



Overlapping pink and blue triangles are one symbol of bisexuality.

## Bisexuality

by Brett Genny Beemyn

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Common wisdom about bisexuality states that either bisexuals do not really exist or that everyone is actually bisexual. Although contradictory, these two popular myths reflect the dominant thinking about bisexuality at different times and among different observers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Sex researchers have often sought to explain (or explain away) bisexuality, seeing it as a transitional stage for individuals who will eventually identify as heterosexual or homosexual, or subsuming it under the category of homosexuality, based on the belief that bisexuals are simply in denial about their "true" selves. Even authorities who argued that humans were bisexual by nature typically rejected bisexuality as a distinct sexual identity.

But as sexologists encountered more and more people who had been involved with both women and men throughout their lives, it became increasingly difficult to deny the existence of bisexuality. Not until the 1970s and 1980s, though, did researchers and scholars begin to survey bisexuals themselves. This growing body of literature has helped counter many of the stereotypes about bisexuals.

### Bi-sexology

Early sexologists considered sexual object-choice to be a determinant of gender; being attracted to a man made one a woman and vice-versa. The first researcher to publish widely on male same-sex desire, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, theorized in the mid-1860s that what he called "uranism" resulted from a "female soul in a male body." Other sexologists agreed, arguing that individuals who engaged in same-sex relationships had an "inverted" gender identity.

It naturally followed then that individuals who were attracted to men and women were considered "psychosexual hermaphrodites." They desired both males and females because they *were* both male and female. Accordingly, the term "bisexuality" was first used in the mid-nineteenth century to describe people whom we would identify today as intersexed.

The work of Sigmund Freud shifted "bisexuality" from a biological to a psychological concept in the early twentieth century. Based on erroneous theories about embryonic hermaphroditism, Freud proposed that all human beings were born with an unconscious bisexual disposition. Through the course of normal childhood development, individuals repressed their "homosexual side," thereby assuming a heterosexual identity and achieving psychological "maturity." Thus, while Freud recognized the potential to be attracted to both women and men, he maintained that actually being bisexual was a neurosis.

Freud influenced popular understandings of bisexuality for much of the first half of the twentieth century, but his was not the only voice on the topic. Freud's associate Wilhelm Stekel agreed that everyone had an innate bisexual predisposition. However, diverging from his mentor, Stekel contended that this initial bisexual potential led naturally to having relationships with women and men. He felt that *both* homosexuality and heterosexuality were symptoms of a neurosis, since being exclusively attracted to one sex required sublimating a basic part of oneself. "*There are no monosexual persons!*," he emphatically argued.

## **Bisexuality in Research on Sexuality**

Despite the attention given to bisexuality in the work of Freud, Stekel, and a number of other psychoanalysts, scientific research on sexuality largely ignored the issue. Historically, most researchers failed to consider bisexuality a specific sexual identity. They combined the responses of individuals who expressed a desire for both women and men with the data from those who were exclusively attracted to others of the same sex or excluded bisexuals from their studies altogether.

The research of Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues in the late 1940s and early 1950s was groundbreaking for its recognition of the inadequacy of reducing the diversity of human sexual experience to a heterosexual/homosexual binary.

Finding that 28% of women and 46% of men had responded erotically or were sexually active with both women and men, Kinsey's studies awakened other researchers and the American public to the prevalence of bisexuality and challenged the distinction psychoanalysts made between the normal and the pathological.

Kinsey, however, was reluctant to use the word "bisexuality" to describe this behavior because of the term's historical usage to refer to the physical or psychological combination of the feminine and masculine. But as a result of Kinsey's research, the earlier senses of bisexuality were largely displaced by the modern meaning of being attracted to both women and men.

Some scholars have since challenged Kinsey's methodology and data (while he interviewed more than 11,000 women and men, he limited his samples to whites). But his conception of human sexual behavior as a continuum from heterosexuality to homosexuality, rather than a dichotomy--what has become known as the Kinsey scale--has had a lasting influence on how sexuality is perceived.

