

Is seeing believing? The contradictions of bisexual in/visibility

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presentation for

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine

August 5th, 2019

**COLLEGE
OF NURSING**



A note about terminology

- **Bisexual:** A label used by those with the potential to be attracted, romantically and/or sexually, to people of more than one sex/gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.
- **Bi+:** An umbrella term to capture a range of non-monosexual identity terms, including but not limited to: bisexual, pansexual, queer, demisexual

How are we seen (if at all)?

Bisexual Life-Style Appears to Be Spreading and Not Necessarily Among 'Swingers'

By JANE E. BRODY

A small but apparently growing number of Americans are practicing bisexuality, an age-old but still largely mysterious life-style that is just beginning to come under the scrutiny of scientific study.

While in recent years a dozen or so prominent persons — ranging from the feminist author Kate Millett to the rock singer David Bowie — have publicly proclaimed their sexual interests in both men and women, most bisexuals remain underground, carefully guarding their secret from everyone, especially those closest to them.

Many of these people are married and, according to the preliminary findings of one study, they fear that disclosure of their homosexual activities would hurt their families and possibly wreck their marriages.

Various Groups Involved

This study, now under way at the University of Washington in Seattle, indicates that bisexuality occurs among various groups, including blue-collar workers, truck drivers, professionals and housewives, as well as students, entertainers, writers, group sex participants and other "swingers."

No one yet knows what percentage of Americans are currently practicing bisexuals, but at most they are believed to make up only a tiny segment of the total population. Based on the late Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey's data and other more recent surveys, specialists in human sexuality estimate that about 25 per cent of men and half that percentage of women have had sexual relations to the point of orgasm with both men and women at some time in their adult lives.

The incidence of bisexuality among men is believed not to have changed

much since Dr. Kinsey did his studies in the late nineteen-forties, but the specialists say that in recent years they have noted a definite increase in bisexuality among women.

Dr. Richard Green, psychiatrist at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he directs the Gender Identity Research Treatment Program, said that the change among women had been "partly for political reasons — a feminine-liberating thing as they dissociate themselves from the extraordinary dependency they've had on men all these years."

Dr. Pepper Schwartz, a sociologist,

"Bisexuality has to imply serious psychological and emotional hurt."

—Dr. Natalie Shainess

who is conducting the study of bisexuals at the University of Washington, said that bisexuality helps some in the women's movement "to feel closer to their sisters."

But for most female bisexuals, Drs. Green and Schwartz say, ideology is not the motivation. Rather, as Dr. Green commented, in American culture it is "easier, less painful, for a woman to have a homosexual experience than it is for a man. There isn't the same societal stigma attached to it. The way male children are raised, being manly is closely linked with being heterosexual. But females are not socialized in the same way, so a lesbian experience is less of a threat to a woman's feelings of femaleness."

Aside from these tentative observations, little else of fact is known about bisexuality. "There just hasn't been any serious study of the phenomenon," Dr. Schwartz said. Dr. Green calls it "the biggest remaining mystery in the sexual field."

In the absence of a study of hard data, there has been much argument among professionals as to what, in fact, bisexuality is, whether it is a "normal," "natural," "healthy" or stable life-style, whether people are born with or learn bisexual inclinations, whether bisexuals are really homosexuals who have retained some capacity for heterosexual behavior or who have been forced into heterosexuality by societal proscriptions on its alternative.

The Orthodox Theory

The belief that bisexuality is abnormal and unhealthy is held by those who subscribe to orthodox psychiatric theory. For example, Dr. Natalie Shainess, a psychiatrist in Manhattan, says:

"Nature over the millennia went to a great deal of trouble to differentiate sex organs so they would line up properly and produce offspring. Bisexuality has to imply serious psychological and emotional harm."

However, Dr. Lonny Myers, director of medical education at Chicago's Midwest Association for the Study of Human Sexuality, which last fall held the first scientific conference on bisexuality, believes that "bisexuality is normal and healthy."

"There is no scientific evidence that there is anything harmful about people of the same sex having sex together," she said in an interview.

Dr. Myers added, "If not for social brainwashing and cultural taboos, peo-

ple could relate sexually to people of both sexes."

