respondents, as opposed to simply an avenue of learning about the possibility of homosexuality. Also, somewhat obvious, the questioning processes of sexual-minority participants resulted in adopting a minority sexual orientation identity, while HQ participants reaffirmed their initial commitments to an exclusively heterosexual identity. As such, heterosexual men's responses frequently included essentialist rhetoric to explain their heterosexuality, as assumptions of heterosexuality were confirmed through the questioning process. Sexual-minority men, on the other hand, more frequently included narratives of integration, as their questioning process led them away from assumed heterosexuality and toward a need to adopt a new framework for understanding their sexuality. Last, while many sexual-minority men reported prior commitments to a heterosexual identity to avoid stigmatization (a theme that also emerged among HQ men), sexual-minority participants indicated feelings of disingenuousness and self-betrayal (de Monteflores 1993) if they chose to maintain a heterosexual identity after confirming same-sex desires. Consequently, sexual-minority men alleviated internal tensions through developing sexual-minority identities. HQ men, however, did not experience duplicitous feelings

during questioning or exploration processes, possibly because they were certain of their prior commitments to a heterosexual identity.

Summary of Results

Overall, these results suggest that many heterosexual-identified men do report having thought about and/or questioned their sexuality in the past or express a willingness to think about and/or question in the future. Furthermore, there are significant differences regarding aspects of sexual identity development, same-sex behavioral exploration, and attitudes toward LGB individuals between heterosexual-identified men who question their sexual orientation and HNQ men. Thematic analyses of HQ men's narratives suggest that questioning processes fall along a continuum of unelaborated to elaborated exploration. In this sample, less elaborated exploration included unelaborated responses or responses that indicated commitment to a heterosexual identity following positive sexual or romantic experiences with the other sex. More elaborated exploration included incorporating information about sexual orientation through interactions with sexual minorities, hypothetically considering a sexual-minority identity, and conducting "attraction comparisons" between other-sex and same-sex individuals. Qualitative comparisons between HQ men's narratives and those of sexual-minority participants reveal that while there are some parallels in questioning processes, in general these processes differ markedly. In sum, through uncovering the nuances of sexual identity formation among heterosexual men, our results call into question notions of a uniform heterosexual identity.

Discussion

A primary goal of this study was to ascertain the frequency of sexual orientation questioning among heterosexual men. Preliminary analyses revealed that more than 50 percent of "exclusively straight"-identified men indicated having questioned their sexual orientation. These men were categorized as HQ men, while exclusively straight participants who did not question were categorized as HNQ men. For many HQ participants, questioning experiences provided new information regarding heterosexual and sexual-minority identities. This new information challenged previous assumptions about heterosexuality and prompted HQ men to subjectively redefine a heterosexual identity for themselves. Ultimately, HQ men reconciled a standardized, self-evident construal of heterosexual identity with one that required exploration and development. Because HNQ men did not reformulate their understandings of heterosexuality, they continued to view their sexual identities as monolithic and unchanging.

Quantitative differences between HQ and HNQ men suggest that there are ways in which these two groups are similar and arenas where they are different. Counter to

our predictions, these groups indicated similar low levels of masculinity ideology, low endorsement of hate crimes toward LGB individuals, high endorsement of civil rights for LGB individuals, and high levels of sexual identity exploration. As expected, these populations diverged on measures of LGB internalized affirmativeness, with HQ men indicating greater endorsement of statements suggesting affiliation with sexual-minority individuals and an openness to a personal sexual-minority status. Furthermore, HQ men indicated greater sexual identity uncertainty and lower levels of sexual identity commitment and integration or synthesis. These differences are understandable given these men's current or past history of questioning their orientation. The lack of difference in masculinity ideology and sexual exploration is likely because of the general nature of the items in these scales, such that the questions specifically pertain not to the participants' own levels of masculinity but instead prescriptive notions about how men should be and do not explicitly mention same-sex exploration. Rather, high endorsement of exploration statements and low homonegativity, through favoring LGB civil rights and repudiating hate crimes, by all heterosexual participants may be because of high levels of general sexual exploration and permissive sexual attitudes in men (e.g., Oliver and Hyde 1993; Smith, Resick, and Kilpatrick 1980), along with attendance at a socially progressive university.

