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Sexual Trajectories of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Studies on sexual trajectories of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people generally focus on the first same-sex attraction and sexual experience, and their relation to self-identification and coming out as LGB. Relational and opposite-sex experiences are generally not taken into account. The aim of this study was to provide a more comprehensive overview of LGBs' sexual trajectories, and to distinguish subsamples with different trajectories. A sample of LGB members of an online research panel ($N = 3,054$) completed a sexual health questionnaire, including items about the timing of sexual and relational milestones. Results showed that the majority of gay men and lesbian women had had same-sex sexual and relational experiences, whereas most bisexual men and women had had experiences with the opposite sex. Among gay men and lesbian women, two trajectories emerged, differing mainly on whether people had been romantically involved with opposite-sex partners, and on age of first same-sex attraction and self-identification. Among those who were not exclusively attracted to the same sex, six patterns emerged. The first had no same-sex experiences. Almost all participants in four other clusters had had opposite-sex experiences, but they differed in their same-sex experiences. The final cluster was characterized by less opposite-sex experiences. Differences in psychological adjustment between the clusters are described. In conclusion, both relational and opposite-sex experiences proved to be important elements of LGB men and women's sexual trajectories.

Keywords: Sexual trajectories, Sexual milestones, Sexual orientation, Psychological adjustment

INTRODUCTION

Most people, regardless of their sexual orientation, start experiencing romantic and sexual relationships during adolescence. In Western countries, most young people have not yet kissed at age 12, but the vast majority have engaged in sexual intercourse by the time that they are 24 years old (De Graaf, Vanwesenbeeck, Meijer, Woertman, & Meeus, 2009; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Some aspects of this sexual and relational trajectory, such as physical development or the emergence of general sexual feelings and desires, is not different for sexual minority youth than for heterosexual youth (Grossman, Foss, & D'Augelli, 2014). However, because of heteronormative expectations, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people experience developmental challenges that heterosexual people do not during their sexual and relational trajectories (Mayer, Garofalo, & Makadon, 2014).

Studies on sexual and relational trajectories of LGB generally focus on the first same-sex attraction and sexual experience, and their relation to self-identification and coming out as LGB. Most social and developmental scientists agree that the timing and sequence of these milestones follows a variety of developmental trajectories, although same-sex attraction is usually the first milestone (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Results on the sequence of same-sex experiences, self-labeling, and coming-out are diverse. In one study, the most common order was same-sex sexual experience, self-identification, and coming out (Friedman, Marshal, Stall, Cheong, & Wright, 2008). Contrarily, Calzo, Antonucci, Mays, and Cochran (2011) found that both men and women, on average, self-identified as LGB before they had their first same-sex experiences. Floyd and Bakeman (2006) found approximately equal average ages of first consensual same-sex experience and self-identification as LGB. Maguen, Floyd, Bakeman, and Armistead (2002) found that groups of roughly equal sizes had their first same-sex experiences before, in the same year, or after coming out.

Several researchers have examined clusters or typologies of LGB individuals following different trajectories. Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter (2008; 2011), for example, identified subgroups based on the temporal development of identity formation (attraction, identification, and sexual experiences), and subgroups based on identity integration (involvement in LGB-related activities, internalized homophobia, and disclosure). Several studies have been conducted on clusters of bisexual identities. A cluster analysis of the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid by Weinrich et al. (2014) revealed four groups for women and five for men ranging from straight to lesbian or gay. Dodge et al. (2012) constructed four (partly) overlapping categories of bisexual men based on self-identification as bisexual, dating partners, current sexual partners and sexual partners in the previous year. However, these studies on bisexual identities do not have a developmental focus.

People who follow different sexual and relational trajectories may have different demographic characteristics, either now, or at the time of sexual and relational milestones. Lesbian and bisexual women reach their sexual identity milestones at a later age (Calzo et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000), they more often have opposite-sex romantic relationships (Bauermeister et al., 2010) and they more often report bisexual attraction (Weinrich et al., 2014) than gay and bisexual men. Historical changes in the social acceptance of non-heterosexuality may enable young LGBs to follow an earlier trajectory than older cohorts (Drasin et al., 2008; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

In addition to demographic factors, childhood gender nonconformity could play a role. Stereotypically, LGBs are seen as less conforming to gender stereotypes than heterosexual people (Rieger & Savin-Williams, 2012). Parents of sexual minority youth are aware earlier of their child's sexual orientation if the child displays more gender nonconforming behavior (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). Possibly, the same applies to the child's own awareness, which enables gender nonconforming LGBs to start their same-sex sexual

trajectory at an earlier age, without the need to experiment with opposite-sex partners.

Although this link has not been studied so far, Friedman et al. (2008) suggested it to explain their findings of an association between an earlier trajectory and experiences with victimization.

