

# **Routinely asking about sexuality using non- binary measures: implications for physicians and researchers**


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# **Common Myths about Sexuality in Healthcare and Research**

- Sexuality is not important in a healthcare context
- Sexuality does not change over time
- Participants and patients are exclusively attracted to the opposite sex
- The sexuality of participants and patients fit into binary options

(Matharu & al. 2012; Fenway Institute 2013; Humphrey & Nazareth 2001).





# Asking Patients and Participants about Sexuality

Sexuality is a particularly difficult topic for many healthcare providers and researchers to ask about and discuss for a variety of reasons, including:

- not understanding the value of doing so
- feeling uncomfortable
- feeling inadequately trained
- Many providers and researchers do not ask patients and participants about their sexuality
- The providers and researchers that do ask often ask in once, and binary terms, i.e. gay or straight, was your last partner male or female?

(Matharu & al. 2012; Fenway Institute 2013; Humphrey & Nazareth 2001; Williams Institute, 2009).



# Relevance to Healthcare

- The existing literature indicates that knowledge about patients' sexuality is crucial for the provision of appropriate, patient centred health care

(Institute of Medicine, 2011, Fenway Institute, 2013)





# Relevance to Research

- Need for high quality scientific data about sexuality
- Enumerate population level outcomes
- End invisibility
- Inform the development and provision of relevant services, programmes and policies

(Williams Institute, 2009)



# The current study

- 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> year medical student knowledge and perceptions about sexual and gender diversity
- Students were asked to report their sexual attraction as part of their demographic data at three points during the academic year
- Sexual attraction as a reasonable proxy for other aspects of sexuality

# Study Participants

- 186 students enrolled in the undergraduate medical programme at University of Otago, Christchurch
- 109 in their fourth year and 77 in their fifth year
- 91 participants identified as male and 95 as female.
- First data collection had a response rate of 83%. At the second and third data collection points had a response rate of 97% and 94% respectively.
- 146 students completed the questionnaire at all three time points (78%)
- Average age of participants was 24

# Methods

- Baseline data about sexual attraction collected at the beginning of the academic year, time between baseline and time 2 was variable, time between time 2 and 3 was 3 weeks.
- Friedman two way ANOVA by ranks for related samples





# Sexual Attraction Question

Which choice best describes your sexual attraction?

- (1) Only attracted to the opposite sex
- (2) Mostly attracted to the opposite sex
- (3) Equally attracted to both sexes
- (4) Mostly attracted to the same sex
- (5) Only attracted to the same sex
- (6) Not sure
- (7) None of these categories best describe my sexual orientation

