

Trending Queer: Emerging Adults and the Growing Resistance to Compulsory Heterosexuality

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This trend study analyzes nine years (from 2011-2019) of cross-sectional survey responses to Klein's Sexual Orientation Grid (1978) to explore changes in sexual orientation among emerging adult college students. Categorical regression models based on ordinal responses revealed that participants were moving away from exclusively heterosexuality on attraction, behavior, and identity subscales at a rate of approximately 6% per year. This trend augments for women after 2014, coinciding with increased advocacy efforts related to U.S. marriage equality, but attenuates for men. Participants' race also related to variations in sexual orientation: Black participants were less likely than White participants to identify as exclusively heterosexual, whereas the pattern reversed for Asian participants relative to White participants. These findings suggest that changes in sexual orientation are occurring among emerging adults in the U.S., potentially in response to changing social and political contexts, but these changes are more pronounced in women and Black emerging adults.

Sexologists have long suggested that the sexual interests and practices of emerging adults are more complex than can be adequately explained using a binary construct of sexual orientation (Ellis, 1901; Freud, 1910; Kinsey, 1948). Kinsey and colleagues (1948; 1953), and decades later, Laumann and colleagues (1994), estimated that the general public experiences more same-sex attraction and behavior than actually assume gay, lesbian, or bisexual identities. More recently, researchers have begun to conceptualize sexual orientation in more nuanced ways, suggesting it is better represented by five groups, including “exclusively” (81% male; 71% female) and “mostly” heterosexual identities (9% male; 20% female; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2010; 2012; 2014). In a study of undergraduate college women, Thompson and Morgan (2008) found that 20% selected “mostly” rather than “exclusively” straight, as their identity category, and in another study, 67.5% of the exclusively straight women admitted they had “questioned” their sexual orientation in the past (Morgan & Thompson, 2011).

Emerging self-awareness of one's sexual orientation is a developmental process that takes place within an ecological reality of changing intra- and inter-personal, social, and socio-political contexts. Research on this topic is challenging, requiring careful consideration of the tension between the internal subjectivities of participants and social-contextual variables that

shape responding. In addition, as others (i.e., Chauncey, 1995; Foucault, 1978) have pointed out, the very existence of the homosexual person/identity may have emerged from a confluence of historical events that supported the creation of new sexual categories, which in turn led to the formation of new social identities and sexual communities; creating the possibility of critical consciousness and social movements. For example, outcomes of modern LGBT and feminist movements (e.g., social changes, enhanced rights, and increased visibility) may have challenged what Rich in 1980 called *compulsory heterosexuality*, the socially ingrained view that assumes heterosexuality and requires its enforcement in order to maintain male dominance over women.

As social meaning and consequences (and sexual-social identities) change, due to changes in ideology and the political landscape, the nature of sexual orientations will also change to reflect this new meaning (D’Emilio, 2005; Liptak, 2015)¹, leading, potentially, to the expansion (or restriction) of sexual orientation options. Consequently, the operationalization of sexual identities will also need to change (Savin-Williams, 2005). For some, these expanded sexual orientation categories may provide categories that “fits” who they are. Others, who may have always identified as sexual or gender minorities, may simply feel more comfortable responding as such in a research study, reflecting less a demographic shift, and more “coming out” in survey form (Bridges & Moore, 2018). Finally, queer theory (Warner, 1993) warns that the very process of establishing, and ultimately imposing, sexual identities, even those emerging from movements built on resistance to compulsory heterosexuality, will inevitably encounter new resistance to that effort, which will in turn lead to new forms of sexual organization.

The universality of these changes should also be considered with caution. Nationally representative studies of LGBT individuals in the U.S. have yielded mixed results about the consistency of changes across race and gender. Whereas, Laumann et al., (1994), in their national survey, noted variation in same-sex attraction, behavior, and identity across race, Gates’ (2014) analysis of four national surveys found few differences in race/ethnicity between LGBT participants. In addition, a recent analysis found a disproportionate shift in young Black women’s identities toward bisexual or “not exclusively heterosexual” identities, also noting a shift in women of all races identifying as bisexual (Bridges and Moore, 2018).

