

Same-sex partnering and experiences measured on multiple occasions in a birth cohort reveals higher lifetime prevalence than would be found in a cross-sectional study

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Introduction

While cross-sectional studies provide information on current and past same-sex behaviour (SSB), validity of this information is not known.

We explored consistency of reporting lifetime SSB in a birth cohort born in 1972/73 by comparing different measures of SSB taken at age 38, and those taken on several occasions between ages 21 and 38 years.

Aims

To compare:

- Reports of same-sex partners (SSPs) and same-sex experiences (SSEs) at age 38
- Reports of lifetime – to age 38 years - SSPs, anal intercourse (AI) for men with other men, and SSEs based on answers given (a) at age 38 and (b) at all assessments

Methods

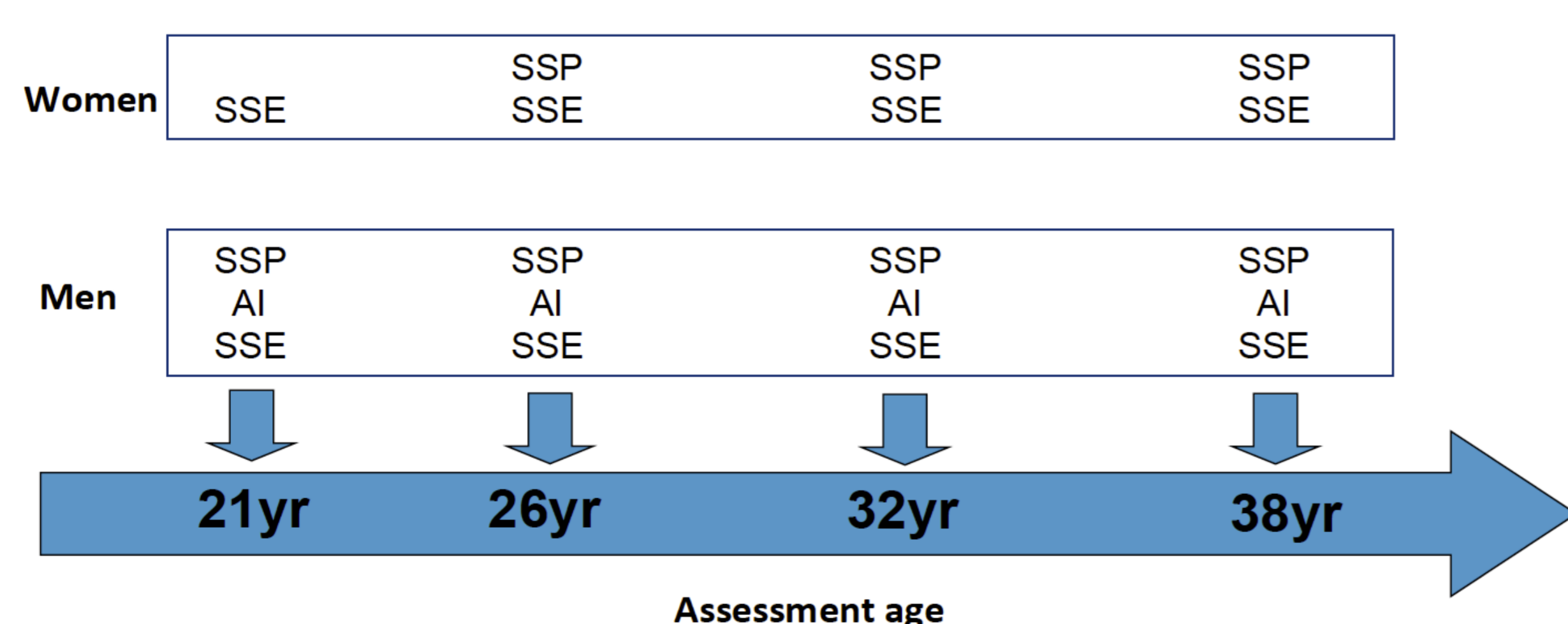
- Participants were from the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study a longitudinal study of a New Zealand birth cohort born in 1972/3
- Computer-presented questions on sexual behaviour were asked at ages 21, 26, 32 and 38, including SSPs at all ages for men and 26, 32 and 38 for women, and SSEs at all ages for both

Same-sex partners (SSPs)

- Questions on same-sex sexual contact ever and in past 12 months
- Defined as “oral, anal or any other form of sex” for men and “oral, vaginal or any other form of sex” for women
- For men, additional questions on AI were asked SSPs

Same-sex experiences (SSEs)

- Defined as “any contact you felt was sexual. It could have been kissing, touching or intercourse, or any other form of contact”
- Asked about gender of those they had ever, and in the past 12 months, had sexual experiences with (options for women, equivalent for men):
 - Only with males (or a male), never with a female
 - More often with males and at least once with a female
 - About equally with males and females
 - More often with females, and at least once with a male
 - Only with a females (or a female), never with males
 - I have never had a sexual experience with anyone at all



SSP = Same-sex partner SSE = Same-sex experience AI = Anal Intercourse

Results

Table 1 Cross-tabulation of reports of SSPs and SSEs at age 38, for those who answered both questions

		Any Same-sex Experience (SSE)			
		Past 12m	Ever - not past 12m	Never	Total
Any Same-sex Partner (SSP)					
Men N=455	Past 12m	17	0	0	17 (3.7%)
	Ever - not past 12m	0	35	3	38 (8.4%)
	Never	0	16	384	400
	Total	17 (3.7%)	51 (11.2%)	387	455
Women N=456	Past 12m	12	2	0	14 (3.1%)
	Ever - not past 12m	2	57	4	63 (10.7%)
	Never	2	29	348	379
	Total	16 (3.4%)	88 (19.3%)	352	456

- Reports of SSB ever were higher using SSE than SSP, increasing the number by 23.6% among men and 35.1% among women.

Table 2 Proportion reporting SSP, AI (men with other men) and SSE (a) at age 38 and (b) from any assessment

		Men			Women	
		SSP N=461	AI N=461	SSE N=462	SSP N=457	SSE N=462
(a) Age 38 responses only	Ever by age 38	12.4%	5.2%	14.9%	16.8%	22.7%
(b) Responses from any assessment	Ever by age 38	16.9%	6.5%	21.2%	20.5%	31.4%
Percentage increase in reports from single to multiple assessments		36.3%	25.0%	42.3%	22.0%	38.3%

Conclusions

- ◆ Overall questions on same-sex experiences captured more same-sex behaviour than questions on same-sex partners
 - ✧ Possible explanation: a broader “repertoire” of same-sex behaviour captured by the definition for experiences than that of partners
- ◆ Lifetime – to age 38 – reports of same-sex behaviour are markedly higher when combining reports from previous assessments at earlier ages.
 - ✧ Possible explanations:
 - ❖ erroneous reports at early assessments
 - ❖ less willingness to report past same-sex behaviour with age
 - ❖ earlier same-sex behaviour is forgotten or reinterpreted as not being sexual with age (most plausible).
 - ✧ Implications: cross-sectional studies may underestimate lifetime same-sex behaviours
- ◆ Same-sex behaviour – even when based on a single report – was more common than reported from other population-based studies*
 - ✧ Possible explanations: past experiences of confidentiality in the study led to greater disclosure, or a true difference exists.

* i.e. Mercer, Catherine H., et al. Changes in sexual attitudes and lifestyles in Britain through the life course and over time: findings from the National Surveys of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal). *The Lancet* 382.9907 (2013): 1781-1794