

Counseling Psychology Research on Sexual (Orientation) Minority Issues: Conceptual and Methodological Challenges and Opportunities

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This lead article of the special issue discusses conceptual and methodological considerations in studying sexual minority issues, particularly in research conducted by counseling psychologists (including the work represented in this special issue). First, the overarching challenge of conceptualizing and defining sexual minority populations is described. Second, the importance and value of scholarship about sexual minority issues are highlighted. Third, challenges in sexual minority research are outlined, using the articles in this special issue for illustrative purposes, and suggestions are offered for consideration in future research. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the ways in which counseling psychologists are uniquely positioned to advance knowledge, practice, and social justice through research on sexual minority issues.

Keywords: sexual orientation, lesbian, gay, and bisexual psychology, sexual minority, homosexuality, research methods

In this article, we discuss key conceptual and methodological considerations in studying sexual minority issues, particularly in research conducted by counseling psychologists (including the work represented in this special issue). First, we address the overarching challenge of conceptualizing and defining sexual minority populations. Second, we highlight the importance and value of scholarship about sexual minority issues. Third, we discuss challenges and concerns in sexual minority research, using the articles in this special issue for illustrative purposes, and we offer broad suggestions for consideration in future research. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the ways in which counseling psychologists are uniquely positioned to advance knowledge, practice, and social justice through research on sexual minority issues.

In the title of this article, we have placed the word *orientation* in parentheses to reflect our view that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) concerns are linked with a wider set of sexual minority issues involving diverse expressions of gender and sexuality, including transgender status. In writing this article, we are aware that much of our discussion focuses on sexual orientation and LGB populations and that our discussion of other sexual minority issues and populations, such as transgender, transsexual, and intersexual

populations, is more limited. This focus parallels the contents of this special issue. Specifically, most studies in this issue focus on LGB populations and sexual orientation, with transgender individuals represented minimally in samples and study topics. Nevertheless, the inclusion of one study with female-to-male transsexuals (Sánchez & Vilain, 2009, this issue) and one study with intersexual individuals (Schweizer, Brunner, Schützmann, Schönbacher, & Richter-Appelt, 2009, this issue) is noteworthy. We acknowledge the appeal of a unified and inclusive sexual minority literature. However, we also recognize the risk that collapsing sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex issues can mask substantive differences across groups that may marginalize group-specific concerns and slow the development of accurate knowledge about groups. Given the centrality of this inclusiveness-to-distinctiveness continuum in formulating any sexual minority research endeavor, we begin with a discussion of the complexities involved in identifying one's population of interest in such research.

Conceptualizing and Defining Sexual Minority Populations

Arguably the most encompassing difficulty in sexual minority research is the task of articulating and justifying decisions about the population(s) of focus in a given study. This ongoing task typically begins in early conversations among the researchers about inclusion and exclusion criteria, resurfaces again in the recruitment and data collection phases when participants provide feedback about these criteria, and is raised yet again in the review process. Moreover, at each step of the process, research colleagues, participants, reviewers, and editors all may provide conflicting feedback about what should or should not be done.

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Such ambiguity about the right course of action reflects the fact that defining a sexual minority population of focus carries with it challenging scientific (and political) tensions and consequences. The tension is marked by the desire to be inclusive of marginalized groups on the one hand and the concern about glossing over important within-group variability on the other hand, both legitimate motivations. From a scientific standpoint, being inclusive in sample composition often is grounded in a desire to redress prior scholarly neglect of specific subgroups (e.g., bisexual and transgender individuals) and serves to highlight shared experiences (e.g., oppression, stress). However, this inclusiveness can inadvertently lead to misleading information overall if the underlying constructs and measures are not evaluated in terms of their applicability to all subgroups and if these groups are not examined specifically for their unique experiences.

Difficulties in defining clearly the population(s) of focus manifest a central conceptual question in sexual minority research: Who, exactly, are sexual minority people? Perhaps because the evolution of this research has been characterized by samples expanded iteratively in response to critiques of extant neglect, the momentum has been to extend the acronym umbrella (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007) continually toward increasing inclusion (e.g., LGBTQQA for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and ally). This is reflected in conceptualizations highlighting similarity among sexual minority groups, as, for example, Fassinger and Arseneau's (2007) argument that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people share common experiences of gender transgression as well as societal sexual prejudice.

At the heart of these definitional debates are lack of consensus about distinctions among separate but overlapping constructs such as sex, gender, gender expression, gender identity, transgender, gender variant, sexuality, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual orientation identity (e.g., Chung & Katayama, 1996; Currah & Minter, 2000; Green, 2000; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002), as well as imprecise labels and language used in articulating these constructs in the extant literature. The terms *sex* and *gender* historically have been used interchangeably in the popular and scholarly literature, as well as in law, yet they have been disentangled in feminist and sexual minority scholarship. Sex generally refers to anatomical or biological characteristics as male or female, whereas gender refers to culturally ascribed characteristics associated with maleness or femaleness that are distinct from natal, assigned, or biological sex (Green, 2000). Contrary to popular assumptions, sex in humans does not occur solely within the male–female binary (i.e., approximately 1 in every 2,000 children is born intersexed, or with a sexual anatomy that mixes male and female characteristics; Green, 2000). The terms *transgender* and *gender variant* often are used interchangeably to refer to “any person whose anatomy, appearance, identity, beliefs, personality characteristics, demeanor or behavior diverges from or is perceived to diverge from prevailing social norms about gender,” with the term *gender variant* emerging more recently as a broader and more inclusive term (Currah & Minter, 2000, p. 17). *Gender expression* includes personal behaviors and characteristics that are visible to others, such as physical appearance, clothing, and mannerisms. *Gender identity* is the conscious claiming and expression of gender as related to the self (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007, also introduced the term *gender orientation* as a gender construct parallel to *sexual orientation*, but, to our knowledge, this term is

not yet being used widely). *Sexuality* encompasses the broadest dimensions of human sexual behavior, such as sexual values and mores, sexual needs and preferences for sexual activities, and preferred modes of sexual expression; *sexual identity* is the claiming (i.e., recognition, acceptance, self-labeling) of those broad dimensions as relevant to the self. *Sexual orientation* is a specific manifestation of sexuality as expressed through sexual, affectional, and relational predispositions toward other persons on the basis of their gender, whereas *sexual orientation identity* is the inward or outward conscious claiming of those predispositions (see Worthington & Mohr, 2002, and Worthington et al., 2002, for a thorough discussion of the distinctions between sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual orientation identity).

Researchers often use several of these terms interchangeably or without clear definitions, thereby exacerbating confusion about exactly who was sampled in their studies. However, the lack of clarity is understandable, given the complexities of conceptualizing and measuring aspects of human sexuality within assumptive frameworks that are very limiting. For example, in the conceptualization and measurement of sexual orientation, there is a fundamental tension between *essentialism* (i.e., the assumption that sexual orientations are categorical phenomena that are fixed, stable, and fundamental to each individual's biological composition) and *social constructionism* (i.e., the assumption that sexual orientations are relatively recent and arbitrary demarcations of sexual proclivities that potentially are fluid and changeable across time and context, Broido, 2000; Tolman & Diamond, 2001). In this context, researchers have begun to revisit an age-old nature–nurture debate, which has had broad implications for theory and research on sexual minority issues. In this debate, the influential work of Kinsey and colleagues (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953; see Sell, 1997, for a historical account) has come under increasing scrutiny on the basis of a number of limitations, including overattention to overt sexual experiences and the polarizing of heterosexuality and homosexuality as opposites on a bipolar continuum, with bisexuality in between. Extensive evidence has been produced indicating that same-sex sexual behaviors, cognitive and emotional attractions, and erotic fantasies are widespread in significant segments of the heterosexually identified population and that other-sex experiences are widespread among individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Diamant, Schuster, McGuigan, & Lever, 1999; Dunne, Bailey, Kirk, & Martin, 2000; Sell, Wells, & Wypij, 1995; White, 1997).

Further complicating the conceptualization and measurement of sexual orientation is the conflation of gender with sexual orientation, that is, the assumption that sexual orientation involves the desire to be or to mimic the other gender or that transgression of gender norms (e.g., tomboys, sissies) implies a same-sex sexual orientation (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007). Fundamental to this problem is an essentialist gender binary (the notion that people are either male or female and that gender identity and gender role characteristics are biologically determined). Thus, in this complicated confusion of gender and sexuality, sexual orientation has been assumed to be determined on the basis of whether an individual, presumed to belong to the male or female category of the gender binary, is sexually attracted to or engaging in sexual activity with a person (or persons) presumed to belong to either the same or a different category within the gender binary. The result is

a similar gay–straight binary in which gay people are presumed to be attracted to and engage in sexual activities with (only) people of the same gender, while straight people are assumed to be attracted to and engage in sexual activities with (only) people of a different gender. It is worth noting that the relatively recent acknowledgment of bisexual people in the literature simply adds categories rather than challenging the fundamental presumptive binaries related to sexual orientation and gender. That is, bisexual people's sexual attractions are assumed to be based on gender and sexual orientation categories that are accepted as given, rather than conceptualized as independent of those categories.

