

Framework for sexual orientation





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Framework for sexual orientation

Purpose

Framework for sexual orientation outlines the components, related definitions, and scope of the concept of sexual orientation. Using this framework will support consistent collecting and reporting of information.

There is an increasing awareness among policy-makers, both internationally and nationally, that there is a need for sexual orientation statistics. In New Zealand, some sexual orientation information is available but there is no standardised approach for collecting or reporting this information.

The lack of a standardised approach for collecting and reporting sexual orientation in New Zealand limits the consistency and comparability of this information. This means policy-makers have limited access to the information they need to quantify issues affecting populations of particular sexual orientations.

To achieve consistency in collecting and reporting sexual orientation information in statistical and administrative collections, an across-government working group was established in 2017. The following framework for sexual orientation is based on research and the working group's findings from public consultation held in April 2018 (Stats NZ, 2018).

Framework definitions

The complexity of sexual orientation can be defined and explained using a framework. In statistics, frameworks are used to represent an agreed way of thinking about a topic and to 'map' the topic of interest. This is done by bringing together and describing the aspects the topic covers, and by providing working definitions that relate to the topic. Frameworks support collecting and reporting information in a consistent way.

The framework for sexual orientation covers three key aspects of sexuality: sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity. These are related in the sense that sexual orientation is generally based on sexual attraction; sexual attraction can result in different sexual behaviours and sexual identities. The three aspects can independently change.

Note: The framework is based on the work of Pega et al (2010, 2013).

Defining the three aspects of sexual orientation

Definitions for the three aspects of sexual orientation are provided below.

Sexual attraction – sexual interest in another person. Sexual attraction is having sexual feelings towards someone.

A person may be attracted to one specific sex or gender, to more than one sex or gender, or to no-one.

Sexual behaviour – how a person behaves sexually. It is whether they have sexual partners of another sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or refrain from sexual behaviour.

Sexual identity – how a person thinks of their own sexuality and the terms they identify with. Sexual identity terms include lesbian, gay, straight, asexual, takatāpui, bisexual, or pansexual, among others.

Points to note about sexual orientation

Sexual orientation concepts and labels can vary due to a range of social and demographic factors including age, sex, ethnicity and socio-economic status. When using the framework to collect or report information on sexual orientation, there are many points to consider. These are briefly discussed below.

Sexual orientation is self-identified

Sexual orientation is self-identified. A person selects their own social and historical labels to identify themselves, which reflects their own perception and meaning about their sexuality (adapted from Pega et al, 2013).

Relationship between the three aspects

The three aspects of sexual orientation are strongly related and overlap, but people may not always report consistently across them. This means a person's sexual identity may or may not match their sexual attraction or sexual behaviour (Joloza et al, 2010). One aspect of sexual orientation (eg sexual identity) cannot be used to infer the other aspects of sexual orientation (ie sexual attraction and behaviour).

Statistics produced using different aspects of sexual orientation will not be directly comparable.

Using scales or categories to describe the aspects

Sexual attraction falls along a continuum – a scale of sexual attraction. In contrast, sexual behaviour and sexual identity are best described using separate, discrete categories. (Pega et al, 2013).

Sexual orientation is fluid

Sexual attraction, behaviour, and identity may be fluid, changing over time or across social contexts. This is because a person's sexual orientation journey, and how information is collected and to be used, may influence how and whether a person will identify their sexual orientation.

Data collected provides a snapshot of a person's sexual orientation – at that time. For some people this may change and for some they may not know what their sexual orientation is at that time.

Appropriate age for asking

Questions about sexual orientation are not appropriate to ask everyone in the population. The appropriate age for sexual orientation questions depends on which component of sexual orientation you are asking (sexual attraction, behaviour, or identity), the need for the information, the context, and the safety of the respondent.

Culture can influence understanding

Society and culture influence sexual orientation. Some cultural groups are more familiar than others with the three aspects of sexual orientation. Māori, for example, may often adopt sexual identities such as straight/heterosexual, gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but may also adopt the Māori-specific sexual identity takatāpui.

