

Perceived Consequences of Hypothetical Identity-Inconsistent Sexual Experiences: Effects of Perceiver's Sex and Sexual Identity

Mariana A. Preciado · Kerri L. Johnson

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Abstract Most people organize their sexual orientation under a single sexual identity label. However, people may have sexual experiences that are inconsistent with their categorical sexual identity label. A man might identify as heterosexual but still experience some attraction to men; a woman might identify as lesbian yet enter into a romantic relationship with a man. Identity-inconsistent experiences are likely to have consequences. In the present study, we examined lay perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences for self-perceived sexuality and for social relationships among a sexually diverse sample ($N = 283$). We found that the perceived consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences for self-perception, for social stigmatization, and for social relationships varied as a function of participant sex, participant sexual identity (heterosexual, gay, lesbian), and experience type (fantasy, attraction, behavior, love). We conclude that not all identity-inconsistent sexual experiences are perceived as equally consequential and that the perceived consequences of such experiences vary predictably as a function of perceiver sex and sexual identity. We discuss the role lay perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences may play in guiding attitudes and behavior.

Keywords Sexual identity · Gender · Self-perception · Social relationships · Sexual behavior

Introduction

Most people organize their sexual orientation under a single sexual identity label, typically straight/heterosexual, gay/lesbian, or bisexual. However, a great deal of complexity often underlies categorical identity labels in that sexual orientation is composed of multiple components (e.g., attraction, fantasy, behavior, love), each of which may not be concordant with the others (Klein, 1990; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolff, 1985). A man might identify as straight but still experience some attraction to men; a woman might identify as lesbian yet enter into a romantic relationship with a man. Identity-inconsistent sexual experiences, or sexual experiences that are in conflict with one's present self-labeled sexual identity, are likely to impact one's self-perception, status in society, and social relationships. In the present study, we examined lay perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences among heterosexually identified men and women, gay-identified men, and lesbian-identified women.

Prevalence of Identity-Inconsistent Sexual Experiences

Recent studies have documented the prevalence of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences in the population. Numerous surveys have documented identity-inconsistent experiences among heterosexual men and women. For instance, in a large national representative study of 3,432 American men and women between the ages of 18 and 59, only 1.4 % of women and 2.8 % of men reported a same-sex sexual identity (e.g., lesbian, gay). Yet, 7.5 % of women and 7.7 % of men reported currently experiencing some form of same-sex attraction or interest (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994, p. 297). More recently, an analysis of five population-based surveys conducted in the United States over the last seven years found that while only 3.5 % of men and women reported a same-sex sexual identity (e.g., lesbian, gay, or bisexual), 11 % reported currently experiencing some form of

M. A. Preciado (✉) · K. L. Johnson
Department of Psychology, University of California, Los Angeles,
1285 Franz Hall, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-3815, USA
e-mail: mariana.preciado@ucla.edu

K. L. Johnson
Communication Studies, University of California, Los Angeles,
Los Angeles, CA, USA

same-sex attraction or interest (Gates, 2011). Research on college students has found percentages of heterosexually identified individuals reporting some same-sex attraction ranging from 38 to 79 % for women and 20 to 43 % for men (Knight & Hope, 2012; Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2010).

Such patterns of identity-inconsistent experiences are not unique to heterosexually identified individuals. Many studies have found evidence of bisexual attraction and behavior among lesbian-identified women (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Rust, 1992; San Francisco Department of Public Health, 1993). In one nationally representative sample of American adults, the majority of women who reported experiencing same-sex attractions also reported experiencing other-sex attractions (Laumann et al., 1994). Likewise, the same study found that two-thirds of the adult women who reported engaging in sexual behavior with a female partner in the previous 5 years also reported engaging sexual behavior with a male partner during the same time period.

Few studies have explicitly examined identity-inconsistent sexual experiences among gay-identified men. It is possible that men who have mostly same-sex sexual experiences and some other-sex sexual experiences are more likely to identify as bisexual or even heterosexual (e.g., Malcolm, 2000) than gay. Indeed, the notion that male bisexuals are really homosexuals who are either closeted or have not yet realized their “true” sexuality—namely, that they are really gay—remains a strongly held lay theory (e.g., Steinman, 2001).

Consequences of Identity-Inconsistent Sexual Experiences

Identity-inconsistent sexual experiences are not without consequences. In spite of empirical evidence to the contrary, many people still characterize sexual orientation as categorical, referring to categorical sexual identity labels (e.g., heterosexual, gay, lesbian). Consequently, experiences that contradict one’s sexual identity may not only bring into question beliefs about one’s sexuality but also have social consequences. For instance, if a heterosexually identified man has sex with another man, it may prompt him to contemplate whether he may actually be gay or bisexual. If publicized, such actions may also leave him open to social stigmatization and to the ire and/or social exclusion from members of his social circles who expect exclusively heterosexual behaviors. The severity of these consequences may vary depending on the nature of the identity-inconsistent experience and the personal characteristics of the actor.

Identity-inconsistent experiences are likely to carry different consequences for different individuals. There are likely differences between men and women’s perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences. Emotionally and physically intimate same-sex friendships are common among women (e.g., Diamond, 2002; Reis, 1998), and sexualized portrayals of bisexuality and sexual fluidity among women are common in mainstream media (Thompson, 2007). The actual and perceived typicality of such same-sex experiences among

women may mitigate women’s perceptions of the personal and social consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences. For instance, a woman may believe that if she feels a romantic attraction to another woman, that does not necessarily indicate that she is bisexual or a lesbian. Instead, she may believe that those romantic feelings derive from the fact that she and the woman in question have always had a particular emotional closeness that led to those feelings. Indeed, women in same-sex relationships sometimes report that they are not lesbians—they just happen to be in love with a person who is a woman (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). In contrast, men’s gender and sexual roles, particularly those of heterosexually identified men, are held to much stricter norms, creating expectations that men’s sexual experiences will be highly categorical (Bem, 1981; Hammack, 2005). As such, relative to men, women may feel that identity-inconsistent experiences pose less of a challenge to their beliefs about their own sexuality and would result in fewer social consequences.