The relationships between LGB and transgender individuals are complex and at times divergent, with the most obvious connections based on stigma, oppression, and discrimination related to sexism and stereotyping on the basis of gender and sexuality (Green, 2000). As such, there is considerable overlap among transgender issues and LGB issues related to identity (e.g., stigma, self-expression), relationships (e.g., loss, conflict), and public policy and the law (e.g., hate crimes and incidents, legal discrimination, social marginalization). In addition, many transgender individuals face unique developmental processes (e.g., gender transition) and medical issues (e.g., medical and psychological misdiagnosis and mistreatment, denial of access to qualified care). Furthermore, given the persistence of beliefs that gender transgressions reflect homosexuality and that gender role conformity reflects heterosexuality, many transgender individuals are presumed to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In reality, although many researchers add transgender individuals onto the end of the LGB acronym (i.e., LGBT), the term *transgender* represents a broad group of people with a variety of gender identities (e.g., transsexual, gender queer, genderblend, drag king, drag queen, and androgyne) and with separate and distinct sexual orientation identities (e.g., heterosexual, lesbian or gay, or bisexual). Importantly, many typically considered sexual orientation issues may not apply (or may apply in unique ways) to transgender individuals who identify as heterosexual. It must also be acknowledged that an increasing segment of the population may not accept the gender binary categories of male and female in response to research designed to assess same-sex versus other-sex attractions, behaviors, or relationships, making standardized measurement of sexual orientation and identity more complex under these circumstances. Specifically, transgender individuals may not self-identify as male or female (man or woman) and also may not base their attractions on whether a person is male or female.

Both the gender binary and the gay–straight binary disintegrate when scrutinized in the context of data showing that there are more than two biological sexes that can be observed in humans and in countless other species throughout nature (e.g., Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Roughgarden, 2004) and that there is tremendous variation in gender expression within biological sexes (e.g., Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008), as well as the data (cited above) that both same-sex-oriented and other-sex-oriented people exhibit both same-sex and other-sex behavior. Given these conceptual problems, it is nearly impossible to operationalize sexual orientation without encountering confounds related to various aspects of sexuality and gender (see Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue, for an example of how these dynamics may become problematic in sexual orientation identity research).

A number of alternative measures of sexual orientation have appeared in the literature (e.g., Friedman et al., 2004; F. Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Shively & De Cecco, 1977; Storms, 1980; Worthington & Moreno, 2005), but none of these instruments has gained widespread use or acceptance over the original Kinsey Scale (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953). In fact, a number of content analyses have concluded that there is no consensus among researchers about how sexual orientation is measured most effectively and that the most common method is to request self-identification as gay male, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual (or some variation) using forced-choice formats (Chung & Katayama, 1996; Morin, 1977; Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003; Shively, Jones, & De Cecco, 1984). However, Worthington and Reynolds (2009, this issue) and others (e.g., Diamond, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2005) have noted that, as some self-labels are discarded by new generations and new terms are added or reintroduced into the lexicon of an expanding list of possible identities (e.g., bi-curious, hetero-flexible), it is becoming increasingly problematic to use self-identification labels as proxies for sexual orientation in research, particularly when constrained into the four-category system dictated by sexual orientation and gender binaries. Simple self-labeling does nothing to capture the complex interrelationships among sexual orientations and identities.

Although we would like to offer a few definitive statements about specific advancements in the measurement of sexual orientation and identity that extend beyond the use of the Kinsey Scale or simple self-identification, the reality is that the research literature currently offers only limited evidence for alternative measures. Specifically, although the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (F. Klein, 1993; F. Klein et al., 1985) is probably the most extensively used alternative, it too has been criticized on the basis of conceptual limitations, and there is very little research to support the reliability and validity of the scale (see Sell, 1997; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue). The Sexual Orientation and Identity Scale (Worthington & Moreno, 2005) used by Worthington and Reynolds (2009, this issue) is a promising new instrument that promotes the conceptualization of sexual orientation and identity as distinct but related constructs requiring separate measurement, but the limited available research on this new instrument prevents an unqualified endorsement of its use until additional psychometric evidence is available.

Disentangling all of these sexual minority–related constructs requires an integrative approach to understanding both the essential and socially constructed aspects of sexual orientation and identity, that is, an acknowledgment that there are both enduring aspects of sexuality and gender (e.g., studies of transgender people reveal relatively stable internal gender identities, regardless of family, medical, or social attempts to dictate gendered behavior) and socially constructed aspects (e.g., social mores that dictate dating scripts). In other words, sexuality and gender can be both socially constructed and enduring. As an example of such an integrative approach, Tolman and Diamond (2001) asserted that sexual desires are always embedded in specific social contexts (from macro to micro levels) while simultaneously being embedded in specific biological contexts (e.g., physiological, chemical, and physical health). Relatedly, Worthington and Mohr (2002) suggested that the stability of sexual orientations can be assumed without compromising an understanding of the potential flexibility of sexual identities. Considering both enduring and socially con-

structed aspects of sexuality and gender may help researchers to uncover the essentialist or constructionist assumptions in their own conceptualizations and operationalizations of sexual minority variables and produce cleaner research as a result.

The Value of Empirical Study of Sexual Minority Issues

Calls for research on sexual minority issues typically are grounded in the importance of such research for understanding the lives of sexual minority individuals. Less acknowledged, however, is the way in which research on sexual minority issues can contribute to understanding human behavior in general. In this section, we highlight several examples of how the study of sexual minority issues and sexual minority populations can advance understanding of human behavior and reveal opportunities for promoting positive human functioning. Specifically, we discuss examples from research on sexuality, romantic relationships, and managing stigma in relation to sexual orientation and identity.

Sexuality

There are many ways that research on sexual minorities informs understanding of sexuality more broadly. Sexual minority people's status as transgressors of sociosexual norms renders them useful informants on a host of sexual behaviors. We focus here on the example of women's same-sex sexuality. Much of the extant research on sexual behavior presumes penile–vaginal intercourse as the defining element of real sex (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008; Fassinger & Morrow, 1995; Rose, 2000; Rothblum, 1994). This narrow conceptualization reflects a dominant heteropatriarchal cultural script that having sex consists of foreplay in preparation for and followed by intercourse, ultimately culminating in male ejaculation and orgasm. Consistent with this script, Sanders and Reinisch (1999) revealed that undergraduate students nearly universally equated sex with penile–vaginal intercourse and that most also considered penile–anal intercourse to constitute sex. By contrast, only minorities of participants considered kissing, various forms of touching, and oral contact to constitute sex. (Interestingly, despite assessing a host of demographic variables such as age, race, and political affiliation, the researchers did not report participants' sexual orientations, a disappointing oversight in a study of sexuality!) Narrow, phallogocentric definitions of sex render women's experiences of sexual behavior, pleasure, and orgasm at best only implicit, and at worst inconsequential, in the sexual script (see Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008, for fuller discussion).

By contrast, placing women's same-sex sexuality at the center of analysis can transform current paradigms about conceptualizations of sex, the range of sexual behaviors, and the relationship contexts that are the purview of sex research. Indeed, studying women's same-sex sexuality requires that investigators remove the penis from consideration and articulate their assumptions about what constitutes sex beyond phallogocentrism. Is sex defined as sexual pleasure for one or more partners? Must it involve genital contact? Must it result in orgasm for one or more partners? How researchers answer these questions will guide how they conceptualize and operationalize sexual behavior between women, as well as between men and between different-sex partners.

For example, research suggests that sexuality between women may not be focused on a single act of sex but often involves a

prolonged romantic and sexual episode composed of a range of behaviors that might or might not involve genital contact and might or might not result in (multiple) orgasm(s) (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2008; Fassinger & Morrow, 1995; Rose, 2000). Thus, as researchers learn about sexual practices that are common between women, they can incorporate these behaviors into the repertoire of behaviors assessed routinely in sexuality research. In addition, sexual behavior between women may not be restricted to romantic relationship contexts. Rose and Zand (2000) found that the most prevalent dating script among lesbian women was a friendship script, in which a friendship grew and gradually was expressed sexually. Such findings suggest the value of including friendship within the scope of relationship contexts in which sexual behavior is studied. Such research could result in greater understanding of the role of sexuality in friendship and the role of friendship in sexuality.

Thus, research on women's same-sex sexuality can enrich understanding of human sexual behavior precisely because such research necessitates the deconstruction of phallogocentric and androcentric definitions of sex. Moving women's same-sex sexuality from the margins to the center of sex research can help researchers to think about a broad range of sexual behaviors that constitute sexual episodes in a range of relationship contexts, rather than focusing narrowly on penile–vaginal intercourse as the totality of people's sexual experience.

