

A Critical Review of Sexual Fluidity Literature and the Potential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sexual Orientation Identity

Sydney Hainsworth (University of Arizona) & Russell B. Toomey (University of Arizona)

Background

Adolescence and young adulthood are important times for identity development in many domains, including sexual orientation identity (SOI; Arnett, 2000; Arnold, 2017; Sokol, 2009).

This review serves as a critique of the SOI developmental theories that imply that SOI development follows stages or milestones that are similar for everyone, ending once an individual has decided on a sexual orientation identity (Cass, 1979; McCann & Fassinger, 1996; Yarhouse, 2001).

Life course theory acknowledges that development continues throughout an individual's life and can be impacted by external factors (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003).

This critical review used a life course theory lens (Elder, 1998; Elder et al., 2003) to argue that the cultural and social changes that occurred with the COVID-19 pandemic could have had an impact on the SOI of some individuals and that this proposal merits further study.

Methods and Sample

Literature for this review was gathered from peer-reviewed journals in December 2022 and January 2023 from Google Scholar.

Keyword search terms:

- "sexual orientation": "stability", "change", "fluidity", "transition shift", and "mobility"
- "COVID-19": "identity fluidity", "identity development", "identity distress", and "generation identity development"

31 studies of SOI were included in this review, see Tables 1 and 2 for more descriptive information.

10 studies of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on identity were also included in this review.

Examination of the Sexual Fluidity Literature

Table 1

Data sources used in SOI fluidity publications included in this review

Data Source	Abbreviation	Publications
National Longitudinal Study of National Adolescent to Adult Health	Add Health	Everett (2015); Fricke & Sironi (2015); Liu et al. (2019); Sabia (2015); Savin-Williams et al. (2012); Silva (2018)
Growing Up Today Study	GUTS	Katz-Wise et al. (2014; 2017a); Ott et al. (2011; 2013)
Study with 80 sexual-minority women	Diamond Study	Diamond (2000; 2003; 2005; 2008)

Rate and Direction of SOI Fluidity

Overall rate of fluidity: 1.4% to 78%

The most common identity shift was heterosexual to sexual minority (n = 11).

Least stable: Primarily same/other-sex oriented (n = 3)

Most stable: Heterosexual and gay/lesbian (n = 4)

Within studies, bisexual was a stable SOI for some, and fluid for others.

Predictors of SOI Fluidity

Non-significant: Age, SES, race/ethnicity, SOI milestones

Significant positive associations with fluidity: Identifying as a sexual minority, lower initial level of same/other-sex attraction, past year sexual behavior, religiosity

Gender: 6 studies found women to have more fluid SOI, 6 studies found men and women to have equally fluid SOI, 1 study found men to have more fluid SOI

Table 2

Descriptive summary of fluidity studies (demographics at baseline if applicable)

Data Source /Author	Sample Size	Country (State)	Gender	Age (Mean)	Sexual Minority (%)	White (%)	Method	Method	Method	Identity Measure
Add Health	11,727 - 258	US	F & M	16	10%	65%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Kinsey Style
Berona et al., 2018	2,450	US (PA)	F	14	27%	41%	Qual	Longitudinal	Interview	Kinsey Style
Callahan & McGuire, 2022	90	US	TGF, TGM, & Enby	21	78%	Majority	Qual	Cross-Sectional	Interview	Free Response
Campbell et al., 2021	11,543	Australia	F	18-23	38%		Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Kinsey Style
Diamond et al., 2017	294	US (UT)	F & M	24	66%	87%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey & Daily Diary	Not Reported
Diamond Study	80	US (NY)	F	22	100%	85%	Qual	Longitudinal	Interview	Lesbian, bisexual, unlabeled, heterosexual
Dickson et al., 2013	1,037	New Zealand	F & M	21	5%		Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other
Feinstein et al., 2019	1,057	US	F	21	100%	78%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Lesbian or bisexual
GUTS	13,952 - 1,461	US	F & M	23	19%	93%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Kinsey Style
Katz-Wise et al., 2017b	140	US	F, M, & TGM	24	41%	Majority	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Kinsey Style
Katz-Wise, 2015	199	US (WI)	F & M	21	100%	84%	Quant	Cross-Sec	Survey	Kinsey Style
Mereish et al., 2017	489	US	F	28	100%	82%	Quant	Cross-Sec	Survey	Bisexual or queer
Morgan et al., 2018	15	US (NE)	M	17	100%	100% Black	Qual	Longitudinal	Interview	Free Response and Kinsey Style
Rosario et al., 2006	156	US (NY)	F & M	18	100%	22%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Lesbian/gay, bisexual, straight, other
Stewart et al., 2019	744	US (SE)	F & M	15	13%	48%	MM	Longitudinal	Survey	Heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, unsure, unlabeled, other
Xu et al., 2021	6,037	England	F & M	16	5%	96%	Quant	Longitudinal	Survey	Kinsey Style

Note: F = cisgender female; M = cisgender male; TGF = transgender female; TGM = transgender male; Enby = nonbinary

Examination of the COVID-19 Identity Literature

Several studies have shown how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way individuals think about many different aspects of their identity such as:

- Overall identity (Booker et al., 2022; Pasupathi et al., 2022; Sequeira & Dacey, 2020)
- Professional identity (Brown et al., 2022; Cullum et al., 2020; Findyartini et al., 2020; Sequeira & Dacey, 2020)
- Racial/ethnic identity (Gao & Sai, 2021; Wagaman et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021)

Social distancing orders have been associated with lower levels of hope for the future, identification with the LGBTQ+ community, sense of pride in that they belonged to the LGBTQ+ community, perceptions of minority stress, and significantly higher levels of alcohol use (Scroggs et al., 2021).

Conclusion

It is not uncommon for an individual to identify with different SOI labels across their lifetime. There are many internal and external factors that may encourage someone to adopt a different SOI label.

Many people re-examined parts of their identity over the lock-down period of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted social structures and relationships which have been shown to be correlated with SOI fluidity. For researchers to have a more well-rounded view of sexual development and fluidity, it is vital that we examine the impact of this world-wide, society changing event of the COVID-19 pandemic.

