

Prevalence and consistency of opinions on same sex partnerships over 12 years in a New Zealand birth cohort

Connor J,¹ Burgess E,² Cresswell J,² Righarts A,¹ Dickson N¹

¹Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand
²London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, United Kingdom.

Introduction

Attitudes towards sex and relationships influence sexual behaviour, the wellbeing of those marginalised and the provision and use of services. Some countries conduct repeated surveys on sexual attitudes, but to our knowledge no longitudinal studies have investigated individuals' changes in opinion over time.

Aims

- To quantify
 - Prevalence of opinions on same sex partnerships in the Dunedin Study birth cohort at 26 years of age (1998-1999) and 38 years of age (2010-2012), and
 - Consistency and change in opinions among individuals

Methods

Participants answered computer-presented questions about the acceptability of same-sex partnerships, based on the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-1) from the UK.

What is your opinion about... Sex between two men? ... Sex between two women?
Always wrong; Mostly wrong; Sometimes wrong; Rarely wrong; Not at all wrong; Depends; Don't know

In these analyses responses were grouped as: Always/mostly wrong; Rarely/not at all wrong; Sometimes wrong/depends; Don't know

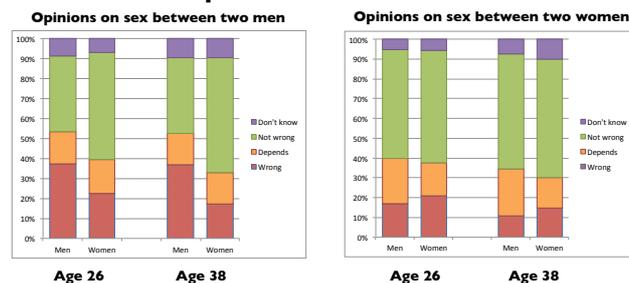
Prevalence of opinions at age 26 and 38 assessments was compared, for men and women separately.

At an individual level, opinions at 26 and 38 were compared to determine consistency or change, and associated characteristics.

Results

The response level was >90% at each assessment (n=966; n=936).

Prevalence of opinions



- The distribution of women's opinions was similar for sex between men and sex between women, and more liberal at later assessment. Men's acceptance of sex between men was lower, and did not change with age.
- The proportions reporting sex between two men was 'not wrong' were 38% for both time points in men, and 54% increasing to 58% in women. For sex between women, 'not wrong' was reported by 55% of men at 26 and 58% at 38; 57% of women at 26 and 60% at 38.
- There was a significant fall in the prevalence of reporting that sex between two women was "always/mostly" wrong between 26 and 38, for both men (p= 0.006) and women (p= 0.014).

Results

Consistency and change in opinions

Although aggregate changes were small, at an individual level 42% of men and 35% of women changed their opinion about sex between men, and the same proportions changed opinions about sex between women.

Consistency in opinions on same-sex partnerships between 26y and 38y

N	Consistently "Wrong"	Consistently "Depends"	Consistently "Not wrong"	Consistently "Don't know"	Men v women (χ ² p-value)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Sex between two men					
Men	104 (24.1)	21 (4.9)	119 (27.6)	7 (1.6)	<0.001
Women	53 (12.5)	21 (4.9)	193 (45.4)	9 (2.1)	
Sex between two women					
Men	23 (5.4)	36 (8.4)	184 (42.8)	4 (0.9)	0.005
Women	44 (10.3)	21 (4.9)	203 (47.5)	8 (1.9)	

Change in opinions on same-sex partnerships between 26y and 38y

N	Less liberal	More liberal
	n (%)	n (%)
Sex between two men		
Men	90 (20.9)	90 (20.9)
Women	59 (13.9)	90 (21.2)
Sex between two women		
Men	59 (13.9)	105 (24.4)
Women	58 (13.6)	93 (21.8)

For both men and women, consistent acceptance of same-sex partnerships was associated with having had same-sex experience before age 26 and higher educational level, but not with occupational social class (NZSEI). Consistent acceptance of same-sex partnerships was inversely associated with having had a child before age 26, for both men and women, after adjusting for education, own same-sex experience, experience of abortion, and occupational class.

Conclusions

A fairly stable level of acceptance of same-sex sexual behaviour over 12 years was seen in this cohort but it obscures considerable flux in opinions among individuals.

Generally the cohort had more accepting attitudes towards same sex partnerships at both ages than those of similar ages in national studies from Britain, Australia and the United States.

The patterns of difference by age were similar to findings from cross-sectional studies, but this analysis suggests that overall changes in prevalence of opinions are driven by individual change with age (age effects) as well as period effects (younger generations replacing older ones)

Further investigation of factors associated with attitude change could be used to improve health promotion by advancing the understanding of sexual lifestyles and choices.