

# Ethnicity in 25 Years of Published Sexuality Research: 1971-1995

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*We investigated the degree to which ethnicity has been a focus of sexuality research by coding all research reports published in The Journal of Sex Research (n = 454) and Archives of Sexual Behavior (n = 673) between 1971 and 1995 with regard to the ethnic composition of the sample and whether ethnicity was a variable used in the research. Overall, only about one quarter of the articles even included a description of the ethnic composition of the sample; however, likelihood of describing the ethnicity of research participants increased over the 25-year span. Of those articles in which ethnicity of research participants was described, the ethnic diversity of samples used in sexuality research increased over time. Overall, ethnicity was considered a relevant variable in only 7.3% of published research articles. Such ethnically-focused research most often was based on community samples and was equally as likely to be race homogeneous as race comparative in approach. Our results are discussed with regard to future research on ethnicity and human sexuality.*

Approximately 30% of the United States population is comprised of ethnic minorities (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). If a complete understanding of sexual phenomena is to be achieved, potential effects of ethnicity need to be investigated and any such ethnic effects appreciated. To what degree has ethnicity been a focus of research on human sexuality? Has an emphasis on ethnicity in sexuality research increased or decreased over time?

Although apparently no one has explored these issues specifically with regard to sexuality research, some researchers have noted apparent racism in published psychological research in general (Fairchild, 1991; Scarr, 1988). For example, Graham (1992) investigated potential changes over time in whether Blacks were the focus of psychological research. She examined nearly 15,000 research articles published in 6 prominent journals published between 1970 and 1989. Blacks were the focus in an extremely low proportion of articles overall (3.6%), and the proportion actually decreased from 1970 to 1989. The extent to which ethnicity has been considered in sexuality research is unknown; investigation of this issue was the objective of the current study.

We examined ethnicity in sexuality research published from 1971-1995 in

the two general sexual science journals published during that period: *The Journal of Sex Research (JSR)* and *Archives of Sexual Behavior (ASB)*. These two journals were selected because they are the longest running journals specifically publishing general research on human sexuality (broadly defined). Also, in a recent rating of the impact of various journals on published research in clinical psychology, *JSR* and *ASB* were the two highest ranked sexuality journals (Institute for Scientific Information, 1995). 1971 was chosen as the starting point for our investigation, as this was the first year in which *ASB* was published. By extending the investigation to 1995, we covered a full quarter century. We sought to determine the proportion of published research articles in which the ethnicity of research participants was reported, the proportion of articles in which ethnicity was included as a variable under study, and whether these proportions changed over the 25-year time period. Additionally, we sought to characterize the type of samples used in studies of ethnicity and human sexuality as well as the primary ethnic groups represented in such studies.

## Method

### Data

All research articles published in *JSR* and *ASB* between 1971 and 1995 were included in the current study. Commentaries, editorials, book reviews, literature reviews of previously published work, meta-analyses, research reports based on nonhuman data, and case studies or reports of clinical treatment that did not include inferential statistics were not considered research articles and were excluded from the current study. The resulting sample consisted of 454 research articles published in *JSR* and 673 research articles published in *ASB*.

### Coding Categories

*Type of research sample.* We coded the type(s) of sample(s) included in each published report. Each sample was coded using the following seven categories: *Clinical Sample* (e.g., treatment patients), *Institutionalized*

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*Individuals* (e.g., prison inmates, military personnel), *College Students*, *General Community Members* (adults), *Children* (ages 0-11 years), *Adolescents* (ages 12-17 years), and *Health Professionals* (e.g., physicians, nurses, psychologists). If a particular research report included samples from more than one category, each specific sample was coded accordingly. If a particular sample could be categorized according to more than one category, it was coded with respect to the order of the categories listed previously (i.e., characteristics that made a sample different from a general community sample took precedence). For example, children treated for hormonal dysfunction were coded as a *Clinical Sample* rather than the more generic category *Children*.

**Ethnicity.** We coded the ethnic composition of the sample upon which each research article was based using the following ethnic categories: White, Black, Latino, Asian, and Other. For those studies in which ethnicity of research participants was reported, we also coded whether race was considered in the analysis of results. Consideration of ethnicity may take the form of explicit comparison of different ethnic groups (race comparative approach; McLoyd & Randolph, 1984) or exclusive focus on one ethnic group to investigate a specific phenomenon within that group (race homogeneous approach; McLoyd & Randolph, 1984). Each article was coded accordingly.

#### Procedure

All articles were coded by the second and third authors during two months. Each coder was assigned every other volume of *JSR* and *ASB* to minimize effects of any systematic coder bias. That is, if the coders differed in some important dimension of the coding process and one coder was responsible for the oldest volumes, whereas the other coder was responsible for the newest volumes, an apparent trend over time might be apparent simply because of differences between coders. Also, volumes were coded in random order to

avoid any potential effects from practice at coding articles that could have resulted in an apparent, but spurious, trend over time.