There are some gaps in existing studies of (the typologies) of the identity development trajectories of LGB. First, most evidence is based on American samples. In cross-national comparisons, the Netherlands ranks highest in the acceptance of homosexuality (Kuntz, Davidov, Schwartz, & Schmidt, 2015). In 2008, 70% of the Dutch population thought that same-sex sexual behavior was not wrong at all, compared to 32% of the American population (Smith, Son, & Kim, 2014). In an environment that is accepting of a non-heterosexual orientation, the need to hide, deny or suppress these feelings will be lower, which could affect the sexual and relational trajectories of LGB people. Improvement of the social acceptance of homosexuality seems to be related to increased openness about their sexual orientation and less heterosexual experience among adolescents (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). Furthermore, a homonegative climate associates with more sex-centered trajectories and heterosexual experiences among LGB people (Dubé, 2000).

Second, some potentially important experiences are excluded from studies on sexual milestones. For example, most studies do not take relational experiences (falling in love, romantic relationships) into account. Qualitative research suggests that a relational component is equally important for the development of sexual orientation as a sexual component (Friedman et al., 2004; Schneider, 2001). For many LGB people, being in a same-sex relationship comes last in their identity development, possibly because feeling comfortable with their sexual identity is a prerequisite for such commitments (Dubé, 2000; Floyd & Stein, 2002). Particularly among gay and bisexual men, the first same-sex sexual partner is rarely a romantic partner (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). This is in sharp contrast with

heterosexual trajectories, in which sexual experience is usually preceded by dating experience, and romantic relationships constitute the primary context for the sexual debut (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Third, most studies focus on same-sex experiences, whereas many LGBs have also experienced sex with opposite-sex partners (Dubé, 2000; Glover, Galliher, & Lamere, 2009; Mustanski, et al., 2014). The vast majority of coupled bisexual people is in a heterosexual relationship (Herek, Norton, Allen, & Sims, 2010). Fourth, most previous studies used convenience sampling, leaving certain groups of LGB individuals understudied (Dodge et al., 2012; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2008; 2011; Weinrich et al., 2014).

The sexual and relational trajectories LGB individuals followed may be relevant for later well-being. On average, psychological well-being appears to be lower among lesbian, gay and bisexual people than among heterosexual people, which is generally ascribed to LGB-specific stressors, including external and internalized homophobia (Meyer, 2003). Bisexual people seem to have more mental health problems than gay men and lesbian women, probably because they face stressors that add to the general minority stress factors of LGBs (Dodge & Sandfort, 2007). Bisexual people experience discrimination from both the heterosexual and the homosexual community. They are less visible than lesbian and gay people, and other people question their identity or see them as either promiscuous or confused (Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010).

Possibly, differences in psychological well-being among lesbian, gay or bisexual people could be related to different developmental trajectories. Earlier trajectories are found to be related to lower levels of internalized homophobia (Floyd & Stein, 2002), but also to more depression during adulthood (Friedman et al., 2008). Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2011), however, found that identity integration (involvement in the LGB community, internalized homophobia, disclosure) was more important for psychosocial well-being than

the timing of sexual identity milestones. Identity integration could be more difficult for certain groups of LGBs, for example people who are ‘mostly straight’ (Thompson & Morgan, 2008). Having opposite-sex sexual experiences could be linked to less psychological well-being, if they occur under heteronormative pressure or concealment of one’s same-sex orientation (Glover et al., 2009). Being in a same-sex relationship is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being among sexual minority youth (Bauermeister et al., 2010; Glover et al., 2009). The order of experiences may be relevant as well. Men whose first same-sex experiences preceded self-identification as gay report higher levels of internalized homophobia than men whose sequence was the opposite (Dubé, 2000).

The present study aimed to address the gaps that were identified in the existing literature. The first goal of this study was to describe comprehensive sexual trajectories of Dutch LGBs. A comprehensive description of sexual and relational trajectories encompasses not only sexual identity milestones (same-sex attraction, self-identification, and coming out) and same-sex sexual experiences, but also relational and opposite-sex sexual experiences, as well as the sequencing, spacing, and timing of these experiences. The second goal was to explore whether a typology in sexual trajectories can be identified. Cluster analysis was used to achieve this purpose, separately for gay men and lesbian woman (i.e., exclusively same-sex attracted men and women) and bisexual men and women (i.e., non-exclusively same-sex attracted men and women). The third aim of the study was to examine which persons tend to follow these trajectories. We hypothesized that younger LGBs, men, and people who are more gender conforming during childhood in general reach their same-sex sexual and relational milestones at an earlier age. The fourth purpose was to explore the associations between sexual trajectory type and psychological adjustment (viz. self-esteem, psychological well-being, and internalized homophobia).

