HOMOPHOBIC BULLYING AND MENTAL HEALTH IN ADOLESCENCE: HOW DIFFERENT METHODOLOGICAL DECISIONS LEAD TO DIFFERENT RESULTS

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Adolescence is characterized by heightened peer regulation regarding gender and sexuality and by the possible emergence of mental health problems. Therefore, studying the interplay of mental health and homophobic bullying in non-heterosexual youth is crucial. This study investigates how two methodological decisions can affect the results in such studies. The first decision concerns whether youth are assigned to different sexualities based on their desire or on their behavior. The second concerns who is compared with whom. For instance, a researcher may decide to compare heterosexual with non-heterosexual youth or homosexual with non-homosexual youth, following the heteronormativity or the homophobia hypotheses, respectively.

Participants were 757 Greek students (54.3% female; mean age = 16.0, SD = 0.8) who filled the Homophobic Content Agent Target scale, the University of Illinois Aggression Scale, the Psychological Sense of School Membership, the Beck Hopelessness Scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale and the WHO-Five Well-Being Index. One-sided comparisons were conducted with the non-parametric criterion Mann-Whitney U.

Some comparisons yielded the same results irrespective of the methodological decisions made. For instance, irrespective of the sexuality criterion, in depression, heterosexual youth scored lower than non-heterosexual youth, and homosexual youth scored higher than non-homosexual youth. In some comparisons, the results depended on the first decision. For instance, homosexual youth scored higher than heterosexual youth in bullying when judging sexuality based on sexual behavior but not on sexual desire. Finally, in some comparisons, the results depended on the second decision. For instance, differences in self-esteem emerged when heterosexual youth were compared with non-heterosexual youth, but not when homosexual youth were compared with non-homosexual youth.

In conclusion, the decisions on when one is named hetero- or homosexual and on how to group youth with reference to their sexuality have important implications for the research on homophobic bullying and mental health.