After initial definition of the coding categories, each coder independently coded the same two randomly chosen volumes of *JSR* and two randomly chosen volumes of *ASB* (105 research articles involving 945 individual judgments). Interrater reliability ranged from a low of 89.5% for whether White research participants were included to a high of 99.0% for whether Asian research participants were included. For the articles used in the calculation of interrater reliability, discrepancies were resolved through discussion among the three authors. Across all categories, the two coders showed 94.6% interrater reliability, which was not surprising, given the relatively objective nature of the variables.

#### Results

Because we analyzed all research articles in the population under study (rather than a sample of articles), generalization to a larger population was not an issue. Accordingly, inferential statistics are not necessary. Of the 1,123 research articles, ethnicity of the research participants was reported in 297 (26.4%) of them. However, ethnicity was included as a variable in only 82 (7.3%) of the articles. Of these 82 articles, 38 (3.4% of the total sample) were based on a race homogeneous approach, and the remaining 44 (3.9% of the total sample) were of a race comparative approach.

Table 1 contains information on the ethnic composition of the samples used in articles wherein ethnicity was either reported or used as a variable under study. Also, Table 1 contains information on the types of samples used when ethnicity was included as a research variable. When ethnicity of research participants was reported, Whites were included in the large majority of samples, and Blacks were about twice as likely as Latinos or Asians to have been in-

Table 1

*Description of Samples Used in Articles in Which Participant Ethnicity was Reported or Ethnicity was Used as a Variable Under Study*

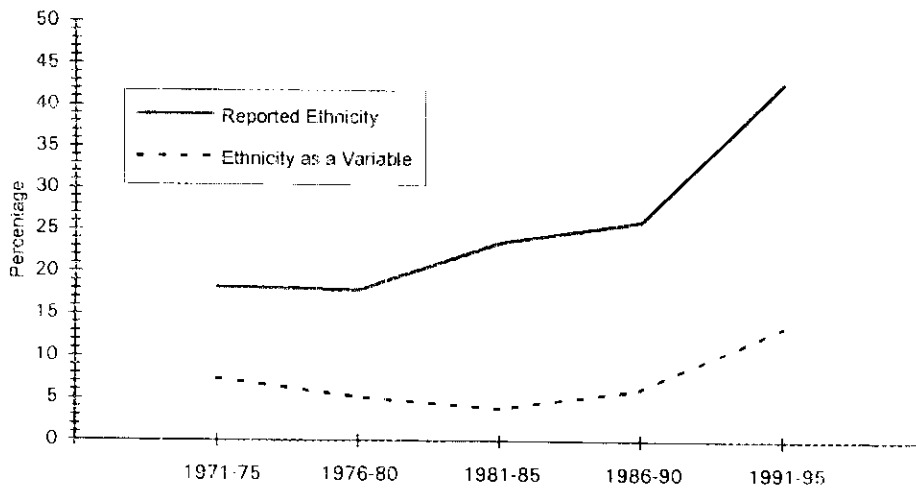
	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Among the Studies</i>		
<i>Reporting Participant Ethnicity (n = 297):</i>		
Included Whites:	257	(86.5%)
Included Blacks:	137	(46.1%)
Included Latinos:	73	(24.6%)
Included Asians:	57	(19.2%)
Included other ethnic group(s):	112	(37.7%)
<i>Among the Studies</i>		
<i>Including Ethnicity as a Variable (n = 82):</i>		
Included Whites:	47	(57.3%)
Included Blacks:	47	(57.3%)
Included Latinos:	20	(24.4%)
Included Asians:	18	(22.0%)
Included other ethnic group(s):	25	(30.5%)
Clinical samples	11	(13.4%)
Institutionalized samples	4	(4.9%)
College student samples	21	(25.6%)
General community samples (adults)	41	(50.0%)
Child samples (ages 0-11 years)	2	(2.4%)
Adolescent samples (ages 12-17 years)	9	(11.0%)
Samples of health professionals	0	(0%)

*Note:* Percentages can total to more than 100 because of inclusion of more than one ethnic group or type of sample.

cluded. Among those articles in which ethnicity was included as a variable, Whites and Blacks were equally likely to have been included and were more likely to be represented compared to Latinos, Asians, or other ethnic groups. With regard to the types of samples used when ethnicity was included as a variable, one half of the samples were general community samples of adults, and about one quarter of the samples were college students.