Dr. Duane E. Spiers, psychologist and sex therapist in Omaha and director of Creighton University Medical School's Behavioral Sciences Division, agrees. He said, "I think we're all born potentially bisexual and are conditioned by social and family experiences to develop either hetero, homo or ambisexual patterns."

On the other hand, Dr. Green, who says "there are more views on bisexuality than there are bisexuals," noted that "in every animal, there is a pre-natal biological program for heterosexuality. Why should the human being be different? The difference is in post-natal influences, to which human beings are much more vulnerable."

Until this issue is at least partly resolved, the specialists say, it will be difficult to predict what effect, if any, such things as unisex styles, increasingly permissive sexual attitudes and threat to male dominance will have upon the incidence of bisexual behavior.

A Heterosexual Role Model

Dr. John Money of Johns Hopkins University, an expert on the development of gender and sexual identity, said that while some societies — notably the Bakata people of Sumatra — had institutionalized bisexuality, in this society "the amount of sanction toward bisexuality is incredibly small and there is no reason to think we are now training children to react bisexually."

Dr. Green added that "most parents today give children a heterosexual role model, and I don't think that a reduction in sexual stereotyping—in clothing, toys and activities—will have any effect on the incidence of bisexuality."

Drs. Green, Spiers and others believe

that if society stops labeling as "sissy" those boys whose interests deviate from traditional "manly" activities, then fewer males may be pushed toward a homosexual identity.

However, Dr. Lawrence J. Hatlerer, a Cornell University psychiatrist who has treated hundreds of homosexual men, feels that woman's liberation will bring out the latent insecurities of some men and push them toward homosexual outlets.

Dr. Schwartz, who with Philip Blumstein at the University of Washington has thus far interviewed 150 bisexuals, said that her study is beginning to shed some light on the nature and evolution of sexual identity. "We are finding that

"If not for social brainwashing and cultural taboos, people could relate sexually to people of both sexes."

—Dr. Lonny Myers

it is not fixed at an early age and stable thereafter. Rather, it seems to change, and what you are at 21 is not necessarily the same as what you are at 41."

"We're finding people who are capable of wide swings in sexual object choice without any evidence of underlying pathology at the time the change is made," Dr. Schwartz reported.

A typical pattern she has found is that of a man who, during adolescence, has extensive homosexual experiences. Then he goes to college, dates girls, falls in love with one, marries her and has a good sex life. Some years later, he may

get involved with a man and perhaps live with him for several years.

"At one time he is one way, at one time, another. But basically, he gets involved with individuals, not sex objects," Dr. Schwartz explained.

Her observations reflect an underlying disagreement on the definition of bisexuality. While some professionals say that the ability to have sex with both sexes is sufficient to make one "bisexual," others say it must also include the capacity for emotional relationships with both sexes.

The one point of agreement seems to be that the so-called "50-50" bisexual, who becomes equally involved sexually and emotionally with members of both sexes, is rare indeed. Most bisexuals are either predominantly heterosexual or predominantly homosexual.

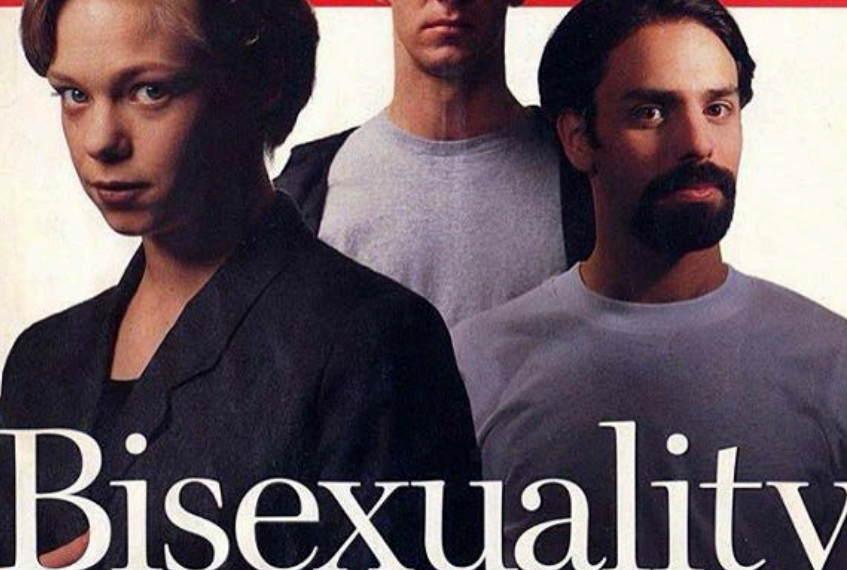
Motivations Are Sought

What motivates people to express their bisexual inclinations, and in some cases, make their proclivities publicly known?