Heterosexually identified and same-sex identified individuals may also perceive differences in the consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences. There are reasons to expect that same-sex identified individuals’ self-perception are less strongly impacted by identity-inconsistent experiences than that of heterosexually identified individuals. Because the assumption of heterosexuality is pervasive (e.g., Cass, 1979; Konik & Stewart, 2004), same-sex identified individuals may have other-sex sexual experiences before identifying with a same-sex sexual identity and, thus, have likely reconciled those experiences within their self-perceived sexual orientation (Hammack, 2005). It is worth noting, however, that this tendency may be on the decline. Young people are coming out at increasingly younger ages and, as some studies have shown, are therefore less likely to engage in sexual activity with opposite-sex partners before coming out (e.g., Dubé, 2000; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Even if a same-sex identified individual has not had other-sex experiences, same-sex identified individuals are nevertheless less likely than heterosexually identified individuals to have identities that are susceptible to threats. Indeed, these individuals are likely to have adopted their sexual identity by engaging in extensive self-evaluation regarding their sexual orientation (e.g., Konik & Stewart, 2004).

Additionally, another important difference between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals (e.g., gay men, lesbian women) is that identity-inconsistent experiences for heterosexually identified individuals are same-sex sexual experiences, which are non-normative and often stigmatized within society at large (e.g., Herek, 2009); identity-inconsistent experiences for same-sex identified individuals are not. As such, non-heterosexuals may perceive that identity-inconsistent experiences would result in less severe social stigma than would be perceived by heterosexuals.

On the other hand, identity-inconsistent experiences may also result in social exclusion from social circles for same-sex identified individuals. For those same-sex identified individuals who

are closely tied to the gay and lesbian community, identity-inconsistent experience may be perceived as a transgression of community norms and mores (e.g., Rust, 1992; Steinman, 2001). Thus, the differences between same heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals in their perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences may be more pronounced for perceptions of resulting social stigma than for social exclusion from one's own social circles.

Identity-inconsistent experiences are also likely to carry consequences commensurate with their nature. The experience of sexual attraction or sexual fantasy may be less consequential for self-perception and for one's social relationships than the experience of sexual behavior or love. For example, heterosexually identified men and women who experience same-sex attraction may label their attraction as a "man crush" or "girl crush," a socially acceptable "fervent infatuation" a heterosexually identified man or woman may develop for another man or woman who is "impossibly sophisticated, beautiful, or accomplished" (Rosenbloom, 2005). If identity-inconsistent experiences are restricted to attractions or fantasies, they may be seen as relatively unimportant; indeed, this is the position of the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality and sin (Catholic Church, 2000).

The Present Study

The present study examined lay perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences. Specifically, we studied the differences in the perceived consequences for a range of identity-inconsistent experiences. The study population included both men and women and both heterosexually identified and same-sex identified individuals. Based on our evaluation of the existing literature, we formulated three hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1: We predicted that men would perceive identity-inconsistent experiences as more consequential than would women.
2. Hypothesis 2: We predicted that heterosexually identified individuals would perceive identity inconsistent experiences as more consequential than would gay- and lesbian-identified individuals, especially with regard to consequences for self-perceived sexuality and social stigmatization.
3. Hypothesis 3: We predicted that identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual behavior and love would be perceived as

more consequential than would identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual fantasy and attraction.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited online via advertisements on the website www.facebook.com and via the university psychology subject pool website. Advertisements on www.facebook.com were targeted towards men and women who reported being "interested in" people of the same sex and who were between the ages of 18 and 27 years. The study advertisement used on the university psychology subject pool website did not target any specific population.

A total of 313 participants completed the survey. However, analyses were restricted to the 283 participants who sexually identified as straight, gay, or lesbian and fell within the target age range ($N = 283$; 164 female, 119 male). Of the 19 excluded because of their sexual identity, 8 identified as bisexual, 9 identified as something other than straight, gay, lesbian, or bisexual (e.g., questioning), and 2 did not report a sexual identity. These participants were excluded because their small number did not allow us to analyze them separately and including them in the larger sample of gay- and lesbian-identified participants would have unfairly masked differences between the groups. Four participants were excluded because they were older than 27 (aged 28–48), and 7 were excluded because they were younger than 18 (aged 14–17). Fifty-seven percent of the final sample ($N = 161$) was heterosexually identified.

The only demographic variables measured in the brief survey were age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity. Race/ethnicity categories included African-American, East Asian, Latino(a), Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander, South Asian, White/Caucasian, and Other. The average age of the sample was 20 years ($SD = 2.25$). Political attitudes were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very conservative) to 5 (very liberal). On average, the sample reported political attitudes of 3.69 ($SD = .86$), indicating a liberal-leaning sample. The sample was mostly White/Caucasian (53 %) or East Asian (20 %). See Table 1 for a breakdown of age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity by participant sex and sexual identity.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for the sample

	Age (in years)		Political attitudes ^a		Race	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	% White	% Asian
Heterosexual females	19.14	1.31	3.43	0.76	36.00	27.00
Heterosexual males	20.27	1.67	3.36	0.72	23.08	42.31
Lesbian females	21.07	2.59	4.30	0.90	84.91	1.89
Gay males	21.06	2.88	3.87	0.81	77.78	3.17

^a Absolute range, 1–5

We conducted a 2 (Sex) \times 2 (Sexual Identity) ANOVA for age and political attitudes to test whether they significantly varied between heterosexually identified men and women and gay- and lesbian-identified participants. The interaction of participant sex and sexual identity was significant for age, $F(1, 279) = 4.87, p = .028$. While gay- and lesbian-identified participants were not significantly different in age, $F(1, 279) < 1$, heterosexually identified men were significantly older than heterosexually identified women, $F(1, 279) = 22.47, p < .001$. Moreover, while heterosexually identified and gay-identified men were not significantly different in age, $F(1, 279) = 3.20, p = .075$, heterosexually identified women were significantly younger than lesbian-identified women, $F(1, 279) = 40.24, p < .001$.

