

Understanding Women's Sexualities and Sexual Orientations: An Introduction

Linda D. Garnets and Letitia Anne Peplau*

University of California, Los Angeles

Researchers and theorists who attempt to generalize about sexuality and sexual orientation in both men and women simultaneously often take male experiences as the norm and ignore unique aspects of women's lives. The purpose of this issue is to focus attention on scientific research and theory about aspects of women's sexualities, with special emphasis on sexual orientation. A new paradigm is presented that recognizes the great diversity of women's erotic experiences and the many sociocultural factors that shape women's sexuality and sexual orientation across the lifespan. This introductory article highlights major themes and provides a brief summary of the articles in the issue. Four central topics are discussed: (1) the complex nature of women's sexualities and sexual orientations; (2) the importance of historical, social, and cultural contexts for adequately understanding women's sexualities; (3) the development of sexual orientation in women; and (4) implications for research and policy.

In recent years, Americans have focused increased attention on women's sexuality and sexual orientation. Although many once considered heterosexuality as the "natural" state of affairs, there is now controversy about the origins of sexual orientation and its implications for tolerance toward sexual minorities. Discussions of civil rights for lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities are common: Such issues as gays in the military and insurance benefits for domestic partners are frequently debated. Public discussions have also questioned the very meaning of such presumably basic concepts as "sex." In 1998, when U.S. President Bill Clinton told the American public that he had never had sexual relations with former

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White House intern Monica Lewinsky, many people assumed that their relationship had been platonic. Later Clinton explained that they had engaged in oral sex but he insisted that this did not constitute "sexual relations." A recent study found that 59% of college students, like Bill Clinton, would not say they "had sex" with someone if their most intimate behavior was oral sex (Sanders & Reinisch, 1999).

Every major social institution in America, from the military to organized religion, has been challenged to rethink long-standing beliefs and policies concerning sexual behavior and sexual orientation. Heated debates about sex education in the schools offer one example. Should elementary school children learn about non-traditional families with two mommies? Should heterosexual teens be given detailed education about sexuality and contraception, or is a minimalist curriculum advocating abstinence preferable? Should the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual teens be incorporated into school programs or simply ignored? All Americans are touched in some way by the growing public discussion of sexuality and sexual orientation.

The increased visibility of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals has had mixed social consequences. One result has been to expand public awareness about a wide range of personal lifestyles. Simplistic stereotypes are challenged as people watch more realistic portrayals of lesbian and gay characters on television shows and in movies and as more sexual-minority individuals are open with friends, coworkers, and neighbors about their lives. This may lead some people to question their unexamined assumptions about heterosexuality and its institutionalized form in marriage. There are signs of increasing tolerance toward homosexuals, as shown, for instance, in changing attitudes about employment discrimination. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of Americans endorsing equal employment rights for homosexuals has increased from 56% in 1977 to 71% in 1989 and 84% in 1998 (Berke, 1998, p. 3).

At the same time, the growing public presence of homosexuals and other sexual minorities has challenged the undisputed dominance of heterosexuality and led to a powerful backlash. One example is provided by the case brought before the Hawaii state supreme court to legalize same-sex marriage (Goldenberg, 1996). The court ruled that the state had failed to show any compelling reason for the existing ban on gay and lesbian unions. In response to this victory for gay and lesbian civil rights, a campaign was mounted in Hawaii and in other states to enact laws preventing the recognition of same-sex marriages. More than 30 states have now enacted such laws. Further, in 1996 the U. S. House of Representatives passed the "Defense of Marriage Act," which defined marriage for federal programs as a legal union between a man and a woman. This act also allowed states the right not to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states. Moreover, voters in Hawaii recently changed the state constitution to define marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman, thus ensuring that same-sex marriages could not be performed in Hawaii.

The greater visibility of gay people has also increased public expressions of animosity. As one example, a coalition of religious groups recently placed full-page ads in major newspapers condemning homosexuality. Republican Congressional Majority Leader Trent Lott publicly likened homosexuality to kleptomania and alcoholism (Berke, 1998, p. 3). Around the country, groups are working to amend state constitutions to forbid laws protecting the civil rights of gay people. Hate crimes, such as the vicious murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard, continue. Events such as these highlight the persistence of hostility and discrimination against sexual minorities.