The past decade has seen increased interest in exploring the prevalence and diversity of sexual orientation(s) among youth and young adults (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010; 2012; 2014; Morgan & Thompson, 2011; Thompson & Morgan, 2008). This research challenges previous approaches to operationalizing sexual orientation as unidimensional, and revisits earlier notions of fluid or complex sexualities (see Kinsey, 1948; Klein, 1978; Laumann et al., 1994). A recent study (Phillips et al., 2019) found that, from 2005 to 2015, a growing number of high school adolescents were identifying as bisexual, lesbian, or gay; and that there was an increase in same-sex sexual behavior among female adolescents. Similarly, a longitudinal study by Kaestel (2019) tracking a cohort from adolescence (1995, ages 16-18) to adulthood (2009, late 20s-early 30s) concluded that sexual orientation comprises both static and changing aspects, spanning young adulthood, and varying by gender.

The Current Study. The current study explores trends in emerging adult college students’ self-reported sexual orientation across almost a decade, from 2011 to 2019 in order to assess whether, and to what extent, the changes identified in previous studies (e.g., Phillips et al.,

¹ It is worth noting the cautions offered by some (Conrad, 2010) about the limited potential of the marriage equality movement to counter compulsory heterosexuality, suggesting it represents another manifestation of heteronormativity.

2019) are static or represent a continuous trend away from exclusive heterosexuality. The study will also evaluate possible interactions among race, gender, and sexual orientation. Studies evaluating how race intersects with sexual orientation have been inconsistent, highlighting differences among racial groups in some instances, but not others (Gates, 2014; Laumann et al., 1994). Greene (1998) argued that the various historical stressors that have played a role in shaping the sexual prejudice found in the Black community may have also led to resistance, increasing the value placed on family bonds and reducing the likelihood of LGBT youth being ostracized (compared to White LGBT youth). Ongoing cultural and political shifts pertaining to both race and sexual orientation may similarly contribute to an increasingly complex interaction between race and sexual identification. Because the various intersections of race and sexual orientation are complex and potentially evolving, they require additional exploration using methods that separate out attractions, behaviors, and identification.

The primary goal of this study is to attempt to gather further evidence of variation in sexual orientation (e.g., attraction, behavior, identity) in emerging adults, and explore how these variations have changed over time, and in what ways they are influenced by gender and race.

Method

Sample

From 2011 to 2019 (excluding 2013²), 5,062 undergraduate students enrolled at a public university in New York State were recruited through the Department of Psychology's subject pool or through other classes. Students completed an online anonymous questionnaire that included measures described below. All participants were emerging adults, ranging in age from 18 to 29, with a median age of nineteen ($mean = 19.5$; $SD = 1.5$); and 58% identified as female, 42% male, and <1% identified as transgender, gender non-conforming, or other. For race, 68% identified as White, 5% Black/African American, 16% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American/First People, and 10% reported a race of mixed or other.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire identifying their sex, race, and sexual orientation. Participant sex was operationalized in terms of the following categories: male, female, transgender male, transgender female, gender queer, gender non-conforming (GNC), gender fluid, and other. Due to the small numbers of respondents in these categories, transgender men and women and GNC participants were excluded from these analyses. Participant race was operationalized in terms of the categories: White, Black, Asian, Native American, mixed/other-race. Due to the small number of participants reporting a race of Native American, these participants were combined with mixed/other-race participants. Following Klein's (1978) approach, sexual orientation was operationalized along three dimensions: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. For sexual attraction, participants were asked to indicate from 1 (*other sex only*) to 7 (*same-sex only*) their response to the question, "*Sexual Attraction: Who turns you on? Who do you find attractive as a real or potential sexual partner?*" For sexual behavior, participants were asked to indicate from 1 (*other sex only*) to 7 (*same-sex only*) their response to the question, "*Sexual Behavior: Who are your sexual contacts and partners?*" Finally, for sexual identity, participants were asked to indicate from 1 (*heterosexual*

² In 2013, it became necessary to focus lab resources on a separate line of research. Consequently, sexual orientation data were not collected for this year.