Romantic Relationships

The growing literature that compares same-sex and different-sex couples suggests a substantial degree of similarities between these groups on a range of relationship characteristics and on the predictors of relationship quality and stability (Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2005; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). However, some findings suggest more positive functioning in same-sex couples than in different-sex couples (Kurdek, 2004). For example, some studies have suggested that, relative to heterosexual couples, same-sex couples tend to report distributing financial, household, and child-care labor more equitably (e.g., Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005) and to report greater levels of intimacy, autonomy, and equality in their relationships (Kurdek, 1998, 2004). Because relationship quality indicators are associated with relationship satisfaction and dissolution for all couples (Kurdek, 1998), understanding how same-sex couples attain and maintain quality relationships can provide valuable information for improving relationship satisfaction for all couples.

In terms of relationship dissolution among couples, findings are somewhat mixed. Research has suggested that rates of relationship dissolution are higher in same-sex couples than in heterosexual married or parent couples but similar to those of cohabitating heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1993; Kurdek, 1998, 2004, 2005). These findings suggest the preeminence of legal marriage, a marker of relationship commitment in heterosexual couples, but a marker that did not exist for same-sex couples until recently (and still does not in most of the United States). Thus, researchers have varied in their approaches to comparing same-sex couples with dating, cohabitating, or married heterosexual couples, inconsistencies that likely have led to misattributions of relationship dissolution rates to same-sex or different-sex couple status

rather than to legal commitment status. As legal commitment status is a well-documented barrier to relationship dissolution, same-sex couples without legal commitment status experience fewer barriers to leaving their relationships than do their heterosexual peers (Kurdek, 1998).

With the growing number of same-sex couples who are pursuing marriages, civil unions, or domestic partnerships, researchers have increasing opportunities to compare legally committed same-sex couples with legally committed heterosexual couples. In one such study, Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, and Solomon (2008) found that civil union and non-civil union same-sex couples reported higher levels of overall relationship quality and intimacy and lower levels of ineffective arguing, negative problem solving, partner withdrawal, and self-withdrawal than did heterosexual married couples and that there were no differences between civil union and non-civil union couples. Balsam et al. also found that same-sex civil union couples did not differ from heterosexual married couples in rates of breakups during the 3-year duration of the study but that there were more breakups in non-civil union couples than there were in civil union and heterosexual married couples, again pointing to marriage or legal commitment status as a barrier to relationship dissolution in both same-sex and different-sex couples. Thus, the evolution of marriage rights for same-sex couples and parallel advancements in research in this arena can contribute much to elucidating the potential relationship and social functions served by legal commitment status.

Managing Stigma

There are individual differences in sexual minority people's direct exposure to stigma and prejudice. Nevertheless, continued public claims that sexual minority individuals are immoral, unnatural, unhealthy, or harmful and therefore not deserving of equal rights (e.g., marriage, military service) suggest that, at the present time, it is nearly impossible to avoid exposure to sexual minority stigma. Exposure to stigma and prejudice has been conceptualized as a minority stress that can have deleterious consequences for the health and well-being of sexual minority populations (Meyer, 1995, 2003). A growing body of research provides empirical support for this conceptualization in individuals (e.g., Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Rosario, Rotheram-Borus, & Reid, 1996; Ross, 1990; Waldo, 1999) and same-sex couples (e.g., Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Hamrin, 2006). Nevertheless, research indicates quite clearly and consistently that most sexual minority individuals can manage social stigma effectively enough to be healthy and well adjusted and to have rewarding romantic relationships. Thus, valuable information can be garnered about human resilience and strength by studying how sexual minority individuals maintain their health and well-being in a context of pervasive social stigma. A number of scholars have theorized about the ways in which managing stigma can foster strengths in sexual minority persons (e.g., Brown, 1989; Friend, 1990b; Morrow, 2001).

Brown (1989) noted that most lesbian and gay individuals are bicultural in that they typically grow up in families composed of heterosexual people, they may have adopted heterosexual behavior or identity at some point, and they may frequently be presumed to be heterosexual. As such, lesbian and gay persons usually have an

intimate understanding of both heterosexual culture and lesbian or gay culture. Expanding this perspective, when intersections of race/ethnicity, gender, age, social class, and other cultural dimensions are considered, it can be assumed that most sexual minority people experience multicultural realities. This constant negotiation of cultural realities can foster a flexible worldview in which continua replace polarizations, ambiguity is comfortable, and differences are manageable. Second, Brown postulated that, in a social context of ubiquitous and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), lesbian and gay persons experience marginality or an omnipresent otherness. This outsider perspective may foster freedom from conventional ways of seeing the world and cultivate abilities to challenge conventional assumptions. Third, lesbian and gay persons, because they exist outside of many social norms, must create and recreate their own norms and expectations about relationships, family, and other socially defined roles. One example of normative creativity is the construction of families of choice composed of partner and friend networks in addition to, or instead of, biological kin (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Another example is considering various methods of conception and adoption as paths to parenthood rather than assuming the primacy of biological parenthood. Thus, biculturalism, marginality, and normative creativity are strengths that sexual minority individuals may develop through managing their stigmatized status (Brown, 1989).

Crisis competence is another strength that is postulated to result from the management of sexual stigma, that is, that sexual minority people develop skills in managing life challenges and crises in the process of constantly facing stigma and that such crisis competence is useful across life transitions (Friend, 1990a, 1990b; Kimmel, 1978; Morrow, 2001). For example, in the area of aging, Friend (1990a, 1990b) argued that, because lesbian and gay persons have had to manage prejudice and discrimination throughout their lives, they may be prepared to manage societal prejudices that accompany aging as well. Similarly, freedom from gender-specific roles has been posited to facilitate lesbian and gay persons' adjustments to changing roles that can accompany aging (Berger & Kelly, 2001; Friend, 1990a, 1990b; Morrow, 2001). Morrow (2001) further suggested that, because many lesbian and gay individuals experience loss of family support in the coming-out process, they are likely to have developed independence and social networking skills that can be useful in managing losses in social networks that occur in the aging process.

Studies are beginning to provide empirical support for some of these resilience constructs. For instance, self-reports of a sample of predominantly White lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals yielded 11 themes of positive aspects of being lesbian or gay (Riggle, Whitman, Olson, Rostosky, & Strong, 2008). Participants identified such aspects as belonging to a community, creating a family of choice, having strong connections with others, serving as a positive role model, authenticity and honesty with self and others, personal insight and sense of self, increased empathy for others, social justice and activism, freedom from gender-specific roles, exploration of sexuality and relationships, and egalitarian relationships. In another study, Konik and Crawford (2004) tested Brown's (1989) notion of biculturalism and found that participants who reported having a non-gender-exclusive identity (e.g., bisexual, biaffectionate) scored higher on a measure of cognitive flexibility than did participants who identified as lesbian, gay, or

heterosexual; thus, flexibility in sexual orientation identity, rather than sexual minority identity per se, was associated with cognitive flexibility in this study. Finally, Quam and Whitford (1992) found that the majority of their older participants believed that being lesbian or gay helped them in the aging process through facilitating self-acceptance, providing lesbian and gay community acceptance and support, and promoting economic planning as well as psychological and spiritual well-being. While these studies are notable exceptions, research on the strength and resilience of sexual minority persons is limited, and further research is needed on these topics. Nevertheless, the available empirical data clearly have value for understanding potential resilience development processes in other minority populations, as well as for conceptualizing more generally human resilience in the face of stigma, trauma, and loss.

As discussed in this section, research on sexual minority issues can advance psychological research in general. Diamond (2003) offered a number of useful suggestions for working to fulfill this promise. For example, questions about sexual orientation identity as well as same-sex and other-sex attraction and behaviors should be included across studies. Such questions acknowledge sample variability along these dimensions and also can provide useful information about the diversity of these dimensions within the population and their potential relevance across a variety of research domains. In addition, sexual minority status should be considered alongside alternative explanatory factors that may underlie apparent sexual minority effects. For instance, understanding lesbian sexuality may have as much to do with understanding women's sexuality as it has to do with lesbian sexual orientation status. Similarly, the relatively healthy conflict resolution behaviors documented in same-sex couples may be related to practice in working through conflict with oneself, family, and friends rather than sexual orientation per se, and such practice may be relevant to relationships that cross race, ethnicity, religion, social class, and other dimensions that defy cultural conventions. Relatedly, it is important to consider within-group variability on potential underlying explanatory factors in both sexual minority and heterosexual populations. For example, among those in both same-sex and other-sex relationships that transgress cultural conventions (e.g., nonmonogamy or polyamory), there are individual differences in levels of stress, successful coping, and social support. Attention to such within-group variability can reveal shared and unique factors that contribute to relationship functioning in same-sex and other-sex relationships. Overall, considering sexual minority research within rather than apart from the broader body of psychological research can offer a richer understanding of human experiences.