The interaction of participant sex and sexual identity was not significant for political attitudes, $F(1, 270) = 3.17, p = .076$. However, both the main effects of Sex and Sexual Identity were significant. Specifically, female participants were significantly more liberal than male participants, $F(1, 271) = 5.42, p = .021$, and gay- and lesbian-identified participants were significantly more liberal than heterosexually identified participants, $F(1, 271) = 50.29, p < .001$.

Finally, we conducted two logistic regression analyses to test whether the likelihood of being White/Caucasian and the likelihood of being East Asian varied as a function of the interaction of participant sex and sexual identity. The interaction of Sex and Sexual Identity was not significant for either the likelihood of being White/Caucasian, $OR = 1.42 (SE = .83), z < 1$, or the likelihood of being East Asian, $OR = .94 (SE = 1.21), z < 1$. However, we found that gay- and lesbian-identified participants were 9.51 times more likely to be White and 19.36 times less likely to be Asian than were heterosexually-identified participants, all z s > 4.50 , all p s $< .001$.

Measures and Procedure

Upon clicking the link included in the facebook or subject pool advertisement, participants were directed to the online survey, hosted by www.surveymonkey.com. After consenting to participate in the survey, participants were asked to contemplate 8 hypothetical sexual experience scenarios that varied in partner sex (i.e., male or female) and type of experience (i.e., sexual fantasy, attraction, behavior, and love). The two sexual fantasy prompts stated, "Imagine that just before you fall asleep one night, you have a sexual fantasy about a man/woman." The two sexual attraction prompts stated, "Imagine that one day, while you are walking down the street, you see a man/woman and you feel sexually attracted to him/her." The two sexual behavior prompts stated, "Imagine that one night you had sex with a man/woman." The two love prompts stated, "Imagine that you fell in love with a man/woman."

After reading each prompt, participants were asked to answer questions about the consequences of each hypothetical scenario,

if other people knew about the experience. Each consequence item was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (indicating little or no perceived consequence) to 5 (indicating great perceived consequence). Participants indicated how much the experience would change their life in general, $M = 3.65, SD = .90$. We will refer to this as Overall Change. Participants indicated how much the experience would change the way they thought about their sexuality, $M = 3.54, SD = .99$. We will refer to this as Self-Perception. Participants indicated how much the experience would impact whether other people would want to "hang around" them and whether they would be called bad names. These two items were averaged into one Stigmatization score, $\alpha = .94, M = 2.50, SD = 1.08$. Participants indicated how much the experience would impact whether they would be physically hurt by others, $M = 1.84, SD = .91$. We will refer to this as Physical Harm. Finally, participants indicated how much the experience would impact whether their friends would want to "hang around" them and whether they would be able to continue to participate in their current activities and organizations. These two items were averaged into one Social Network Change score, $\alpha = .94, M = 2.18, SD = 1.02$.

Finally, as part of a larger study on self-perceived sexual orientation, participants completed a measure of their need for personal structure (Neuberg & Newsom, 1993), feeling thermometers measuring their attitudes towards various groups, including gay men and lesbian women (e.g., Herek & Capitano, 1999), and a demographic questionnaire. Participants were then debriefed and given an opportunity to email questions to the researcher.

Results

To understand the perceived implications of identity-inconsistent behaviors, we analyzed responses to the scenarios that involved an identity-inconsistent experience. For heterosexual participants, only responses to the four scenarios involving same-sex encounters were analyzed; for gay and lesbian participants, only responses to the four scenarios involving other-sex encounters were analyzed. The dependent variables in the following analyses were Overall Change, Self-Perception, Stigmatization, Physical Harm, and Social Network Change. Each of the five dependent variables had responses for each of the four scenarios.

Analytic Strategy

We present analyses testing our hypotheses separately for the five outcomes. Our data violated the assumption of sphericity. Therefore, for each of the following analyses, we report results of F -tests involving within-subjects factors using the Huynh–Feldt adjustment of degrees of freedom (Huynh & Feldt, 1976).

For each outcome, we conducted a 2 (Sex) \times 2 (Participant Sexual Identity: Heterosexual vs. Gay/Lesbian) \times 4 (Experience Type: Fantasy, Attraction, Behavior, Love) repeated-measures

analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for participant age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity (White/Caucasian vs. East Asian). Note that controlling for participant age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity was not necessary in order to observe the effects reported below. Removing participant age and political attitudes did not change the direction or significance-level of any of the observed effects. Removing race/ethnicity as a covariate resulted in several effects involving sexual identity and experience type becoming statistically significant. However, to account for racial/ethnic differences across sexual identity groups, we report the more conservative results controlling for all covariates.

To account for multiple comparisons, we adjusted the significance level for all initial effects by the total number of possible interactions and main effects for each outcome (one three-way interaction, three two-way interactions, three main effects) times the number of outcomes (five), such that $\alpha_{\text{crit}} = 1 - (1 - .05)^{1/35}$ (Abdi, 2007; Sidak, 1967). Thus, the significance level for all initial interaction tests and tests of main effects was set to .0015. All pairwise comparisons (e.g., males vs. females) were also adjusted within each analysis of simple interactions and simple effects (Sidak, 1967). For pairwise comparisons, we report the adjusted p value, which was compared against a significance level of .05.