only) to 7 (*gay/lesbian only*), 8 (*asexual*), and 9 (*bisexual*) their response to the question, “*Sexual Identity: How do you think of yourself?*”

Klein (1978) originally explored variations in sexual attraction, behavior, and identity along a seven-point scale, and we consider his approach both conceptually and methodologically useful in exploring a range of questions involving sexual attitudes, sexual behaviors, and sexual consent. It also presents some conceptual challenges. Although the terms “mostly” and “somewhat” heterosexual may describe nuanced notions of personal sexual identity, they are not widely endorsed as social identities. For example, a “mostly heterosexual” person may not understand questions about a coming out experience. Similarly, the range “mostly heterosexual” to “mostly homosexual” may not provide appropriate identity options for someone who typically describes themselves with the label “bisexual”. To address this last issue, we made the decision to include “I prefer the term bisexual” as an optional response to the sexual identity question since year 2016. However, to model this variable within our original 7-point scale, it was necessary to randomly assign the 9 (*bisexual*) to one of categories between 2 (*mostly heterosexual*) and 6 (*mostly homosexual*) based on the empirical relative frequencies of participant responses of the corresponding year.

Analysis and Results

Analytic Plan. Of primary interest was the extent to which individuals in our sample demonstrated greater variation over time with respect to sexuality, characterized in terms of sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. We conceptualized each variable as multiple ordered categories, whereon participants could move from one end of the scale (*other sex only* = 1) toward the next (*same sex only* = 7) through logically-sequential steps (*mostly other sex* = 2, *somewhat other sex more* = 3, etc.). We first regressed each outcome variable on time (i.e., year data was collected), sex (i.e., male versus female), and non-White status (i.e., Black, Asian, and “other-race”) in separate univariate cumulative logit models (Figure 1). These models establish reference categories (*l to j*) from one end of scale, “exclusively heterosexual” or “other sex only” depending on the criterion. Coefficient estimates for each parameter indicate whether a 1 unit increase in the predictor (e.g., year) increases or decreases the log-odds of categories (*l to j*). Consequently, coefficients generated in subsequent analyses will indicate the contribution that each predictor variable makes to the likelihood of participants’ falling toward the exclusive heterosexual (or other sex focused) end of the outcome measures (a positive coefficient), or away from it (a negative coefficient).

Predictor variables were coded so that the reference categories were 2011 (the first year of data collection), female, and White; with the estimated coefficients reflecting the expected change along the ordered continua associated with each passing year, being male, and being non-White, respectively. We were also interested in whether or not 2014 represented a marked shift in the rate of change - as this year coincides with marriage equality at the national level - and so coded before 2014 as the reference category, with the estimated coefficient representing the expected (i.e., average) change associated with post-2014 cohorts. Because estimation of the model requires a logit transformation, the estimated coefficients are interpretable as the expected change in the log of the odds ratio associated with each variable. To facilitate interpretation, we also convert coefficients from log odds to odds.

Figure 1. Cumulative logit model for ordinal responses.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{logit}[P(Y \leq j)] &= \alpha_j + \beta x, j = 1, \dots, J - 1 \\ \text{logit}[P(Y \leq j)] &= \log\left(\frac{P(Y \leq j)}{1 - P(Y \leq j)}\right), j = 1, \dots, J - 1\end{aligned}$$

For example, as x changes from 1 to 2:

$$\frac{P(Y \leq j|x = 2)/P(Y > j|x = 2)}{P(Y \leq j|x = 1)/P(Y > j|x = 1)} = e^\beta, j = 1, \dots, J - 1$$

If $\beta > 0$, then

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{P(Y \leq j|x = 2)/P(Y > j|x = 2)}{P(Y \leq j|x = 1)/P(Y > j|x = 1)} &> 1 \\ \Rightarrow P(Y \leq j|x = 2)/P(Y > j|x = 2) &> P(Y \leq j|x = 1)/P(Y > j|x = 1)\end{aligned}$$

as x increases from 1 to 2, the cumulative odds of $Y \leq j$ increases.

