

Are Self-identified Bisexuals Just Lying to Us—or to Themselves?

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I should like to offer an alternative perspective on many of the men and women who describe themselves as bisexual, an alternative to the unflattering view that they are all lying, deceiving themselves, or “transitioning” to homosexuality. (Note that I am not here taking a stand on the current debate over whether “true” bisexuality actually exists in men.)

I believe that many self-described bisexuals are simply people who find themselves in love with or romantically attracted to someone of the “wrong” sex, that is, to someone whose sex is discordant with their own sexual orientation. Because we lack a word for describing this combination, the term *bisexual* appears to them to best describe their phenomenological state. This is particularly true if the romantic attraction to that person has also led to sexual desire for him or her.

I base this suggestion on Lisa Diamond’s brilliant 2003 article in *Psychological Review* (“What Does Sexual Orientation Orient? A Bibehavioral Model Distinguishing Romantic Love and Sexual Desire”) and on the closely related work of anthropologist Helen Fisher. Diamond’s major thesis is that sexual desire is gender oriented—we sexually desire members of one sex or the other—but romantic attraction is person oriented: We fall in love with a particular person not his or her gender.

Diamond also offers a persuasive evolutionary argument for why romantic attraction and sexual desire are fundamentally independent processes—albeit concordant for most people. In brief, sexual desire has evolved to facilitate reproduction and, hence, is biased toward heterosexuality. Romantic attraction (aka pair bonding) has evolved to ensure that offspring live long enough to reproduce and is what evolutionary biologists refer to as an “exaptation” of infant attachment. Infant attachment is not gender oriented—infants attach to both to male and female caregivers—and, hence, neither is its evolutionary derivative, adult pair bonding.

Many of the participants in Diamond’s own longitudinal study of heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian women report romantic attractions to and relationships with members of the sex to whom they are not typically sexually attracted. When asked if the sexual desire that often accompanies these romantic attractions generalizes to other members of that sex, the answer is typically no.

This phenomenon is nicely illustrated by the actress Anne Heche, who publicly announced that “I was never a lesbian until I fell in love with Ellen (Degeneres).” She and Ellen subsequently separated and Anne went on to marry her (male) cameraman. I suspect she now thinks of herself as bisexual, whereas I would suggest she is and has always been heterosexual.

For reasons further explicated by Diamond, women are more likely than men to follow the path from romantic attraction to sexual attraction, whereas men are more likely to begin with sexual attraction and move on to romantic attraction. Thus, more women than men find themselves romantically attracted to someone whose sex is discordant with their own sexual orientation and, hence, more women than men describe themselves as bisexual as a way of characterizing their phenomenological experience.

I also offer this explanation as an alternative to the conventional wisdom (among sexuality researchers anyway) that women's sexual orientations are more "fluid" than men's. Even if all women's sexual orientations remained completely fixed throughout life (and I'm not asserting that they do), we would still find more women with partners of different sexes over time and, hence, more women describing themselves as bisexual. Their "fluidity" is a reality, but it is not necessarily a fluidity of their sexual orientation per se.

In men, this phenomenon typically takes a different form and hence is not recognized as the same thing. I have met many married men who say they are bisexual because they desire sex with men in general, but assert that they truly love their wives and enjoy satisfying sexual relations with them. When I ask them if they are also sexually attracted to other women, they say no. I have no reason to think they are lying to me or to themselves on any of these counts. In their own eyes, they are not gay, but bisexual. In the absence of a term that would characterize their discordance more precisely, I suggest that this is a perfectly reasonable description of their phenomenological experience.

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