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Short report:

ATTRACTION AND LOVE IN SCHOOLCHILDREN IN IRELAND – PILOT

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Introduction

A growing corpus of evidence consistently suggests that those adolescents who belong to sexual minorities and identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, are at higher risk of various mental and physical health problems than their heterosexual peers (Goldbach, Tanner-Smith, Bagwell, & Dunlap, 2014; Marshal et al., 2008). The majority of these studies, however, were conducted in North America, and it remains a question whether their findings can be generalised to other countries (Saewyc, 2011). It is also important to note that identity is just one dimension of sexual orientation which also includes behaviour and romantic attraction. These dimensions are not entirely convergent (Geary et al., 2018; Kann et al., 2016), and attraction is less studied than the other two dimensions (Savin-Williams, 2006). It has been argued that in adolescence, it may be more age-appropriate to categorise sexual minorities based on romantic attraction (Költő et al., 2018). In other words, instead of the identity terms “Heterosexual”, “Lesbian/Gay”, or “Bisexual”, young people should be classified to groups attracted exclusively to opposite-gender partners, exclusively to same-gender partners, or to both genders.

Focus of this report

In this study, we tested whether a standardised two-item measure, assessing feelings of attraction and love, is suitable for 13–18-year-old schoolchildren in Ireland. Beside presenting overall frequencies of the responses and the association between gender patterns of attraction and love, we also summarise student feedback on the items (in form of written comments and classroom discussion).

Sample and method

The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) is a cross-national study conducted in 48 countries, in a collaboration with the World Health Organisation (WHO) Regional Office for Europe. Ireland joined the network in 1994. Data are collected on a four-year cycle. In 2018, Ireland participated for the sixth time in the HBSC study. The overall aims of the HBSC study are to gain new insight into and increase our understanding of young people’s health and well-being, health behaviours and their social context. HBSC collects data on key indicators of health, health attitudes, and

health behaviours, as well as the context of health for young people. The study is a school-based survey with information collected from students through self-completion questionnaires in classrooms. The methods employed comply with the international HBSC protocol and are described in detail at <http://www.nuigalway.ie/hbsc/hbscireland/2018study/>.

To pilot the HBSC questionnaire developed for the 2018 data collection, a non-probability sample of three primary and two post-primary schools was investigated. Researchers administered pilot questionnaires in classroom conditions to groups of pupils from third class to fifth year.

The questionnaire given to students from fifth class to fifth year ($N = 239$) contained two standardised questions on romantic attraction. The questions were: “Are you attracted to...” and “Have you ever been in love with...”, and response options are “Girl or girls”, “Boy or boys”, “Both girls and boys”, “I am not attracted yet to anyone”/ “I have never been in love”. The responses, combined with the self-reported gender of the participant, enabled us to categorise young people attracted exclusively to opposite-gender (OGA), exclusively to same- (SGA), or both-gender partners (BGA), or have not experienced attraction (NA). A similar fourfold variable was created to categorise adolescents having been in love with opposite- (OGL), same- (SGL), both-gender partner(s) (BGL), or have not been in love (NL).

After administering the items to the students in a standardised questionnaire, they were asked to underline difficult words or phrases in the questions, provide written feedback on either specific questions or on the whole questionnaire if they wanted, and the researchers facilitated a subsequent classroom discussion.

Results

Of the 230 participants who responded to these questions, 57.4% reported to be in love with opposite-gender partners, 1.7% reported being in love with same-gender and 3.5% with both-gender partners, while 37.4% reported not having been in love. Regarding attraction, 80.9% of the students reported being attracted exclusively to opposite-gender partners, 1.7% to same-gender partners; 7% to both-gender partners, while 10.4% reported not having experienced attraction yet. Love and attraction were significantly associated with each other: $\chi^2(9) = 144.56, p < .001$, with a medium-to large effect: Cramer’s $V = .46$. The correspondence is not full, though: attraction to opposite- and both-gender partners were more frequent than love, and more young people reported never having been in love than never having felt attraction to anyone (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Correspondence of attraction and love

	OGA	SGA	BGA	NA	Within Love
OGL	123 (93.2)	1 (0.8)	3 (2.3)	5 (3.8)	132 (57.4)
SGL	2 (50.0)	2 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (1.7)
BGL	0 (0.0)	1 (12.5)	6 (75.0)	1 (12.5)	8 (3.5)
NL	61 (70.9)	0 (0.0)	7 (8.1)	18 (20.9)	86 (37.4)
Within Attraction	186 (80.9)	4 (1.7)	16 (7.0)	24 (10.4)	230 (100.0)

Note. Values in brackets indicate percentage. For attraction columns, percentages are within the love categories; for love and attraction overall values, percentages are within that variable.

Regarding understandability of the questions, none of the participants underlined any words or phrases in the questions indicating they were difficult to understand. Two written pieces of feedback were given:

- *“I have liked someone but not truly in love with them”*
- *“I am not attracted to anyone yet”*

Three written comments were given at end of the questionnaire that are, or may be, relevant to these items:

- *“I don’t think that people should be asked about ‘sexual orientation’ or ‘romantic experiences’”*
- *“These are very personal questions”*
- *“I don’t understand what some of the questions had anything to do with my health (either mental, physical or social) like for example ‘have you ever been in love with?’ What does that matter? Are you trying to determine my sexuality??? To me that doesn't really have anything to do with my health. Sure when you are in love you become a bit distracted but that's about it.”*

In the subsequent classroom discussion, a number of children mentioned that there was no option for those who think that “they’re in love or really in love”. Some felt that the questions were “sad” and they “have nothing to do with romantic experiences”.

Discussion

The extent to which young people report being in love with same- and both-gender partners was similar to the patterns found in representative samples of adolescents from eight other European countries (Költő et al., 2018). The proportion of those who report having been in love with opposite-gender partners or not having been in love is more similar to patterns found in adolescents from England than those observed in the other seven (continental) countries (Költő et al., 2018). That more adolescents report ‘attraction’ than ‘love’ and fewer report they have not experienced love than report that they have felt attraction supports the idea that the two concepts are slightly divergent (Cramer, 1993). That students indicated no issues with understandability of the items is in line with our research team’s previous experiences when testing the items in six European countries (Young et al., 2016). While acknowledging that these items may be too personal or private for some young people, these initial findings support that the presented items are suitable for categorising gender-based patterns of romantic attraction and love in schoolchildren in Ireland.

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