Medical Xpress

New research explores complex relationship between sexual identity, sexual attraction and sexual arousal

December 2 2015, by Anne Craig

New research from of the Sexuality and Gender Laboratory at Queen's University shows that heterosexual women have more diverse patterns of sexual response than previously reported.

Research on women's sexual orientation and patterns of sexual response has previously focused on women's genital and subjective sexual arousal relative to their sexual identity, as heterosexual, bisexual or lesbian. Among women, however, there is significant diversity among women in their sexual attractions to other women and men, regardless of sexual identity. For example, a substantial minority of heterosexual women (20 per cent in some studies) also report some attraction to women.

In the first study, women watched short videos, and in the second study, women listened to stories about interacting sexually with a woman or a man. Genital response was measured with a vaginal photoplethysmograph (a clear acrylic device that illuminates the capillary bed of the vaginal wall) and participants also self-reported their sexual arousal.

In both studies, Meredith Chivers (Psychology) showed that only heterosexual women who were exclusively attracted to men showed similar genital responses to both female and male sexual stimuli. Heterosexual women who also report some attraction to women, however, showed a different pattern of response; their genital responses

were greater to female stimuli, similar to other sexually-diverse women.

"Both exclusively and predominantly androphilic women (women attracted to men) showed sexual response patterns that differed from their self-reported sexual attractions. Sexually-diverse women showed genital and self-reported arousal responses that were more similar to their self-reported sexual attractions," says Dr. Chivers. "As a whole, this research illustrates the complex relationship between sexual identity, sexual attraction, sexual arousal and genital responses to sexual stimuli."

Recently, research has misinterpreted this current study to suggest that heterosexuality doesn't exist in women because heterosexual women show sexual responses to female stimuli. Read the story here.

The current study highlights how this interpretation is incorrect; women's sexual identity, attractions and patterns of sexual response are not interchangeable, such that a woman's sexual desires and attractions cannot be deduced from her sexual response patterns.

"Instead, this research provides a window of opportunity to understand how women's sexual response relates to her experience of sexual attraction and desire, addressing gaps in contemporary models of sexual response," says Dr. Chivers.

Based on the findings that self-identified heterosexual women respond to both female and male sexual stimuli, researchers could next explore how exposure to mainstream sexual media, in which women are routinely objectified, and where sexual interactions between two women are becoming commonplace, affects patterns of sexual response.

The results of the research were published in *PLOS ONE.*

More information: Meredith L. Chivers et al. Straight but Not

Medical Xpress

Narrow; Within-Gender Variation in the Gender-Specificity of Women's Sexual Response, *PLOS ONE* (2015). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0142575

Provided by Queen's University

Citation: New research explores complex relationship between sexual identity, sexual attraction and sexual arousal (2015, December 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-12-explores-complex-relationship-sexual-identity.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.