Table 1. *Social Demographic Characteristics of the Sample (Based on Weighted Data)*

	Men	Women	Total	F/χ^2	p
	$n = 1,580$	$n = 1,474$	$N = 3,054$		
Age					
<i>M</i>	49.63	43.31	46.58	155.14	<.001
<i>SD</i>	14.01	13.99	14.35		
Education, %					
Low	18.6	14.7	16.7	10.11	.006
Middle	33.5	37.5	35.4		
High	48.0	47.8	47.9		
Ethnicity, %					
Non-western	1.3	2.6	1.9	7.12	.008
Urbanity, %					
Low	19.6	20.3	19.9	11.64	.003
Middle	48.0	52.8	50.3		
High	32.4	26.9	29.7		
Relationship status, %					
Married	39.8	36.8	38.4	37.66	<.001
Same-sex partner	15.3	11.7	13.6		
Opposite-sex partner	24.5	25.1	24.8		
Cohabiting	14.4	20.8	17.5		
Living apart	10.1	12.7	11.3		
No partner	35.8	29.7	32.8		

METHOD

Participants

A total of 1,580 males and 1,474 females who reported any same-sex sexual attraction completed an online questionnaire. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 88 ($M = 46.6$ years, $SD = 14.35$). Almost half (47.9%) of the participants completed a higher (bachelor or master) degree. One in five (19.9%) participants lived in a rural area, 50.3% in a suburban area, and 29.7% in an urban area. One third (32.8%) of the participants were single, 38.4% were married (16.5% with a same-sex partner, 16.4% with an opposite-sex partner), and 28.8% were in a non-marital relationship (either living apart or together). All participants lived in the Netherlands. Sociodemographics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were members of an online research panel. The largest part of the approximately 100,000 members of this online panel were recruited through their participation in another survey using a randomly selected sample. In addition, the organization that manages the panel makes extra efforts to include hard-to-reach subgroups, for example by snowball sampling or targeted recruitment. About one quarter of the panel consists of self-selected members. For the present study, all panel members received a small screening survey to indicate whether they were sexually attracted to people of the same-sex, which was filled out by 67,777 individuals (response rate of 66.4%). Those who reported same-sex attraction ($n = 4,836$, 7.14%) received a follow-up invitation to complete a survey about sexual experiences, sexual health, and related topics such as childhood gender nonconformity and psychological well-being. The survey was introduced as a study about relationships and sexuality. Anonymity of responses was guaranteed. Of the panel members who received this follow-up invitation, 63.3% completed the survey. It took approximately 30

minutes to fill out the survey. After completion, participants received points, which could be saved and used to purchase products online. Data collection took place in June and July 2013.

Measures

The questionnaire began with questions about demographics (sex assigned at birth, age, educational level, ethnicity, urbanization, and relationship status) and sexual orientation (same-sex attraction and self-identification).

Same-sex attraction

Same-sex attraction was assessed with a single item measure: “Are you sexually attracted to women, men or both women and men?” (1 = exclusively to women, 5 = exclusively to men). Participants were categorized as lesbian or gay if they reported exclusive same-sex attraction, and as bisexual if they reported non-exclusive same-sex attraction. In addition, participants answered a question about the age (in years) when feeling same-sex attraction for the first time.

Self-identification

Self-identification was also assessed with a single item measure: “How do you identify yourself?” (1 = gay/lesbian, 2 = bisexual, 3 = straight, 4 = other). In addition, the participants answered a question about the age (in years) when they first identified as gay/lesbian, bisexual, or other than heterosexual.

Coming out

Coming out was also assessed with a single item measure: “Have you ever told someone that you are (also) attracted to men (for men)/women (for women)?” (0 = no, 1 = yes). In addition, the participants answered a question about the age (in years) that they first told someone that they were (also) attracted to same-sex persons.

Sexual and relational same-sex and opposite-sex experiences

Participants were asked if they had ever had a romantic relationship with a man, a romantic relationship with a woman, been in love with a man, been in love with a woman, sex with a man, and sex with a woman (0 = no, 1 = yes). In addition, they were asked at what age (in years) they had had these experiences for the first time.

Internalized Homophobia

Internalized homophobia was assessed with nine items reflecting negative attitudes and feelings towards one's own homosexuality (e.g., "If I could choose, I would rather be straight"). The scale was used before in the Dutch Schorer Monitor Survey (van Empelen, van Berkel, Roos, & Zuilhof, 2011). Participants indicated how much these items applied to them on a five-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree). Mean scores were calculated with higher scores indicating more internalized homophobia. Cronbach's alpha was .78.

Childhood Gender Nonconformity

Childhood gender nonconformity was assessed with three items for men (i.e., "As a child, I acted girlish", "As a child, I looked girlish", and "As a child, I felt girlish") and three items for women (i.e., "As a child, I acted boyish", "As a child, I looked boyish", and "As a child, I felt boyish") on a five-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree), which were adapted from the Flemish sexual health population survey called Sexpert (Buysse et al., 2013). Mean scores were calculated with higher scores indicating more gender nonconformity. Cronbach's alpha was .87.