We report all the F tests of the initial ANCOVA analyses in Table 2. We also report all the expected means of the dependent variables, controlling for participant age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity, and stratified by participant sex and sexual identity in Table 3. We refer to these tables throughout the Results section. In the section below, we deconstruct the three-way and two-way interactions in various ways to test our specific hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Differences by Participant Sex

We predicted that male participants would perceive identity-inconsistent sexual experiences to be more consequential than would female participants. We tested this hypothesis for all five outcomes. For each outcome, we first examined whether the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant. If so, we deconstructed the simple interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity within each experience type. If not, we examined the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity and deconstructed the simple effects of participant sex for heterosexually identified and gay- and lesbian-identified participants separately. If the two-way interaction was not significant, we examined the main effect of participant sex.

Consequences for Change in Life, Overall

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was not significant for Overall Change. However, the interaction of participant sex and sexual identity was significant (see Table 2). We conducted tests of

simple effects to separately assess the differences in Overall Change between heterosexually identified men and women and gay- and lesbian-identified men and women. Tests of simple effects confirmed our hypothesis among heterosexually identified participants. As expected, heterosexually identified men rated identity-inconsistent experiences as likely to cause more change to their life, overall, than did heterosexually identified women, $F(1, 176) = 9.34, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .094$. However, gay-identified men did not rate the consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences for their life, overall, significantly differently than did lesbian-identified women, $F(1, 176) = 2.98, p = .088$.

Consequences for Self-Perception

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant for Self-Perception (see Table 2). We tested whether the simple interaction of participant sex and sexual identity was significant across all experience types. The interaction of participant sex and sexual identity was significant for the sexual fantasy experience, $F(1, 178) = 31.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .152$. For identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and love, neither the simple interaction of participant sex and sexual identity nor the simple main effect of participant were significant, all F s < 2.50 , all p s $> .150$.

Tests of simple effects within the simple two-way interaction revealed that, as expected, heterosexually identified men rated identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual fantasy as more consequential for self-perception than did heterosexually identified women, $F(1, 178) = 7.16, p = .008, \eta_p^2 = .073$. However, gay-identified men rated identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual fantasy as less consequential for self-perception than did lesbian-identified women, $F(1, 178) = 38.12, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .312$ (see Table 3 for adjusted means).

Consequences for Stigmatization and Physical Harm

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type and the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity were not significant for either Stigmatization or Physical Harm. However, the main effect of participant sex was significant for both Stigmatization and Physical Harm (see Table 2). As expected, across participant sexual identity and sexual experience type, male participants reported a greater likelihood that stigmatization and physical harm would result from identity-inconsistent sexual experiences than did heterosexually identified and lesbian-identified women (see Table 3 for adjusted means).

Consequences for Social Networks

Neither the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type, the two-way interaction of

Table 2 Results from all ANCOVA analyses

Outcome	Type	Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Overall change	Within	Sex × sexual identity × experience type	2.64	5.12	ns	.028
		Sex × experience type	2.64	<1	ns	.001
		Sexual identity × experience type	2.64	1.36	ns	.008
		Experience type	2.64	2.98	ns	.017
		Error	464.44			
	Between	Sex × sexual identity	1	11.30	<.0015	.060
		Sex	1	<1	ns	0
		Sexual identity	1	4.21	ns	.023
		Error	176			
		Self-perception	Within	Sex × sexual identity × experience type	2.76	11.94
Sex × experience type	2.76			1.81	ns	.010
Sexual identity × experience type	2.76			2.26	ns	.013
Experience type	2.76			2.20	ns	.120
Error	482.26					
Between	Sex × sexual identity		1	5.74	ns	.032
	Sex		1	<1	ns	.003
	Sexual identity		1	6.97	ns	.038
	Error		175			
	Stigmatization		Within	Sex × sexual identity × experience type	2.46	<1
Sex × experience type		2.46		2.55	ns	.014
Sexual identity × experience type		2.46		2.21	ns	.012
Experience type		2.46		2.25	ns	.013
Error		434.76				
Between		Sex × sexual identity	1	7.31	ns	0.04
		Sex	1	11.48	<.0015	.061
		Sexual identity	1	51.90	<.0015	.227
		Error	177			
		Physical harm	Within	Sex × sexual identity × experience type	2.15	<1
Sex × experience type	2.15			<1	ns	.005
Sexual identity × experience type	2.15			4.23	ns	.024
Experience type	2.15			1.27	ns	.007
Error	376.34					
Between	Sex × sexual identity		1	5.97	ns	.033
	Sex		1	10.65	<.0015	.057
	Sexual identity		1	18.46	<.0015	.095
	Error		175			

Table 2 continued

Outcome	Type	Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η_p^2
Social network change	Within	Sex × sexual identity × experience type	2.27	1.24	ns	.007
		Sex × experience type	2.27	1.77	ns	.010
		Sexual identity × experience type	2.27	1.12	ns	.006
		Experience type	2.27	3.35	ns	.019
		Error	402.25			
	Between	Sex × sexual identity	1	6.03	ns	.033
		Sex	1	6.51	ns	.035
		Sexual identity	1	24.3	<.0015	.121
		Error	177			

Statistical significance defined at $p < .0015$. Results for covariates not presented

participant sex and participant sexual identity, nor the main effect of participant sex were significant for Social Network Change (see Table 2).

Hypothesis 2: Differences by Participant Sexual Identity

We predicted that heterosexually identified individuals would perceive identity inconsistent experiences as more consequential than would gay- and lesbian-identified individuals, especially with regard to consequences for self-perceived sexuality and social stigmatization. We tested this hypothesis for all five outcomes. For each outcome, we first examined whether the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant. If so, we deconstructed the simple interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity within each experience type. If not, we examined the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity across experience types and deconstructed the simple effects of participant sexual identity for male and female participants separately. If the two-way interaction was not significant, we examined the main effect of participant sexual identity.

