

Long abstract

Fertility intentions and sexual orientation: evidence from the 2020 youth survey in Estonia
Hanna Vseviiov, Mark Gortfelder, Allan Puur

Introduction

There is an increasing body of literature investigating experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual-identified (LGB) people in a variety of domains such as education (Goodenow et al. 2016), the labour market (Ahmed et al. 2013; Leppel 2016; Martell and Eschelbach Hansen 2017), health and health behaviour (Rath et al. 2013; Thomeer et al. 2016; Watson et al. 2018; Liu and Reczek 2021), the same-sex dating and partnerships (Költö et al. 2018; Kolk and Andersson 2020).

Research into these issues has been driven by significant changes in the attitudes towards people with other than heterosexual orientation. With just a few decades we have witnessed a shift in Western countries from homosexual sex being a criminal offence to legal recognition of the same-sex partnerships and marriage, and emerging possibilities for same-sex to couples to become parents (Flores 2019). However, despite marked progress, evidence from the above studies suggests that LGB people still struggle with social acceptance and are subject to a host of disparities relative to their straight counterparts, including worse physical and mental health, higher rates of substance use, etc.

Although the availability of statistics on sexual minority populations remains limited, and most national statistical offices do not publish sexual identity population estimates, there is evidence from a number of countries that the percentage of adults identifying as LGB is on the rise in several countries (Ott et al. 2011; Carvalho et al. 2017; Bridges and Moore 2018). Moreover, demographic projections indicate that the size of sexual minority populations may increase significantly over the coming decades (Wilson et al. 2021). This provides an additional motivation to pursue research on sexual minority populations.

Previous studies of fertility intentions among sexual minorities

The literature review shows that there are only a few studies that explore intentions to become parents among LGB people and the factors associated with it. The scarcity of research relates to the fact that self-reports, which are considered a preferred option for the measurement of sexual orientation, are seldom available in large multi-disciplinary surveys (Kühne et al. 2019).

Using nationally representative data from the 2002 US National Survey of Family Growth, Riskind and Patterson (2010) studied parenting intentions, desires, and attitudes of childless lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals 15 to 44 years of age. They found that gay men and lesbian women were less likely than matched heterosexual peers to express desire for parenthood. Moreover, gay men who expressed desire to become parents were less likely than heterosexual men to express the intention to become parents; however, this was not true for women. Despite being less likely to express parenting desires, gay and lesbian participants endorsed the value of parenthood just as strongly as did heterosexual participants. A follow-up by Riskind and Tornello (2017) involved a more recent (2011–2013) National Survey of Family Growth sample that included bisexual individuals. This study revealed that bisexual women and men's parenting desires and intentions more closely resembled those of heterosexual individuals than they did of lesbian and gay individuals.

Tate, Patterson and Levy (2019), using US data from the National Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health on childless lesbian, gay, or heterosexual individuals (n=7,600) explored

intentions for parenthood, ideal family size, and predictors of parenting intentions as a function of gender and sexual orientation. The authors observed that 87% of heterosexual participants intended to become parents but this held for only 56% of lesbian and gay participants. In addition, among those who intended parenthood, lesbian and gay individuals reported smaller intended family sizes than did their heterosexual peers. Somewhat different results were reported by Simon et al. (2018). Based on a convenience sample of childless women (n=196), they found no differences by sexual orientation for women's desires and intentions to have children, their idealization of parenthood, and perceptions of their parental self-efficacy.

European studies of fertility intentions among sexual minorities are based on small-scale surveys using convenience samples. Baiocco and Laghi (2013) found that childless lesbian and gay individuals were less likely than heterosexual peers to report parenting desires and intentions. The difference between the desires was almost 30 percentage points for both men (52% compared to 81%) and women (61% compared to 90%). Of those who expressed parenting desires, 30% of gay men, 69% of heterosexual men, 45% of lesbian women and 81% of heterosexual women expressed a parenting intention too. Kranz et al. (2018) focused on the desires and intentions for fatherhood among German gay and heterosexual men. As in other similar studies, the results show that gay participants report weaker fathering desires and intentions than their heterosexual counterparts. However, there was no wider desire-intention gap among gay than among heterosexual participants. Gato et al. (2020) analysed anticipation of parenthood among lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women, and also gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men in Portugal. Findings indicated that LGB individuals were less likely to intend to have children than heterosexual individuals; furthermore, among LGB individuals, lesbian women expressed stronger intentions to have children than did gay men. Bisexual individuals were not significantly different from any of the other groups.