How can scientific research contribute to the public's understanding of these issues? Research findings have played a vital role in legal cases and in public policy. As one example, the American Psychological Association (APA) has influenced public policy by reviewing the scientific evidence on lesbian and gay parents for legal cases concerning child custody. In a case involving a lesbian mother (*Bottoms v. Bottoms*), the APA filed an amicus curiae brief that concluded that

the presumptions that a parent in an openly gay or lesbian relationship is an unfit custodian has no basis in the social science research. Application of such a presumption precludes a full evaluation of the best interests of the child. A parent's sexual orientation should not, absent specific evidence of harm to the child, be considered a factor weighing against an award of custody of that parent. (Brief of amici curiae, 1994, p. 41)

This and other APA briefs have been based on research consistently demonstrating that the home environments provided by lesbian parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to foster the psychosocial development and psychological well-being of children (e.g., Patterson & Redding, 1996). Specifically, no substantial differences have been found between lesbian parents and their heterosexual counterparts in terms of parenting ability or approach toward child rearing. Scientific research finds no differences in the gender identity, gender-role development, social relationships, or mental health of children raised by homosexual or heterosexual parents. These findings have contributed to efforts to secure the legal rights of lesbian and gay people as parents.

Beyond the courtroom, research findings can help to replace faulty stereotypes with accurate information. Ultimately, questions about the causes of sexual orientation, the life experiences of sexual-minority individuals, and links between sexual orientation and psychological well-being are not matters of opinion but rather topics for scientific inquiry. In other words, there are essential links between basic research findings concerning sexual orientation and important social issues of the day.

Goals of This Issue

This issue focuses on women's sexuality and sexual orientation for two important reasons. First, there is growing scientific evidence that the nature and

development of sexuality and sexual orientation are different for women and men (e.g., Baumeister, 2000; Garnets & Kimmel, 1991). When theorists attempt to generalize about both sexes simultaneously, they tend to take male experience as the norm and may ignore the unique aspects of women's sexualities (Peplau, Garnets, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1998). Second, an understanding of women's sexual orientation requires a recognition of women's position in society. The experiences of women and men are different in part because of inequalities in their social and economic status and because of social attitudes about women's "proper" roles and behaviors (Hyde & Durik, 2000; McCormick, 1994). These, in turn, are shaped by the cultural and ethnic context of women's lives.

This issue of the *Journal* presents scientific research and theory documenting the complexity and diversity of women's sexuality and sexual orientation. Although the public commonly categorizes women as heterosexual, lesbian, or perhaps bisexual, women's lived experiences often defy these neat classification schemes. Some women view themselves as heterosexual but recognize strong attractions to other women. Many middle-aged lesbians had sexual relationships with men in their youth. Two women with similar personal histories may define their sexuality differently. For some women, explicit sexuality is not particularly important; emotional bonding with a partner is what counts. In this issue, we use plural terms such as women's "sexualities" and "sexual orientations" to signal the importance of encompassing the full range of women's desires and relationships.

The articles in Section I of this issue address the complex nature of women's sexualities and sexual orientations. Esther Rothblum raises basic questions about the current social meanings of such taken-for-granted terms as "lesbian," "heterosexual," "bisexual," and "sex," and she examines the research implications of scientific approaches to defining these concepts. Paula Rust presents research about bisexuality in women's lives. The recent emergence of the "bisexual" as a personal and social identity adds further complexity to efforts to pigeonhole women into rigid categories. Bisexuality challenges the assumptions that heterosexuality and homosexuality are mutually exclusive and that gender is the primary criterion for selecting a sexual partner.

Historical and Social Contexts for Understanding Women's Sexualities

An adequate understanding of women's sexualities requires an examination of the historical, social, and cultural contexts that influence women's experiences. For American women, three important perspectives are historical changes in women's economic and legal status, the influence of sex experts' beliefs about sexuality, and the impact of the feminist and gay/lesbian/bisexual civil rights movements.

Historical Trends

During the 20th century, the sexual lives of Western women were shaped profoundly by societal changes extending full citizenship to women and providing women with greater personal control in decision making about reproduction and abortion. Dramatic increases in women's participation in higher education and in paid employment have enabled women to lead lives that are economically and socially independent of men. As one example, the increase in female-headed households resulted, in part, from women's enhanced ability to support themselves and their children without a husband. Women's sexuality has also been affected by changes in technology. The advent of more reliable forms of birth control has led to a greater separation of sex and reproduction. New reproductive technologies enable women to become mothers in such nontraditional ways as insemination by an anonymous donor with no paternal legal rights.

