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Invited Commentary on “Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Sexual Orientation”

Lawrence Hartmann ^a

^a Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; and American Psychiatric Association, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

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Commentary

Invited Commentary on “Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Sexual Orientation”

LAWRENCE HARTMANN

*Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; and American Psychiatric Association,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA*

On the one hand, now that the stigma around, and pathologizing of, homosexualities have receded considerably in many but far from all scientific and social circles, it is potentially interesting, reasonable, and useful to try to study psychological and other differences between people who are predominantly homosexual and people who are predominantly heterosexual. A generation or two ago, such studies would probably have been automatic grist for the mill of pathologizing homosexualities. That is, probably no longer routinely the case, but it is still a real possibility and danger.

On the other hand, given the considerable stigma and pathologizing of homosexualities that continues to exist in most cultures, societies, and individuals, it would be wise and prudent for any scientific studies of psychological differences between heterosexual people and homosexual people to be unusually—in fact, extremely—careful in their methods and assumptions, and modest in their assessment of cultural factors, and in their conclusions. The present study partly, but only partly, I think, rises to a proper level of modesty and care.

“Narcissism, Self-Esteem, and Sexual Orientation” is a suggestive but very small study. It involved about 100 young adult Jewish Israeli more-or-less heterosexual men, average age 26 (yet called “students”), and about 100 similar more-or-less homosexual men. That is a small and rather specialized group. Also, and differently important, the study relies on self-reports and questionnaires; such reliance is fraught with likely bias in areas heavy with prejudice, with forceful social and religious traditions, and with strongly held unscientific ideas. As one example among many of the problems in getting clean facts in a similar area, a study several years ago nearly certainly wrongly

Address correspondence to Lawrence Hartmann, M.D., 147 Brattle Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. E-mail: imhartmann@verizon.net

decided that there was no more suicidality in gay and sexually confused teenagers than in other teenagers—based on a post-suicide questionnaire to the teenagers' recently bereaved parents asking if their youngster had been gay or sexually ambiguous or confused.

The present study also relies on several psychological tests (PNI, NPI, RSES) that are intended to help define narcissism and self-esteem. They seem to be rather sensible tests, but one is left with the impression that they simplify, miss some subtlety and overlap, and imply greater clarity than most scientists, clinicians, or good lay observers would probably accept. Both narcissism and self-esteem are important terms, in common sense English and in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, but neither is precisely defined in any widely agreed upon way. The terms actually overlap, to many of us, in many ways. That is not a dismissal of the study, but it is a complication. In current usage, "narcissism" is often used in a somewhat pathologizing way (though "normal" and "healthy" narcissism is occasionally referred to and is an obvious exception), and "self esteem" is largely, if not wholly, used as praise. The terms are not, however, clearly or cleanly fixed or bounded, and this article may or may not contribute to that task.

A further challenge to this article's basic thesis or task is the definition of homosexualities. The article lumps people self-defined as Kinsey 0, 1, and 2 as heterosexual and Kinsey 4, 5, and 6 as homosexual. That is a convenient and familiar, but rather crude, behavioral but not psychological way of defining a varied field.

The author's discussion usefully, if briefly, includes consideration of a few cogent intrapsychic, environmental, and biopsychosocial concepts that may influence the results of the study, including the likely possibility that, e.g., sociocultural, political, and religious values and traditions nearly certainly influence self-esteem greatly in homosexual people (and one might add, in heterosexual people: it is handy to have scapegoats to whom one can feel superior). Similar factors probably also influence narcissism, some of which may be, as the author points out, compensatory.

The author takes as a starting point some of Freud's early (1905) ideas about narcissism and homosexuality. Since she hardly refers to later Freud, to me her article would gain standing if she had regularly used "early Freudian" instead of "Freudian" ideas about homosexuality. She also includes some to my mind odd and even self-damaging reliance on the voluminous, but rather biased and discredited, writings of Socarides. It is hard to tell from her syntax, for instance, whether the author accepts that homosexual men are routinely pathologically pleasure-driven or if she is merely reporting Socarides's opinion that they are. It is also a bit pejorative and unsettling that the author uses "politically correct"—rather than, e.g., no comment or "scientifically reasonable"—to describe (and implicitly criticize) the late 20th century shift in psychiatric and psychoanalytic thinking about homosexuality.

The several significant caveats about this small study may easily fall away from the reader's memory when we read the article's conclusion that, in this group of men, by these tests, self-esteem is relatively lower in young homosexual men than in young heterosexual men, and narcissism is relatively higher. That is an interesting small finding, but it is also small, tentative, and provocative, in need of far more studies: large scale, with psychological depth, with less reliance on self-report and questionnaires, with female subjects, and cross-cultural.