In this study, we complement the existing research on European countries by analysing data from a recent youth survey conducted in Estonia.

Research questions, data and methods

We pose three research questions: i) what is the sexual orientation of young adults aged 16–19; ii) what are the background factors associated with the LGB orientation, and iii) what is the relationship between fertility intentions and sexual orientation.

Our study is based on a survey conducted during Spring 2020. A probability sample men and women aged 16–19 was drawn from the population register; 1,632 young adults answered an online questionnaire. The survey themes included parental home, education and employment, life goals and plans for future, health, relationships and sexuality. Sexual orientation was assessed with a categorical measure that asked participants about their attraction towards the opposite or the same sex. Response options were “only the opposite sex”, “mainly the opposite sex”, “the opposite and same sex equally”, “mainly the same sex” and “only the same sex”. Fertility intentions were measured in terms of lifetime childbearing intentions i.e. the number of children the respondent intended to have. To answer the research questions, we employ descriptive and multivariate analysis (linear and logistic regression models).

Preliminary findings

According to survey responses, the sexual orientation of young adults in Estonia is as follows: 75.9% feel attracted only the opposite sex, 13.2% are attracted mainly to the opposite sex,

4.2% are attracted to the opposite and same sex equally, 1.2% are attracted mainly to the same sex and 1.0% only to the same sex. A small fraction of respondents (0.5%) chose an open-ended category “other”; in most cases, these respondents defined themselves as asexual. Finally, 3.9% could not answer or refused. The analysis suggests that the latter group exhibits similarity to the respondents with LGB orientation. Compared to an earlier study of adult population aged 18–54 (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 2003), the prevalence of LGB orientation appears higher due to greater proportion of those who reported to be attracted mainly to the opposite sex or to both sexes equally.

The results based on the logistic regression models identified factors that are associated with lower and higher odds of the LGB orientation. Factors related to lower odds include a larger number of siblings at parental home. Factors related to higher odds include being female, living in a large town or capital, maternal tertiary education, bad atmosphere at parental home, experience of domestic violence at parental home, and frequent use of alcohol at parental home. The latter findings corroborate results from recent studies which have found that gender and sexual minorities may have an experience of familial violence and maltreatment in childhood (Xu and Rahman 2020; Martinez and McDonald 2021).

Table 1 reports the association between the sexual orientation and intended number of children obtained from the linear regression model. The modelling results indicate a statistically significant negative relationship between the LGB orientation and intended family size. The comparison of the results based on non-adjusted and adjusted models suggests that the association is only to a limited extent confounded by socio-demographic characteristics and family background of the respondents.

We also modelled the association between the sexual orientation and the number of children considered optimum for families in Estonia. The association was much weaker and less systematic. It failed to reach the level of statistical significance, except for those who reported attraction equally to the opposite and same sex. We interpret this as an indication that young adults with the LGB orientation perceive their individual life circumstances as less compatible with parenthood than their heterosexual peers. However, the difference in the general value of children between the orientation groups appears much smaller.

Table 1. Modelling results of intended number of children (linear regression)

Sexual orientation	Non-adjusted model		Adjusted model	
	Coef.	Sig.	Coef.	Sig.
Mainly opposite sex	-0.187	0.009	-0.129	0.070
Equally opposite and same sex	-0.705	0.000	-0.669	0.000
Mainly or only same sex	-0.820	0.000	-0.858	0.000
Other/Don't know/Refusal	-0.554	0.000	-0.461	0.000
Control variables	No		Yes	

Notes: The reference category is „only opposite sex“. Controls include gender, area of residence, ethnicity, number of siblings, maternal education, parental divorce, self-reported health, MHI-5 mental health index.