Sexuality has increasingly moved out of the realm of private behavior to become an important component of an individual's social identity. As noted by historians John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman (1988):

Over the last three and a half centuries, the meaning and place of sexuality in American life have changed from a family-centered, reproductive sexual system in the colonial era; to a romantic, intimate, yet conflicted sexuality in nineteenth-century marriage; to a commercialized sexuality in the modern period, when sexual relations are expected to provide personal identity and individual happiness, apart from reproduction. (pp. xi–xii)

As articles in this issue demonstrate, today there are important links between sexuality and social identity.

The Views of "Sex Experts"

Women's lives are also influenced by the beliefs of sex experts. In Western society, the legacy of Victorian attitudes was to view women as sexually disinterested. As Sandra Bem (1993, p. 86) observed, both 19th-century science and popular opinion assumed that women were "completely lacking in sexual motivation until and unless they were stimulated by men; autonomous female sexuality was inconceivable." It was thought that real "sex" requires a penis. As a result, many considered sex between women impossible. In 1885, a law was passed in England making homosexual acts a crime. Queen Victoria refused to sign the law until all references to women were removed, insisting that female homosexuality did not exist and that the law would "tarnish the honorable tradition of women's love" (Butler, 1990, p. 62). As this anecdote illustrates, beliefs about women's sexual orientation are intrinsically linked to beliefs about women's sexuality.

The Victorian view of women's sexuality colored the thinking of early 20th-century sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1908/1950) and Havelock Ellis (1897/1928). These theorists reasoned that if women are inherently

asexual, then women who are sexually attracted to other women must not be “real” women. Through a biological defect, they must have some essential masculine element. The category of “sexual invert” was created to describe these mannish lesbians. The inversion theory of sexual orientation promoted three ideas that have influenced views of women’s sexuality throughout the 20th century (Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999). A first idea was that heterosexual women are feminine and lesbians are masculine. A second idea was that heterosexuality is normal and that homosexuality is a perversion or pathological condition. Finally, inversion theories asserted that sexual orientation is biologically determined, with homosexuality reflecting a biological abnormality.

The 20th century witnessed many important changes in experts’ beliefs about female sexuality. Sigmund Freud (1905/1938) challenged the notion that sexual orientation is biologically based, arguing instead that both heredity and the environment, particularly early childhood experiences in the family, are significant factors in the development of sexual orientation. The widely publicized sex research of Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebbard (1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) challenged the view of women as asexual. Instead, they offered evidence of women’s capacity for sexual arousal, demonstrated that sexual intercourse is only one of many potentially fulfilling forms of sexuality for women, and began to document the diversity of women’s sexual experiences. Gradually, theorizing about women’s sexuality and sexual orientation shifted from a reliance on clinical impressions and case studies toward the use of more rigorous scientific methods.

In 1973, another landmark event occurred. As a result of new scientific research showing that sexual orientation is not inherently linked to mental health, combined with the efforts of gay activists, the APA removed homosexuality *per se* from its list of mental disorders (Bayer, 1981). In 1975, the APA’s Council of Representatives adopted a resolution stating that

homosexuality *per se* implies no impairment in judgment, stability, reliability or general social or vocational capabilities; further, the American Psychological Association urges all professionals to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations. (Conger, 1975, p. 633)

In the past two decades, professionals have increasingly come to see homosexuality as a natural variant in the development and expression of erotic attractions and commitment. This perspective has provided the basis for new gay-affirmative approaches to research and practice. In addition, the APA has disseminated scientific evidence demonstrating that same-gender sexual orientation is not pathological; has worked to educate psychologists, other professionals, and the public about the reality of gay and lesbian lives; and has participated in *amicus* briefs concerning the legal rights of lesbians and gay men.

Social Movements

Feminism has been characterized as “the first political movement in history to address itself to sensual desire . . . to personal eroticism as political issues” (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1982, p. 88). Feminists have highlighted the ways in which conventional standards for female sexuality maintain systems of gender inequality. They have emphasized the social forces that shape women’s lives and have challenged common assumptions about the “naturalness” of contemporary gender roles. Feminist scholars (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1990; McCormick, 1994) have demonstrated ways in which studies of women’s sexuality have been biased by a reliance on theories and models based on men’s sexuality and have argued for the value of analyses derived from women’s experiences.

Further, modern feminists have suggested that women’s affection for other women should be conceptualized as a broad continuum. Adrienne Rich (1980) explained that the “lesbian continuum” includes

a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand [the continuum] to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women . . . we begin to grasp the breadth of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of “lesbianism.” (pp. 648–649)

This view emphasizes the commonalities among women regardless of their sexual orientation.