Consequences for Change in Life, Overall

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was not significant for Overall Change. However, the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity was significant (see Table 2). We conducted tests of simple effects to assess the differences between male heterosexually and gay-identified participants and female heterosexually and lesbian-identified participants. We confirmed our hypothesis among male participants. Specifically, heterosexually-identified men rated identity-inconsistent experiences as likely to cause more change to their life, overall, than did gay-

identified men, $F(1, 176) = 8.89, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .107$. However, heterosexually-identified women did not rate identity-inconsistent experiences differently than did lesbian-identified women, $F(1, 176) < 1$ (see Table 3 for adjusted means).

Consequences for Self-Perception

As the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant for Self-Perception (see Table 2), we first examined the simple interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity for each experience type. The interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity was significant for the sexual fantasy experience only, $F(1, 178) = 31.81, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .152$ (all other F s < 2.50 , all other p s $> .150$).

Tests of simple effects within the simple two-way interaction revealed confirmed our hypothesis among male participants. As expected, heterosexually identified men rated the identity-inconsistent sexual fantasy experience as more consequential for self-perception than did gay-identified men, $F(1, 178) = 25.39, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .255$. However, heterosexually identified women and lesbian-identified women did not rate identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual fantasy significantly differently, $F(1, 178) = 3.66, p = .057$.

We then examined the simple main effects of participant sexual identity for the sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and love experiences. For both sexual attraction and love, the simple main effect was not significant, all F s < 2 , all p s $> .160$. However, the simple main effect of participant sexual identity was significant for sexual behavior. Across men and women, heterosexually identified participants reported that identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual behavior would be more consequential for self-perception than did gay- and lesbian-identified participants, $F(1, 176) = 15.70, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .082$.

Table 3 Adjusted means for perceived consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences by experience type (rows) and participant grouping (columns)

Experience type	Overall		Heterosexuals		Gay/lesbian		Male		Female	
	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE
Overall change										
Overall mean	3.65	0.06	3.81	0.10	3.49	0.10	3.64	0.09	3.66	0.08
Fantasy	2.93	0.10	3.18	0.12	2.68	0.14	2.94	0.14	2.93	0.13
Attraction	3.17	0.09	3.52	0.10	2.81	0.14	3.17	0.14	3.20	0.11
Behavior	4.07	0.07	4.43	0.07	3.70	0.13	3.99	0.12	4.13	0.09
Love	4.44	0.07	4.61	0.06	4.26	0.12	4.35	0.11	4.51	0.08
Self-perception										
Overall mean	3.56	0.07	3.79	0.11	3.33	0.11	3.51	0.10	3.61	0.09
Fantasy	2.64	0.09	3.02	0.14	2.28	0.12	2.40	0.12	2.88	0.13
Attraction	3.15	0.10	3.49	0.14	2.80	0.14	3.10	0.15	3.19	0.13
Behavior	4.08	0.07	4.54	0.08	3.63	0.13	3.98	0.12	4.18	0.09
Love	4.36	0.08	4.47	0.09	4.25	0.12	4.22	0.13	4.51	0.08
Stigmatization										
Overall mean	2.44	0.06	2.99	0.10	1.90	0.10	2.65	0.09	2.24	0.08
Fantasy	2.28	0.06	2.89	0.10	1.66	0.08	2.57	0.10	1.97	0.08
Attraction	2.21	0.06	2.88	0.09	1.53	0.08	2.35	0.10	2.05	0.08
Behavior	2.71	0.07	3.54	0.01	1.88	0.11	2.89	0.10	2.54	0.10
Love	2.58	0.08	3.36	0.11	1.79	0.11	2.73	0.11	2.42	0.10
Physical harm										
Overall mean	1.80	0.05	2.10	0.09	1.50	0.09	1.98	0.08	1.61	0.07
Fantasy	1.62	0.05	1.96	0.08	1.27	0.06	1.80	0.09	1.45	0.06
Attraction	1.69	0.05	2.04	0.08	1.33	0.07	1.84	0.10	1.52	0.06
Behavior	1.96	0.07	2.48	0.11	1.43	0.09	2.18	0.11	1.71	0.09
Love	1.92	0.07	2.44	0.13	1.39	0.08	2.11	0.12	1.70	0.10
Social network change										
Overall mean	2.10	0.06	2.48	0.10	1.73	0.10	2.26	0.09	1.95	0.08
Fantasy	1.82	0.05	2.28	0.08	1.36	0.07	1.94	0.08	1.72	0.07
Attraction	1.93	0.06	2.42	0.09	1.44	0.08	2.11	0.10	1.74	0.08
Behavior	2.35	0.07	3.03	0.11	1.66	0.10	2.56	0.11	2.13	0.09
Love	2.31	0.08	2.85	0.12	1.75	0.11	2.47	0.12	2.13	0.11
Experience type	Heterosexual male		Heterosexual female		Gay male		Lesbian female			
	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE	M_{adj}	SE
Overall change										
Overall mean	4.00	0.15	3.62	0.11	3.28	0.13	3.71	0.13		
Fantasy	3.40	0.24	2.55	0.18	2.51	0.21	3.28	0.21		
Attraction	3.54	0.22	3.18	0.16	2.77	0.19	3.19	0.20		
Behavior	4.48	0.18	4.20	0.14	3.64	0.16	3.96	0.16		
Love	4.58	0.17	4.56	0.12	4.20	0.14	4.40	0.15		
Self-perception										
Overall mean	3.90	0.17	3.68	0.13	3.11	0.15	3.54	0.15		
Fantasy	3.21	0.23	2.53	0.17	1.73	0.20	3.08	0.20		
Attraction	3.48	0.24	3.14	0.18	2.86	0.21	3.10	0.22		
Behavior	4.57	0.18	4.39	0.14	3.58	0.16	3.80	0.16		
Love	4.33	0.19	4.66	0.14	4.27	0.16	4.19	0.17		