Conceptual and Methodological Issues in Counseling Psychology Sexual Minority Research

The rigors of conducting high-quality research on any topic are acutely evident to most scholars. However, investigators who conduct research with sexual minority populations face a variety of additional conceptual and practical challenges. In this section, we discuss the most pressing conceptual and methodological considerations in sexual minority research. A central lens in our evaluation of the literature is the conceptual clarity of research on sexual orientation minority issues. Thus, many of our observations and suggestions are relevant to both quantitative and qualitative research. In addition, we highlight general methodological limita-

tions that are not inherent to, but are important to rectify in, research on sexual minority issues. Given that much of the extant research is quantitative in approach, our observations reflect this state of the literature, and we discuss the empirical articles in this special issue in relation to these challenges and limitations. To further aid readers, we summarize our suggestions in regard to each issue raised within the text, and we also provide this information in a concise checklist in Appendix A. These suggestions are intended to help readers consider important issues when designing sexual minority research. Our suggestions may disappoint the reader who is seeking concrete guidance. Indeed, at times, they may raise more questions than they answer. In our view, this is indicative of the state of sexual minority research—an area of inquiry that is complex and still relatively young. Our approach of offering suggestions for consideration rather than prescribing a list of good or bad practices also reflects our view that the costs and benefits of various possible strategies depend upon the specific research questions and available resources of the investigator(s). Although our suggestions may not provide quick answers to the many challenging questions that arise when conducting sexual minority research, we hope they inspire researchers to think more deeply and carefully about these questions.

Construct-Related Issues

It is critical in any research not to underestimate the value and importance of carefully conceptualizing the constructs of interest, and people who conduct sexual minority research face special challenges due to ambiguities and lack of consistency in the ways that many sexual minority constructs have been defined. A good example of this challenge is found in consideration of the construct that has been labeled variously as *internalized homophobia*, *internalized homonegativity*, *internalized heterosexism*, and several other terms (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008a). We use the term *internalized heterosexism* for the sake of consistency. Most writers agree that this construct involves application of anti-LGB prejudice to the self. In fact, Moradi, van den Berg, and Epting (2009, this issue) used the term *internalized anti-lesbian and gay prejudice* to reflect a shared underlying meaning of this construct. However, a review of internalized heterosexism scales conducted by Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008b) highlighted the diverse conceptualizations of the construct offered by different researchers. The internalized heterosexism scales reviewed included items assessing variables such as connection to and involvement with LGB communities, knowledge of LGB-related resources, public identification as LGB, attitudes regarding homosexuality and bisexuality, and affirmation of one's LGB orientation. Indeed, some researchers have conceptualized lack of connection to LGB communities as part of internalized heterosexism, whereas others have viewed it as a consequence of internalized heterosexism, a moderator of the link between internalized heterosexism and distress, or a mediator of the link between internalized heterosexism and distress (Szymanski et al., 2008a, 2008b).

Frost and Meyer (2009, this issue) argued for the importance of conceptual clarity when investigating internalized heterosexism and, in particular, for defining the construct as application of anti-LGB attitudes to the self. They noted that outness (i.e., sexual orientation disclosure) and connection to LGB communities are

conceptually distinct from internalization of anti-LGB stigma, even though all of these variables reflect ways that LGB people cope with social stigma. From their perspective, conceptualizations of internalized heterosexism that merge these related but distinct constructs can potentially hinder knowledge regarding the experiences and psychosocial functioning of LGB people. Frost and Meyer cautioned that results from different studies might not be comparable because of different conceptualizations and operationalizations of internalized heterosexism. Their conceptualization of constructs led them to make a specific hypothesis about the mechanism through which self-stigma might influence interpersonal relationships and to differentiate the effects of self-stigma from those of outness and community connection. Similarly, Moradi et al. (2009, this issue) applied personal construct theory to investigate the guilt and threat aspects of self-stigma and their distinctive relations with interpersonal and intrapersonal identity stresses. These studies underscore the importance of construct clarity for formulating and testing conceptually grounded hypotheses.

Another construct-related issue that we believe deserves greater attention is the conceptual breadth of constructs of interest. Psychological constructs have a hierarchical structure that ranges from narrowband constructs to global constructs (Reise, Waller, & Comrey, 2000), and all researchers must decide the location of their interests within that hierarchy (e.g., self-efficacy for algebra vs. mathematics vs. academics). For example, Pachankis, Goldfried, and Ramrattan (2008) investigated gay men's sensitivity to rejection based on their sexual orientation: an LGB-specific manifestation of the broader construct of rejection sensitivity. Conversely, Worthington and colleagues (Worthington et al., 2002; Worthington, Navarro, Savoy, & Hampton, 2008; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue) have sought to expand what was formerly an LGB-specific construct (at least as applied in the early research literature), sexual identity development, into a more global construct that is applied across all sexual orientation groups. How can researchers decide whether to study variables at an LGB-specific level versus a more general level? Sometimes the answer to this question may be obvious because of the research focus. For example, researchers wishing to compare rejection sensitivity levels in lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women would have to assess the construct at a general level because, in most contexts, it would not be particularly meaningful to assess sexual orientation rejection sensitivity in heterosexual women. On the other hand, sexual identity development is equally relevant to heterosexual and LGB individuals of varying types (see Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue).

In the absence of such obvious decisions, it can be useful to consider the effects of matching variables at their level in the conceptual hierarchy. Reise et al. (2000) noted that narrower constructs tend to be more effective in predicting specific outcomes, whereas global constructs tend to be better at predicting complex and multifaceted outcomes. This observation suggests that sexual minority-specific variables may be more strongly linked to sexual minority-specific outcomes than to global outcomes. Sheets and Mohr (2009, this issue), for example, cited evidence that function-specific domains of social support may be better than general social support at predicting outcomes associated with that domain. More specifically, their study demonstrated that sexuality-specific social support was better than general social support at predicting internalized binegativity in a sample of bisexual-identified young

adults. In contrast, general social support was better than sexuality-specific support at predicting general outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction). Mohr, Weiner, Chopp, and Wong (2009, this issue) also addressed matching variables according to level in the conceptual hierarchy in their study of therapist sexual orientation bias and provided evidence that bisexuality-specific bias was most likely to occur with clinical issues judged to be related to bisexual stereotypes.

A final and seldom-discussed issue that we believe requires greater attention in sexual minority research is the possibility of conceptualizing and assessing constructs at different levels of analysis. Interest in multilevel theory and research has been apparent in disciplines concerned with studying individuals within higher level social units, such as industrial-organizational psychology (e.g., K. J. Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) and education (e.g., Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). Multilevel perspectives also have been explored increasingly by personality psychologists because the study of within-person processes can illuminate questions about the degree to which variables are state-like versus trait-like and about person-situation interactions (Nezlek, 2007).

The multilevel perspective suggests that many of the constructs that psychologists study—for example, well-being, shyness, attitudes toward women—can be conceptualized in terms of characteristics that vary within people, between people, and between groups of people. To illustrate this principle, we consider the phenomenon of heterosexism. Psychological research most commonly focuses on heterosexism as a person-level construct, wherein some people hold more heterosexist beliefs than others. However, it seems possible that a person's level of heterosexism could vary from one situation to another or from one day to the next. Similarly, systematic differences in heterosexism probably exist at the level of the social unit (e.g., families, work units, fraternities, universities, and geopolitical entities such as states and countries).

This discussion of levels of analysis with respect to heterosexism is relevant to the special issue because three of the articles featured a focus on sexual minority people's responses to heterosexism (Levitt et al., 2009, this issue; Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009, this issue; Szymanski, 2009, this issue). Although all of these studies aimed to investigate the effects of heterosexist events on psychological functioning, they approached this question from different levels of analysis. The qualitative methodology adopted by Levitt et al. (2009, this issue) was suited naturally to explore the effects of heterosexist events as a within-person phenomenon. Participants shared how their thoughts, feelings, and coping strategies changed in the face of anti-LGBT legislation. Szymanski (2009, this issue), on the other hand, explored heterosexist events as a person-level variable. From this perspective, people who reported a high level of cumulative heterosexism over the previous year were expected to report a high level of distress. Finally, Rostosky et al. (2009, this issue) conceptualized heterosexism as a state-level phenomenon and hypothesized that there would be higher levels of minority stress and psychological distress in states that had passed anti-LGBT legislation. Contrasting these three perspectives demonstrates how heterosexism can be viewed as (a) an event that explains changes within an individual's experience, (b) a cumulative impact of aggregated events that explains differences between individuals' experiences, and (c) events occurring at a macro level that explain differences in

the experiences of groups of people. In short, we encourage researchers to consider multiple levels of analysis and be intentional about the levels they select when conceptualizing their constructs of interest.

To summarize this discussion of construct-related issues in developing and framing research questions, we suggest that investigators

1. Determine the appropriate narrowness of the constructs of interest,
2. Determine the appropriate levels of analysis for constructs of interest, and
3. Clarify the nature of the constructs.

Issues Related to Population(s) of Interest

Implicit in questions about the psychological variables under investigation are assumptions about the types of people for whom those variables are relevant. The process of determining the population(s) of interest in light of the research questions in the study may appear relatively straightforward. However, as our opening discussion has suggested, making such determinations is not obvious when conducting research on sexual minority issues.

