

Sexual Orientation and Sex in Women's Lives: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

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Use of such categorical terms as heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian is widespread, yet research indicates that sexuality is a multidimensional phenomenon. Sexual behavior, identity, and desire are not highly intercorrelated for women, and this has implications for new ways of conceptualizing sexual orientation. Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of sexual orientation has implications for conceptualizing sexual activity and sexual desire for women. Some methodological issues are presented for future research on female sexual orientation, including a better understanding of gender and a more multifaceted approach to sexual orientation.

In the novel *Never Say Never* (Hill, 1996), two coworkers, Leslie, who is a lesbian, and Sara, who is heterosexual, become close friends. Though it is obvious to the reader and to both women that they are sexually attracted to each other, the suspense builds as to whether or not Leslie and Sara will “consummate” their relationship—that is, become genitally sexual. Whether or not the women do “it” will affect the reader’s perception as to whether the book had a happy ending (they became lovers) or an unhappy one (they remained “just friends”). It will also determine whether Sara “becomes” a lesbian.

What is sexual orientation? What does it mean to be a heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian woman? Are these terms on a continuum or separate categories? Can all women categorize themselves in one of these three ways? This article will discuss conceptual issues of sexual orientation in women. Closely related to sexual orientation is the concept of sexual behavior. Sexual orientation is usually defined in terms of the gender of one’s sexual partner. This article will ask the question, what is “sex” for women? Finally, there has been so little research addressing these concepts that some methodological issues for future research will be presented.

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Conceptual Issues in Sexual Orientation

Dichotomous Definitions

Fehr (1988) views categorical definitions as “classical” in the sense that they are defined by specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. She states:

Category membership is therefore an all-or-none phenomenon; any instance that meets the criterion is a member; all others are non-members. Boundaries between concepts are thus clearly defined. Because each member must possess the particular set of attributes that is the criterion for category inclusion, all members have a full and equal degree of membership and therefore are equally representative of the category. (p. 558)

Similarly, Rosch (1978) has argued that categories in language can be structured into a model of best fits, followed by examples that resemble these best fits to some extent.

In a categorical definition of sexual orientation, all aspects of sexual orientation—desire, behavior, and identity—are presumed to be congruent. The terms “heterosexual” and “lesbian” are often used in ways that presume these are unidimensional. When a woman says that she is a “lesbian,” we may take for granted that this identity includes homogeneity of sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, and participation in a lesbian community, for example. Consider the following quotation:

I have been heterosexual as some homosexuals say they have been homosexual: forever. Already, at the age of 5, I was attracted (in some diffuse sense of “attract”) to male movie stars in ways that were different from my fascination with female stars. Demands by lesbian separatists earlier in the Second Wave that heterosexual feminists vacate their relationships with men seemed to me then and seem to me still both cruel and impossible. . . . The impossibility, for women like me, is akin to the impossibility I would feel if, in obedience to political fiat, I were asked to change my fingerprints. (Bartky, 1992, p. 426)

This quotation is noteworthy for highlighting several issues usually assumed about sexual orientation: that it forms at an early age, that it involves sexual attraction, and that it can’t be changed. The quote is unusual in that heterosexual women are rarely asked to describe their own sexuality, since heterosexuality is the “default” sexual orientation in Western societies.

Let us assume that sexual orientation is categorical. This would imply that there is a distinct boundary between being a lesbian on the one hand and a heterosexual woman on the other. At one extreme, we could picture a woman who has felt sexual/affectional desire only toward females since she was a girl. Similarly, this woman has had sexual relations only with other females. She considers herself a lesbian and has integrated into the lesbian community.

In reality, few women fit this image. Young girls who are attracted to other girls and women quickly learn to hide these feelings from others and even from themselves. They may date boys and even get married in order to fit the dominant heterosexual lifestyles. Women who do have the courage to express sexual desire

and relations with other women may avoid using the term "lesbian" to describe themselves because of its negative connotations.