Psychological Well-being

We used the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) to assess participants' psychological well-being (Kessler et al., 2002). This measure contains 10 statements about psychological distress (e.g., "During the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel hopeless?"). Participants indicated how often they experienced these feelings during the past 4 weeks on a five-point

scale (1 = all of the time, 5 = none of the time). Higher scores indicated higher levels of psychological well-being. A mean scale score was calculated. Cronbach's alpha was .93.

Self-esteem

We used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE) to assess participants' self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). This measure contains five statements reflecting positive feelings and five statements reflecting negative feelings about oneself (e.g., "I feel positive about myself?" and "I feel useless sometimes"). Participants indicated how much these items applied to them on a five-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree). Negatively formulated items were recoded, resulting in higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. A mean scale score was calculated. Cronbach's alpha was .91.

Statistical Analyses

Descriptive analyses were conducted for experiences with being in love, sex and romantic relationships with same- and opposite-sex partners, and sexual attraction, sexual self-identification, and coming out. The percentages of participants who had these experiences were presented, as well as the mean ages of the first experiences and the ranking of these experiences within the sexual and relational trajectory. These descriptions are presented separately for gay men and lesbian women (exclusive same-sex attraction) and bisexual men and women (non-exclusive same-sex attraction).

A two-step cluster analysis (SPSS TwoStep) was used to explore whether a typology in trajectories could be distinguished, separately for exclusively and non-exclusively same-sex attracted participants. Cluster analysis is an exploratory analytic tool, which categorizes participants into groups, so that the degree of association is strong between participants in the same group and weak between participants in different groups (Everitt, Landau, Leese, & Stahl, 2011). We included the six different sexual and relational same-sex and opposite-sex experiences and the mean ages of first sexual attraction and first self-identification in these

analyses. We decided to use SPSS TwoStep, because this clustering method can handle both categorical and continuous variables. This type of cluster analysis preclusters in the first step and uses hierarchical methods in the second step. When the change in the Schwarz Bayesian Criterion (BIC) is small, the number of clusters created thus far stabilizes. In this way, the optimal number of clusters is automatically generated. Cases are subsequently categorized under the cluster that is associated with the largest log-likelihood.

Differences between sexual trajectory types with regard to age and sexual orientation (for bisexual people: mostly same-sex, both sexes, mostly opposite-sex) were examined using chi square analyses. Differences between sexual trajectory types with regard to age, childhood gender nonconformity, self-esteem, psychological well-being, and internalized homophobia were examined using analysis of variance (ANOVA). We used contrast estimates (deviation) to investigate which trajectory types differed significantly from the total sample. Because sexual trajectory types differed on biological sex, age, and childhood gender nonconformity, we examined whether differences in psychosocial well-being remained after controlling for these demographic measures. Because some of the variables that were included were skewed, we applied bootstrapping to alleviate statistical problems that may result from the violation of not meeting the assumptions of normality.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows the percentages of participants with experience of being in love, sexual and romantic relationships with same- and opposite-sex partners, and same-sex attraction, self-identification, and coming out, as well as the mean ages and sequence of these experiences. The vast majority of gay men and lesbian women have been in love, had sex and/or had a relationship with a same-sex partner, whereas the same applied for bisexual men and women with regard to opposite-sex partners. For gay men, the sexual and relational trajectory started on average with same-sex attraction, whereas for lesbian women and

Table 2. *Timing, Spacing and Sequencing of Sexual and Relational Events*

	Exclusive same-sex attraction						Non-exclusive same-sex attraction					
	Men (<i>n</i> = 792)			Women (<i>n</i> = 330)			Men (<i>n</i> = 788)			Women (<i>n</i> = 1,144)		
	%	<i>M age</i>	<i>ranking</i>	%	<i>M age</i>	<i>ranking</i>	%	<i>M age</i>	<i>ranking</i>	%	<i>M age</i>	<i>ranking</i>
First same-sex attraction	100.0	14.3	1	100.0	18.4	2	100.0	22.0	4	100.0	22.0	4
Been in love with same-sex partner	97.5	16.9	2	98.8	16.7	1	49.5	16.0	1	65.4	14.4	1
Had sex with same-sex partner	97.3	19.3	4	92.4	25.6	8	77.0	24.3	6	60.5	26.5	7
Had relationship with same-sex partner	86.9	25.6	9	91.2	27.3	9	17.6	27.1	7	24.1	28.6	8
Been in love with opposite-sex partner	31.9	18.3	3	53.9	19.5	5	95.8	22.4	5	99.1	23.0	5
Had sex with opposite-sex partner	32.6	20.0	5	62.1	19.0	3	93.1	19.0	2	97.1	17.1	2
Had relationship with opposite-sex partner	21.3	20.7	6	39.4	19.4	4	85.9	21.1	3	93.5	18.1	3
First self-identification	99.0	21.6	7	95.8	24.8	7	76.4	28.9	8	49.0	26.1	6
Coming out	94.8	22.4	8	90.6	23.4	6	51.0	29.2	9	77.0	26.5	7