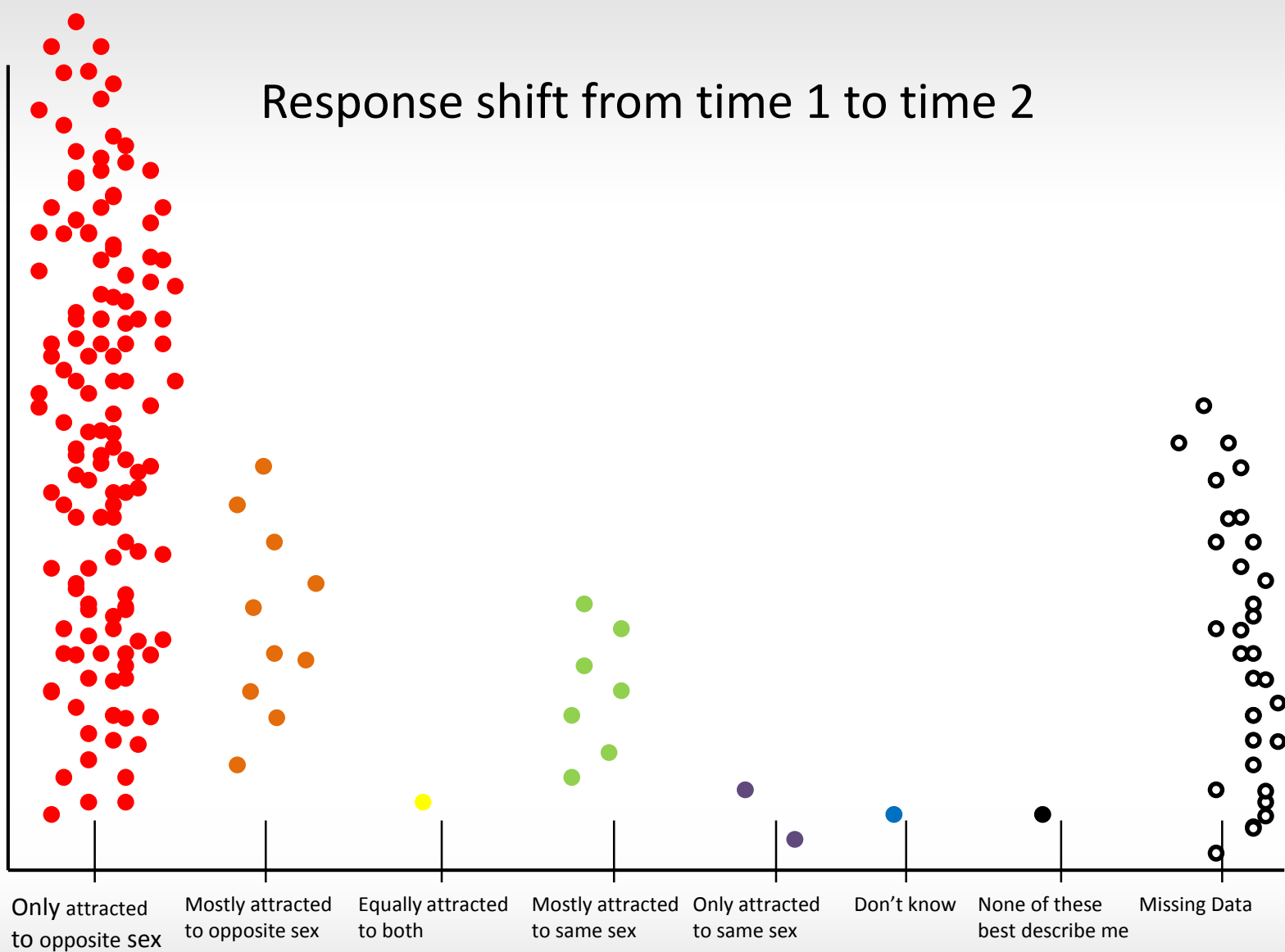
(National Study of Family Growth, CDC 2006; Williams Institute, 2009)