On the other hand, if $\beta < 0$, then

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{P(Y \leq j|x = 2)/P(Y > j|x = 2)}{P(Y \leq j|x = 1)/P(Y > j|x = 1)} &< 1 \\ \Rightarrow P(Y \leq j|x = 2)/P(Y > j|x = 2) &< P(Y \leq j|x = 1)/P(Y > j|x = 1)\end{aligned}$$

the cumulative odds of $Y \leq j$ decreases as x increases from 1 to 2.

Univariate analyses were run first to estimate the unconditioned effects of each variable on each of the three outcomes. Then, we ran a multivariate model to evaluate the unique influences of each variable, as well as test whether sex and pre- versus post-2014 status had an interactive effect. We anticipated that post-2014 cohorts would demonstrate a lower log odds of being exclusively heterosexual, but that this effect would be significantly weaker for men. As with any multiplicative model, the estimated coefficient for each of the constitutive variables (e.g., sex) can be interpreted as their effect on sexual attitudes, behavior and identity when the other constitutive variable (i.e., post-2014) is equal to 0 (see Cohen, West & Aiken, 2014). As such, the effect for sex can be interpreted as the expected change in log odds corresponding to being male (versus female) prior to 2014, whereas the effect of being assessed post-2014 pertains to female participants (relative to pre-2014 females). The interaction term reflects how the effect of the post-2014 assessment differs for men in terms of log odds.

Univariate Analysis. As shown in Table 1, starting in 2011, the progression of years had a significant impact on sexual orientation, as predicted. More specifically, across the nine years of data collection, there was a roughly 7% decrease in the log odds per year that participants would report sexual attraction toward “other sex only”, an effect which remained consistent across the behavior and identification categories. Large effects were observed for sex, with men being 2.3 times more likely to report attraction toward the “other sex only” end of the continuum, with similar but smaller effects for the behavior and identity outcomes. Other-race participants were more likely to report sexual attraction that falls toward the “same-sex only” end of the scale, whereas Asian participants were more likely to report sexual attraction that falls toward the “other sex only” end of the scale. The results for the sexual behavior and identity outcomes were similar, with Asian participants being more likely, and black and other-race participants being less likely, to report sexual behaviors and identity toward the “other sex only” and