One way to approach the decision-making process might be to consider the effects on the research questions of studying the widest possible diversity of sexual minority people—a collection of people that includes a college undergraduate woman who has just begun to identify as queer; a Mexican man who is married to a woman, has sex with men on occasion, and considers himself heterosexual; a lesbian-identified older adult who reports that she has never had sexual contact with another woman; a gay-identified man whose long-term romantic partner is a lesbian; and a bisexual-identified transgender woman who is married to a man and has little connection to LGBT communities. To which of these people do one's research questions apply? This type of exercise may help researchers identify the dimensions related to sexual orientation and gender that differentiate people for whom the research questions, constructs, and measures do and do not apply.

The exercise also may point to within-group distinctions that further refine either the sampling criteria or the research questions (or both). As one example, consider level of outness or identity disclosure. For a study of perceived sexual orientation support from friends, it might be meaningless to recruit LGB participants who have not revealed their orientation to a single friend. Identity salience is another example to consider. On the basis of minority stress models, researchers have posited that stigma consciousness should be linked to distress among sexual minority people. However, would this link be expected in a bisexual-identified person who is in a heterosexual marriage and whose sexual orientation identity is peripheral to her or his everyday life? Such deliberation not only helps to refine theory but also highlights within-group factors, such as sexual identity salience, that may serve as important moderator variables.

We have discussed defining sexual minority populations in the opening section of this article, we return to it here as an important element of developing and framing research questions, and we discuss it further (below) in terms of validity. Our continual return

to this issue highlights its centrality in conducting sexual minority research. To summarize our discussion here regarding the connection between defining populations of interest and framing research questions, we suggest that investigators

1. Identify population(s) of interest in light of research questions,
2. Determine on what dimensions of sexual minority status the population should be defined, and
3. Consider relevant within-group distinctions in light of research questions.

Internal Validity

In regard to designing and implementing investigations, we believe counseling psychology research on sexual minority issues would benefit from greater diversity in research approach. A review of LGB-related counseling research published in the 1990s revealed that more than 70% of the empirical studies used a cross-sectional survey design (Phillips et al., 2003). An additional 14% of the studies used other types of correlational designs (12% qualitative, 2% archival/ correlational field research), and only 16% of the studies involved experiments. Findings from the Phillips et al. (2003) review suggest that relatively few studies used experimental or longitudinal designs and that few studies involved collection of data in the field. The empirical articles in this special issue suggest a continuation of this methodological homogeneity. All of the quantitative studies but two used a cross-sectional design. One exception is the longitudinal study of Rostosky et al. (2009, this issue), which provided evidence that LGB minority stress levels were especially likely to increase in states after anti-LGB marriage legislation had been passed. The other exception, conducted by Mohr et al. (2009, this issue), used an experimental analogue design to provide evidence of the effects of client bisexuality on therapists' clinical judgments. The remaining four studies used cross-sectional qualitative designs. Of these studies, one conducted by Schweizer et al. (2009, this issue) is unique for its use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate coping and gender identity in a small sample of intersex people.

Recent research suggests that there is good reason for concerns about using cross-sectional data to test directional hypotheses. Maxwell and Cole (2007) investigated the effects of this practice and concluded that "cross-sectional approaches to mediation typically generate substantially biased estimates of longitudinal parameters even under the ideal conditions when mediation is complete" (p. 23). Moreover, longitudinal studies have shown that relations among variables over time are not always in the expected directions.

The relative lack of longitudinal and experimental research is likely due, in part, to some of the challenges intrinsic to conducting research with sexual minority populations (e.g., recruitment of sexual minority participants for a laboratory study, multiple sampling over time). Such challenges notwithstanding, we encourage researchers to seriously consider using alternatives to cross-sectional survey designs when doing so will provide better answers to the research questions. Particularly, given the focus of many counseling psychology researchers on developmental processes

(e.g., minority identity, vocational development) and the effects of minority stress, the underuse of longitudinal approaches represents a grave shortcoming in the extant literature.

To summarize our discussion of internal validity in designing and implementing research, we suggest that investigators

1. Consider experimental and repeated measures designs if hypotheses are causal and
2. Consider longitudinal designs if theory is developmental.

External and Ecological Validity

Studies published in psychology journals often end with caveats about the generalizability of the research findings, and studies of sexual minority topics are no exception. For example, many of the empirical articles in the present issue highlight limitations due to underrepresentation of people of color. As Meyer and Wilson (2009, this issue) noted, investigators who study sexual minority populations face special challenges to gaining a diverse and representative sample. Perhaps the most commonly discussed challenges are those related to the stigmatized status of sexual minority people. Participation in a study of sexual minorities requires potential participants to disclose their stigmatized sexual or gender identity. People who prefer not to disclose their identity to others will be less likely to volunteer for studies and may be less likely than others to come into contact with research announcements in public sexual minority venues and publications, which can lead to underrepresentation of this segment of the population of interest in a sample.

These potential sampling processes may be equally likely to occur with sexual minority people who have not yet committed to a sexual minority identity or who have little contact with sexual minority communities and resources. Such individuals may not view themselves as sexual minorities because of high levels of internalized stigma or membership in a culture in which a sexual orientation-based identity either is extremely hidden or is not culturally meaningful. Also, because levels of identity disclosure, identity commitment, and community participation may differ across sociodemographic groups, samples of sexual minority people may be systematically biased in terms of race, ethnicity, class, religion and other dimensions of diversity. Effects of such sampling bias in sexual minority research are not merely hypothetical. For example, Bailey, Dunne, and Martin (2000) found that the twin concordance rate for nonheterosexual orientation in men was more than 25% lower in their population-based sample than previous estimates based on nonprobability samples from studies in which recruitment materials stated a focus on participant sexual orientation.

In contrast to many other sociodemographic categories, sexual minority status generally is not assessed in organizations, social science studies, or large-scale social surveys. Thus, sexual minority people are difficult to identify because their sexual minority status is concealable and because they frequently are not given an opportunity to report their sexual minority status to organizations and research investigators. The latter of these two points highlights a way in which the institutional marginalization of sexual minority issues may impede progress in sexual minority research. In short, options for representative sampling are limited for researchers who wish to recruit sexual minority participants.

A risk of venue-based sampling is underrepresentation of people who have little contact with the venue. For example, several articles in the current issue recruited participants through e-mail groups for LGBT-oriented student groups at universities. Not surprisingly, the resulting samples consisted largely of highly educated young adults who were relatively open about their sexual orientation—a much narrower population than that addressed by the research questions. Frost and Meyer's (2009, this issue) study offered what is probably the most rigorous and thoughtful approach to venue-based sampling in the present issue. The researchers used ethnographic methods to identify diverse venues where LGB people might be found in New York City; they then used quota sampling to guarantee a final sample that was diverse in age, gender, and race/ethnicity.

A possible advantage to qualitative studies is that the smaller sample-size requirements typical of such studies may provide researchers with greater flexibility in exploring recruitment sources outside of sexual minority-specific venues. Unfortunately, this potential to obtain a diverse sample was not realized in terms of participant race/ethnicity in most of the qualitative studies reported in this special issue. For example, Arm, Horne, and Levitt (2009, this issue) reported that only 1 of 10 participants was a person of color in their study of family members of LGBT people, even though recruitment took place in a Black-majority city. This speaks to the challenge of recruiting people of color in sexual minority studies, as well as to the importance of devising recruitment methods that do not rely on sexual minority venues.

How can researchers negotiate the sampling challenges that potentially compromise external validity in sexual minority research? Although probability-based sampling represents the gold standard in many cases, there is no simple answer to this question. The answer depends on a variety of issues, including the population of interest, the research question, and resources (e.g., money, time, community partners, and existing data sources). Some researchers are finding ways to use existing probability-based samples to investigate questions about differences between heterosexual and LGB people (e.g., Cochran, Mays, Alegria, Ortega, & Tekeuchi, 2007; Patterson, 2006). In addition, researchers have found creative ways of using venue-based sampling to address comparative questions. For example, Rothblum, Balsam, and Mickey (2004) used venue-based sampling to recruit LGB people and asked these participants to recruit their siblings into the study. LGB participants could be compared with their heterosexual siblings—a strategy that controlled for family demographics and other variables associated with a shared family environment. Despite this strength, however, this sampling approach could have introduced response bias to the extent that participants were aware that they might be compared with their siblings and could have introduced selection bias in that participants were out to their heterosexual siblings. As this example illustrates, researchers conducting comparison studies must consider the costs and benefits of their sampling approach for the particular comparisons that they plan to conduct.

Finally, use of the Internet to collect data from sexual minority people has grown increasingly popular, partly because of the belief that sexual minorities make greater than average use of the Internet to gain information and connect with similar others (Riggle, Roskosky, & Reedy, 2005). Although this sampling method may introduce some systematic biases based on access to and use of the

Internet, research suggests that careful use of this method can yield diverse samples and results that are similar to those from other sampling methods (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004).