To examine potential trends over time, the data were combined into five five-year intervals: 1971-75, 1976-80, 1981-85, 1986-90, and 1991-95. Figure 1 displays the proportion of articles in which the ethnicity of research participants was reported, as well as the absolute percentage of published articles in which ethnicity

Figure 1. Ethnicity in Sex Research as a Function of Year of Publication



was included as a variable. The proportion of articles in which ethnicity of participants was reported generally increased over time, with the most dramatic increase occurring in the first half of the 1990s. Up to 1991, only 22% of published articles reported the ethnicity of research participants. The proportion of articles in which ethnicity was included as a variable remained rather low and demonstrated a curvilinear relationship in that the likelihood of ethnicity being included as a variable declined slightly from 1971 to 1985 and increased slightly since then.

Last, we attempted to determine whether the ethnic diversity of samples used in sexuality research had increased or decreased over time. For those articles in which the ethnicity of research participants was reported ( $n = 297$ ), we calculated the mean number of different ethnic categories (range 1-5) represented in the articles published during each five-year time period. There was an apparent linear increase over time in the number of different ethnic groups included in research samples:  $M = 1.56$  during 1971-75;  $M = 1.61$  during 1976-80;  $M = 2.09$  during 1981-85;  $M = 2.23$  during 1986-90; and  $M = 2.48$  during 1991-95.

### Discussion

With respect to issues of ethnicity in published sexuality research, there

is good news and bad. The proportion of articles in which ethnicity of the research participants was even reported generally increased over time, as did the apparent ethnic diversity in the samples used in sexuality research. Still, a description of the ethnicity of the research participants was included in less than one half of the most recently published articles in sexual science. The majority of articles in which ethnicity was reported appeared not to have considered ethnicity further. The absolute frequency with which ethnicity was included as a research variable remained relatively low, although about twice as many recent articles included ethnicity as a variable compared to articles published prior to 1990 (see Figure 1).

What about the research topics covered by those studies using ethnicity as a research variable? We did not attempt to characterize the topical content of these 82 articles. Compared to the total number of research articles published, this subset seems rather small. However, during the process of coding the articles, the degree of diversity in topics appeared to us fairly large. To take just two illustrative examples, Fisher (1980) attempted to characterize sexual behavior and its correlates among Black women (i.e., a race homogeneous approach), and Catania, Stone, Binson, and Dolcini (1995) included the ethnicity of their research respondents (White, Black,

Latino) in attempting to account for changes in condom use among heterosexual adult men and women (i.e., race comparative approach). Given the relative lack of studies in which ethnicity has been a focus, as well as the diverse topics covered in those studies in which ethnicity was a focus, it appears premature to attempt an integration of the literature on ethnicity and sexuality.

We believe our investigation of the reports published in the two primary sexuality research journals illustrate the deficit that exists in the empirical investigation of the intersection between ethnicity and human sexuality. Analysis of other sexuality journals, such as *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy* or *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, might reveal somewhat different trends, but this seems unlikely, given the general congruence between our findings and those of more general psychology journals (see Graham, 1992). Our results indicate modest increases in the ethnic diversity of research samples, at least cursory recognition of the ethnicity of research participants, and use of ethnicity as a research variable. However, other important questions remain unanswered.

Graham (1992) noted that much of the psychological research on Blacks failed to include appropriate controls for differences in socioeconomic status (also see Ponterotto, 1988). Hence, differences between Blacks and Whites may be confounded by differences in socioeconomic status. Have similar controls been used in research on ethnic differences in sexuality? Also, what about the way research hypotheses are framed or the ways research questions are posed? The formulation of research questions and the choice of research methods can result in biased findings congruent with the researcher's preconceived notions regarding ethnic differences (Scarr, 1988). Has past research on sexuality and ethnicity been slanted in some way so as to ensure confirmation or disconfirmation of ethnic stereotypes? Further re-

search is needed to address these and other questions.

Despite the relative dearth of empirical research on ethnicity and sexuality, future investigation in the area needs to be conducted cautiously. Researching potential ethnic differences is a politically sensitive undertaking (Scarr, 1988), and Human Subject Review Boards (HSRBs) have been found to discriminate against such studies (Ceci, Peters, & Plotkin, 1985). As researchers often encounter conflict with HSRBs because of the sensitive nature of sexuality topics (Mosher, 1988), combining sexuality and ethnicity may potentially result in increased political backlash against researchers. On the conceptual level, several researchers have noted the difficulty in assigning individuals to ethnic/racial categories and questioned the validity of even making such distinctions in social science research (e.g., Jones, 1991; Yee, Fairchild, Weizmann, & Wyatt, 1993; Zuckerman, 1990). Others have urged that, when ethnic differences are found, other proximal influences on variation in the variable under study be thoroughly investigated as potentially better predictors than ethnicity per se (Graham, 1992; Scarr, 1988).

Only time will tell whether the potentially positive trends we documented in sexuality research published between 1971 and 1995 continue and whether certain deficiencies in the research literature are remedied. Future researchers are encouraged to undertake empirical investigation of ethnicity and human sexuality and to be aware of the sensitive issues inherent in such work.

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