At the other extreme, a woman may always have been attracted to males and had sexual relations only with men. Yet we know little about heterosexuality among women. Media images of women depict them as very sexual, but in passive, objectified roles (see Umiker-Sebeok, 1981, for a review of this literature). At the same time, there may be pressure by parents and schools for young women to remain celibate, and there are few approved roles for women to be heterosexually active outside of marriage (see Hyde and Jaffee, this issue). Consequently, even heterosexual women may know little about their own sexual desire and attraction.

Some of the earliest writings about sexual orientation focused on "stages" that gay men and lesbians go through in the process of coming out. Generally these stages described an initial sense of difference and identity confusion that eventually was replaced by identity acceptance and synthesis (see Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981). In this way, lesbians were presumed to move from lack of congruence to congruence between identity and behavior.

How would a categorical definition of sexual orientation include bisexuality? Bisexuality may be viewed as a separate category for women who are attracted to and have sexual relationships with women and men. In the past, categorical definitions of sexual orientation would have excluded bisexuality, viewing bisexuals as women in transition to be lesbians, or as lesbians who wanted a less stigmatizing self-description (Rust, 2000). Development of a strong bisexual movement and bisexual communities has demonstrated that bisexuality is not transient and in fact may be an even more stigmatized term than lesbianism.

In sum, a dichotomous definition of sexual orientation is bipolar, with heterosexual women and lesbians as opposite constructs. Bisexuality is seen as either nonexistent or as a transitional phase between being heterosexual and lesbian (this point is discussed in detail by Rust, this issue). There is congruence between sexual identity, behavior, and desire. Thus, if a woman experiences any same-gender behavior or attraction, she is presumed to be a lesbian with a same-gender identity as well.

Continuous Definitions

On the other hand, sexual orientation can be conceptualized as multifaceted. Consider this quotation:

How does my heterosexuality contribute to my feminist politics? That is an impossible question for me to answer because, although I have lived monogamously with a man I love for over 26 years, I am not and never have been a "heterosexual." But neither have I ever been either a "lesbian" or a "bisexual." What I am—and have been for as long as I can remember—is someone whose gender and sexuality have just never seemed to mesh very well with the available cultural categories, and *that*—rather than my presumed heterosexuality—is what has most profoundly informed my feminist politics. (Bem, 1992, p. 436)

This statement describes the experience of many women who have unsuccessfully tried to “fit” into categorical definitions. Even as new terminology has entered counterculture vocabularies (e.g., “queer” to describe people who do not have a mainstream sexual orientation), these individuals continue to feel marginalized and disenfranchised.

Recently a group of graduate students and I (Morris, Ojerholm, Brooks, Osowiecki, & Rothblum, 1995) examined the content of 10 books of lesbian coming out stories. We found that the themes in these self-reported narratives bore little resemblance to the “stage theories” of the coming out process. There were many ways that women “became” lesbians, and their own definitions of identity, community, and politics often remained in flux. Coming out was a lifelong process, with lesbians deciding whether or not to come out as they met new people and entered new situations.

Rust (1993) surveyed 346 self-identified lesbians, 60 self-identified bisexual women, and 21 women who did not label themselves. This sample of mostly young, White women indicated—contrary to what is proposed in the stage theories—that sexual attraction to another woman preceded questioning of heterosexual identity (see also Diamond and Savin-Williams, this issue). Furthermore, the women in this sample had used different labels to identify their sexual orientation over the years, with 41% of the lesbians identifying as bisexual at some point in the past, 60% of the lesbians wondering whether they were bisexual, and 76% of the bisexual women wondering whether they were lesbian. Thus, the categories “lesbian” and “bisexual” are more fluid and continuous than is usually assumed in the lesbian communities.