In modern times, the term takatāpui encompasses all Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities. When takatāpui is asked about in a sexual orientation context, it is referring to sexual identities only.

Other cultures, for example Pacific and Asian people, may use different terms that do not fit into western sexual identities.

Gender identity and sexual orientation perception

Gender identity can influence how a person reports their sexual attraction, behaviour, and identity.

Some people may view their sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity in terms of their (biological) sex and will answer a sexual orientation question accordingly. For others, their gender identity (which may differ from their sex) will influence how they answer a question about their sexual orientation. Both are valid responses.

Romantic aspects of attraction

Romantic attraction and sexual attraction are two different concepts. A person can be romantically attracted to another without sexual feelings and vice versa. It is acknowledged that romantic attraction can be related to some people's sexual orientation. This can be particularly so for youth and asexual identities.

Measuring sexual orientation

The framework above outlines three aspects of sexuality that make up sexual orientation – sexual attraction, behaviour, and identity. Having three aspects makes measuring sexual orientation challenging, because a single question will not fully capture the complexity of sexual orientation (Joloza et al, 2010). For this reason, collections often need to focus on a single aspect of sexual orientation.

Different aspects of sexual orientation will be more or less relevant to different information needs. Information on sexual identity may be more relevant for general social statistics and for monitoring social well-being (Stats NZ, 2008). Information on sexual behaviour is likely to be more relevant in the health context (Stats NZ, 2008).

Related standards

Statistical standard for sexual identity has more information on how to collect, organise, and report **sexual identity** information.

Glossary

Asexual: A person who experiences a persistent lack of sexual attraction or desire for sexual activity. Asexuality is distinct from celibacy, which is the deliberate abstention from sexual activity.

Bisexual: A person who is sexually attracted to more than one sex or gender, including their own.

Framework: Represents an agreed way of thinking about or mapping a topic. A framework describes the topic's scope and provides definitions for aspects that relate to the topic. Frameworks support consistent collecting and reporting of information.

Gay: A person who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender. More commonly used in relation to males.

Gender: The social and cultural construction based on the expectation of what it means to be a man and/or a woman, including roles, expectations, and behaviour.

Gender identity: Gender identity is an individual's internal sense of being wholly female, wholly male, or having aspects of female and/or male.

Heterosexual: A person who is sexually attracted to people of a different sex or gender than their own. Straight is an alternative term.

Lesbian: A woman who is sexually attracted to people of the same sex or gender.

Pansexual: A person who is sexually attracted to other people regardless of their sex or gender.

Romantic attraction: An emotional attraction towards another person that does not necessarily involve sexual attraction.

Romantic orientation: A term indicating the sex or gender with which a person is most likely to have a romantic attraction or relationship. It encompasses the identities that are based on romantic attraction. Romantic orientation is different to sexual orientation but can be used alternatively or side-by-side with the term sexual orientation. Can also be called affectional orientation.

Sex: The distinction between males and females that is based on the biological differences in sexual characteristics. Sex is biologically determined and is based on chromosomal and physical attributes.

Sexual attraction: Sexual interest in another person. Sexual attraction is having sexual feelings towards someone.

Sexual behaviour: How a person behaves sexually. It is whether they have sexual partners of another sex or gender, the same sex or gender, or refrain from sexual behaviour.

Sexual identity: How a person thinks of their own sexuality and the terms they identify with.

Sexual orientation: A term that covers three key aspects: sexual attraction, sexual behaviour, and sexual identity. These are related – sexual orientation is generally based on sexual attraction; sexual attraction can result in different sexual behaviours and sexual identities (Pega et al, 2013).

Statistical standard: A statistical standard provides a comprehensive set of guidelines for surveys and administrative sources collecting information on a particular topic.

Straight: A person who is sexually attracted to people of a different sex or gender than their own. Heterosexual is an alternative term.

Takatāpui: A traditional term meaning ‘intimate companion of the same sex’. It has been reclaimed to embrace all Māori who identify with diverse genders and sexualities such as whakawāhine, tangata ira tāne, lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, intersex, and transgender (Tiwhanawhana Trust, 2015).

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