Table 3. *Characteristics of Exclusive Same-Sex Attraction Cluster Groups*

	Trajectory 1	Trajectory 2		
	(<i>n</i> = 452)	(<i>n</i> = 666)	χ^2/F	<i>p</i>
Been in love with same-sex partner (%)	100.0	96.8	14.53	<.001
Sexual experience with same-sex partner (%)	100.0	93.5	30.35	<.001
Romantic relationship with same-sex partner (%)	100.0	80.5	99.84	<.001
Been in love with opposite-sex partner (%)	0.0	64.3	470.65	<.001
Sexual experience with opposite-sex partner (%)	0.0	69.1	530.44	<.001
Romantic relationship with opposite-sex partner (%)	0.0	44.4	273.33	<.001
Self-identification as LHB (%)	99.3	97.6	4.87	.027
Age of first same-sex attraction (<i>M</i>)	13.7	16.7	62.32	<.001

bisexual people the first step was to fall in love with a same-sex partner. For most groups, having a romantic same-sex relationship came last in their trajectory. For bisexual men, coming out was the final step, and almost half of bisexual men had not told anyone about their sexual attraction to men at all.

Two-step cluster analysis for gay men and lesbian women on the sexual and relational milestones revealed two sexual and relational trajectory subtypes. Table 3 shows the characteristics of both subtypes. Both participants who followed the first trajectory and participants who followed the second trajectory in general had experience of being in love, having sex, and having a romantic relationship with a same-sex partner. The participants who followed the first trajectory had no experience of being in love, having sex, and having a romantic relationship with an opposite-sex partner. On the contrary, the majority of the participants who followed the second trajectory had a same-sex sexual experience (69.1%) or been in love with a same-sex partner (64.3%). Less than half (44.4%) had a romantic relationship with an opposite-sex partner. In addition, there were large differences between the first and second trajectory with regard to the age of first same-sex attraction, which leads us to label the first trajectory as “early, homosexual experienced” and the second as “late, bisexual experienced”.

Two-step cluster analysis on the sexual and relational milestones revealed six sexual and relational trajectory subtypes for bisexual men and women. Table 4 shows the characteristics of these subtypes. Nearly all participants in the first five cluster groups had experience of all sexual and relational opposite-sex partner experiences. Participants in the first cluster group had no same-sex experiences with love, sex or relationships at all. We labeled this trajectory “no same-sex experiences”. Participants in the second cluster group (“same-sex love”) had been in love with a same-sex partner, but no same-sex relational or sexual experience. Same-sex experiences of participants in the third cluster group (“same-sex

Table 4. *Characteristics of Non-Exclusive Same-Sex Attraction Cluster Groups*

	Trajectory 1 (n=311)	Trajectory 2 (n = 233)	Trajectory 3 (n = 401)	Trajectory 4 (n = 430)	Trajectory 5 (n = 319)	Trajectory 6 (n = 235)	χ^2/F	<i>p</i>
Been in love with SSP (%)	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	66.0	1710.96	<.001
Sexual experience with SSP (%)	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	63.4	1681.07	<.001
Romantic relationship with SSP (%)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	40.9	1592.71	<.001
Been in love with OSP (%)	99.7	100.0	99.8	100.0	100.0	82.6	284.49	<.001
Sexual experience with OSP (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	63.4	648.86	<.001
Romantic relationship with OSP (%)	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	21.7	1466.22	<.001
Self-identification as LHB (%)	26.7 ^b	36.5 ^b	62.3	70.2 ^a	84.6 ^a	73.6 ^a	316.74	<.001
Age of first same-sex attraction (<i>M</i>)	25.2 ^a	20.9	25.0 ^a	20.2 ^b	20.7 ^b	18.7 ^b	21.74	<.001
Sexual attraction (%)								
Mostly same-sex	1.0 ^b	3.4 ^b	2.0 ^b	9.1 ^b	38.9 ^a	43.8 ^a	24.55	<.001
Both sexes	3.2 ^b	10.3	5.5 ^b	17.2 ^a	21.9 ^a	16.2	4.54	<.001
Mostly opposite-sex	95.8 ^a	86.3 ^a	92.5 ^a	73.7	39.2 ^b	40.0 ^b	4.13	.001

Note. SSP = same-sex partner; OSP = opposite-sex partner; ^a Significantly higher than total percentage or mean ($p < .05$); ^b Significantly lower than total percentage or mean ($p < .05$).

sex”) were limited to same-sex sex. Participants in the fourth cluster group (“same-sex love and sex”) all had been in love and had sex with a same-sex partner. Participants in the fifth cluster group (“same-sex love, sex and relationships”) had experience of being in love, having sex, and having a romantic relationship with both same and opposite-sex partners. The distinctive characteristic of the last cluster was that not all participants in this group had had opposite-sex experiences and that also the same-sex experiences did not cluster around either love, sex or relationships. We labeled this trajectory therefore “varied in love, sex and relationships”.