In sum, from a continuous perspective, sexual orientation is a multidimensional concept that varies in degree and intensity. Sexual orientation is viewed as diverse, with each individual having a unique template of erotic and affectional identity, behavior, fantasies, relationships (including relationship status), and emotional attachments, all of which can change over time (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). These components can be (and often are) incongruous, so there is no simple relationship among behavior, identity, and desire. For example, many more people engage in same-gender sexual behavior than those who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

Research on Sexual Orientation

Most research in this area has used categorical definitions of sexual orientation, such as asking participants to check off whether they are lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual. Furthermore, a survey entitled “Lesbian Mental Health Survey” (Oetjen & Rothblum, 2000) is unlikely to obtain many respondents who identify as bisexual or heterosexual. Nor will it interest women who are sexually involved with women but who do not identify as lesbian. Such categorical methods

introduce a level of artificiality that may not in fact correspond with the identity or experiences of women respondents.

Almost all research has assessed sexual orientation (for men and women) by an item known as the "Kinsey Scale" because it was first used in Alfred Kinsey's surveys of male and female sexual behavior (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). This item asks respondents to indicate their sexual orientation on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 0 (*exclusively heterosexual*) to 6 (*exclusively lesbian or gay*). More recently, the midpoint of the scale may be labeled *bisexual*. Use of this scale raises a number of issues that have never been empirically examined. Do most women view their sexual orientation as falling on a continuous scale of this type? How does self-reported sexual orientation on this scale correspond to self-identity as lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, or something else (for example, would someone circling a 2 on this scale still identify as heterosexual or as bisexual)? Perhaps most intriguing is that fact that researchers, while using this continuous scale, in fact "categorize" respondents and then refer to them as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual, respectively. That is, a continuous method is used for categorical purposes.

In a recent study, Jessica Morris and I (1999) examined the interrelationships among various dimensions of sexual orientation. The study examined the way in which over 2,000 women who answered a "Lesbian Wellness Survey" were distributed on five aspects of lesbian sexuality and the coming out process. The five aspects were sexual orientation (on the "Kinsey Scale"); years out (length of time of self-identity as lesbian/gay/bisexual); outness/disclosure (amount of disclosure of sexual orientation to others); sexual experience (proportion of sexual relationships with women compared to men); and lesbian activities (extent of participation in lesbian community events). The intercorrelations among these dimensions were quite low, indicating that being lesbian is not a homogeneous experience.

Closer examination by the demographic characteristics of race/ethnicity and age revealed a diversity of experience. African American, Native American, and Latina respondents had moderate correlations among the aspects of the lesbian experience, whereas the intercorrelations of White and Asian American respondents tended to be mild or nonsignificant. The results indicate that researchers who are studying one aspect of the lesbian experience (e.g., outness to others) need to ensure that they are not assuming such behavior based on other dimensions (such as frequent participation in lesbian community activities or years of being out), especially among White and Asian American lesbians. Most studies of sexual orientation have focused on members of the visible gay and lesbian communities (there is still relatively little research on people who are bisexual). By recruiting participants at lesbian community events or using mailing lists of lesbian newsletters, for example, researchers are stratifying by lesbian *self-identity*.

There is nothing wrong with focusing research on members of the visible lesbian communities (and, as they become more frequent in cities across the United

States, the female bisexual communities). Lesbians and bisexual women who participate in community events are representative of "out" members of these communities. Interestingly, researchers often apologize for this "nonrepresentative" sample when, in fact, focusing on visible members of the lesbian and bisexual women's communities is extremely informative. These are the communities that have successfully overcome the stress of coming out. Their views and behaviors affect more closeted women, as well as the general public, since the media tend to focus on members of the lesbian communities (though rarely on bisexual women). The lesbian and bisexual women's communities are in the vanguard of influencing social change; they are also the targets of hate crimes and anti-lesbian and anti-bi violence. Increasingly, research on out lesbians is including women who are adolescents, elderly, members of ethnic minority groups, or women with disabilities. Hopefully, members of lesbian and bisexual community groups will increase in the future, as more women feel free to be open about their sexual orientation.