Table 1. Results for Univariate and Multivariate Cumulative Logit Models

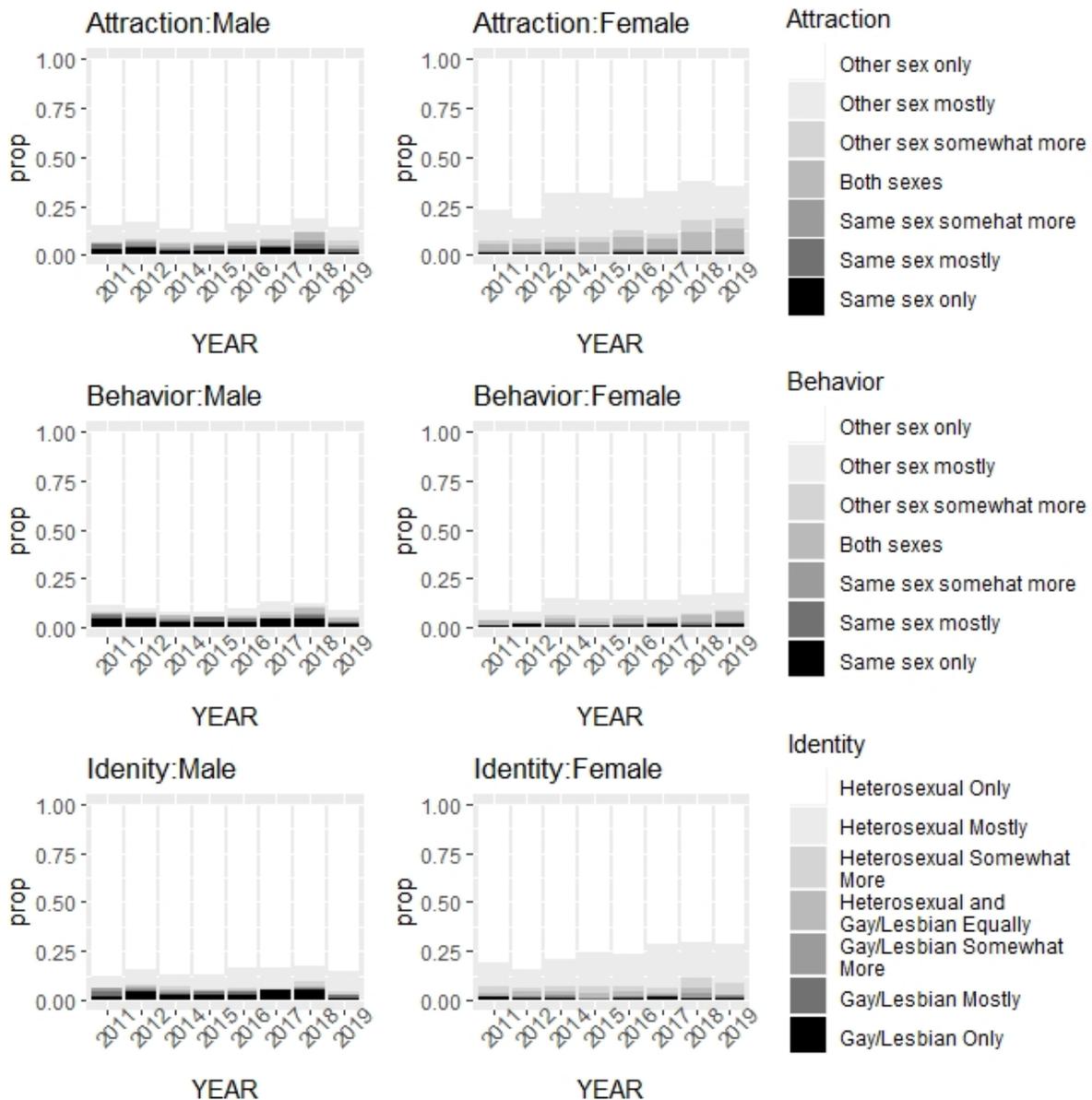
Predictor	Attraction			Behavior			Identity		
	b	SE	Exp(b)	b	SE	Exp(b)	b	SE	Exp(b)
Univariate Cumulative Logit Models									
Year	-0.07	0.01**	0.9	-0.07	0.02**	0.9	-0.08	0.01**	0.9
Sex	0.82	0.07**	2.3	0.32	0.09**	1.4	0.50	0.08**	1.6
Race									
Black	-0.21	0.15	0.8	-0.40	0.18*	0.7	-0.36	0.15*	0.7
Asian	0.27	0.10*	1.3	0.26	0.13	1.3	0.25	0.10*	1.32
Other	-0.22	0.10	0.8	-0.29	0.13*	0.7	-0.31	0.11*	0.7
Post-2014	-0.40	0.08**	0.7	-0.40	0.11**	0.7	-0.34	0.09**	0.7
Multivariate Cumulative Logit Models									
Year	-0.07	0.02**	0.9	-0.06	0.03*	0.9	-0.09	0.02**	0.9
Sex Male	0.18	0.15	1.2	-0.34	0.20	0.7	0.04	0.16	1.04
Post-2014	-0.37	0.14*	0.7	-0.45	0.19*	0.6	-0.17	0.15	0.8
Race									
Black	-0.14	0.15	0.9	-0.36	0.18	0.7	-0.31	0.16	0.7
Asian	0.25	0.10*	1.3	0.25	0.13	1.3	0.24	0.11*	1.3
Other	-0.24	0.10*	0.8	-0.33	0.13*	0.7	-0.34	0.11**	0.72
Sex Male: Post-2014	0.81	0.17**	2.2	0.81	0.23**	2.2	0.57	0.18**	1.8

Note. N = 5062. Coefficients reflect changes in the likelihood of falling toward the “other sex only” or “heterosexual only” end of the attraction, behavior, or identity measures. The reference categories for year, sex, race, and post-2014 were 2011, female, White, and pre-2014, respectively. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

“heterosexual only” ends of the scales. Although Black participants were also less likely to report sexual attraction with the “other sex only”, these differences were not statistically significant. Finally, participants surveyed in, or after, 2014, were less likely to report sexual attraction, behavior, and identity that falls toward the “other-sex only” and “heterosexual only” end of the scale than those surveyed before 2014. Taken together, these results imply that - at the univariate level - sexual attraction, behavior and identity are - in general - less exclusively heterosexual over time, after 2014, and for women and Black and other-race participants, but more exclusively heterosexual for Asian participants.