**Results**

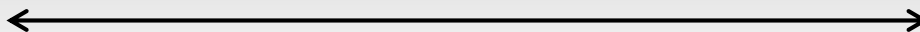
## Response shift from time 1 to time 2

Frequency



Opposite sex  
attraction

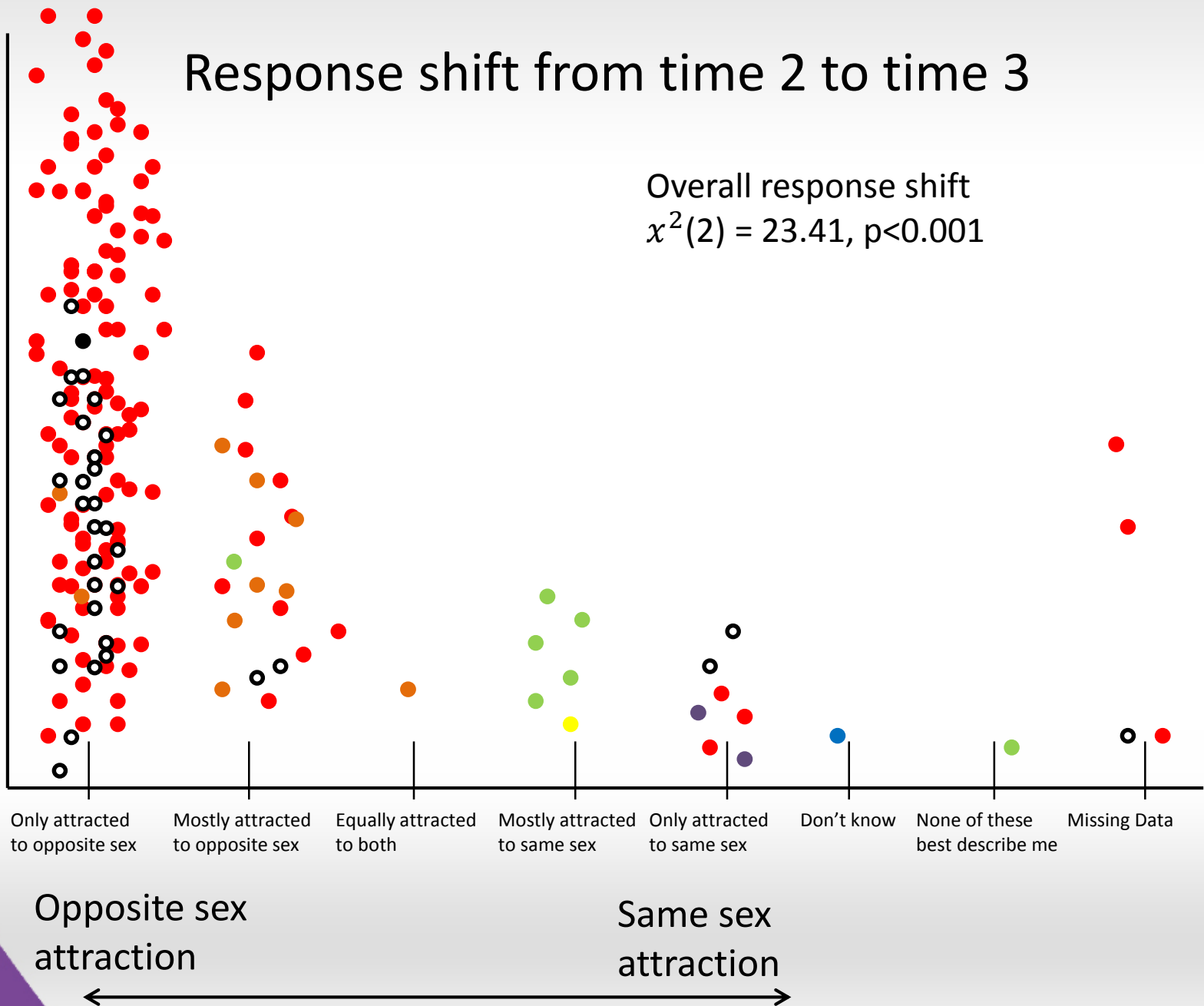
Same sex  
attraction



## Response shift from time 2 to time 3

Overall response shift  
 $\chi^2(2) = 23.41, p < 0.001$

Frequency

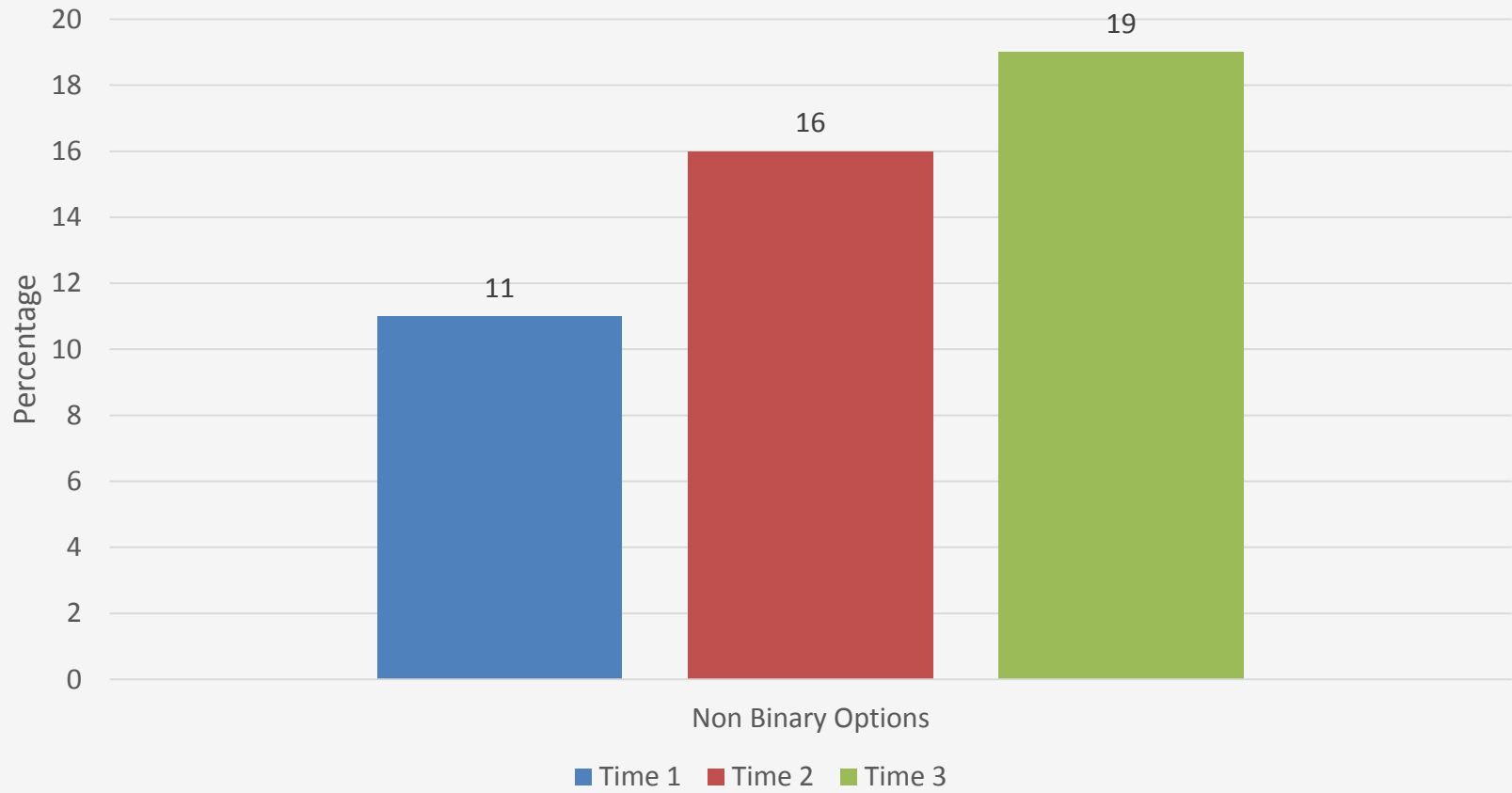


# Sexual Attraction Over Time

Category	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Only attracted to the opposite sex	86%	80%	74%
Mostly attracted to the opposite sex	6%	12%	14%
Equally attracted to both	1%	1%	1%
Mostly attracted to same sex	4%	3%	4%
Only attracted to same sex	1%	4%	5%
Not sure	1%	1%	1%
None of these best describe me	1%	1%	1%

# Identification with Non-Binary Options

Chart Title



# Reported Change

- 38 (26%) participants changed their reported sexual attraction at any point during the data collection period
- 45 (31%) participants reported some degree of same sex attraction during the data collection period
- An increasing number of participants identified with non-binary options to report their sexual attraction. 19% at the last data collection point
- Trend in the direction of change was toward same sex attraction
- No statistically significant difference between male and female participants

# Alignment with the literature

- Johnson, Wadsworth, Wellings, and Field (1994) have shown that there are major differences in prevalence between reports of current and lifetime same sex experiences, suggesting that such experiences are episodic or passing events for many people, especially during adolescence
- At age 26, same sex attraction ever in men (10.7%) and women (24.5%) was reported by Dickson, Paul & Herbison (2003). Current same sex attraction dropped to 5.6% of men and 16.4% of women



# Interpretation

- Results may show a change due to:
- Actual change
- Increased comfort with disclosing anything other than exclusive opposite sex attraction
- Identity formation

# Implications

- Sexual attraction data provides a snapshot of a dynamic process, and therefore it may be inaccurate to assume that a patient or participant continues to identify with that group on an ongoing basis
- Routine collection of sexual attraction data could be beneficial for identification of actual changes
- Routine collection may also be beneficial because patients may be more likely to disclose when they feel comfortable or have established rapport
- Sexual attraction data collection should be done in a non-binary way in order to capture the variation within the measure



# Thank You!

- Thank you for listening
- I am very grateful to the MB ChB students at the University of Otago for participating in this study