Other research focuses more generally on women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual but who may not be part of organized community events and groups. Researchers have recruited lesbians via friendship circles, a method sometimes referred to as the "snowball" technique because women are asked to distribute surveys to their friends and friends of friends. Women who self-identify as lesbian or bisexual but who do not attend visible lesbian/bi events may differ in important ways from women who are networked into these communities. There is some research that indicates that outness is related to positive mental health (Jordan & Deluty, 1998) and thus it is important to study women who are not or not yet out.

Many researchers would like to see research on sexual orientation that uses probability sampling and/or national census data to obtain "representative" data about lesbians and bisexual women, rather than relying on lesbian/bi communities and snowball sampling. This was the recommendation of the recent Institute of Medicine report (1999) on lesbian health. What is the sexual orientation of the female population at large? We will never be able to answer this question with certainty as long as being lesbian or bisexual is a stigmatized condition. Just as there are women who would not attend lesbian events for fear of being seen by their neighbors or coworkers, for example, so there are "out" lesbians who would not respond to a government survey or anonymous telephone interview for fear of repercussions.

There have been some attempts to conduct "representative" surveys of sexual orientation. In the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), probability sampling was used to survey over 3,000 English-speaking adults in the United States; however, 17% of those asked to participate refused. The survey assessed same-gender experiences in three ways. Same-gender behavior included questions about gender of partners in the past year, past five years, and since age 18, and about specific same-gender sexual activities. The results indicated that 4.3% of women (vs. 9.1% of men) had had some form of

sexual activity with a same-gender partner since age 18. Sexual desire was defined as the appeal of having sex with someone of the same gender and about the gender of people to whom respondents were sexually attracted. There was a trend for more women (5.6%) than men (4.5%) to find same-gender sex appealing, whereas there was a trend for more men (6.2%) than women (4.4%) to be attracted to someone of the same gender. Finally, the survey assessed identity and found that 1.4% of women and 2.8% of men endorsed a nonheterosexual identity.

This survey also found that same-gender sexual behavior, desire, and identity are not highly interrelated. In fact, of women who reported any same-gender sexuality in adulthood, only 15% reported all three components; the corresponding percentage for men was 24%. Thus, the results of this probability survey are comparable to the results obtained from surveying dimensions of sexual orientation in the lesbian communities (Morris & Rothblum, 1999).

The National Health and Social Life Survey also focused on respondents who had both same- and other-gender sexual experiences. Of respondents who had same-gender partners in the past year, 75% had only same-gender partners, whereas 25% also had at least one other-gender partner. The longer the time period, the fewer respondents have had sex with *only* same-gender partners, so that over the lifetime, only 0.2% of women have had only same-gender partners (Laumann et al., 1994).

Again, these results are similar to those obtained from surveys of women in lesbian and bisexual communities. Cochran and Mays (1988) found that 12% of their sample of 529 Black lesbians had had heterosexual sex in the previous year. Other research on bisexual women (reviewed in Rust, 2000) has found that the concept of bisexuality is extremely broad. Not all women who identify as bisexuals have sex with women and men; in fact, very few have male and female partners simultaneously, and the majority of bisexual women are in heterosexual relationships. Rust states:

Most women and men who identify as bisexual do so because they feel attracted to both women and men in some unequal or variable degree or because they feel they have the capacity to be sexually active with either women or men, not because they feel equally attracted to women and men or because they engage in concurrent heterosex and homosex. Conversely, many self-identified heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men have bisexual feelings and engage in bisexual behavior, resulting in considerable overlap in the actual sexual experiences of individuals who identify themselves as bisexual, lesbian or gay, and heterosexual. (p. 140)

The limited research on dimensions of women's sexual orientation, whether conducted directly in lesbian/bisexual women's communities or via national surveys, indicates that identity as lesbian or bisexual, sexual activity with women, and sexual desire are separate and (somewhat) overlapping dimensions. This raises the question whether sexual orientation for women should be defined on the basis of sexual activity/attraction and, if so, what *does* sex mean for women?