Table 3 continued

Experience type	Heterosexual male		Heterosexual female		Gay male		Lesbian female	
	M_{adj}	<i>SE</i>	M_{adj}	<i>SE</i>	M_{adj}	<i>SE</i>	M_{adj}	<i>SE</i>
Stigmatization								
Overall mean	3.36	0.15	2.62	0.11	1.94	0.13	1.85	0.13
Fantasy	3.18	0.16	2.31	0.12	1.99	0.14	1.62	0.14
Attraction	2.99	0.16	2.41	0.11	1.75	0.14	1.69	0.14
Behavior	3.73	0.18	2.90	0.13	2.10	0.16	2.12	0.16
Love	3.54	0.19	2.87	0.14	1.94	0.17	1.96	0.17
Physical harm								
Overall mean	2.42	0.13	1.78	0.10	1.55	0.12	1.45	0.12
Fantasy	2.14	0.13	1.55	0.10	1.41	0.11	1.39	0.12
Attraction	2.12	0.14	1.66	0.10	1.56	0.12	1.42	0.12
Behavior	2.71	0.18	1.93	0.13	1.67	0.15	1.53	0.16
Love	2.70	0.19	1.97	0.14	1.55	0.16	1.44	0.17
Social network change								
Overall mean	2.79	0.15	2.18	0.11	1.74	0.13	1.72	0.13
Fantasy	2.43	0.13	1.90	0.01	1.40	0.12	1.56	0.12
Attraction	2.58	0.15	1.96	0.11	1.66	0.13	1.54	0.13
Behavior	3.20	0.18	2.40	0.13	1.93	0.16	1.89	0.16
Love	2.94	0.20	2.44	0.15	1.97	0.17	1.87	0.18

Means are adjusted for participant age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity

Consequences for Stigmatization and Physical Harm

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type and the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity were not significant for either Stigmatization or Physical Harm. However, the main effect of participant sexual identity was significant for both Stigmatization and Physical Harm (see Table 2). As expected, across participant sex and sexual experience type, heterosexually identified participants reported a greater likelihood that stigmatization and physical harm would result from identity-inconsistent sexual experiences than did gay- and lesbian-identified participants. See Table 3 for adjusted means.

Consequences for Social Networks

Neither the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type nor the two-way interaction of participant sex and participant sexual identity were significant for Social Network Change. However, the main effect of participant sexual identity was significant (see Table 2). As expected, across participant sex and sexual experience type, heterosexually identified participants reported a greater likelihood that their social networks would change as a result of identity-inconsistent experiences than did gay- and lesbian-identified participants (see Table 3 for adjusted means).

Hypothesis 3: Differences by Experience Type

We predicted that identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual behavior and love would be perceived as more consequential than would identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual fantasy and attraction. We tested this hypothesis for all five outcomes. For each outcome, if the three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant, we first examined the simple interaction of participant sexual identity and experience type for men and women, separately. If the three-way interaction was not significant, we examined both two-way interactions (participant sex and experience type, and participant sexual identity and experience type). If neither of the two-way interactions were not significant, we examined the pairwise comparisons of the four levels of experience type.

Consequences for Change in Life, Overall

Neither the three-way interaction nor the two-way interactions involving experience type were significant for Overall Change (see Table 2). Thus, we examined the pairwise comparisons of the four levels of experience type across participant sex and sexual identity. As seen in Table 3, the means were ordered such that the love experience was rated as most consequential for life, overall, followed by sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual fantasy. The pairwise comparisons were all significant at $p < .001$,

with the exception of the comparison between sexual fantasy and sexual attraction, which was not significant.

Consequences for Self-Perception

The three-way interaction of participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type was significant for Self-Perception (see Table 2). We first examined the simple interaction of participant sexual identity and experience type for men and women, separately. The simple interaction of sexual identity and experience type was significant for both men, $F(3, 482.26) = 7.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .093$, and women, $F(2.50, 482.26) = 3.27, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = .040$. Thus, we examined the pairwise comparisons of the four experience types separately for heterosexually identified men, heterosexually identified women, gay-identified men, and lesbian-identified women. The means of the pairwise comparisons are presented in Fig. 1. All comparisons were statistically significant at $p < .001$ with five exceptions. For heterosexually identified men, the comparison of sexual fantasy and sexual attraction was not significant, $p = .055$, and the comparison of sexual behavior and love was significant at $p = .019$. For heterosexually identified women, the comparison of sexual behavior and love was significant at $p = .012$. For lesbian-identified women, the comparison of sexual fantasy and attraction was not significant.

Consequences for Stigmatization and Physical Harm

Neither the three-way interaction nor the two-way interactions involving experience type were significant for Stigmatization or

Physical Harm (see Table 2). Thus, we examined the pairwise comparisons of the four levels of experience type across participant sex and sexual identity. As seen in Table 3, the means for Stigmatization were ordered such that the sexual behavior experience was rated as most likely to result in stigmatization, followed by love, sexual fantasy, and sexual attraction. The pairwise comparisons were all significant at $p < .001$, with the exception of the comparison between sexual fantasy and sexual attraction, which was not significant, and the comparison between sexual behavior and love, which was significant at $p = .016$.

The means for Physical Harm were ordered such that the sexual behavior experience was rated as most likely to result in stigmatization, followed by love, sexual attraction, and sexual fantasy. The pairwise comparisons were all significant at $p < .001$ with three exceptions. The comparison between sexual fantasy and sexual attraction was not significant, the comparison between sexual attraction and love was significant at $p = .001$, and the comparison between sexual behavior and love was not significant.