Multivariate Tests. Multivariate tests were conducted to assess the combined and conditional contributions of the predictor variables. Table 1 displays the results of the multivariate not participants were assessed prior or post 2014, effect for time was found.

Figure 2. Change in Sexual Attraction, Behavior, and Identity from 2011-2019 by Sex.



cumulative logit models for the three outcomes. After controlling for sex, race, and whether or an In each passing year, individuals were less likely to report themselves as exclusively heterosexual with respect to attitudes, behavior, and identity (Figure 2). The effects for Black versus White participants were borderline significant for behavior and identity, though the effects for Asian and other race versus White were robust (except for the effect of being Asian on behavior).

With respect to the interaction variables, the simple effect for sex was not significantly associated with any of the three outcomes, suggesting that being male conferred no differential impact prior to 2014. By comparison, the simple effect for post-2014 cohorts was significant for attraction and behavior, suggesting that responses by females on these outcomes were moving away from exclusively heterosexual during this time period, even when controlling for the linear effect of time (i.e., year). That is, it appears that aside from the expected diminishment in exclusive heterosexuality tied to each passing year, there is an additional impact for female participants assessed after 2014. The interaction between sex and post-2014 assessment was also significant across all three outcomes. Relative to men prior to 2014, the estimated log odds suggest that male participants surveyed in or after 2014 were more likely to report being on the “other sex only” continuum for attitudes, behavior, and identity. These findings, taken together, suggest that there is a linear impact of time, whereby successive cohorts are becoming less exclusively heterosexual; but, following 2014, this trend appears to be accelerating for women and potentially decelerating for men. Regarding the latter, the shift for men post-2014 appears to be countervailing the expected impact of time on diminishing heterosexual exclusivity.