Conceptual Issues in Female Sexual Activity

In the United States, the concept of "sex" is so closely linked with genital intercourse that most heterosexual women will not "count" experiences that didn't include this aspect of sexual activity. When asked when they first had "sex," women who have sex with men will often "count" the first time they had sexual intercourse with a man, even if this experience was not particularly sexual for them and even if they had prior sexual experiences that were quite arousing and even led to orgasm (see Rothblum, 1994, for a review). Loulan (1993) has described how female adolescents who have engaged in a variety of sexual activities but have not had intercourse will say that they have not "gone all the way." Thus, women's definition of what constitutes sexual activity with a male partner is often separate from their own sexual arousal and desire.

"Sex" when both partners are female is even more complex. On the one hand, lesbians and bisexual women will say that sex between women allows for a greater variety of sexual expression, exactly because it is not focused on intercourse (see Rothblum, 1999, for a review). On the other hand, sexual activity between women is socially constructed in the lesbian/bisexual communities to mean certain activities and not others. Two women who are "just" kissing and cuddling, for example, have not "gone all the way" (Rothblum, 1999). Interestingly, the current Vermont Youth Behavior Risk Survey (Vermont Department of Health, 1999) asks respondents whether they have had "intercourse" with males only, females only, both males and females, or neither. It is difficult to say how female adolescents will conceptualize "intercourse" between two females, but the wording of this item reflects the salience of the word "intercourse" to mean sexual activity in research.

Research on female sexuality has found lesbians to engage in sexual activity with relatively low frequency. A major survey of sexual activity among 12,000 people (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983) indicated that lesbians are less likely to have genital sex than are married heterosexual, cohabiting heterosexual, or gay male couples. Loulan (1988) surveyed over 1,500 lesbians and found the majority (78%) to have been celibate for some period of time. Most had been celibate for less than 1 year, 35% had been celibate from 1 to 5 years, and 8% for 6 years or more. The national survey by Laumann et al. (1994) similarly found women to be lower than men on rates of sexual behavior.

The results of these surveys were interpreted as reflecting women's lack of socialization to initiate sexual encounters. Survey authors also indicated that lesbians, being women, placed more focus on love, affection, and romance than on genital sexual activity (e.g., Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). Thus, heterosexual and bisexual women may have sex more often because men are more likely to want and initiate sexual activity.

It is difficult to obtain accurate data on sexual behavior. Sexual activity is private, and women in particular are not socialized to discuss details of sexual

activity. This issue is confounded for lesbians and bisexual women, who may live in areas where same-gender sexual activity is against the law and who may lose their jobs or custody of their children if such knowledge became public. Most sex surveys have been criticized for being of questionable accuracy, as people may not respond honestly for a variety of reasons (see Laumann et al., 1994, for a discussion).

Certainly the low rates of sexual "activity" found in these surveys may in part be due to how sexual behavior is traditionally defined. What are the implications of lesbians engaging in genital sex less than heterosexual women or than men, yet at the same time using a genital-based definition to define "sex"? Is there a way that women of all sexual orientations should discuss the relative devaluation of alternatives to genital sex? Can we reclaim erotic, nongenital experiences as "real" sex?

Conceptual Issues in Female Sexual Desire

The lack of congruence between female sexual behavior and desire implies that sexual behavior per se may not be what is most important to women and may not define their sexual identity. On the one hand, women in Western societies live in a culture of sex (Rothblum, 1994) in which images of women being sexual are everywhere in the media and are used to promote a wide range of products in the economy. On the other hand, the overemphasis on sex ignores the reality that women have related passionately and emotionally to other women all their lives.

Some years ago, Kathy Brehony and I (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993) interviewed self-identified lesbians who considered themselves to be in a couple but who were not currently sexual with their partners (and may never have had sex with these partners). Here are some examples of the ways of relating that we found (all names are pseudonyms):

Laura became attracted to her heterosexual roommate, Violet. Violet seemed to encourage the relationship in multiple ways, such as having heart-shaped tattoos made with each other's names and telling Laura it was okay that people mistook them for lovers. When Laura suggested they become lovers, Violet said she couldn't do it. Laura was devastated.