References

- Ahmed, A., Andersson, L., Hammarstedt, M. (2013). Sexual orientation and full-time monthly earnings, by public and private sector: evidence from Swedish register data. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 11(1): 83–108.
- Baiocco, R., Laghi, F. (2013). Sexual orientation and the desires and intentions to become parents. *Journal of Family Studies*, 19(1): 90–98.
- Bridges, T., Moore, M. R. (2018). Young women of color and shifting sexual identities. *Contexts*, 17(1): 86–88.
- Carvalho, H.W., Dall' Agnol, S.C., Lara, D.R. (2017). Trends in sexual orientation in Brazil. *Psico*, 48(2): 89–98.
- Flores, A.R. (2019). Social acceptance of LGBT people in 197 Countries, 1981 to 2017. Williams Institute, UCLA. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Global-Acceptance-Index-LGBT-Oct-2019.pdf>. Accessed October 20, 2021.
- Gato, J., Leal, D., Coimbra, S., Tasker, F. (2020). Anticipating parenthood among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual young adults without children in Portugal: Predictors and profiles. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11: 1–18.
- Goodenow, C., Watson, R.J., Homma, Y., Saewyc, E. (2016). Sexual orientation trends and disparities in school bullying and violence-related experiences, 1999–2013. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 3(4): 386–396.
- Haavio-Mannila, E., Kontula, O. (2003). *Sexual trends in the Baltic Sea area*. Helsinki: The Population Research Institute.
- Kolk, M., Andersson, G. (2020). Two decades of same sex marriage in Sweden: A demographic account of developments in marriage, childbearing, and divorce. *Demography*, 57(1): 147–169.
- Kranz, D., Busch, H., Niepel, C. (2018). Desires and intentions for fatherhood: A comparison of childless gay and heterosexual men in Germany. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 32(8): 995–1004.
- Költö, A., et al. (2018). Love and dating patterns for same- and both-gender attracted adolescents in Europe. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 28(4): 772–778.
- Kühne, S., Kroh, M., Richter, D. (2019). Comparing self-reported and partnership-inferred sexual orientation in household surveys. *Journal of Official Statistics*, 35(4): 777–805.
- Leppel, K. (2016). The incidence of self-employment by sexual orientation. *Small Business Economics*, 46(3): 347–363.
- Liu, H., Reczek, R. (2021). Birth cohort trends in health disparities by sexual orientation. *Demography*, 58(4):1445–1472.
- Martell, M.E., Eschelbach Hansen, M. (2017). Sexual identity and the lesbian earnings differential in the U.S. *Review of Social Economy*, 75(2): 159–180.
- Martinez, K., McDonald, C. (2021). Childhood familial victimization: An exploration of gender and sexual identity using the scale of negative family interactions. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(3/4): 1119–1140.
- Ott, M.Q., Corliss, H.L., Wypij, D., Rosario, M., Austin, S.B. (2011). Stability and change in self-reported sexual orientation identity in young people: Application of mobility metrics. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(3): 519–532.
- Rath, J.M., Villanti, A.C., Rubenstein, R.A., Vallone, D.M. (2013). Nicotine and Tobacco Use by Sexual Identity Among Young Adults in the United States. *Tobacco Research*, 15(11): 1822–1831.
- Riskind, R.G., Patterson, C.J. (2010). Parenting intentions and desires among childless lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(1): 78–81.
- Riskind, R.G., Tornello, S.L. (2017). Sexual orientation and future parenthood in a 2011–2013 nationally representative United States sample. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 31(6): 792–798.
- Simon, K.A., Tornello, S.L., Farr, R.H., Bos, H.M.W. (2018). Envisioning future parenthood among bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual women. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 5(2): 253–259.
- Tate, D.P., Patterson, C.J., Levy, A.J. (2019). Predictors of parenting intentions among childless lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 33(2): 194–202.
- Thomeer, M., Reczek, C., Thomeer, M.B. (2016). Happiness and sexual minority Status. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(7): 1745–1758.
- Watson, R.J., Peter, T., McKay, T., Edkins, T., Saewyc, E. (2018). Evidence of changing patterns in mental health and depressive symptoms for sexual minority adolescents. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 22(2): 120–138.
- Wilson, T., Temple, J., Lyons, A. (2021). Projecting the sexual minority population: Methods, data, and illustrative projections for Australia. *Demographic Research*, 45(12): 361–396.
- Xu, Y., Norton, S., Rahman, Q. (2020). Childhood maltreatment, gender nonconformity, and adolescent sexual orientation: A prospective birth cohort study. *Child Development*, 91(4): e984–e994.