Just as all heterosexual men are not a uniform group, neither are the questioning processes employed by these men. Analyses of questioning processes among HQ men's narratives yielded five themes, which were classified along a continuum of "unelaborated exploration" to "elaborated exploration." More unelaborated exploration likely stems from heteronormative pressures that stigmatize any evidence of same-sex sexual interests. The tremendous stigma attached to sexual-minority groups may have dissuaded many HQ men from engaging in active questioning processes. Thus, HQ men who solely discussed other-sex exploration may have done so to protect themselves from heterosexism and homophobia. In addition, men who view heterosexuality as natural and morally advantageous are less likely to see sexual orientation questioning as personally relevant. When asked to describe what was important in developing their sexual orientation, participants who narrated unelaborated questioning may have foregone same-sex experimentation in favor of more "appropriate" heterosexual exploration (e.g., other-sex romances, sexual encounters, fantasies, etc.). Despite it being more socially acceptable, unelaborated questioning is not an invalid questioning process. Participants who noted questioning through engaging in opposite-sex exploration are actively evaluating the relevance of other-sex experiences to their developing sexual identities rather than simply complying with mandated heterosexual norms. For the HQ men in this study, other-sex activities were deliberate acts that were interpreted and (later) integrated into a sexual identity. For these participants, alternatives to a heterosexual orientation were viewed as possible, and thus understanding one's sexual orientation required some form of empirical investigation. Thus, it appears that, for these men, a heterosexual identity is neither standardized nor uniform and thus must be validated by (hetero)sexual experience. Furthermore, as

sexual identity development is a dynamic process that is highly salient in young adulthood (Worthington et al. 2002), these participants may be in the early stages of sexual identity exploration and may return later in their development to engage in more elaborated exploration (Savin-Williams 2005).

The three other themes that emerged were classified as representing an increasingly elaborative exploration processes, mainly because they involved active dialogue about sexual orientation or cognitive exploration of a sexual-minority identity. These processes were viewed as more elaborative because reports of same-sex questioning processes among heterosexual men (i.e., interpersonal communication about sexual orientation, hypothetical thinking or perspective taking, and attraction comparisons) directly validate the *active exploration* component of Worthington et al.'s (2002) heterosexual identity development model. Through active exploration, heterosexual and sexual-minority men deviate from ideologically prescribed pathways of sexual exploration to entertain same-sex fantasies and sexual activities. Indeed, even for the participants who included negative reactions to the possibility of same-sex activity, the process of active questioning challenged the confines of compulsory heterosexuality. Despite the more elaborated nature of these forms of questioning, the end result is the same as with unelaborated exploration—participants narrated having questioned and rejected the characteristics associated with sexual-minority identities to enhance their self-understandings and affirm their commitment to a heterosexual orientation. However, as with HQ men narrating less elaborated exploration, it is possible that these participants will again return to question their sexual orientation at a later point in time, with potentially different end results.

The qualitative comparison between HQ and sexual-minority men revealed anticipated parallels and divergences and lent further empirical support to Worthington et al.'s (2002) distinction between individual and social components of sexual identity among heterosexual individuals. For both HQ and sexual-minority respondents, the act of questioning accomplished two things: (1) it generated a space for interpreting *individual* desires and (2) it allowed for the examination of alternative *sociocultural* groups. For example, on encountering sexual-minority individuals, HQ and sexual-minority men were better able to establish a sense of group membership that had previously been absent or obscured by cultural norms. However, unlike sexual-minority men, HQ men maintained their original heterosexual *social* identities before and after questioning rather than developing completely new social identities. As a result, HQ men enjoyed the privileged status associated with a dominant social group that served as protection from stigmatization, especially if they chose to explore their sexual identities in socially transgressive ways (e.g., through interaction with sexual minorities or sexual experimentation with same-sex peers). Moreover, the opportunity to engage in questioning processes from a position of safety may have allowed HQ men to reconsider the *individual* components of their sexual identities (e.g., sexual values, preferred partners, referred sexual activities, etc.) even as their social identities remained constant.