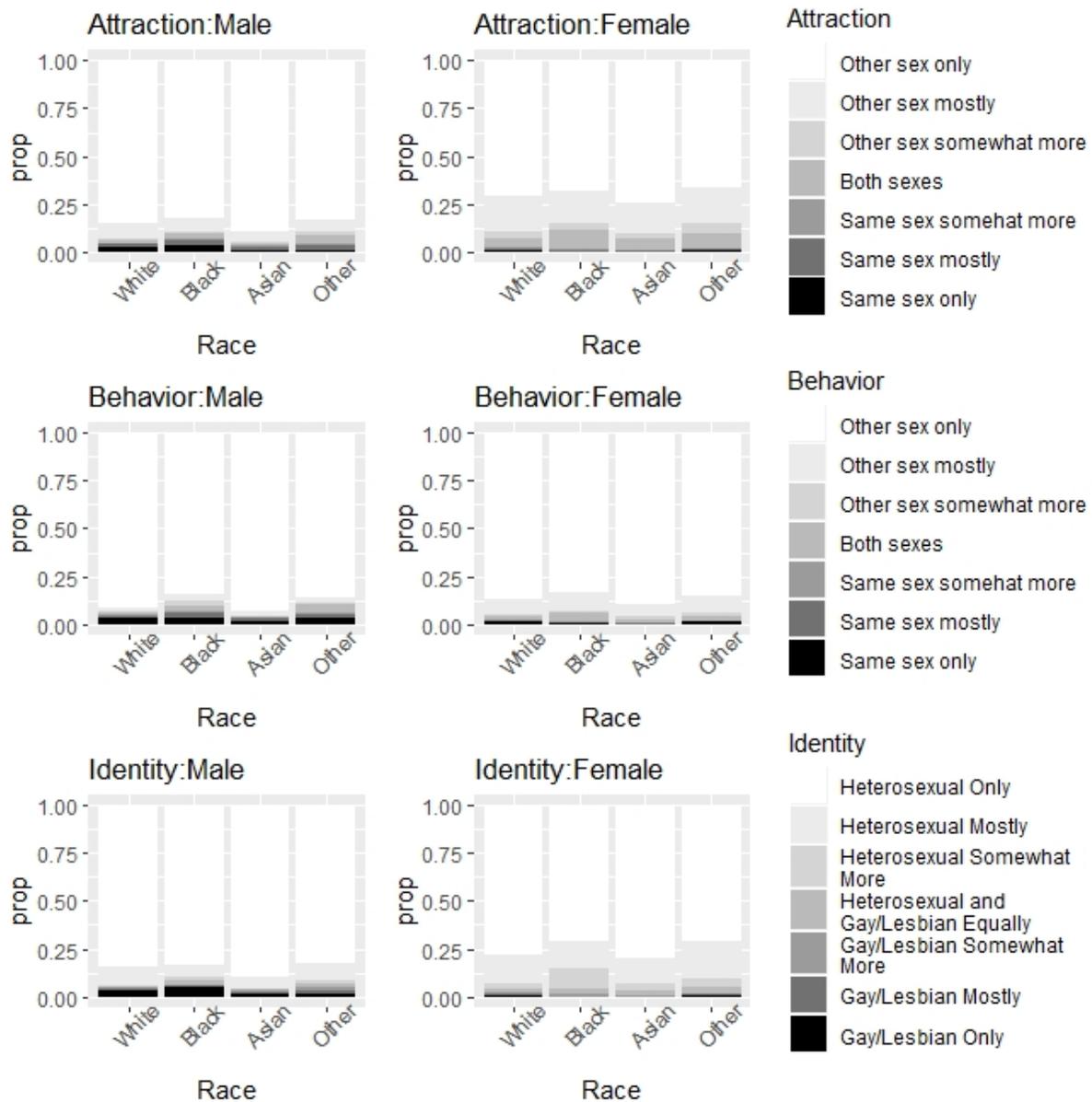
Discussion

The current study expands on the work of Phillips et al. (2019) and others (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams 2010; Morgan & Thompson, 2011), and evaluated changes in reported rates of sexual attraction, behavior, and identity among emerging adult college students from 2011 to 2019, to determine whether the trends mentioned above continue, how they might intersect with sex and race, and explore whether they might be associated with political and cultural shifts proximal to 2014. The results suggest that (1) heterosexuality remains the norm, but there appears to be an increasing willingness to report identity and sexual attraction as something other than exclusively heterosexual; (2) although males and females did not significantly differ on any criteria prior to 2014, following 2014 male and female respondents appeared to gravitate increasingly toward and away from exclusive heterosexuality, respectively, and to a greater degree than would be expected by the passage of time alone; and (3) the respondent’s race influenced their sexual orientation, with Asian participants being more likely to endorse exclusively heterosexual attitudes, behaviors, and identification, and Black participants being less likely, all else being equal (e.g., sex).

Although successive cohorts have become less exclusively heterosexual, this change appears primarily among women. To understand these differences, it is useful to reflect on the 40+ years of second wave feminism and successor movements, which have slowly trickled beyond academic and activist circles into the public sphere. Civil equality gains of second wave feminism gave women greater economic and legal power to reject compulsory heterosexuality, after which queer theory-informed third wave feminism sought to reshape mainstream culture by troubling the naturalness and intelligibility of sex and gender. By the mid-2010s, sexual fluidity for women was a recognizable trope in mass media entertainment, while depictions of sexual fluidity remained comparably rare for men (GLAAD, 2015). Although we cannot draw causal links between media representations of sexual fluidity and the gender differences identified in

this study, these representations (more readily available to young women) introduce alternative ways to make sense of sexual feelings outside the strictures of compulsory heterosexuality.

