



Gender, sexual orientation, and occupational interests: Evidence of their interrelatedness

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ABSTRACT

This report documents gender and sexual orientation differences in occupational interests for a large sample of North American college students. The students rated their interests in 26 different occupations. Seventeen of the occupations were of greater interest to males and the remaining nine appealed more to females. Regarding sexual orientation, male homosexuals expressed significantly more interest in all nine female-preferred occupations than did heterosexual males; and, in most cases, bisexual males expressed preferences that were intermediate in this regard. For females, sexual orientation was related to interests in eight occupations. Six of these were in the direction of female homosexuals (or bisexuals) preferring more male-typical occupations. The remaining two occupations – those of accountant and head of a corporation – were actually of greater interest to heterosexual females than to homosexual (or bisexual) females. We conclude that (a) pronounced gender differences exist in people's interests in many occupations, and (b) there are substantial tendencies for homosexuals (and bisexuals to a lesser degree) to have occupational interests that gravitate toward what is typical of the opposite gender rather than their own gender. These “contra-sex” occupational interests among non-heterosexuals were considerably more pronounced in males than in females.

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1. Introduction

For over a century, studies have revealed that males and females both prefer and choose substantially different types of occupations (Anker, 1998; Charles, 1992; Durkheim, 1893/1984; Ellis & Awang, 2011; England, 1981; Rose, 1986). Far fewer studies have examined how sexual orientation is related to occupational preferences and choices. The following literature review provides a foundation upon which we seek to clarify how male and female heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals differ in their occupational interests.

1.1. Sex differences in occupational interests and choices

A recent review documented many cross-cultural gender differences in occupational preferences and choices (Ellis et al., 2008). For example, males are more inclined to choose work in competitive business fields, in engineering, and in the physical science, while female choices are more often in fields such as teaching (especially of young children), health care (especially nursing), and other so-called “helping occupations” (Block, Denker, & Tittle, 1981; Whitam & Dizon, 1979). Similarly, a detailed study by Aros,

Henly, and Curtis (1998) demonstrated that males are drawn to work that is competitive and/or involves manipulating physical things, while females are more likely to have artistic and socially active occupational interests.

One review by Croson and Gneezy (2009) led them to conclude that “women prefer jobs that are less risky, more socially virtuous and less competitive” (p. 449). Several researchers have concluded that another major gender difference in occupational interests has involved males choosing “things” oriented lines of work and females gravitating toward “people” focused jobs (Geary, 2010; Lippa, 1998; Lippa, 2010; Su, Rounds, & Armstrong, 2009).

Sex differences in occupational preferences are evident at a young age. A meta-analysis of research published between 1970 and 1991 revealed that even in primary school, boys expressed more interest in science-related occupations while girls preferred arts-related and helping careers (Weinburgh, 1995). In a recent study, Lupart, Cannon, and Telfer (2004) found that boys in grades 7 through 10 rated careers in information technology, science, and engineering more favorably, while girls rated artistic careers and “making the world a better place” as more important for the careers they would most likely choose. Based on a widely used measure of occupational interests (Holland, Fritzsche, & Powell, 1994), Osborn and Reardon (2006) reported that females scored higher on the “social and artistic” scale while males scored higher on the “realistic and investigative” scale.

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As a qualification to the above findings, several studies have shown that as the proportion of women entering the workforce increases – as has been true in recent years in most countries – occupational gender segregation has moderated slightly (Cohen, 2004; Cotter, DeFiore, Hermsen, Kowalewski, & Vanneman, 1995; Jacobsen, 1994). Furthermore, gender differences in occupational interests have also diminished somewhat since the 1950s, at least among college students in the United States (Fiorentine, 1988).

1.2. Sexual orientation and occupational interests and choices

Even though stereotypes abound, the number of studies of how sexual orientation is related to occupational preferences and choices is meager compared to the vast array of studies of sex differences in occupational preferences and choices. To illustrate the stereotypes, Whitam and Dizon (1979) noted that the proportion of male hair dressers who are gay is *reputed* to be unusually high. The same has been *implied* for the men who are designers of clothing fashions (Esgate & Flynn, 2005). Regarding the field of acting, the late Elizabeth Taylor reportedly stated that “there would be no Hollywood without homosexuals ... Everybody knows that” (cited in Valdes, 1995).