A gay/lesbian rights movement was launched in the United States in 1969 on the heels of the powerful civil rights and feminist movements. This movement has worked to secure greater legal rights for lesbians and gay men, including non-discrimination policies in the workplace and military and legal parity with heterosexuals in marriage, child custody, adoption, and foster care. These efforts were strengthened in 1996 when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that lesbians and gay men may not be singled out for official discrimination simply because of hostility or prejudice toward their sexual orientation (Savage, 1996). This historic decision marked the first time that the high court had treated gay rights as a matter of civil rights. Overall, this movement has helped to identify sources of bias against sexual minorities, worked to change social institutions that maintain the marginality of lesbians and gay men, and fostered a collective identity among lesbians, gays, and bisexuals as members of a minority group (see D’Augelli & Garnets, 1995).

Moreover, activists and scholars have highlighted the associations among heterosexism, sexism, and attitudes toward women’s sexuality. As one example, a significant correlation exists between endorsement of traditional gender roles and prejudice toward lesbians and gay men (Kite & Whitley, 1996). For those who advocate traditional patterns of femininity and male privilege, lesbians are seen as violating women’s proper roles and challenging the patriarchal power structure

(Pellegrini, 1992). From this viewpoint, lesbians' economic and social independence from men challenges women's traditional subordinate status and rejects the custom of defining a woman's social identity on the basis of her relationship to men.

In Section II of this issue, three articles highlight the importance of social contexts. Anthropologist Evelyn Blackwood reviews research documenting great cross-cultural diversity in sexual and romantic relations between women. Her analysis illustrates how the patterning of women's same-sex desires and relationships is shaped by gender ideologies, kinship systems, and class distinctions. Beverly Greene examines the unique experiences of African American lesbian and bisexual women. In a final article in this section, Gregory Herek tackles another contextual influence: the widespread prejudice against sexual minorities in the United States. Herek draws on extensive survey research to assess heterosexuals' attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and to analyze how gender influences sexual prejudice.

Development: The Puzzle of Sexual Orientation

Until recently, research and theory about the development of sexual orientation focused on homosexuality; heterosexuality was seen as normative and needing little explanation (Kitzinger, Wilkinson, & Perkins, 1992). Today it is clear that an adequate analysis of sexual orientation must account for the full range of affectional and erotic patterns. The articles in Section III of this issue address the development of sexual orientation in women. (See also Bohan, 1996.)

Biological explanations for the causes of homosexuality gained prominence in the work of early sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing and Ellis. Currently, biological research focuses on the possible influence of prenatal hormones and genetics on the development of sexual orientation. Despite current media enthusiasm for biological theories about human behavior, scientific evidence fails to find clear links between biological factors and women's sexual orientation. This research is reviewed in an article by Rosemary Veniegas and Terri Conley in this issue. Public opinions about biological determinism and the policy implications of available scientific evidence are also considered.

A second popular answer to the puzzle of sexual orientation is that early experiences in the family are crucial. This was the view of Freud and many psychoanalytic theorists who saw lesbianism as resulting from a fixation or arrest in psychosexual development (Magee & Miller, 1997). For women, homosexuality was linked to penis envy and to parental relationships, such as a domineering mother and a weak father. Available empirical research provides little support for psychoanalytic predictions (e.g., Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981). Rather, the childhood family experiences of lesbians appear to be diverse.

More recently, the increased visibility of lesbian and gay parents has raised a new question. How, if at all, does the parents' sexual orientation influence the

sexual orientation of their adult children? We already know that most lesbians and gay men had heterosexual parents, so the influence of parents' sexual orientation cannot fully account for the sexual orientation of their children. Nonetheless, both genetic and socialization perspectives might predict an increased likelihood of homosexuality or bisexuality among the offspring of gay and lesbian parents (Bailey & Dawood, 1998). Several studies have compared children raised by lesbian mothers and gay fathers to children of heterosexual parents in otherwise comparable situations (see reviews by Allen & Burrell, 1996; Patterson, 1997). In an illustrative study, Golombok and Tasker (1996) compared 25 grown children of lesbian mothers to 20 grown children of heterosexual single-parent mothers. They found no significant differences in the proportion of offspring who reported same-gender sexual attraction or who identified as lesbian/gay/bisexual. However, adult children of lesbians were more likely to consider the possibility of having a lesbian or gay relationship and more likely to have had such a relationship in the past, especially if their family environment was characterized by openness and acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships. Overall, however, this and other studies demonstrate that the vast majority of children of gay and lesbian parents are heterosexual.

