

Inappropriate use of conflicting data in Tomeo et al (2001)

In research with 942 nonclinical adults, Tomeo, Templer, Anderson, and Kotler (2001) found that gay men and lesbians reported child sexual abuse significantly more frequently than did heterosexual men and women. In that paper, the researchers wrote that “forty-six percent of the homosexual men in contrast to 7% of the heterosexual men” reported molestation experiences prior to age 16 (Tomeo et al, 2001, 535). Lesbians also reported significantly more molestation experiences than did straight women (22% in contrast to 1%)

The prime finding of Tomeo et al (2001) – there is a difference between gay and straight groups on sexual abuse -- was not novel. However, based on Marie Tomeo’s dissertation, Tomeo et al (2001) discussed the results in terms of possible import for causes of homosexuality. In her dissertation, one of Tomeo’s prime research hypotheses was that homosexuals would report more sexual abuse than heterosexuals (Tomeo, 2000). She also asked participants the ages they identified as gay and then when they experienced child sexual abuse. In keeping with her research questions, she wondered if the abuse came before awareness of same-sex orientation or afterwards. However, due to conflicting reports in the article and the dissertation, it is impossible to draw any interpretations from this study.

There are contradictions in the paper and the dissertation between the results sections and the discussion sections. A crucial problem is the inability to be certain about when the abuse occurred - before or after awareness of same-sex attraction. Tomeo, et al (2001) makes the following statement:

Sixty-eight percent of the present homosexual male participants and 38% of the present homosexual female participants (68 and 36%, respectively, if including just the homosexual fair participants) did not identify as homosexual until after the molestation.

This suggests that if molestation resulted in homosexuality, this phenomenon occurs in a greater proportion of male homosexuals. It may not, however, be a casual factor in either gender. Perhaps children or adolescents with a higher potential for homosexual behavior are more likely to enter a situation that leads to same-sex molestation. It must also be borne in mind that the present homosexual participants may not be representative of homosexual persons. The overwhelming preponderance of homosexual participants was in the gay pride group. (Tomeo, et al, 2001, 540-541).

The clear implication in this discussion section is that the frequency of homosexual identification was a consequence of the abuse. However, in the table which reported the data regarding timing of identification, the authors report the same percentage of males who reported identification as gay *before* the abuse. See Table II from Tomeo et al (2001).

**Table II.** Number and Percentage of Homosexual Participants Self-Identified as Homosexual Before Molestation

	Before molestation		Before molestation by male		Before molestation by female	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
All homosexual participants						
Homosexual men ( <i>N</i> = 124)	84	68	81	65	102	82
Homosexual women ( <i>N</i> = 153)	95	62	110	72	57	37

Something is not right here. The numbers for females add up to 100% but the male numbers are contradictory. The table indicates that 68% of men identified as homosexual *before* their molestation experience. If the table is correct, then any case for causation from this study is compromised. The dissertation does not clarify the situation as there are additional inconsistencies in that document.

In absence of more representative sampling and better control of multiple co-variables, psychologists (e.g., Byrd, 2004) should not make inferences regarding causation from studies assessing only recollections of child sexual abuse and adult sexual orientation. In the case of Tomeo et al (2001), the implications are even more unclear. The main results — gays report more abuse than straights — may indeed be correct, given the consistency with past studies. However, for multiple reasons, including the one I detail here, I do not believe any inferences about causation should be made from Tomeo, et al (2001).

A final thought. The research on sexual abuse among GLBT populations is sometimes misused by anti-gay rights advocates to make inferences about causation. There are many reasons why this line of research is important but making inferences about causation is hardly a major one. Childhood sexual abuse appears to be a profoundly disruptive experience for many people and may contribute to a variety of negative outcomes in adulthood (e.g., Fletcher, 2009; Godbout, Sabourin, & Lussier, 2009). Finding appropriate clinical and other applied responses could be obscured by a focus on trauma as a general cause of homosexual orientation.

## References

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