Conclusions and Future Directions

With little research having explored heterosexual male sexual identity development, the results from this study provide a preliminary glimpse into the diversity of heterosexual men's developmental trajectories. Though just fewer than half of the heterosexual participants in this study indicated their sexual identity has yet to become salient or deliberate, many participants did. For this population of HQ men, perhaps societal norms associated with compulsory heterosexuality and hegemonic masculinity influence *preliminary* understandings of sexual orientation, such that heteronormativity is tacitly accepted until new social information about sexual orientation is presented. For example, heterosexual men may begin with the assumption that they are heterosexual but alter this assumption after encountering information about sexual minorities. Historically, one would expect that encountering sexual-minority groups is a more common experience for these emerging adults than for those who participated in either Eliason's or Boratav's earlier studies (Savin-Williams 2005). This subsequent broadening of awareness can lead heterosexual men to discard compulsory heterosexuality in favor of developing more informed sexual identities. As a result, we see a diversity of developmental pathways toward establishing a heterosexual identity, particularly within communities that facilitate visibility for alternative sexual identities.

In addition, through engaging in questioning processes, these HQ men expanded the individual and social identity components of their sexual identities. For example, on learning about sexual minorities, HQ men were better able to see themselves as part of a distinct social group. A heterosexual (social) identity became salient only when it was positioned among differing social identities (e.g., sexual minorities). Thus, HQ men's awareness of multiple sexual identities established a sense of group membership that had previously been absent. In addition, while maintaining ties to a heterosexual (social) identity, HQ men enjoyed the privileged status associated with a dominant group.

Despite the compelling nature of these results, they do not fully speak to the true diversity of experience within heterosexual male identity development. Studies with participants of different ethnic, geographical, educational, and economic backgrounds could help clarify patterns and nuances in sexual orientation questioning. The participants in this study were members of a geographically and institutionally liberal environment that likely contributed to the potential for questioning. Examining heterosexual identity development among more traditional undergraduate institutions, as well as noncollegiate young adults, would be necessary for generalization of these results. Interviews with heterosexual men could also better assess the complexities of their experiences and solicit more detail from those who provided little elaboration regarding their sexual orientation questioning. In addition, longitudinal studies would help increase our understanding of the trajectories of identity questioning during emerging adulthood, as the results from this study provide a snapshot of a developmental period in which many individuals are just beginning to identify as sexual minorities (Savin-Williams and Diamond 2000).

Furthermore, research should continue to assess heterosexual individuals who have not questioned their orientation to attempt to understand their developmental experiences. Thus, researchers should continue to investigate how heterosexual orientations and identities develop, taking into account both the social restrictions on exploration as well as the findings from this study that suggest that sexual orientation questioning may be more prevalent among heterosexually identified men than previously thought.

It is apparent that the heterosexual identities of the men in this study are far from uniform. As the HQ men moved into different contextual spaces, they not only were shaped by native representations of heterosexuality but also contributed to them in significant ways. For instance, many HQ men viewed the context of college as a venue for engaging in identity work. Among these HQ men, this context incited a new conceptualization of heterosexuality. Conversely, HQ men's insistence on retaining a heterosexual *social* identity perpetuated heterosexual privilege or dominance in the context of the university. Yet despite HQ participants' belief that heterosexual identities were "most desirable," this did not obstruct them from crafting a heterosexual identity that was cultivated through processes that allowed for the possibility of a sexual-minority identity. Ultimately, the results of this study throw doubts on the myth of a singular, universal heterosexual identity and should prompt researchers to further explore various trajectories of male heterosexual identity development.

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