Non-binary Living in a Binary World: The Unlabeled Experience

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Introduction & Hypotheses

Introduction

Both popular media and social science research suggest that gender/sexual identities and roles that have dominated western society are being challenged (Budgeon, 2014). Heteronormative assumptions and the gender binary are rapidly evolving to capture experiences that reflect greater diversity (Diamond, 2005; Nagoshi et al., 2012), including those that extend beyond labels. How this increased flexibility affects well-being, however, is not yet understood.

The current study seeks to advance our understanding of this diversity among gender, sexual and romantic minorities (GSRM) by answering the following questions:

Question 1: With regard to gender identity and sexual orientation, what are the experiences of unlabeled individuals in their communities? Why do unlabeled individuals choose to be unlabeled?

Question 2: Is unlabeled status associated with minority stress and well-being?

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from a range of sources (students, LGBTQ organization, and social media targeting GSRMs) and included a variety of racial backgrounds. Mean age: 19.24 years (SD = 1.49).

Procedure & Measures

As a part of a larger battery of measures, participants completed the following scales:

Extended Satisfaction with Life Scale (ESWLS; Alfonso, Allison, Rader and Gorman, 1996)

50 items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree)

- I am satisfied with my life.

8 Subscales

- General (α = .92)
- Social Life (α = .97)
- Physical Appearance (α = .93)
- Sex Life (α = .97)
- Self (α = .94)
- Family (α = .97)
- Relationship: Present (α = .95)
- Relationship: Past (α = .96)

Sexual Identity Orientation Grid (KOSG; Klein, 1978)

Assessed current sexual orientation (0 = Heterosexual Only to 6 = Homosexual Only)

- How do you label or identify yourself?

Daily Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire (DHEQ; Balsam, 2013)

50 items (0 = Did not happen/NA to 5 = It happened, and it bothered me extremely)

- Hiding part of your life from other people

9 Subscales

- Gender Expression (α = .84)
- Parenting (α = .61)
- Vigilance (α = .78)
- Discrimination/Harassment (α = .76)
- Victimization (α = .87)
- Isolation (α = .72)

50% of participants who reported an “unlabeled” gender identity were assigned female at birth and reported being gendered in public as “she” (65%) or both “she/her” (18%).

In general, “unlabeled” participants reported lower overall and family life satisfaction compared to cisgendered, and lower social life satisfaction compared to men (see Table 1). “Unlabeled” were similar to other GSRMs on reported levels of minority stress and all other ESWLS subscales.

Table 1: Sexual Orientation and Life Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Trans</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unlabeled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>24.64</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>24.52</td>
<td>6.46</td>
<td>15.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Life</td>
<td>23.88</td>
<td>7.77</td>
<td>22.54</td>
<td>7.64</td>
<td>20.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Wilcoxon, means which do not share superscripts differ according to Scheffe post-hoc tests (p<.05).

The majority (82%) of participants who reported an “unlabeled” gender identity were assigned female at birth and reported being gendered in public as “she” (65%) or both “she/her” (18%).

In general, “unlabeled” participants reported lower overall and family life satisfaction compared to cisgendered, and lower social life satisfaction compared to men (see Table 1). “Unlabeled” were similar to other GSRMs on reported levels of minority stress and all other ESWLS subscales.

Table 2: Sexual Orientation and Life Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Straight</th>
<th>Reversed</th>
<th>Day/Life</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unlabeled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>25.29</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>20.75</td>
<td>7.35</td>
<td>22.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>8.25</td>
<td>20.47</td>
<td>8.73</td>
<td>20.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note. Wilcoxon, means which do not share superscripts differ according to Scheffe post-hoc tests (p&lt;.05).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

This study represents one of the first attempts to understand the experience of those who describe themselves as “unlabeled” and how they compare to other GSRMs on measures of well-being and minority stress. Although a range of explanations for eschewing labels existed among a small number of participants, lower life satisfaction suggests that this may be an at-risk population meriting further study.