

Americans accept and engage in same-sex behaviors more than ever, study shows

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Ryne Sherman, Ph.D., co-author and assistant professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

In a large study examining a nationally representative survey of

American adults from 1973 to 2014, researchers from Florida Atlantic University, San Diego State University and Widener University have found that same-sex sexual experience has doubled, and acceptance of same-sex sexual experience has quadrupled. This suggests that the cultural change of the last few decades extends beyond simple tolerance of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals and their civil rights to include acceptance of same-sex sexuality and the freedom to engage in same-sex sexuality—or at least the freedom to report one has done so on a survey. Either way, Americans have experienced a fundamental shift toward acceptance of same-sex sexual behavior and a greater willingness to engage in it.

The study, published in the current issue of the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, involved a total of 33,728 participants. Researchers used data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults conducted since 1972. Questions in the survey on acceptance of same-sex sexual behavior have been asked since 1973, and those on sexual partners have been asked since 1989.

The percentage of men who have had sex with at least one man increased from 4.5 percent to 8.2 percent; the percentage of women who have had sex with at least one woman increased from 3.6 percent to 8.7 percent. The percentage of adults who have had both male and female partners (bisexual behavior) increased from 3.1 percent to 7.7 percent. Among 18 to 29 year olds in the 2010s (Millennials), 7.5 percent of men have had a gay sexual experience, and 12.2 percent of women have had a lesbian sexual experience. The increases in same-sex experiences were largest among whites and in the South and Midwest.

"Lesbian sexual experience is highest when women are young, suggesting there is some truth to the idea that some women are 'lesbian until graduation' or 'bisexual until graduation,' at least among younger generations such as Millennials. This pattern does not appear for gay

sexual experiences," said Ryne Sherman, Ph.D., co-author and assistant professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science.

Those who believed that "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex" was "not wrong at all" hardly changed between 1973 and 1990 (from 11 percent to 13 percent). Acceptance then steadily rose, reaching a near majority in 2014 at 49 percent. Among 18 to 29 year olds, acceptance rose from 15 percent in 1990 to 63 percent (a clear majority) in 2014.

In the study, the researchers examined change over time in reports of adult same-sex sexual experience, including bisexual behavior, and attitudes toward same-sex sexual behavior by examining the percentage of Americans who report having at least one same-sex partner. They also examined whether these trends, and trends in the acceptance of same-sex sexual behavior are due to age, period or cohort. In addition, they explored whether trends in attitudes and behavior differ by gender, race, region, education, and religious service attendance.

"Millennials are markedly more accepting of same-sex behavior than GenX'ers were at the same age - but then, so are most adults," said Sherman. "The change is primarily one of time period, where all adults shifted in their attitudes."

Sherman and co-authors Jean M. Twenge, Ph.D., Department of Psychology at San Diego State University, and Brooke E. Wells, Ph.D., Center for Human Sexuality Studies at Widener University, stress that accurate estimates of same-sex sexual behavior are critical as they are utilized to inform public policy analyses and initiatives, to determine health disparities, and to accurately assess the prevalence of discrimination, health outcomes (both positive and negative), and associations among discrimination, health behavior and health outcomes.

Provided by Florida Atlantic University

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