Science Editorial: What are the hottest research topics in GLBT psychology?

By James Cantor

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this editorial are my own. They do not necessarily reflect those of APA, Division 44, the Science Committee, or their members or officers.

As tepid as I am about pop culture, I’m somewhat of a fan of Top Ten Lists. So, for psychologists interested in GLBT research, this seemed an interesting prospect. Knowledge about the status and progress in GLBT research can help us to identify under-researched questions; to guide the selection of topics for convention, the Newsletter, and continuing education; and to assist students who are dissertation-bound and young investigators who are trying to carve a research niche for themselves. Thus, this is the first in what I hope is a series of editorials examining the field of GLBT science and its trends. I welcome comment—in this newsletter, on the Division 44 listserves, or in other psychology venues—on this topic. The Top Ten Topics can be identified in more than one way, of course. I have selected only one for this editorial, but I certainly encourage other folks to develop and pursue other criteria. (My suspicion is that the methods will actually converge on similar answers.)

To pick the Top Ten Topics, I first identified the ten most frequently cited papers for each year from 1998 to 2002. The frequency of citations is easily available online from the Science Citation Index and the Social Science Citation Index. I focused on frequency of citation instead of frequency of new articles because citation frequency automatically selects those works that have the highest impact on the field. It filters out the dreck, so much of which is published each year. The following keywords formed the computer search strategy: "homosex* or bisex* or gay or lesbian* or transsex* or transgend* or (gender dysphor*)". In order to remain focused on psychology articles, purely medical articles had to be removed, so the following keywords were used as rule-outs: HIV or AIDS or papillo*. Other non-psychology articles were dropped by hand from the list. There were ties for the tenth most widely cited paper for some years. So, even though I was aiming for ten papers for each of five years, I obtained 55 papers in total. Finally, these 55 papers were sorted by general topic to produce those ten topics that are receiving the most attention from researchers. They are:

1. Homophobia (tie)
2. Biological basis of sexual orientation (tie)
3. Suicide, including in adult men in GLB youth in cross-section samples
4. Transsexuality
5. Health, including in GLB adults in GLB youth
6. GLB Youth, other topics
7. Psychiatric disorders and sexual orientation, including in adults in GLB youth
8. GLB Development
9. GLB Parenting
10. Other/unclassified

Before commenting on what appears on the list, it is worth noting those which do not. In guessing which topics would appear, I thought about those topics which seem to get the most attention—at Convention, on the Division 44 listserv, and from the Executive Committee. In that context, the lack of any highly cited papers on bisexuality, LGBT aging, or ethnic/cultural diversity is quite surprising. There exist literatures on each of these topics, of course, but they do not appear to be getting widely cited, at least not those papers from 1998–2002.

One can quickly generate any number of hypotheses to explain the mismatch between the above list and conventional wisdom, and I invite others to help solve the riddle. My own pet theory is that these particular topics sit at the forefront of our minds because of their recent political development, not recent scientific development. Bisexuality, for example, enjoys increased attention during the past several years, with great thanks to the efforts of division members bringing it to the forefront. Very little basic scientific information, however, has been produced, at least from 1998–2002.

This invites several more questions. Is the political attention being paid to these topics out of proportion? Is scientific interest merely lagging behind political interest on these issues? Are there no questions remaining in these fields that lend themselves to scientific inquiry? Or are the people who pursue these topics not interested in using scientific methods to advance those parts of the field? It is also possible that research in those fields fails to be cited for exhibiting less quality than quantity. No matter which of those possibilities turns out to be the most accurate in the long run, I would assert that understanding this mismatch is important in its own right. Only with such understanding can we best decide whether and how to act upon it.

The following appendix includes all the highly-cited papers produced by the search and the categories into which I put them. Which topic comes out as number one, of course, will depend on which topics get subdivided or collapsed together, so feel free to rearrange them to suit your own interests. The tie for top topic reflects only my own filing scheme.

It probably comes as little surprise that so many papers on homophobia were highly-cited.
Several aspects of homophobia—the effects of stigma and violence, and the social psychology of prejudice—have been a mainstay interest of GLBT researchers for a long time. The great surprise, at least for me, was that homophobia had no more highly-cited papers than did biological research in sexual orientation. In fact, the number of top papers on homophobia would be outnumbered by the biologically-oriented papers if the biologically-oriented papers on sexual orientation and transsexuality were combined.

Biological research on sexual orientation remains quite controversial among GLBT psychologists, for reasons I won’t pretend to understand. I would underscore, however, that the enormous scientific attention that is paid to the biological basis of sexual orientation is in stark contrast to the deafening lack of such attention by the Division at Convention each year. In fact, the last presentation reviewing the topic was several years ago, and was met with great hostility from the audience. Regardless of one’s personal or political stance on such research, however, I would assert the importance of understanding that research. If the Division for the Psychological Study of LGB Issues does not understand the ins and outs of this literature—while the rest of the scientific world pays so much attention to it—then we can hardly serve as the experts others need us to be. Furthermore, if we fail to help the public to understand this work in its proper context, then we are inviting other, less tolerant, groups to do it for us.

The number of papers on transsexuality will likely seem a mixed blessing. On the one hand, having so many highly-cited papers on transsexuality would seem to argue that the topic deserves much more attention from the division than it is receiving. On the other hand, however, a brief perusal of the papers shows that the papers do not involve the phenomenology and social implications of the existence of transsexuality, which seems to be the predominant interest of GLBT psychologists. Rather, the papers represent investigations into how the human brain and endocrinological systems operate; and, because transsexuals are undergoing cross-sex hormone treatment as part of their transition, they represent a unique opportunity to investigate the behavioral and cognitive effects of hormones on a healthy body. As was true with topics that failed to appear on the highly-cited list at all, it is both interesting and important to ask why phenomenological and social-import papers are not being widely cited.

The final topic receiving so much attention is the various aspects of GLBT youth, particularly suicide in GLBT youth. Perhaps more than in any other topic, the presence of these publications on the list emphasizes the need for the division to continue its attention to these topics. In fact, I would recommend integrating the topic of GLBT youth with the other topic areas. We have seen the movement to integrate GLBT issues into all of psychology rather than to segregate it into "the Gay course," and it may be time to integrate youth issues into all of GLBT rather than to continue to see it as a separate topic.

Regardless of whether and to what extent one may support these opinions, I guarantee the following list will make great summer reading—the best way to keep up to is read those papers that the researchers themselves are reading and citing. The papers appear in categorical order, so that my counting scheme becomes apparent. Happy reading:

Homophobia
Biological Basis of Sexual Orientation


Suicide


Transsexuality


Health

Youth, other topics in

Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Orientation

GLB Development

GLB Parenting

Other