A third developmental perspective traceable to the early inversion theorists points to the possible role of gender nonconformity in childhood. Do girls who enjoy traditionally masculine activities and play with boys—so-called tomboys—grow up to become lesbians? According to Daryl Bem's (1996) "exotic becomes erotic" theory of sexual orientation, the answer is yes. Empirical support for this hypothesis about girls is weak (Peplau et al., 1998; Peplau et al., 1999). If tomboyism is a precursor to lesbianism, which characterizes no more than 3% of adult women in the United States (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), we might expect tomboyism to be rare. In fact, approximately half of American girls and women report being or having been tomboys (e.g., Burn, O'Neil, & Nederend, 1996; Plumb & Cowan, 1984). Studies comparing the remembered childhood experiences of adult lesbian and heterosexual women find significantly higher reports of tomboyism among lesbians, but the difference is moderate in size. Furthermore, these studies are based on retrospective accounts that may be biased by current experiences. In a meta-analysis of 16 retrospective studies, Bailey and Zucker (1995) found that the overwhelming majority of tomboys become heterosexual adults, including those with extreme scores on measures of gender nonconformity. Childhood gender nonconformity does not provide an adequate explanation for the development of sexual orientation in most women.

Two newer perspectives on the development of women's sexual orientation are presented in this issue. These articles focus on the experiences of adolescent girls and systematically investigate the pathways that lead some girls toward heterosexuality and others toward a lesbian or bisexual orientation. Janet Hyde and

Sara Jaffee analyze the pressures on teenage girls to adopt traditional gender roles and to become heterosexual adults. They consider the influences of family, peers, schools, and the media and examine the interrelated messages girls receive about femininity, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Lisa Diamond and Ritch Savin-Williams present findings from a program of research charting the sexual explorations of adolescent and young adult women. Rather than a single developmental sequence leading some women toward lesbian relationships and identity and other women toward heterosexual relationships and identity, they find complex and nonlinear patterns.

Implications for Research and Policy

New ways of conceptualizing women's sexuality and sexual orientation and new empirical findings have important implications for scientific research and for public policy. The articles in Section IV of this issue focus on these implications. Suzanna Rose considers how the inclusion of lesbians in research on personal relationships challenges heterosexist assumptions about friendship and romance. Anne Peplau and Linda Garnets summarize the current state of scientific evidence about the development of sexual orientation in women and highlight gaps in existing knowledge. They argue for a paradigm shift away from old models that equate homosexuality with illness or with sexual inversion. In their place, they propose a new paradigm that recognizes the great diversity of women's erotic experiences and emphasizes the many sociocultural factors that shape women's sexuality and sexual orientation across the lifespan.

In a concluding article, California State Assemblywoman Sheila Kuehl addresses the interface among science, social issues, and public policy in the arena of sexual orientation. She emphasizes the value of scientific research and analysis in informing policy makers and identifies new policy issues that are likely to gain prominence in the next few years. In a brief Afterword, former *Journal* Editor Jacqueline Goodchilds comments on this issue and the role that the *Journal of Social Issues* has played in giving visibility to social science research on gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation.

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LINDA D. GARNETS has been a lecturer in the Departments of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, since 1987, where she teaches a course called "Psychology of the Lesbian Experience." She is nationally known for her publications and presentations on lesbian and gay psychology, including a coedited anthology titled *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Male Experiences*. She is currently on the editorial boards of *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *Lesbian and Gay Psychology*, and the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy*. Garnets is the past Chair of the American Psychological Association's (APA's) Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest and of APA's Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns. She has been a member of SPSSI Council and chaired both the Continuing Education Committee and the Social Action Internship Committee. Garnets is an organizational consultant and psychotherapist, specializing in nonprofit social purpose organizations and lesbian and gay clients.

LETITIA ANNE PEPLAU is Professor of Social Psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has been a member of SPSSI for 2 decades and coedited (with Connie Hammen) an earlier *Journal* issue on "Sexual Behavior: Social Psychological Issues" (1977). A past president of the International Society for the Study of Personal Relationships, Peplau was the 1997 recipient of the Distinguished Scientific Achievement Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality. She has published many empirical papers on gender and close relationships, including studies of heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male relationships. Her other books include *Gender, Culture and Ethnicity* (coedited with Debro, Veniegas, and P. Taylor), *Sociocultural Perspectives in Social Psychology* (coedited with S. Taylor), and *Loneliness* (coedited with Perlman).