Some experts believe bisexuality has grown out of a certain sense of boredom with heterosexuality; others view it as part of the human tendency to experiment, explore, play, follow natural instincts. For some bisexuals, public declarations are believed to be merely publicity stunts, but for others, the declarations are a result of a sense of conscience.

Professionals working in the field say that most bisexuals are still searching for a sense of community through which they can gain some understanding of themselves and the acceptance and support of others like them.

"In our society," Dr. Spiers said, "any bisexuality is a handicap—like being left-handed in a right-handed world."



Bisexuality

Not Gay.
A New
Identity

MAGAZINE

The Scientific Quest to Prove Bisexuality Exists

By BENJAMIN DENZET-LEWIS MARCH 20, 2014

- EMAIL
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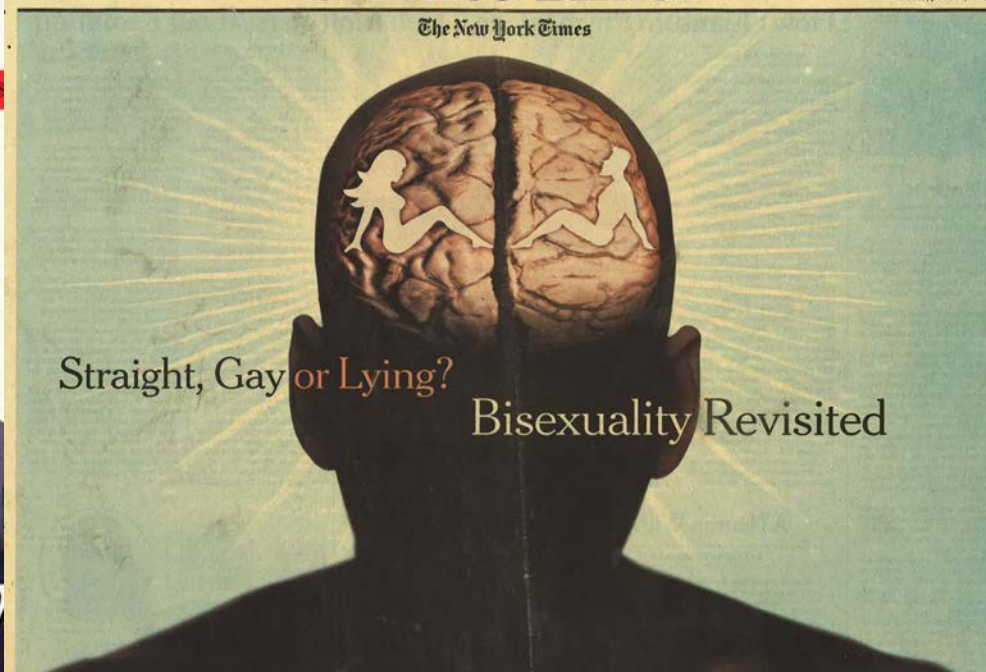
The traffic was bad, even by the warped standards of a Southern California commute. We were headed south from Los Angeles to San Diego on an overcast morning last spring, but we hadn't moved in 10 minutes.

I was sandwiched in the back seat of the car between John Sylla and Denise Penn, two board members of the Los Angeles-based American Institute of Bisexuality (A.I.B.), a deep-pocketed group partly responsible for a surge of academic and scientific research across the country about bisexuality. We were on our way to an A.I.B. board meeting, where members would decide which studies to fund and also brainstorm ways to increase bisexual visibility "in a world that still isn't convinced that bisexuality — particularly male bisexuality — exists," as Allen Rosenthal, a sex researcher at Northwestern University, told me.