For theoretical and practical perspectives on sampling, we refer readers to Meyer and Wilson's (2009, this issue) description of various approaches for sampling LGBT populations. Meyer and Wilson discussed advantages and disadvantages of each approach, as well as the natural tension between ideal and real that researchers face when negotiating practical barriers to representative sampling. Their review provides a useful roadmap for researchers to use in determining which sampling methods are most appropriate for their research questions and available resources, particularly with regard to sampling methods for quantitative research.

Ecological validity, the degree to which participation in the study resembles the real-world activities about which one wants to make inferences, also is important to consider in sexual minority research. Research-setting issues are often not a major concern of studies using a survey or qualitative design, at least not with respect to external validity. However, questions arise about the relevance of results whenever research participation involves being subjected to an experimental manipulation, being required to engage in sexual behaviors in a laboratory context, or being placed into a situation designed to approximate a real-world situation (i.e., an analogue situation).

The study by Mohr et al. (2009, this issue) makes evident such ecological validity concerns. These authors sought to investigate the effects of client bisexuality on therapists' clinical judgment. Because it is impossible to manipulate a client's sexual orientation in the real world, the authors used an analogue design in which they manipulated a client's sexual orientation in a fictitious intake report. Although the authors made efforts to ensure that the report was reasonably realistic, the task presented to the therapist participants was relatively far removed from what typically occurs between client and therapist. Thus, it is unclear whether the results speak to processes that occur in actual cases of psychotherapy. This concern with ecological validity ultimately translates to a concern with external validity.

This example highlights the importance of conducting sexual minority research in a manner that captures the phenomena of interest as they are experienced in real-world settings. There is a great need for studies of actual counseling sessions with sexual minority clients rather than counseling analogues that are many steps removed from the real world. We also believe that there is a need for more data sampled from sexual minority people in the contexts of their everyday lives. Methods that have been developed for sampling people's daily experiences (e.g., social interaction logs, surveys on handheld computers) would be a welcome addition to counseling psychology research on sexual minority issues (for a discussion of such methods, see Reis & Gable, 2000).

Qualitative methods, such as those used in several of the articles in this special issue, can offer a high degree of ecological validity in that the real-world relevance of findings is often immediately evident because of the emphasis on understanding and describing participants' lived experiences. For example, in grounded theory studies (Fassinger, 2005), constructs are built directly from the narratives of participants, offering a high degree of connection between theoretical frameworks and actual experiences of the population(s) of interest. Also high in ecological validity is participatory action research, which involves partnering with commu-

nities to identify and address community concerns (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivray, 2001).

To summarize this discussion of external and ecological validity in designing and implementing sexual minority research studies, we suggest that investigators

1. Weigh costs and benefits of different methods of sampling from the population(s) of interest,
2. Design recruitment procedures so as to reach the population(s) as defined, and
3. Maximize the degree to which the data reflect the actual phenomena of interest.

Measurement

Thoughtful selection of measurement strategies is always important, but when conducting research with sexual minority people, researchers face unique challenges related to measurement. There are several reasons why finding good instrumentation often is exceedingly difficult. First, the psychometric properties of established measures usually have not been tested with sexual minority samples. There may be cases when there is no reason to expect that these properties would be influenced by sexual minority status. However, the more the content of a scale relates to issues to which sexual minority people may have unique reactions (e.g., family relationships, sexuality, gender role attitudes, social support), the more likely it seems that sexual minority status may affect validity, reliability, or factor structure of scale scores. Second, validity is in question when a measure has been created for one sexual minority population but used with a different sexual minority population for which it has not been tested. Third, existing measures may feature heterosexist language that renders them inappropriate for use with sexual minority participants. Chernin, Holden, and Chandler (1997) offered examples of heterosexist bias in assessment, including measures with items that assume other-sex partners and erotic attractions on the part of participants. A variant of this problem occurs when measures for sexual minority people use language that ignores the unique concerns of bisexual women and men. Fourth, researchers may wish to assess sexual minority-related constructs for which measures have not yet been developed. For example, until relatively recently, measures assessing uncertainty about one's sexual orientation identity were not available (see Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue, for an example of such a scale). Finally, because of the sociopolitical evolution of sexual minority issues, older measures designed to assess a number of key constructs may become outdated or obsolete; the latter is especially true of measures of identity development processes because of the evolving nature of social attitudes toward and acceptance of sexual minority people. Moreover, older measures may contain items that are inappropriate because of changes in linguistic conventions and perspectives regarding sexual identity (e.g., items referring to *homosexual lifestyles*).

The challenge of locating appropriate measures often leads researchers to adapt existing scales (e.g., replacing *husband/wife* with *partner*, replacing *gay man* with *lesbian*) and to create their own scales. An increasingly common practice in sexual minority research has been to modify language in an instrument designed

for one sexual minority population to make it applicable to different sexual minority populations. We caution researchers about the degree to which a measure and its related construct can be assumed to apply equally to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. For instance, Moradi et al. (2009, this issue) argued against language modifications to include bisexual individuals because the constructs that they assessed had emerged from literature on experiences of lesbian and gay persons and because prior research raised questions about the meaning of those measures as applied to bisexual-specific identity (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). When such modifications are made, they should be clearly justified and examined carefully for contraindications such as those noted by Moradi et al.

Clearly, adapting measures facilitates research on sexual minority people, but the psychometric properties of adapted or new measures are not always given much empirical or conceptual attention. Moreover, because adapted measures often are not the focus of the article in which they first appear, researchers who might wish to use the scales may not even be aware of their existence. The development and publication of high-quality measures is a painstaking and lengthy process, but it is clear that new instrumentation is a critical need in many areas of sexual minority research. What should researchers do when they wish to assess a construct for which no established measure is available? Our main recommendation is that researchers perform an exhaustive and creative search of the literature for measures before creating their own ad hoc scale. It may be possible to request others' ad hoc scales that are described in, but not the focus of, published research. Also, it may be possible to find measures in literatures unrelated to sexual minority issues. For example, researchers interested in studying connectedness to the LGBT community may be able to use general measures of community connectedness available in the community psychology literature. If no candidates emerge after an exhaustive search and it is necessary to create an ad hoc measure, then we recommend that authors assess and publish items and detailed psychometric information for the measure.

Efforts to assess sexual orientation and gender variance and furthering knowledge regarding measurement of these constructs are critical for several reasons. As demonstrated by Worthington and Reynold's (2009, this issue) large-scale study of sexuality differences within sexual orientation groups, the sexual identity labels commonly used by researchers (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual) often assume monolithic groups, when in fact there are substantial within-group variations. Thus, accurate assessment of sexual orientation and gender identity is necessary to ensure that the participants recruited for a study actually represent the population(s) of interest. Finally, we believe that thorough assessments of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as identity-related variables (e.g., outness, identity salience), provide a basis for comparing results across related studies. Differences in findings across studies may be due to identity-related differences between samples, and such possibilities can be investigated only if researchers routinely assess and report these. Unfortunately, there is currently no consensus about how to best assess sexual orientation and gender identity. Sell (2007) recommended assessing multiple dimensions of sexual orientation (e.g., identity, behavior, attraction) but noted that the best items to use may vary depending on the purpose of the study and mode of data collection. Clearly,

sexual minority research will benefit from efforts to develop standards regarding core constructs to assess in sexual minority research, as well as measures designed to assess those constructs.

To summarize our discussion of measurement issues in designing and implementing sexual minority research, we suggest that investigators

1. Select instruments appropriate for sexual minority populations,
2. Investigate and document the psychometric properties of adapted or new instruments,
3. Ensure that measurement strategies reflect the conceptualization of constructs, and
4. Routinely assess facets of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Procedural Issues

Stigma and the sociopolitical nature of virtually all sexual minority scholarship require significant consideration of a variety of procedural issues in conducting research with sexual minority participants. The scope and quality of thoughtful consideration of procedural issues will have significant implications for the value of the findings associated with the research on a range of different levels, including but not limited to (a) sample characteristics, (b) survey return rates, (c) the validity of self-reports (e.g., socially desirable responding, research context demand characteristics, random and/or malicious responding), (d) the validity of observer ratings, (e) dropout rates, (f) validity of the findings, and (g) generalizability of the findings.

Central to this discussion of procedural issues in sexual minority research is the awareness that research on sexual minority issues often has perpetuated stereotypes, reflected prevailing heterosexist biases, and assumed that personal characteristics of research participants reflect causal connections to sexual orientation (Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992; Chung & Katayama, 1996; Clark & Serovich, 1997; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991; Morin, 1977; Phillips et al., 2003). Thus, in designing and carrying out research with sexual minority populations, it is critical to consider the possibility that potential participants might mistrust researchers' motivations and might have negative reactions to procedural aspects of the project. All of the authors of this article have encountered mistrust among potential sexual minority research participants who have had negative experiences participating in past research and who question whether researchers hold affirmative attitudes, beliefs, and political agendas.