In addition, these clusters differed with regard to self-identification, the age of first same-sex attraction, and sexual attraction (mostly same-sex, both sexes, mostly opposite-sex). The “no same-sex experiences” and “same-sex sex” clusters discovered their feelings of same-sex attraction at a later age, compared to the mean ages in the total group of bisexual people. Moreover, the “no same-sex experiences”, “same-sex love”, and “same-sex sex” consisted for the largest part of mostly opposite-sex attracted people. The “same-sex love and sex” and the “same-sex love, sex and relationships” cluster groups had the highest percentages of to both sexes attracted people and the “same-sex love, sex and relationships” and “varied” cluster groups had the highest percentages of mostly same-sex attracted people.

We hypothesized that younger LGBs, men, and people who were more gender nonconforming during childhood would reach their same-sex sexual and relational milestones at an earlier age. The results in Table 5 confirmed the expected sex differences for exclusive same-sex attracted persons: more men than women followed the earlier trajectory. Contrary to our expectations, however, we did not find any age differences and the participants in the “early, homosexual experienced” group were less gender nonconforming during childhood.

Among bisexual people, we found several sex, age and gender nonconformity differences between the different trajectory types. Participants who had followed the “no

Table 5. Cluster Group Differences in Biological Sex, Age, and Gender Nonconformity

		Biological sex	Age	Gender nonconformity
	<i>n</i>	% Male	<i>M</i>	<i>M</i>
Exclusive same-sex attraction				
Early, homosexual experienced	458	83.6	46.8	2.10
Late, bisexual experienced	686	61.6	47.6	2.35
χ^2/F		63.02	0.88	15.73
<i>p</i>		<.001	ns	<.001
Non-exclusive same-sex attraction				
No same-sex experiences	369	35.7 ^b	43.0 ^b	2.19
Same-sex love	269	12.4 ^b	43.7 ^b	2.43 ^a
Same-sex sex	428	58.9 ^a	48.1 ^a	1.91 ^b
Same-sex love and sex	481	41.9	49.3 ^a	2.28
Same-sex love, sex and relationships	363	28.8 ^b	47.4 ^a	2.36 ^a
Varied in love, sex and relationships	314	59.6 ^a	42.4 ^b	2.02
χ^2/F		188.33	13.43	12.65
<i>p</i>		<.001	<.001	<.001

Note. ^a Significantly higher than total percentage or mean ($p < .05$); ^b Significantly lower than total percentage or mean ($p < .05$)

same-sex experiences” trajectory were mainly women and relatively young. Participants in the “same sex love” and “same sex love, sex, and relationships” cluster group were mainly women who are more gender nonconforming during childhood, but they differ according to age. Both the “same-sex sex” and the “varied” cluster group consisted primarily of men, but participants who followed the “same-sex sex” trajectory were older than average and less gender nonconforming during childhood, whereas participants in the “varied” cluster group were relatively young. Participants who followed the “same-sex love and sex” trajectory were older than average.

Table 6 shows the results of a multivariate regression analysis of age, biological sex, childhood gender nonconformity, and trajectory type on psychological adjustment (viz. self-esteem, psychological well-being, and internalized homophobia). Among gay men and lesbian women, older participants had lower scores on internalized homophobia, whereas among bisexual people, age was related to higher scores of internalized homophobia. Both within the exclusively and non-exclusively same-sex attracted group, age was related to higher scores on psychological well-being and self-esteem. Both gay and bisexual men had higher levels of internalized homophobia than lesbian and bisexual women. Bisexual women also had higher scores on psychological well-being than bisexual men. Childhood gender nonconformity was associated with lower levels of psychological well-being and self-esteem among lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, and with lower levels of internalized homophobia among bisexual people.

After controlling for sex, age and gender nonconformity, associations between sexual trajectory type and internalized homophobia and psychological well-being were found for both exclusively and non-exclusively same-sex attracted participants. Gay men and lesbian women who followed a “late, bisexual experienced” trajectory had a relatively high score on internalized homophobia and relatively low levels of psychological well-being. Within the

Table 6. *Analysis of Variance of Trajectory Type and Control Variables on Adjustment Measures (B)*

	Internalized homophobia			Psychological well-being			Self-esteem		
	B / Contrast			B / Contrast			B / Contrast		
	Estimates	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Estimates	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	Estimates	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Exclusive same-sex attraction									
Age	-.005	15.61	<.001	.004	6.58	.010	.009	37.34	<.001
Male vs. Female	.155	10.01	.002	-.034	.044	ns	-.006	.013	ns
Gender nonconformity	.027	1.59	ns	-.077	12.15	.001	-.075	11.13	.001
Late, bisexual experienced vs. early, homosexual experienced	.198	25.41	<.001		3.07		-.034	0.68	ns
<i>R</i> ²	.04			.02			.05		
Non-exclusive same-sex attraction									
Age	.009	28.28	<.001	.009	47.92	<.001	.009	67.09	<.001