Figure 3. Average Estimated Differences in Sexual Attraction, Behavior, and Identity by Participant Race and Sex from 2011-2019



In addition, these changes for women accelerated around or after 2014, years that witnessed a resurgence in feminist activism enabled by smartphones, social media, and global connectivity--a phenomenon Cochrane dubbed the fourth-wave of feminism (2013). Politics of race, gender, and sexuality were also being visibly and continuously contested during this period, spreading virally on social media and among influential celebrities. Reform of masculine gender and sex roles, however, has not proceeded at a similar pace (Kimmel, 2013; Kaufman, 2019), as recent sexual

harassment/assault scandals and tragic consequences of toxic masculinity have shown (Lofgreen, Mattson, Wagner, Ortiz, & Johnson, 2017; Seibold-Simpson et al., 2018).

The intersection of race and sexual identification, as well as their intersection with other identifications (e.g., religious; Narui, 2011), are similarly complex (Huang et al., 2010) and can lead to variation in the extent to which an individual adopts the broader values and mores of others with similar identifications. For example, Szymanski and Sung (2013) found that Asian American students were more likely than Whites to move toward the “exclusively heterosexual” and “different-sex only” ends of the sexual identification, attraction, and behavioral continua. These findings align with scholarship indicating that conformity to gendered social norms and a characterization of same-sex behavior as deviant are common threads across Asian cultures (Liu & Chan, 1996). However, Asian participants may also have been reticent to disclose a non-heterosexual orientation for fear of violating, or because of pressure to conform to, the “model minority” stereotype applied to Asian Americans by society broadly (Narui, 2011).

By comparison, Black participants were found to be gravitating away from exclusively heterosexual attractions, behaviors, and identification (in contrast to Laumann et al., 1994), representing a shift away from anti-homosexual threads identified in Black communities by previous research (Ward, 2005). Possible explanations for these differences include the recent increased visibility of Black and Latina queer women confronting toxic masculinity on the national political stage, increased awareness of the historical role queer people of color have played throughout both the LGBT and Black Civil Rights movements (Ginelle, 2015; Duberman, 1993; Jeanmarie, 1988), and more recently, the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, both pioneered by women of color activists (many of whom identified as queer). The existence and visibility of these prominent Black and queer role models, combined with a popular culture and media that increasingly embraces queer communities of color may present new possibilities to the Black youth who participated in our study (GLAAD, 2019). Additional research that helps to uncover aggregate patterns with respect to race and sexual orientation will help paint a picture of the broader social context in which individual-level processes are playing out.

Strengths and Limitations. The primary strengths of this study are the multi-cohort design, multidimensional measures of sexual orientation, and sophisticated statistical modeling of the phenomena under study. However, there were several limitations. First, the majority of our cohorts were assessed following 2014, and we would have increased confidence in our findings provided additional data from prior to 2011. Second, in order to retain consistent measurement across cohorts, it was necessary to operationalize sexual *identity* using the original 7 categories, and assigned randomly one of the categories 2 to 6 to those who identified as “bisexual.” However, we ran additional analysis using 3-level (collapsing 2-6 and 9 into middle level “bisexual”) scale and the results were consistent (data not shown). Third, because the demographic variable *Latinx* cuts across all race categories, it could not be included in the statistical model in the same way as other groups and was not included in the analyses reported in this brief. However, future analyses will investigate the complex relationship of sex, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation over time. Finally, our sample comprised students from a single university in the Northeast, which may be more varied in their reported sexual orientation (Gates, 2014). As such, the standard cautions apply regarding overgeneralization of the current findings.

Summary

The current study demonstrated that sexual orientation -- composed of sexual attraction, behavior, and identity -- is a mutable phenomenon that has changed over time, and is likely

vulnerable to changing social, cultural, and political realities linked to gender, race, and sexuality. It is clear from the responses gathered over almost a decade that attempting to capture sexual orientation with two to three categories is inadequate to the important task of accurately describing the range and variety of human sexuality. Possible next steps following this study are numerous and may include exploring further the interactions of gender, race, and sexual attraction, behavior, and identity over time; considering how changes in our understanding of sexual orientation affects other research areas in LGBT-affirmative psychology, such as coming out, minority stress, sexual prejudice, and relationships; and continuing to develop new and better techniques to measure this complex and changing phenomenon.

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