One of the first empirical explorations of a link between sexual orientation and occupational interests was reported by Chung and Harmon Lenore (1994). Using Holland (1985) occupational interest inventory, these researchers concluded that gay men’s interests were “less Realistic and Investigative” and “were more Artistic and Social” than those of straight men (p. 223). Another one of the earliest studies was conducted by Bailey and Oberschneider (1997). They interviewed 136 professional dancers and asked them to estimate the percentage of male dancers who they *thought* were gay. The average estimate was 58%. These “informants” also estimated the proportion of female professional dancers who were lesbian to be less than 3%. While useful, this article provided only indirect evidence and was limited to just one occupation.

So far, the most detailed studies of sexual orientation and occupational interests were conducted by Lippa (2002), Lippa (2008). The first of his studies involved a sample of United States male and female college students in which they were provided with a list of 50 different occupations. As one would expect, numerous gender differences in occupational interests were revealed, some of which were quite striking. For example, few males expressed much of an interest in being an interior decorator, a beauty consultant or a florist, but many found such occupations as electrical engineer, building contractor, and jet pilot appealing. Females, on the other hand, exhibited the opposite types of interests.

Regarding sexual orientation, Lippa also found numerous differences. In nearly all cases, male homosexuals exhibited interests that gravitated substantially toward those of females, and, to a lesser degree, female homosexuals, preferred somewhat more male-typical occupations.

Lippa (2008) more recent study was based on an impressively large internet sample of over 200,000 responses drawn from many countries (sponsored by the British Broadcast Corporation). Findings again showed that the occupational interests of male homosexuals were usually skewed toward the interests expressed by females rather than by males. Sufficient numbers of subjects were included in this BBC sponsored study to separately analyze responses by bisexuals as well as homosexuals. Generally, for both males and females, bisexuals expressed interests that were intermediate to those of heterosexuals and homosexuals of their own gender.

1.3. Purpose of the present study

Overall, both gender and sexual orientation appear to be important variables influencing occupational interests. The present study

was undertaken to verify and extend these observations, particularly regarding sexual orientation. Based on past findings, we expected to confirm substantial gender differences in occupational interests, such as males preferring occupations oriented toward things and power over others while females gravitate toward artistic and help-related occupations. Regarding sexual orientation, our expectations were to confirm Lippa (2002), Lippa (2008) findings that homosexuals (and bisexuals to a lesser degree) of both genders will have interests strongly leaning toward those of the opposite gender rather than their own gender.

2. Methods

2.1. The participants

Research participants consisted of students attending 20 United States and two Canadian colleges and universities enrolled in various social and behavioral sciences courses (a list of the colleges is available upon request). They included 3005 males and 6171 females and ranged in age from 18 to 56, with a mean of 22. Racially/ethnically, the participants were 85% white, 4% black, 2% Native American, 2% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Hispanic, and 6% providing no answer.

2.2. The variables

Participants identified their gender as male or female. To assess their sexual orientation, students were asked: *How would you describe your sexual orientation (please circle one)? Heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, or uncertain.* Individuals expressing uncertainty in this regard were excluded from the analyses.

While there are obviously thousands of occupations that exist in contemporary industrial societies, only 26 were listed in the present study so as not to burden respondents with a lengthier list. The occupations were chosen as ones that respondents would readily understand. Secondly, they were selective as representing a wide diversity of occupations that would appeal to either males or females.

Preferences for these 26 occupations were measured by asking participants to rate their interests in each one (as presented in the tables soon to be described). Instructions to participants read as follows: *Disregarding any specific talents you may or may not have, and any financial considerations, how appealing would each of the following lines of work be to you? (Use 0 = as unappealing as you can imagine; 100 = as appealing as you can imagine).*

2.3. Statistical analysis

The significance of gender differences in occupational interests was assessed using *t*-tests. Analysis of variance was employed to determine statistical significance in the case of sexual orientation.

3. Results

Numerous associations were found between occupational interests, sex, and sexual orientation. These associations are described below.

3.1. Male–female comparisons

Table 1 provides a summary of gender differences in occupational preferences. Gender differences in occupational preferences were found for all 26 occupations, with 17 being preferred more by men and the remaining 9 being preferred more by women. The means in Table 1 are bolded to indicate which gender expressed

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