Male vs. Female	.450	73.77	<.001	.103	6.23	.013	-.001	.001	ns
Gender nonconformity	-.065	7.27	.007	-.050	6.66	.010	-.079	20.02	<.001
Trajectory type		16.56	<.001		2.92	.012		2.02	ns
No same-sex experiences	.110		ns	-.017		ns	.003		ns
Same-sex love vs. total	.249		<.001	-.068		ns	-.061		ns
Same-sex sex vs. total	.079		ns	.066		ns	.063		ns
Same-sex love and sex vs. total	-.056		ns	-.094		.007	-.012		ns
Same-sex love, sex and relationships vs. total	-.397		<.001	.019		ns	.071		ns
Varied in love, sex and relationships vs. total	.015		ns	.095		.037	-.064		ns
R^2	.21			.06			.06		

Note. Men scored lower on gender nonconformity than women in both the exclusive ($F(1, 1120) = 405.08, p < .001$) and the non-exclusive ($F(1, 1930) = 338.97, p < .001$) same-sex attracted group.

bisexual group, participants who had no same-sex experiences or only experiences with same-sex sex did not differ significantly from the average score on all measures of psychological adjustment. Participants who only had been in love with a same-sex partner had relatively high scores on internalized homophobia, whereas participants with experience of being in love, having sex, and having a romantic relationship with same-sex partners had relatively low scores on internalized homophobia. Participants who followed the “same-sex love and sex” trajectory had lower scores and participants who followed the “varied” trajectory had higher scores on psychological well-being. Sexual trajectory type was not significantly correlated to self-esteem for both exclusively and non-exclusively same-sex attracted participants.

DISCUSSION

The first purpose of this study was to describe the trajectories that Dutch LGBs follow in their first experiences with love, sex, and relationships, with same and opposite-sex partners, and the development of their non-heterosexual identity. We particularly aimed to address the gaps in the existing literature with regard to the situation in the Netherlands and the inclusion of same-sex experiences and experiences with love and relationships. Despite the gay-friendly climate in the Netherlands, the timing of Dutch LGBs’ trajectories does not seem to be earlier than in other countries. The age of first feeling same-sex attraction ranged between 14.3 years for gay men and 22.0 years for bisexual men and women. In an American sample of LGB adults that is comparable to the sample in the present study, the ages of identity milestones that could be compared were quite similar to the ages of identity milestones in our early trajectory group (Calzo et al., 2011). The timing of developmental milestones is the result of a complex interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Possibly, societal tolerance only plays a small role in this regard. Another explanation could be that the Dutch are not as gay-friendly as they

seem to be in studies ranking public attitudes towards homosexuality. The prevailing attitude in the Netherlands appears to be that homosexuality is okay, as long as LGBs comply with heterosexual norms on gender and sexuality (Buijs, Hekma, & Duijvendak, 2011). These attitudes “under the surface” could hinder Dutch LGBs’ sexual, relational, and identity development.

It proved to be useful to include opposite-sex experiences as well as experiences with love and relationships in a more comprehensive description of sexual and relational trajectories. A substantial percentage of gay men and lesbian women (with exclusive same-sex attraction) also had opposite-sex sexual and relational experiences. In addition, the presence or absence of these experiences appeared to be a crucial differentiating factor in their trajectories. Almost all bisexual men and women (with non-exclusive same sex attraction) had opposite-sex experiences. Relational factors are important as well. Falling in love with a same-sex partner came first in the trajectories of lesbian women and bisexual men and women. Studies that do not include this same-sex experience usually come up with same-sex attraction as the first milestone (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). The average age of the first same-sex romantic relationship was remarkably late, ranging from 25.6 among gay men to 28.6 among bisexual women. Possibly, more internal or external acceptance of the non-heterosexual identity is needed to reach this milestone than to engage in other same-sex experiences. Furthermore, many participants grew up in a pre-internet world, when finding a like-minded partner was more challenging. For LGBs who did have access to dating websites and apps when they grew up, it is more difficult to find a romantic than to find a sexual partner via these venues (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

The second purpose of this study was to explore whether a typology in sexual trajectories could be distinguished based on sexual identity milestones, relational as well as sexual experiences, and same-sex as well as opposite-sex sexual experiences. A cluster

analysis showed that this was indeed possible. Within the group of exclusively same-sex attracted people, the presence or absence of opposite-sex sexual and relational experiences in the trajectory was most distinguishing, and an early trajectory related to less heterosexual experiences. The chance of having same-sex experiences could be higher in a later sexual trajectory, because of the longer period of time in which someone does not self-identify as lesbian or gay and may thus experiment with same and opposite-sex experiences. Another explanation is that these same-sex experiences are confusing and thus delay self-identification. The cluster analyses revealed a more diversified range of trajectories for bisexual people. We found six different trajectories, which differed especially with regard to the nature and comprehensiveness of their same-sex experiences. The vast majority had extensive other-sex experiences.

