

Bisexuality: What The Research Shows

By Michael Castleman

Many men and women who identify as heterosexual—and may well be married—have fantasies about same-gender sex. Some engage in periodic same-sex play. They often wonder: Am I gay/lesbian? Meanwhile, many heterosexual pornography videos feature “girl-girl” scenes, two women enjoying each other, using vibrators and dildos on one another, and sharing cunnilingus. Clearly, both men and women who identify as hetero may also be sexual with people of the same sex. That’s bisexuality.

Compared with heterosexuality and homosexuality, much less is known about bisexuality. It has not been well researched. But a report by Paula Rodriguez Rust, Ph.D., a bisexuality expert at Hamilton College in East Brunswick, NJ, summarizes what’s known about this sexual variation—and how straight and gay people relate to those who, in slang terms, are “AC/DC,” or “swing both ways.”

Forced to Choose

Clearly, bisexuality is possible. But our sexual world is marked by a sharp divide between homo- and heterosexual. Bisexuals often feel forced to choose, and just as some heterosexuals believe (incorrectly) that homosexuality is “abnormal,” some hetero- and homosexuals feel that way about bisexuality (also incorrectly).

The first scientific observations dealing with bisexuality date from the mid-19th century. These early observations culminated in the early 1950s when Alfred Kinsey of the University of Indiana, America’s first scientific sex researcher, argued in favor of a “sexual continuum.” Kinsey argued that most people are exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, but that some fall in between in various degrees of bisexuality. (Kinsey himself was bisexual, married and mostly heterosexual, but with some homosexual interest and many gay experiences.)

Does Bisexuality Really Exist?

But as soon as 19th-century researchers described bisexuality, other investigators insisted that it didn't exist. Their dismissals rested on three arguments. (1) Bisexuals were actually heterosexuals who were "just experimenting." Or (2) they were inmates in single-gender prisons who, for their period of their incarceration, reluctantly made due with the only gender that was sexually available to them. Or (3) they were homosexuals who did not want to be stigmatized as such, and feigned attraction to the opposite sex.

These dismissals of bisexuality are still with us today. College women involved with other women are sometimes called LUGs, Lesbians Until Graduation, when presumably, their youthful experimentation ends and they enter the ranks of their "real" group, the heterosexuals. Meanwhile, some lesbians and gays see bisexuality as the cowardly refuge of those who lack the courage to come out fully as homosexual.

Heterosexuals began celebrating sex for pleasure (as distinct from procreation) in the so-called Sexual Revolution of the 1960s. Homosexuals began celebrating their sexuality—and fighting prejudice and discrimination against them in the 1970s. Around the same time, bisexuality emerged into the media spotlight. A 1974 *Newsweek* article was titled "Bisexual Chic: Anyone Goes." Around that time, the first bisexual organizations formed, in Boston, a bisexual discussion group, the Bivocals, and in the West, the San Francisco Bisexual Center, which published a newsletter, the BiMonthly. Still, however, research into bisexuality remained an academic backwater. *The Journal of Bisexuality* did not begin publishing until 2001, and books about homosexuality outnumber books on bisexuality by at least 100 to one.

Ironically, as bisexuality gained more media notice, some homosexuals stepped up their attacks, calling it a "cop out" or "treason" against bisexuals' presumed "true nature" as homosexuals.

AIDS, which appeared in 1981, transformed our understanding of bisexuality. A surprising number of heterosexually-identified, often married men began turning up with the disease. It soon became apparent that sexual identification was often distinct from sexual behavior. Men could identify as hetero and live hetero lives, yet have periodic, even regular, homosexual experiences—not just as "experiments," but over the long term.

The Prevalence of Bisexuality

Recall that one traditional argument against the existence of bisexuality was the allegation that what appeared to be sexual interest in both genders was actually heterosexual “experimentation” with being gay/lesbian before settling down as straight. While this does not explain away bisexuality, there is some truth to it.