Elizabeth and Marianne were briefly genitally sexual, then Marianne broke that off, saying that the age difference of 20 years was too great for her. Marianne, the younger of the two, became involved sexually with another woman, Eve, and Elizabeth decided to move out of state to get away. Elizabeth and Marianne continued their relationship over the telephone, and both agree that they are the most important people in each other's lives. Elizabeth says about Eve, Marianne's sexual partner, "she will never have access to the total person that I have."

Sarah and Hannah have a primary relationship, but without sex. They have an agreement that they can have other lovers, but only men. Sarah is confused because

she is a lesbian, and now her friends only see her with male lovers. It has shaken her whole identity as a lesbian. Hannah is primarily heterosexual. They are both afraid that sex would make them even more intense, given their closeness already.

These examples bring up a number of themes related to sexual desire. When two members of a couple disagree on what constitutes sex and thus whether or not they are having sex, they may also differ on whether or not they are in a real relationship. Even when both members of the couple agree that their genitally asexual relationship makes them a real couple, society in general may not agree with this definition. The couple may hide their asexuality from their community in much the same way that women in past centuries hid their sexuality from the community at large. Societal validation is especially important for women who are not heterosexual, in light of the fact that many of these women felt invisible to society at large when growing up or while coming out. Furthermore, the examples above came from self-identified lesbians; others may exist among women who are passionate about women yet who are married to men, in celibate religious orders, or extremely closeted even to themselves.

Methodological Issues for Future Research

There has been so little research on women's sexual orientation that every topic area is in need of further study. What are some methodological issues for improving our understanding of female sexuality?

As we enter the new millennium, the transgender movement is beginning to underscore the fact that an understanding of sexual orientation needs a better framework for thinking about gender itself. Who is a woman? Just as burgeoning research has demonstrated that sexual orientation is fluid and multidimensional, gender itself may not be viewed as constant and bimodal by all people (see Rothblum, 2000, for a review). Rust's (2000) research on bisexuality, for example, has found that some people identify as bisexual because their own gender varies from day to day while the gender of their partner is constant. Some days they are men who are attracted to women and other days they are women attracted to women.

This article has pointed out ways in which sexual orientation is multifaceted, and future research needs to address this complexity. This includes being sensitive to how female participants are recruited, how sexual identity is defined, and how items are worded on surveys and during interviews. Women of all sexual orientations may find that questionnaire items do not describe their own experiences. Researchers need to be aware of changing norms, including changing language, in the lesbian and female bisexual communities.

There has been practically no research about sexual orientation over the lifespan, despite the fact that most women who are not heterosexual have a "coming out story" of sorts, which focuses entirely on sexuality over the lifespan. Research

on the coming out process has relied almost entirely on retrospective accounts. Prospective studies about women's sexual orientation are necessary for understanding the development of sexual orientation. Furthermore, there is little lifespan research specifically focused on heterosexual women.

Finally, sexual desire and behavior have most often been assessed with standardized scales that may not reflect women's ways of relating. This is an area in which qualitative, interview, and open-ended methods of data collection are important to examine important themes in the ways that women across sexual orientations define sexual fantasies, desire, behavior, and relationships.

In conclusion, what can we say about female sexuality at the end of the millennium? Sexual behavior is still defined in genital ways that may not accurately reflect the totality of women's sexual experiences. Sexual behavior is only one dimension of women's sexuality, and not highly interrelated with sexual desire, attraction, sexual orientation, and so on. There is increasing knowledge that even the concept of gender itself is flexible, complex, and multidimensional, so that knowing who is a "woman" is not as clear-cut as once believed. Far fewer women may be heterosexual in the traditional sense, indicating that more research on women's sexuality is necessary to learn about women's ways of being in sexual relationships. Even for women who *are* heterosexual, little is known about this "mainstream" group, such as how they came to be heterosexual, the ways that they might question their heterosexuality, and how their sexual desire and attraction differs from those of women who are bisexual or lesbian. Women's sexuality is an area in which we don't even know what most of the questions are, let alone the answers.

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