Consequences for Social Networks

Neither the three-way interaction nor the two-way interactions involving experience type were significant for Social Network Change (see Table 2). Thus, we examined the pairwise comparisons of the four levels of experience type. As seen in Table 3, the means for Social Network Change were ordered such that the sexual behavior experience was rated as most likely to result in change in one's social networks, followed by love, sexual attraction, and sexual fantasy. The pairwise comparisons were all significant at $p < .001$, with the exception of the comparison between sexual fantasy and sexual attraction, which was significant at $p = .034$, and the comparison between sexual behavior and love, which was not significant.

Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Differences by Participant Sex

We predicted that male participants would perceive greater consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences than would female participants. We found qualified support for this hypothesis across sexual experiences. While both heterosexually and gay-identified men perceived a greater likelihood of being stigmatized as a result of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences than did heterosexually and lesbian-identified women, only heterosexually identified men perceived greater consequences for their life, overall, relative to heterosexually identified women. We did not find evidence that there are gender differences in the perceived impact of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences for one's social network.

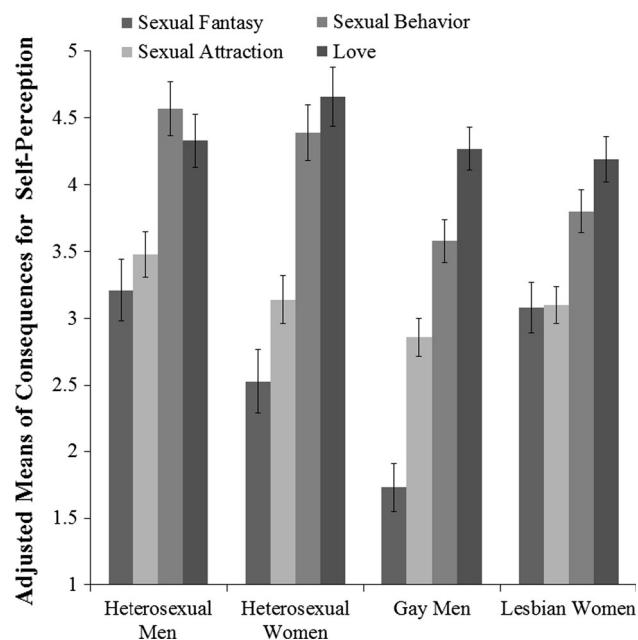


Fig. 1 The expected means of self-perception, adjusted for age, political attitudes, and race/ethnicity, stratified by participant sex, participant sexual identity, and experience type

We found surprising effects for the perceived consequences for self-perception. Specifically, we found that, only for the experience of sexual fantasy, heterosexually identified men perceived a greater impact on self-perception than did heterosexually identified women, but gay-identified men perceived a less of an impact on self-perception than did lesbian-identified women. There are a couple of interesting features of this effect. The first is that only the sexual fantasy experience showed evidence of a gender difference among heterosexually identified participants. Perhaps lay perceptions of heterosexual female sexual fluidity are tied to the notion that women are experimental with their sexuality, indicating that women are likely to act out what could qualify as fantasies but not likely to act out actual same-sex sexual attraction, behavior, or love (see Thompson, 2007).

Also of note is the fact that gay-identified men perceived that identity-inconsistent sexual fantasy would lead to less of an impact on self-perception than did lesbian-identified women. These results suggest that the gender norms that impinge on heterosexually identified men's sexuality and fluid portrayals of women's sexuality may not be as relevant to gay men's and lesbian women's sexuality. This finding makes sense given that gay men and lesbian women are socially understood using gender-inversion heuristics (Freeman, Johnson, Ambady, & Rule, 2010; Kite & Deaux, 1986). In other words, people are more likely to apply female gender norms than male gender norms to gay men and to apply male gender norms than female gender norms to lesbian women, making it likely that, like heterosexually identified women, gay-identified men see identity-inconsistent sexual fantasy as nothing more than sexual experimentation. Another possible explanation is that because male bisexuality is often perceived as merely transitional or transitory, masking a "true" categorical homosexual orientation (Steinman, 2001), gay-identified men may perceive that any identity-inconsistent experiences they might have would be irrelevant to their sexuality.

More broadly, this finding brings to question the degree to which gay-identified men engage in identity-inconsistent sexual fantasy. Perhaps it is so common as to not arouse self-doubts, or, alternately, it may be so uncommon that the possibility it could influence self-perception is perceived as highly unlikely. Further research is needed to assess the actual prevalence of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences among gay-identified men.

Hypothesis 2: Differences by Participant Sexual Identity

We predicted that heterosexually identified participants would perceive greater consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences than would gay- and lesbian-identified participants. We found support for this hypothesis among some of our outcomes. As expected, heterosexually identified participants perceived that identity-inconsistent sexual experiences would lead them to be faced with a greater likelihood of stigmatization and physical harm and a greater likelihood that their social networks would change than did gay- and lesbian-identified participants.

However, only male participants showed the expected sexual identity difference in the perceived consequences for their life, overall. Heterosexually identified women were not significantly different from lesbian-identified women in their perceptions of the consequences for their life, overall.

Finally, we found differing effects of participant sexual identity for the perceived consequences for self-perception across different sexual experiences. Specifically, for the sexual fantasy experience, only heterosexually identified men perceived greater consequences for self-perception than gay-identified men. Heterosexually identified women and lesbian-identified men did not significantly differ in their perceptions of the consequences for self-perception. However, for the sexual behavior experience, both heterosexually identified and gay-identified men perceived greater consequences for self-perception than did heterosexually identified and lesbian-identified women. Again, these effects highlight the need for research exploring the prevalence of different types of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences among heterosexually and non-heterosexually identified populations. Such data could shed light on the reasons why the self-perception consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual fantasy and sexual behavior are differentially perceived by heterosexually identified and gay-identified men, while identity-inconsistent experiences of sexual behavior are differentially perceived by both heterosexually identified men and women and gay- and lesbian-identified individuals.