In some cases, researchers must gain the trust of gatekeepers to the memberships of sexual minority organizations, associations, and social networks to carry out their studies. Gatekeepers are also prevalent among hidden groups outside mainstream sexual minority communities that counseling psychologists may want to access (e.g., ex-gays, LGBT clergy, LGBT military personnel, men on the "down low"). On occasion, gatekeepers holding a range of sociopolitical positions may require assurances from researchers that their specific views and positions on issues relevant to their particular group will not be challenged or disputed by the investigator, which produces ethical and procedural challenges. For example,

organizations espousing the view that same-sex sexual behavior is immoral may only partner with researchers who agree not to challenge this ideological perspective. However, making such an agreement may be counter to the researcher's professional ethical standards. In such cases, it may be possible to identify agreements that are acceptable to all parties. A researcher might agree not to dispute a perspective on theological or philosophical grounds while reserving the right to discuss implications of the research—both negative and positive—for mental health.

Researchers investigating sexual minority populations are advised to take special precautions in addressing procedural issues that can compromise various aspects of their studies. It is critical that investigators anticipate and address the potential negative effects that may result from the procedures they use. Researchers must have preexisting insight into the special circumstances that may come into play when working with sexual minority research participants. Such insight requires cultural competency in terms of knowledge, awareness, and skills for interacting with sexual minority participants, as well as anticipation of potential complications that can result from otherwise standard procedures. For example, publicly announcing the location and topic of a laboratory research project may place sexual minority participants at risk for being outed by their participation, reducing participation by individuals who are not out and, in especially negative climates, unintentionally putting participants at risk for hostility or violence.

Institutional review board (IRB) approval does not guarantee the protection of sexual minority research participants. There is an ironic counterpoint to the ultraconservative judgment and oversight of sexual minority research experienced by many who conduct such research; that is, IRB reviewers (however cautious about sexual minority research) seldom have the requisite competency to adequately identify and respond to potential problems in research procedures. Therefore, it is incumbent upon researchers to carefully vet and pilot test their procedures in advance before implementing them with sexual minority research participants. Pilot testing the procedure provides the opportunity for researchers to examine its sensitivity to participant needs and perspectives, to create conditions conducive to honest responding, and to identify potential threats to confidentiality, anonymity, and harm.

It probably is realistic to assume that the inherent sociopolitical nature of sexual minority research inevitably will prompt negative reactions of one kind or another in at least some fraction of participants in any given study. Negative reactions may be (a) warranted as the result of investigator biases (e.g., heterosexism), (b) misunderstandings about the purpose or contents of specific investigations (e.g., perceiving constructivist research as reflective of a bias that sexual orientation is a choice), (c) reflective of a disconnect between specific participants and the population of interest (e.g., when a research study is focused on lesbian and gay but not bisexual or transgender), and (d) reflective of poor planning. Pilot studies, focus groups, and solicitation of feedback from selected experts or participants can help to minimize the occurrence of negative reactions and increase the chances that the study will be viewed positively. Although such preliminary work adds time to completion of a study, it may strengthen the study by helping the researcher to create materials and protocols that are sensitive to the concerns of prospective participants and are thus more inviting of participation from diverse representatives of the population of interest. For example, one of the authors of this article conducted a pilot study and learned that partic-

ipants differed greatly with respect to the identity labels they preferred in survey items (e.g., queer, LGB). On the basis of this feedback, a statement was included at the beginning of the survey noting that the abbreviation *LGBQ* would be used throughout the survey, with an apology to people for whom this was not the preferred identity label. The statement explained the difficulty of using language that would fit all participants equally well and asked for participants' understanding.

The management of outness is a critical issue in how researchers recruit potential participants (especially from hidden subgroups) and work to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of such participants. Herek et al. (1991) pointed out that disclosure of sexual orientation may put LGBT research participants at higher risk for negative consequences when confidentiality or anonymity is compromised. Consideration of outness in recruitment is critical because outness level may influence individuals' participation concerns and presence in recruitment venues. For example, individuals with low outness levels are probably less likely than others to be members of LGBT-oriented e-mail lists. Also, as suggested above, LGBT people who are not out are likely to be especially concerned about the degree to which their privacy is protected by procedures. For such individuals, such concerns may translate into lower likelihood of participation and higher likelihood of providing inaccurate responses to sensitive questions. Indeed, Villarreal et al. (2006) found that people were more willing to reveal same-sex attractions and behaviors when telephone interviews were conducted by computers than when they were conducted by humans. Moreover, the discrepancy between the two types of interviews was greater in communities that were less affirming of sexual minorities, which indicates the importance of considering local norms in determining recruitment and data collection strategies.

In addition to anticipating and preventing negative consequences of research with sexual minority people, we believe it is important to consider ways in which research can be designed to benefit participants. Nelson et al. (2001) argued for the importance of values-based partnerships between researchers, members of oppressed groups, and others with a stake in the well-being of group members (e.g., service delivery workers). From this perspective, the purpose of such partnerships is to advance values such as caring, health, power sharing, human diversity, and social justice. Nelson et al. noted that community-based participatory research methods offer the most comprehensive model for values-based partnerships. In our view, it is worth considering the issue of benefits to participants even if such research models are not used. For example, giving back to communities through well-written summaries of research findings, talks in community organizations, and articles for the popular press are relatively simple measures to take that may be appreciated by many participants. A strategy used by one author of this article is to offer participants the options of receiving payment or donating the payment to a state organization focused on LGBT human rights issues.

To summarize this discussion of procedural issues in designing and implementing sexual minority research studies, we suggest that investigators

1. Anticipate and address possible negative effects of procedures,
2. Utilize pilot studies to test procedures for sensitivity to participant needs and perspectives,

3. Create conditions conducive to honest responding, and
4. Give something back to participants.

Writing Articles

The groundwork for any well-written article is a balanced and informed description of relevant literature. This is particularly important in sexual minority research. Specifically, because different terms can refer to similar constructs and the same term can be used to refer to different constructs, writers must take care to clarify their constructs of interest and center their literature review on those constructs rather than specific terms or measures. Clear communication regarding distinctions among sexual minority populations is equally important. For example, where relevant, writers should highlight sample characteristics when summarizing and comparing past research findings. Similarly, authors should articulate how they are conceptualizing and measuring sexual orientation and/or identity, gender identity, sexual minority status, relevant aspects of sexuality, and other sample inclusion criteria. These inclusion criteria should be described clearly and justified.

Thorough descriptions of sampling procedures and participant characteristics are critical for sexual minority research, particularly given the harmful consequences that ill-defined or inappropriate sampling procedures have had for sexual minority research and populations (for examples, see Meyer & Wilson, 2009, this issue). Thorough descriptions provide readers with a solid basis for making judgments about the generalizability of the findings and about the implications of the sampling method for findings. For example, it may surprise readers to learn that very basic information about participant race/ethnicity was not provided in nearly one fifth of LGB studies published in counseling psychology journals between 1990 and 1999 (Phillips et al., 2003). In addition to such basic information, we recommend that researchers provide a variety of information germane to participants' sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., identity, attraction, and behavioral aspects of sexual orientation; outness). This information can be used to demonstrate that the sample matches a researcher's population of interest, as well as to help guide inferences about the generalizability of findings.

Furthermore, as discussed in previous sections, authors of sexual minority-related articles should be aware of the sociopolitical nature and potential consequences of their work. As with other minority populations, findings from research with sexual minority populations have been taken out of context, described inaccurately, and used to harm sexual minority populations (Gonsiorek, 1991). Herek et al. (1991) emphasized the importance of anticipating and preempting misinterpretation of results. Authors should present their findings with appropriate caveats and cautions that put the results in the context of relevant limitations. A typical practice in writing qualitative research articles is to devote a section of the article to describing the research team members and their biases (e.g., Burkard, Knox, Hess, & Schultz, 2009, this issue). This process of reflecting on biases and how they might shape decisions throughout the research process, including interpreting research findings, may be useful across research methodologies.

Finally, authors should carefully review their writing to avoid language that is or could be interpreted as biased. Although the

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association [APA], 2001) offers useful guidelines for avoiding bias, we believe these guidelines are only a starting point. Indeed, the introductory portion of the section on avoiding bias emphasizes that the guidelines should not be adhered to rigidly. For example, although the guidelines advise writers to avoid the term *homosexual*, there may be cases where this term is appropriate to use because it is the preferred identity label of participants. Moreover, researchers experienced in sexual minority issues might successfully avoid blatant heterosexist language, but even seasoned writers may lack appropriate knowledge or awareness with respect to populations or topics that have received less attention in the literature to date (e.g., bisexuality, gender variance).

Research on sexual minority issues is now published in journals spanning a great breadth of subdisciplines of psychology and is no longer viewed as suitable only for sexuality journals. This is certainly a welcome development; however, it does not mean that all journals will be equal in the degree to which their editorial staff are knowledgeable about sexual minority issues or view research on sexual minority populations as intrinsically valuable. When writing articles for journals that lack a history of focusing on social justice issues, authors should keep in mind that research on sexual minority issues may not be of particular interest to reviewers. One of the authors of this article encountered this reality when submitting a manuscript on same-sex romantic relationships to a social psychology journal. The editor suggested that the introduction included too much material on sexual orientation issues and not enough discussion of the general social psychological principles underlying the study. Perhaps the best guidance we can offer is that writers should attempt to learn the local norms of their preferred publication outlet. Doing so will allow authors to understand how to frame their work in a compelling manner, given the intellectual tradition of the journal.