Building on Kinsey's attempt to qualify sexual experience, other researchers have devised instruments for assessing sexual orientation that rely on multiple factors. The best known of these scientific tools, the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG), was developed by psychiatrist Fritz Klein in 1978.

The KSOG measures sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, heterosexual/homosexual lifestyle, and self-identification. Individuals rate themselves on each variable for their past, present, and ideal futures using the Kinsey scale, resulting in a twenty-one category profile of sexual orientation.

The Klein grid has been popular among bisexual activists, as well as sex educators and therapists, because it recognizes the complexity of sexuality, including the fact that aspects of sexual orientation can change over time and that sexual self-identification is not necessarily reflected in current sexual experience.

In the last decade, significant scientific and media attention has been given to studies that seek to find a biological cause for sexual orientation. Most of this research looks for genetic or physiological distinctions between lesbians or gay men and heterosexuals, such as Simon LeVay's study of the size of particular nuclei in the hypothalamus and Dean Hamer's examination of familial DNA differences. Bisexuality is rarely addressed or considered a distinct sexual identity in this work, because doing so would likely blur the clear-cut distinctions researchers hope to make, if not cast doubts on their findings altogether.

## **Bisexual Identity Development**

Like most research on sexuality, models of lesbian and gay identity development have often ignored or dismissed bisexuality. These models characterize the coming out process as a movement that typically involves recognizing one's same-sex attraction, finding other lesbians and gay men, accepting oneself, becoming immersed in the lesbian and gay community, and finally, integrating sexuality into one's self-

identity.

While bisexuals may share some of these experiences, they are rarely included in theories of sexual identity development. A number of models do mention bisexuality, but only in the context of forestalling the formation of a positive lesbian or gay identity. For example, the most frequently cited theory, Vivienne Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, considers bisexuality to be a way to deny one's "true" sexuality. Individuals struggling to accept being lesbian or gay may perceive themselves as bisexual for a time, because they can hold onto the possibility of future other-sex relationships.

Few researchers have specifically considered bisexual identity development. Based on studies of bisexual women and men in San Francisco in the 1980s, Martin Weinberg, Colin Williams, and Douglas Pryor devised a four-stage model to describe the coming out process for bisexuals: initial confusion, finding and applying the label, settling into the identity, and continued uncertainty. This last stage, which they saw as unique to the experiences of many bisexuals, resulted from the relative lack of a bisexual community for social validation and the persistent pressure bisexuals receive from parts of the lesbian and gay community to identify as lesbian or gay instead.

Other theorists have rejected the appropriateness of linear stage models. Paula Rodríguez Rust, one of the foremost researchers on bisexuality, argues that the process of coming out is shaped by multiple dimensions, including not only sexual attraction and behavior, but also political commitments, emotional ties, and community involvement. In studying self-identified bisexual women and lesbians, Rust found that the majority of both groups had been involved in other-sex relationships and were attracted to both women and men, but interpreted and labeled their experiences in different and often conflicting ways.

The process of coming out as bisexual is also complicated by the need to cope with both homophobia and biphobia. Examples of biphobia include the assumption that a same-sex couple is lesbian or gay and a mixed-sex couple is heterosexual, that bisexuals are confused or indecisive about their sexuality, that they spread HIV/AIDS to other groups, and that by nature they are equally attracted to women and men and cannot live monogamously. Because bisexuals are often stigmatized by lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, many are reluctant to disclose their bisexuality.

## **Conclusion**

Research on bisexuality, as well as the visibility of bisexual groups and individuals, since the 1970s has begun to challenge the negative perception of bisexuals. While bisexuals continue to be excluded from many studies of sexuality or grouped unquestionably with lesbians and gay men, it is increasingly difficult for researchers to contend that bisexuality is not a distinct sexual identity. The greater attention being given to the lives and experiences of bisexuals can only lead to a more accurate and complete understanding of sexual orientation.

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### **About the Author**

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.