In general, the pattern of the data supports the notion that heterosexually identified individuals perceive greater consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences than do gay- and lesbian-identified individuals. This effect is not surprising. Heterosexually identified individuals are less likely to have well-formed beliefs about their sexual orientation than are gay- and lesbian-identified individuals (e.g., Konik & Stewart, 2004) and are less likely to have experienced identity-inconsistent experiences in their history than are gay- and lesbian-identified individuals (e.g., Dubé, 2000). Heterosexually identified individuals and also hold a higher status in society than do gay- and lesbian-identified individuals (Bem, 1995; Sitin, McCreary, & Mahalik, 2004), further evidenced by discrimination against gay- and lesbian-identified individuals in access to social resources such as housing and employment (Herek, 2009), essentially giving heterosexually identified individuals more to lose if they were to have socially stigmatized same-sex sexual experiences.

On the other hand, both heterosexually identified and gay- and lesbian-identified participants may both have much at stake when it comes to the interpersonal consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences. For some gay- and lesbian-identified individuals closely tied to a lesbian and/or gay community, members of their social networks may be just as surprised and/or upset by their identity-inconsistent experiences as would members of the social networks of heterosexually identified individuals (e.g., Rust, 1992). Indeed, a large body of research shows that behaviorally bisexual individuals are likely to face stigmatization from

both heterosexually and non-heterosexually identified groups (Eliason, 1997; Spalding & Peplau, 1997; Steinman, 2001; for a discussion of perceptions of female bisexuality, see Diamond, 2008).

Hypothesis 3: Differences by Experience Type

As expected, we found that, across outcomes, participants rated the hypothetical identity-inconsistent sexual behavior and love scenarios as more consequential than the fantasy and attraction scenarios. It is also worth noting that while sexual behavior and love were consistently rated as more consequential than sexual attraction and sexual fantasy, the differences between the two pairs varied across the different outcomes. These results may suggest that experiences of attraction and fantasy may not be perceived as the most important catalysts of sexual identity change. Instead, individuals may perceive the need to engage in sexual behavior and/or experience love in order to consider a sexual identity change.

Further research is needed to investigate the relative importance of the experiences within the two pairs. For instance, within the experience of sexual behavior, people may assign different meanings to different types of sexual behaviors (penile-vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, kissing) (e.g., Carpenter, 2001; Sanders & Reinisch, 1999). Similarly, fantasies may contain varying content and may take place in different contexts (e.g., while dreaming or waking). Future research could investigate whether the content of identity-inconsistent fantasies differentially impacts perceived consequences.

Considerations and Extensions

There are features of the present research that bear further discussion. The present study utilized hypothetical identity-inconsistent sexual experiences on which participants reflected and provided perceptions of the degree to which the experiences would impact their lives, beliefs, and social outcomes. The use of hypothetical scenarios, as opposed to asking about experiences that participants had actually had, allowed us to tap into participants' *beliefs* about the consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences, rather than their recollections of the actual consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences. We were interested in these beliefs because they represent the social norms regarding the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences.

While the actual consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences may vary considerably, depending on factors one may not be able to anticipate, the perceived consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences likely reflect people's understanding of social norms and mores, resulting in more consistent, generalizable responses. These generalizable responses matter because these perceptions of the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences guide people's behavior and attitudes, even if those perceptions are likely inaccurate representations of actual

behavior (e.g., Gilbert, Pinel, Wilson, Blumberg, & Wheatley, 1998). For instance, the present research can shed light on social perceptions of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences among others. For example, based on the present data, we would expect that the belief that a heterosexually identified friend has fallen in love with a person of the same sex would be more likely to lead to the perception that they might be gay than if that friend expressed sexually attraction to people of the same-sex.

Moreover, social norms regarding the consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences may be particularly likely to guide the behavior and attitudes of people who may never actually have identity-inconsistent sexual experiences. For example, a heterosexually identified man may be particularly wary of the appearance of demonstrating any type of same-sex affection that may indicate love, but may be less concerned about behavior or revealing information that suggests he experiences same-sex attraction. Future research should examine the differences between the anticipated and actual consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences.

The use of hypothetical scenarios and the restriction of our sample to heterosexually identified, gay-identified, and lesbian-identified participants also allowed us a great amount of control over the interpretation and generalizability of our effects. While it would be interesting to investigate the impact of both same-sex and other-sex sexual experiences among samples with more diverse sexual identities (e.g., bisexual, queer, questioning), defining "identity-inconsistent" experiences among these samples is difficult. The use of participants with strictly categorical sexual identities allowed us to clearly investigate the perceived impact of sexual experiences that depart from the expectations implied by those participants' sexual identities. We would expect that people with less categorical sexual identities would likely expect fewer consequences of atypical sexual experiences, at least for their beliefs about their sexuality. Indeed, recent research demonstrates that individual differences in beliefs about sexual identity moderate the relationship between identity-inconsistent sexual behavior and sexual identity (Preciado & Thompson, 2012).

Furthermore, the incidence and meaning of identity-inconsistent experiences varies significantly across different ages (e.g., Chandra, Mosher, Copen, & Sionean, 2011) and cultures (e.g., Blackwood, 1993). Similarly, the perceived consequences of identity-inconsistent sexual experiences may vary across age and culture. While the present research sets a foundation for understanding the perceived consequences of identity-inconsistent experiences, future research should investigate other individual differences that may impact perceived consequences.

Conclusion

While sexual identity-inconsistent experiences have consequences for the way people think about their own sexuality, their status in society, and their social relationships, the present research

demonstrated that people's perceptions of the severity of these consequences varied depending on the person's sex, the person's sexual identity, and the type of experience. This is not surprising as heterosexually identified men and women, gay-identified men, and lesbian-identified women often exist in markedly different social milieus. As we continue to make strides in understanding the complexity in human sexuality belied by sexual identity categories, we should continue to acknowledge the differences that these categories nonetheless introduce into people's experiences with their own sexuality.

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