To summarize our discussion of writing manuscripts describing sexual minority research, we suggest that investigators

1. Present a balanced and informed description of relevant literature;
2. Ensure that the meanings of constructs related to sexual orientation identity, gender identity, sexual minority status, and other sexuality-related variables are clear to readers;
3. Present a rationale for choice and operationalization of population(s);
4. Fully describe sampling procedures and sample, including participant characteristics on multiple indicators of sexual and gender orientation and identity;
5. Carefully review language to avoid phrasing that could be interpreted as biased;
6. Describe limitations related to all of the above concerns;
7. Anticipate and clarify points that could be misunderstood or distorted by readers and/or the media; and

8. Frame the research in a manner that is informed by the norms of the publication outlet.

Role of Counseling Psychologists in Addressing Sexual Minority Issues

The topics reflected in this special issue mirror several of the themes of focus that have emerged in previous reviews of the sexual minority literature in counseling psychology (e.g., Bieschke, Hardy, Fassinger, & Croteau, 2008; Buhrke et al., 1992; Croteau, Bieschke, Fassinger, & Manning, 2008; Phillips et al., 2003). More specifically, as is evident in the contents of this special issue, much of the counseling psychology scholarship on sexual minority issues focuses on anti-LGB stigma as it is expressed, experienced, and internalized. Given the current sociocultural context of discrimination against and oppression of sexual minority groups, such attention is warranted and valuable. Nevertheless, it is also noteworthy that several cornerstones of counseling psychology theory, research, and practice—including such topics as vocational behavior and racial/ethnic diversity—largely are absent from this special issue (one notable exception is Szymanski and Gupta's, 2009, this issue, study of the intersections of various forms of internalized oppression in the experiences of African American sexual minority individuals).

A recent review by Croteau et al. (2008) highlighted several areas in which counseling psychologists have been instrumental in creating and furthering the sexual minority research literature—sexual identity development (especially in model formation, including heterosexual identity development), vocational psychology (primarily in workplace climate and sexual identity management), and professional training and education (particularly in LGB affirmative training and clinical judgment/attitudes). Croteau et al. offered numerous suggestions for future research, including tapping strengths within counseling psychology to advance measurement, counseling intervention, supervision and training, and diversity research within the sexual minority literature. Bieschke et al. (2008) provided a recent examination of the empirical literature focused on the intersection of sexual orientation and cultural location, including race/ethnicity, age, disability, socioeconomic status, and religion. Using the Fassinger and Arsenneau (2007) model of identity enactment of gender-transgressive sexual minorities as a framework, Bieschke et al. too offered suggestions for future research, arguing in particular for an expanded sexual minority paradigm that integrates cultural context explicitly and comprehensively. In light of the relatively limited inclusion of transgender issues within this special issue, a call for more research on transgender issues is worth repeating here. Although counseling psychologists have become increasingly vocal about when and how transgender issues intersect with or are divergent from LGB issues, high-quality research in these areas has yet to fully emerge in the prominent empirical journals in counseling psychology.

Shifting to consider the range of topics included in this special issue underscores the promise of counseling psychology scholarship for advancing sexual minority research in such areas as counseling and supervision (e.g., Burkard et al., 2009, this issue; Mohr et al., 2009, this issue), intrapersonal and interpersonal strength and resilience factors (Frost & Meyer, 2009, this issue; Sheets & Mohr, 2009, this issue; Szymanski, 2009, this issue), health risk

behaviors (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009, this issue), disentangling of sexual identity and orientation and subgroup differences among sexual orientation identity groups (Worthington & Reynolds, 2009, this issue), and the impact of public policy regarding sexual minority issues (Arm et al., 2009, this issue; Levitt et al., 2009, this issue; Rostosky et al., 2009, this issue). Clearly, counseling psychologists can advance sexual minority research by continuing their contributions to sexual minority scholarship along these important topics and by bringing to bear their traditional expertise or stated commitments to transgender issues, vocational behavior, counseling process and outcome, health and wellness, multiple dimensions of diversity, international issues, and social justice advocacy.

Using such scholarship, counseling psychologists can and should contribute to shaping public policy and practice regarding sexual minority issues. Counseling psychologists' existing efforts to shape psychological training and service demonstrate the promise of the field for enacting social justice policy and practice. For instance, counseling psychologists have been integrally involved in developing the *APA Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organization Change for Psychologists* (APA, 2002), the "Guidelines for Psychotherapy With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients" (APA, 2000), and the *Resolution on Transgender, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression Non-Discrimination* (APA, 2008). These accomplishments provide a blueprint for what counseling psychologists can achieve in advancing social justice for sexual minority populations. Importantly, advancing scientific understanding of social minority issues is the critical foundation for grounding such social justice policy and advocacy efforts.

Looking forward, counseling psychologists' skills and expertise are central to many issues at the forefront of sexual minority social justice and civil rights (see Fassinger, 2008, for fuller discussion). For example, counseling psychologists' specialized expertise and advocacy have the potential to shape workplace policies and practices regarding sexual minority populations (e.g., policies relevant to sexual orientation-based harassment) and to challenge legalized workplace discrimination (e.g., "don't ask, don't tell," which discriminates against sexual minority individuals who wish to serve openly in the U.S. military). Moreover, counseling psychologists can provide research that refutes the commonly held assumption that same-sex marriage threatens heterosexual marriages and children's development (for a review, see Herek, 2006) and research that promotes ethical and therapeutic treatment of individuals who experience conflict regarding same-sex attractions and behaviors (e.g., developing viable evidence-based practices to provide professional assistance that combats potentially harmful reorientation therapies). Furthermore, there is tremendous need to translate recent advances in the conceptualization of transgender issues into high-quality research that will increase psychological understanding of normative variations in gender identity, gender expression, gender-related stigma, and the impact of discriminatory laws and policies against gender-variant people. Overall, we are positioned to provide scientific justification for an affirmative stance toward sexual minority populations within counseling psychology training and practice. We are skilled psychometricians, we are knowledgeable experts in evaluating counseling and educational interventions, and we are known for our leadership in educational and vocational development.

As these examples suggest, counseling psychologists can be at the forefront of sexual minority social justice by serving as scientist-advocates or social justice agents who are informed by scholarship. For this promise to be realized, however, the field must wrestle through a potentially paralyzing dilemma, which is that the value of respecting diversity sometimes is translated into ethical relativism when it comes to sexual minority issues and populations. Specifically, the value of respecting diversity is used as a rationale for tolerating a nonaffirmative stance toward sexual minority populations on the one hand and for repeating calls for affirmative approaches toward sexual minority populations on the other hand. This fundamental ambivalence regarding affirmation may hinder counseling psychologists' advocacy for sexual minority populations and needs to be resolved. For the field to fulfill its promise of social justice to sexual minority individuals, counseling psychologists must articulate values and enact practices that promote the civil rights and well-being of sexual minority populations. Importantly, research produced by counseling psychologists and other scholars, such as that represented in this special issue, provides scientific groundwork for enacting such a social justice agenda.

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(Appendix follows)

Appendix

Checklist of Issues to Consider When Conducting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender–Related Research

Developing and Framing Research Questions

Construct-Related Issues

- Determine the appropriate narrowness of the constructs of interest.
- Determine the appropriate levels of analysis for constructs of interest.
- Clarify nature of constructs.

Issues Related to Population of Interest

- Identify the sexual minority population of interest in light of research questions.
- Determine on what dimensions of sexual minority status the population should be defined.
- Consider relevant within-group distinctions in light of research questions.

Designing and Implementing the Study

Internal Validity

- If hypothesis is causal, consider experimental and repeated measures designs.
- If theory is developmental, consider longitudinal designs.

External and Ecological Validity

- Weigh costs and benefits of different methods of sampling from population of interest.
- Design recruitment procedures so as to reach population as defined.
- Maximize the degree to which the data reflect the actual phenomena of interest.

Measurement

- Select instruments appropriate for population.
- Investigate psychometric properties of adapted or new instruments.
- Ensure that measurement strategies reflect conceptualization of constructs.
- Assess diverse indicators of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Procedural Issues

- Anticipate and address possible negative effects of procedure.
- Use pilot studies to test procedure for sensitivity to participant needs and perspectives.
- Create conditions conducive to honest responding.
- Give something back to participants.

Writing

- Present a balanced and informed description of relevant literature.
- Ensure that the meaning of constructs related to sexual orientation identity, gender identity, and sexual minority status will be clear to readers.
- Present a rationale for choice of population(s) and operationalization of population(s).
- Fully describe sampling procedures and sample, including participant characteristics on diverse indicators of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Carefully review language to avoid phrasing that could be interpreted as biased.
- Describe limitations related to all of the above concerns.
- Anticipate and clarify points that could be misunderstood or distorted by readers and the media.
- Frame the research in a manner that is informed by the norms of the publication outlet.