Cameron Harris, Michael Ryan Buckley and Kate Asson identify as bisexual (though they are not in a relationship with one another). Hannah Whitaker for The New York Times

The New York Times



Straight, Gay or Lying?

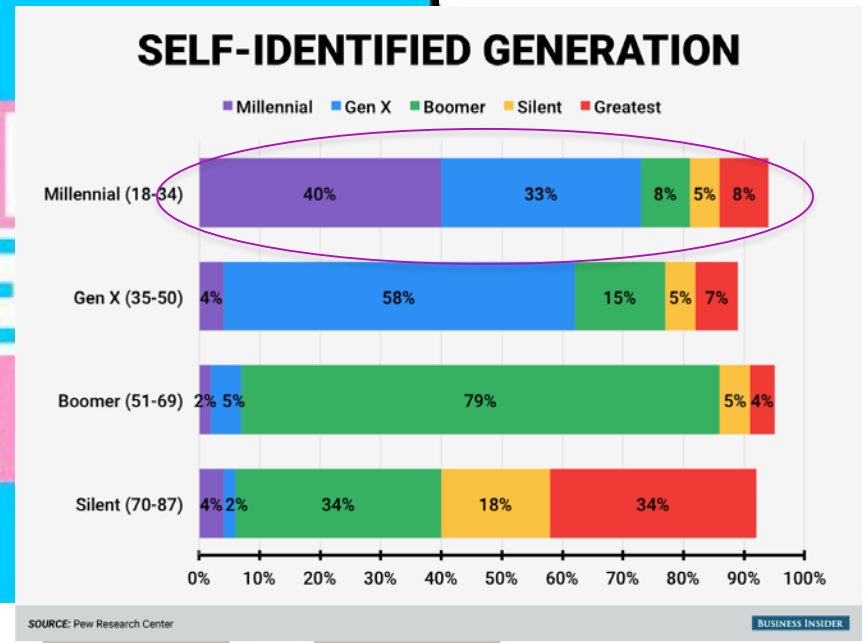
Bisexuality Revisited

In the new study, a team of psychologists directly measured genital arousal patterns in response to images of men and women. The psychologists found that men who identified themselves as bisexual were in fact exclusively aroused by either one sex or the other, usually by other men. The study is the largest of several small reports suggesting that the estimated 5 to 10 percent of people who identify as bisexual are not actually bisexual.

290 COMMENTS

When counting doesn't count. Bisexual people are....

everywhere. And also, in some studies, the
largest sexual minority group (~52%).