In the Kinsey studies, about 4 percent of the women and 10 percent of the men admitted to having had sex with both men and women. Some of that was, indeed, experimental. Eventually, in the Kinsey sample, 2 percent of women and 5 percent of men claimed to be bisexual. A study by Morton Hunt for *Playboy* in the mid-1970s found that about 15 percent of postpubertal men and 10 percent of women had had sex with both genders. But Hunt and other researchers found that considerably lower proportions maintained a lifelong identify as bisexual—just 3 percent of women and 5 percent of men. (For comparison, depending on the study, 5 to 10 percent of the adult population identifies as homosexual.)

Prejudice Against Bisexuals

Homophobia is slowly becoming culturally unacceptable in the U.S., but “biphobia” is alive and well. In interviews, many people who switch from same-sex to opposite-sex lovers and back say they identify as either gay or straight, not as bisexual, depending on who they’re with because to maintain a bisexual identify means having to contend with disbelief and social awkwardness, even personal attacks. In a study of college students’ attitudes in the mid-1990s, participants were asked if they considered homosexuality acceptable or unacceptable. Forty-three percent said male homosexuality was unacceptable, while 38 percent said the same about lesbianism. Significantly larger proportions disapproved of bisexual men and women—61 percent and 50 percent respectively.

Other studies have shown that compared with gay men and lesbians, more people believe that bisexuals are promiscuous, unfaithful to their lovers, unable to make a long-term commitment to a single person, and are more likely to infect a lover with a sexually transmitted infection.

Many homosexuals continue to believe that bisexuality is a “phase” in the process of coming out. In one study, 80 percent of lesbians felt that way about bisexual women, and 53 percent said that bisexual women are not as trustworthy as lesbians.

The Real Lives of Bisexuals

For heterosexuals and homosexuals, sexual attraction is gender-based. Straights feel attracted to the opposite sex, gays and lesbians, to the same sex. However, for some bisexuals—around 15 percent, according a study by Rodriguez Rust—sex is not about gender at all. It's not that bisexuals attracted to both men and women. It's that they want to be sexual with other human beings *regardless of their gender*.

One myth about bisexuals is that they are involved with both men and women at the same time. The research on this is far from definitive, but available studies suggest that only a minority of bisexuals maintain simultaneous relationships with both men and women. They are more likely to switch back and forth. In one study self-identified bisexuals were asked if they had been sexually involved with both men and women during the past 12 months. About two-thirds said yes (66 percent of the men, and 70 percent of the women). However, only about one-third said they'd been simultaneous involved with both men and women.

Another myth is that bisexuals are more promiscuous than hetero- or homosexuals. The research is scant, but one study of 105 bisexual men, aged 19-62, found a lifetime average of 23 male sex partners and 23 female. This suggests that bisexual men have more lovers than the typical heterosexual, but fewer than many gay men. (There have been no studies of women bisexuals' numbers of lifetime partners.)

It's Not Easy Being Bisexual

Bisexuals talk about “coming out twice,” once as gay or lesbian in a heterosexual world when they acknowledge their attraction to the same sex, and then again when they acknowledge their continuing attraction to the opposite sex. This process is more complex than coming out as homosexual, and it typically takes longer. Most gays and lesbians realize they are homosexual in their teens or early twenties. But most people don't realize they are bisexual until their late twenties.

Heterosexuality and post-coming-out homosexuality remain largely fixed over the lifespan. Bisexuality is different. The studies suggest that as young bisexuals approach middle age, they tend to gravitate toward same-sex or opposite-sex lovers, with most choosing heterosexuality. It's not clear why this happens. Perhaps this is intrinsic to bisexuality. Or perhaps bisexuals become weary of the social pressure to choose a straight or gay identity.

Once they come out as bisexual, the realization is often socially isolating. Gays and lesbians are much more numerous, with a well developed culture including meeting places (bars and organizations), publications, even neighborhoods in many cities. But bisexuality is comparatively invisible. Fortunately for bisexuals, the Internet has provided a welcome sense of community. A Google search of the term “bisexuality” produced 1.5 million hits.

If you are bisexual, or think you might be, you’re not alone, and there’s nothing wrong with you.