The third purpose was to examine which persons tend to follow these trajectories. Associations with biological sex, age, childhood gender nonconformity were found. Among exclusively same-sex attracted people, women more often than men follow the “later, bisexual experienced” trajectory. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find any age differences between the earlier and later trajectory, and gender nonconformity during childhood did not precede an earlier trajectory. Apparently, changes in the public opinion toward non-heterosexuality and childhood gender atypical feelings and behaviors did not enable people to recognize their same-sex feelings at an earlier age. Among bisexuals, women more often had no same-sex experiences or only love for somebody of the same sex, or on the contrary all same-sex experiences (love, sex, and relationships). Many women who feel some attraction to other women consider themselves heterosexual and they lead mostly heterosexual lives. Those who do have same-sex experiences, apparently are more likely to ‘go all the way’ than men. Bisexual men more often than women only had same-sex sexual experiences, or did not have (all) opposite-sex experiences. Bisexual people who had few (if any) same-sex

experiences, or not all opposite-sex experiences were on average younger. Possibly, their trajectories were not completed yet, and they will eventually follow one of the other trajectories.

The fourth purpose was to study the association between sexual trajectory type and psychological adjustment (viz. self-esteem, psychological well-being, and internalized homophobia). Within the exclusively same-sex attracted group, the early trajectory with no heterosexual experiences seems to be most beneficial. People who followed this trajectory had lower scores on internalized homophobia and higher levels of psychological well-being. Opposite-sex experiences can be motivated by positive reasons, such as the desire to experiment or having felt heterosexual attraction in the past, or negative reasons, such as wanting to suppress or conceal one's sexual orientation (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). The negative associations between the trajectory that includes these experiences and psychological adjustment, suggests that for the exclusively same-sex attracted group, negative reasons prevail.

Distinguishing exclusive from non-exclusive sexually attracted people enabled us to investigate which trajectories are related to a more positive state of psychological adjustment within the group of bisexual people. Trajectories including experience of same-sex relationships appeared to relate to more beneficial levels of adjustment, with regard to both internalized homophobia and feelings of well-being. This confirms findings from earlier studies among sexual minority youth that being in a same-sex relationship has a positive effect on psychological well-being (Bauermeister et al., 2010; Glover et al., 2009). A same-sex relationship may alleviate minority stress factors, such as internalized homophobia, but also the need to conceal one's identity. In addition, it may provide a minority-specific coping mechanism (Meyer, 2003).

The present study has a number of limitations. First, the cross-sectional design makes conclusions about causal relationships impossible. Although the questions about gender nonconformity and milestones were about the past, and measures of adjustment about the present, one cannot rule out that memories of these earlier experiences are colored by the current state of mind. A second limitation is that due to the large age range of our sample, many participants had to think back for a considerable number of years to remember their earliest sexual and romantic experiences. The results are, therefore, likely to be influenced by memory bias. Although Schrimshaw and colleagues (2006) concluded that most sexual behavior and identity development, in general, can be assessed reliably using interviewer-administered questionnaires among LGB youth, this could not be the case using an online questionnaire among an adult sample. Especially since some of the milestones in the present study were not that clear-cut, it could be that participants had difficulty to decide which experience to report. Sexual experiences, romantic relationships, and feelings of love are all hard to define. Fisher (2012) found different results in reported occurrence and timing of milestone events if a survey or diary method was used, and ascribed this discrepancy partly to the subjective nature of these milestones. It would be illuminating if LGBs could reflect on our findings in a qualitative study, in order to gain more insight in the experiential side of their sexual and relational development.

Despite these limitations, this research is the first to include same- and opposite-sex experiences and experiences with love and relationships in a comprehensive description of the sexual and relational trajectories of Dutch LGBs, and to investigate the correlates of these trajectories. We used a sampling method that was not confounded with participation in the gay community to recruit a large sample of LGBs. By studying this comprehensive trajectory, our study provides insight in the importance of relational milestones and the occurrence of both same- and opposite-sex experiences. Internalized homophobia, self-esteem and

psychological well-being appeared to be primarily related to sexual trajectories among bisexual people. Further research on life challenges and psychological adjustment of bisexual men and women is advisable.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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Ethical approval: The Medical Ethical Review Committee of University Medical Center Utrecht (UMC) confirmed that the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) did not apply to our study and that the study protocol thus was exempt from formal medical-ethical approval under Dutch law (reference number WAG/om13/059550). All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments and the Dutch code of conduct for scientific practice. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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