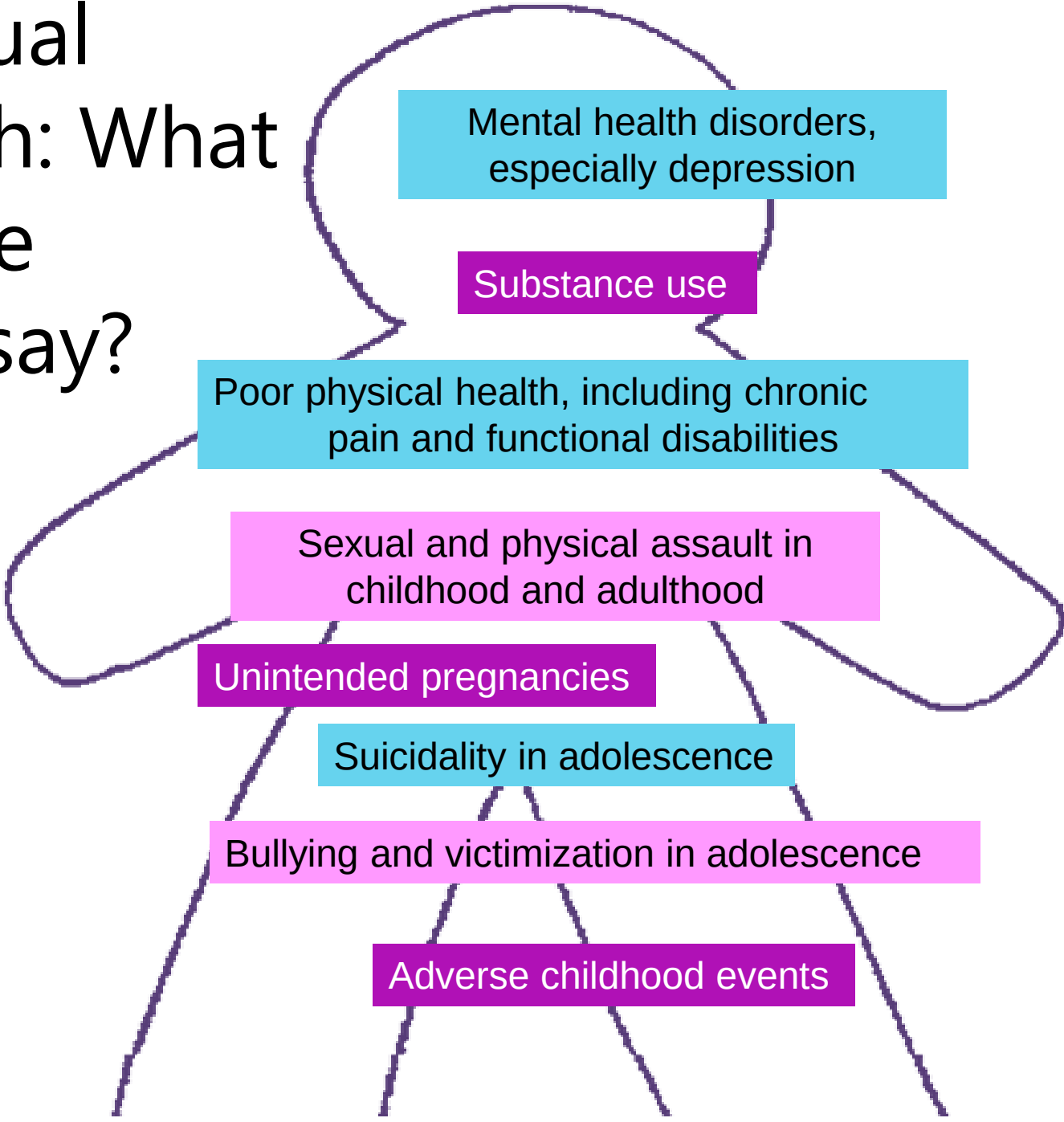
Seen but not believed

- Bisexual desire and bisexual *identity/ies* remain a site of contestation and questioning
- This, in turn, likely has material consequences at
 - individual (psychic toll identity work; cognitive load of strategic outness and/or concealment)
 - interpersonal (relationship dynamics; difficult to find social support; microaggressions)
 - social/structural levels (absent from discourse and inquiry; ill-considered in policies; overlooked in health programming and services (*unless its sexual health and risk))

In/visibility

- Epistemic erasure and injustice...yet don't we “know” through data?
- Can we be made manifest and visible-- “epidemiologically fathomable”
- Where (and how), then, are bisexual people seen?

Bisexual Health: What do the data say?



Mental health disorders,
especially depression

Substance use

Poor physical health, including chronic
pain and functional disabilities

Sexual and physical assault in
childhood and adulthood

Unintended pregnancies

Suicidality in adolescence

Bullying and victimization in adolescence

Adverse childhood events

Where we go from here

- Interventions to address disparities **but also** more support for/dedicated inquiry specifically focused on bi+ populations
- Particularities of bisexual persons' experiences and health **but also** acknowledgement of well-established risk factors
- Recognition and **representation** in all relevant SGM spaces

What do we need to know?

- What **benefits** are associated with bisexuality and bi+ identities?
- Why does stigma and prejudice around bisexuality **remain**— especially in the face of progress around “gay” rights, and increasing understanding of gender as fluid and beyond a binary
- What do structural, e.g., policy solutions and interventions look like?

How do we need to know it?

- Longitudinally
- Cross-culturally
- Intersectionally
- What if we chose “bisexuality”/all those under the bi+ umbrella as an epistemic framework in and of itself
- Bisexual bodies to better understand how structural stigma AND structured inequalities are taken up, i.e., how are inequities *embodied*

Acknowledgements



Brian Dodge
Heron Greenesmith
Amy Hequembourg
Stacey Horn

NIMHD

All the people who've
participated in my, and
others', research and who've
shared their lives and stories
with us