

Bisexuality

From:

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Research on bisexuality has been hampered by the difficulty in defining what bisexual means (...).

Kinsey emphasized that any form of sexual activity – from masturbation to homosexuality to sexual contact with animals – “originates in the relatively simple mechanisms which provide for erotic response when there are sufficient physical or psychic stimuli.” He felt that categorization of individuals according to whom they had sex with was meaningless. In one of the most frequently quoted sections from *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Kinsey stated:

“[Individuals] do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are all black nor all white... Nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects.”

(...) Kinsey and others proposed that an individual’s “heterosexual potential” and “homosexual potential” were mixed and blended by the individual’s upbringing, family dynamics, community, and early sexual experiences. Just as it’s possible to adjust hot and cold water faucets to produce unlimited gradations of water temperature from very hot to very cold, Kinsey thought any mixture of sexual orientation was possible. This line of reasoning led him to develop his seven-point scale for rating individuals on a heterosexual/homosexual continuum (...).

Some researchers have expanded the Kinsey scale to attempt to separate these different types of bisexuality. The “Klein Sexual Orientation Grid” rates individuals according to the seven-point Kinsey scale on their sexual attractions, sexual behaviors, sexual fantasies, emotional preferences, social preferences, self-identification, and “hetero/homosexual life-style” in the past and present and in their “ideal” concept of themselves. An individual will have a grid of twenty-one numbers to describe his or her sexuality – and there will be literally millions of different possible combinations of numbers on such a grid. In many recent research papers on AIDS risk for men, researchers have abandoned the labels homosexual and bisexual altogether and simply describe “men who have sex with men.”

Most individuals seem to be capable of sexually responding to individuals of either gender under certain circumstances, as during the exploratory phases of adolescent sexual identity development and during periods when available sexual partners are limited. Others, however, have more lengthy periods of sexual contact with members of both sexes, and both homosexual and heterosexual attraction seem to be enduring aspects of their identity.

Some of these individuals seem to have a transitional type of bisexuality. They start out self-identifying on one end of the continuum (usually heterosexual) and are behaviorally bisexual for a time on their way to the other end (usually homosexual). One group of researchers interviewed a group of men who identified themselves as bisexual about their sexual behaviors and reinterviewed them one year later. Almost half had moved toward the homosexual end of the continuum, and the researchers concluded that “many bisexuals are in a transition to homosexuality.” Several of the genetic studies of sexual orientation in men indicate that a large majority of men can be rated at one end of the Kinsey scale or the other in behavior, fantasy, and self-identification. One researcher reported on the difficulty of finding a group of men who showed an enduring pattern of bisexuality:

“This proved difficult to do. Most of the self-identified bisexual men . . . were in their late adolescence . . . or had a single female sexual partner but serial male partners with predominantly homoerotic fantasies or identified themselves as “in transition” from heterosexuality to homosexuality. Also of interest is the fact that many of these subjects who were self-identified as bisexuals were rated by us as Kinsey 5’s (homosexual and only incidentally heterosexual) or Kinsey 6’s (exclusively homosexual).”

The enduring state of being almost equally sexually responsive to men and women seems to be quite rare in males.

(...) Although in a group of individuals the likelihood of finding a Kinsey 3 (equally attracted to male and female sexual partners) is higher if the group is exclusively female rather than exclusively male, the number is still small in comparison with the number at the outer ends of the scale. This small number has nevertheless been found consistently in many studies. Some individuals do indeed seem to experience a combination of heterosexual and homosexual attractions almost equally. Two Australian researchers used an approach to defining bisexuality which is different from the Kinsey-based models. They suggested a continuum of “gender-linked” sexuality with heterosexuality and homosexuality at one end (highly gender-linked) and bisexuality at the other (non-gender-linked). Interviews and psychological testing seemed to support this conceptualization in that “personality and physical dimensions not related to gender and interaction style were the salient characteristics on which preferred sexual partners were chosen” in this group.⁸ For these individuals, sexual attraction was independent of the partner’s gender.

(...) The lack of a social identity for the bisexual person comparable to those of heterosexual and homosexual individuals may play a role. In our culture, individuals with stable bisexual orientations may be influenced by social expectations to label themselves either “straight” or “gay” but not “bisexual.” Alienated from heterosexual peers and family because of their homosexual feelings and encountering homosexual individuals who label bisexuality a sign of “lack of commitment” to the “gay community,” these individuals may find it easier to suppress their bisexual orientation, adopt the label of “homosexuality,” and alter their behavior accordingly – becoming exclusively homosexual in their intimate relationships.

A 1994 study that looked at personality differences in homosexual and bisexual men allowed the research subjects to label themselves as homosexual or bisexual. Individuals who labeled themselves “bisexual” were considered bisexual for the study no matter what their Kinsey ratings were. In fact, more than half of the “bisexual” men had a

Kinsey score of 5 or 6 (predominantly or exclusively homosexual fantasy and behavior). The personality testing results led the authors to conclude that the bisexual group was in reality composed of two groups of very different individuals. One group (about 40 percent) showed evidence of depression and reported feeling “troubled” or “not well adjusted.” This group was said to represent “would-be homosexuals” who for “various social and family reasons” were “psychologically conflicted self-identified bisexuals.” The other self-identified bisexuals appeared comfortable with their homosexual attractions but also had a “higher recognition of their ability to be sexually attracted to women.”

Whether or not biological factors play a role as well in the development of bisexual identities is an unanswered question – the research remains to be done.

Many individuals who are labeled “bisexual” can be better understood as heterosexual individuals in unusual temporary circumstances, engaging in same-sex eroticism only temporarily – behavior they will abandon when the special circumstances end. Others are individuals sexually experimenting with different partners on their way to stable heterosexuality or homosexuality. There is a small group, however, who indeed have a “non-gender-linked” sexuality. At present, this group is very poorly understood. Much research remains to be done in order to understand bisexuality before its place in the range of possible human sexual orientations becomes clear.

(Abridged by Adriano)

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