Topic 11: Sexual Orientation

People who do not experience sexual attraction have been documented through history but in today’s society they are largely unrecognised. The assumption that everyone should be able to experience sexual attraction pervades popular culture, medicine, therapy and academia. Asexuality is explicitly or implicitly pathologised or denied and asexuals themselves may be unaware that other people share their experience.

The Asexual Visibility and Education Network was founded in 2001 for the purpose of enabling communication among those who identify themselves as asexual, as well as creating public awareness and laying foundations for constructive discussions with academics and the media. Though increasing numbers of individuals identify themselves as asexual, the context in which asexuals understand their orientation is still open and highly variable. The presentation will explain how an asexual identity is consistent with a diversity of sexual and romantic experiences, united only by absence of sexual attraction. Drawing on AVEN’s experience with the media, the evolution of an asexual identity in public space will be sketched. In recent years asexuality has been the subject of several studies, the findings of which will briefly be discussed.

Recognition of an asexual orientation enables asexuals to form a new self-image, increase within-partnership communication of sexual needs, break experimental ground and ultimately bring about new life-concepts. The idea of asexuality raises questions on such matters as the significance of sexual attraction; the possibility of intimacy, passion and infidelity without sexual attraction; sexual self-empowerment and the influence of normative imperatives on sexual well-being.

T11-O-07

Prenatal exposure to progesterone and sexual orientation in humans

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Objective: Evaluate the effects of prenatal exposure to progesterone (via maternal medical treatment) on the sexual orientation of offspring.

Design and methods: Data collected in young adulthood were analyzed for 34 exposed-unexposed matched pairs (17 male pairs and 17 female pairs) from the Copenhagen Perinatal Cohort. Mean age at assessment was 23.2 years. The following sexual orientation variables were assessed as part of a structured interview conducted by a psychologist: self-labeled sexual orientation; lifetime attraction to own sex; current attraction to own sex or both sexes; kissed with own sex and with other sex, having been partially undressed in a sexual situation with own and with other sex, having been fully undressed in a sexual situation with own and with other sex, “intercourse” with own and with other sex. Questionnaires assessed the following: having “gone to bed with” a person of own sex, masturbation together with another person(s) of the same sex and of the other sex, and composite measures of attraction to males and attraction to females.

Results: Exposure was associated with decreased likelihood of identifying as heterosexual, greater likelihood of having engaged in same-sex sexual behavior, increased same-sex attraction, and higher scores on a scale of male attraction. Differences were not found on measures of heterosexual behavior.

Conclusions: These subjects’ sexual orientation appears to be bisexual. Based upon these findings we suggest that sexual orientation may be more accurately and productively conceptualized in terms of a two-dimensional model, rather than a bipolar continuum.

T11-O-08

Bisexual women differ from lesbian and heterosexual women on several sexuality measures

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Objective: Compare sexual orientation groups on: numbers of male and female sexual partners and total numbers of partners in lifetime and the past year; propensity for casual sex; frequency of condom use in the past year; erotophilia-erotophobia; sexual sensation seeking; propensity for sexual excitation and sexual inhibition.

Design and methods: A volunteer sample of 545 women from the USA and Canada completed anonymous questionnaires. Analyses were conducted based on two groupings: 1) self-identity [heterosexual n=450, bisexual n=46, lesbian n=49] and 2) lifetime partner type [women who had sex with men only (WSMO) n=396, women who had sex with men and women (WSMW) n=136, women who had sex with women only (WSWO) n=13]. Comparison of the scores across sexual orientation groups included age as a covariate in a series of univariate GLM analyses.

Results: Statistically significant sexual orientation group differences (based on both self-identity and lifetime partner type) were found for almost all variables. These were not explained by other demographic differences. Specifically, bisexuals showed a different pattern of responding than both heterosexual and lesbian women, and WSMW