

A New Paradigm for Understanding Women's Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

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Major scientific findings about women's sexuality and sexual orientation are reviewed. Sexual orientation is unrelated to mental health. There is no inherent association between gender conformity and women's sexual orientation; masculinity and femininity are linked to sexual orientation in some social contexts but not in others. Research has so far failed to identify major biological or childhood antecedents of women's sexual orientation. Women's sexuality and sexual orientation are potentially fluid, changeable over time, and variable across social contexts. Regardless of sexual orientation, there are important commonalities in women's sexuality. In particular, women tend to have a relational or partner-centered orientation to sexuality. Together, these findings provide the basis for a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of women's sexual orientation.

Scientific research on women's sexuality and sexual orientation is still a young endeavor. Nonetheless, several basic findings have been supported consistently by empirical research. Taken together, these findings highlight the need to reject old models of women's sexual orientation and to develop a new paradigm that is grounded in scientific research and sensitive to the realities of women's lives. Too often, old theories have taken male experience as the norm for human experience. Yet there appear to be important differences in the sexualities of women and men that emerge when women's lives are the central focus of investigation. Consequently, we believe that a necessary research strategy will be to develop separate analyses of women's and men's sexualities, each based on a

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careful examination of the nature and antecedents of sexual orientation for that half of humankind. Whether or not generalizations and unified theories applicable to both sexes will eventually emerge remains to be seen.

We begin by summarizing well-established empirical findings about women's sexualities, which are outlined in Table 1. As relevant, we note differences between women and men to underline the importance of research and theory that put women center stage. We then identify key ingredients in a new paradigm for understanding women's sexual orientation.

Mental Health and Sexual Orientation: Rejecting the Illness Model

Implicit in many discussions of sexual orientation is the assumption that heterosexuals are normal and mentally healthy but homosexuals are abnormal and impaired in their psychological functioning (see review by Bullough & Bullough, 1997). This illness model has influenced theories about the causes of women's sexual orientation, as seen in the idea that lesbians have arrested psychosexual development. It has led to stereotypes of sexual-minority individuals as unhappy, maladjusted, and unable to form satisfying intimate relationships. A growing body of empirical work has refuted the illness model. Based on scientific evidence, the consensus among psychiatrists and psychologists is that homosexuality is not a form of pathology nor is it associated with mental illness or poor psychological functioning. On standardized measures of personal adjustment and psychological well-being, gay and lesbian individuals (Gonsiorek, 1991), couples (Peplau & Spalding, 2000), and parents (Patterson & Redding, 1996) are comparable to their heterosexual counterparts. Although research about bisexuals is limited, Fox (1996) found no evidence of psychopathology in nonclinical samples of bisexual women and men.

In summary, the illness model of sexual orientation is no longer scientifically viable. One implication is that scientific researchers should avoid taking heterosexuality as the norm for mental health (see Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991, for research guidelines).

Gender and Women's Sexual Orientation: Rejecting the Inversion Model

Early-20th-century sex experts such as Havelock Ellis (1928) and Krafft-Ebing (1908/1950) proposed an inversion model of homosexuality, suggesting that sexual orientation is closely tied to gender. Normal heterosexual women are feminine in their physiology, personality, and attractions to men. Lesbians are sexual inverts, women who are masculine in aspects of their physiology, personality, and attraction to women. The cumulative record of research on women's sexual orientation has repeatedly disconfirmed this model (see review by Peplau, Spalding, Conley, & Veniegas, 1999). There is no inherent link between

heterosexuality and femininity in women or between homosexuality and masculinity in women. Biological models based on inversion premises, most notably the proposal that prenatal hormones "masculinize" the brains of females destined to be lesbians, have not been confirmed by scientific research.

Research presented in this issue has demonstrated, instead, that there are consistent similarities among women, regardless of sexual orientation. Research on the centrality of intimacy and relationships to women's sexuality is illustrative. In addition, studies of bisexual women raise important questions about gender and sexual attractions (see Rust, this issue). Compared to other women, bisexual women appear to be less constrained by gender in their sexual and affectional attractions (Firestein, 1996). Bisexuals emphasize individual characteristics rather than gender in selecting a partner (Fox, 1996).

In summary, although the inversion model of sexual orientation remains popular, it lacks scientific support. There is no intrinsic association between gender conformity and women's sexual orientation; masculinity and femininity are linked to sexual orientation in some social contexts but not in others.

Biology and Women's Sexual Orientation: Challenging Biological Models

Empirical research has failed to demonstrate that biological factors are a major influence in the development of women's sexual orientation. (In addition to the review by Veniegas and Conley in this issue, see also Bailey, 1995; Peplau et al., 1999.) Lesbian and heterosexual women are indistinguishable in their body build (A. Ellis, 1963). Researchers generally agree that there is no causal relationship between adult sex hormone levels and sexual orientation (Byne, 1995). Studies of the impact of prenatal sex hormones on human development show that the great majority of women exposed to atypical levels of sex hormones before birth are heterosexual in their attractions and behavior. According to one leading expert, "the main bone of contention is whether variations in the prenatal hormonal milieu have any effect at all and, if they do, are [they] of any practical significance" (Zucker, Bradley, & Lowry Sullivan, 1992, p. 93). Investigations of sexual orientation and brain structure in women have never been conducted.

Currently, the most promising biological research on women's sexual orientation focuses on genetics (Bailey & Pillard, 1995). Research has found that lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to report having homosexual relatives. Studies of twins reared together find greater concordance (similarity) between the sexual orientation of monozygotic ("identical") twins than between dizygotic twins or adoptive sisters. Proponents of genetic perspectives see these findings as encouraging. In contrast, skeptics emphasize possible limitations of the studies (e.g., McGuire, 1995) and the need for studies of twins reared apart. The one study that attempted to identify a genetic marker for homosexuality in women was

unsuccessful (Hu et al., 1995). A definitive understanding of possible genetic influences on women's sexual orientation must await future research.

In summary, there is little evidence that biological factors are a major determinant of women's sexual orientation. In a recent review, Baumeister (2000, p. 356) acknowledged gaps in the available evidence, but nonetheless concluded, "the currently available data offer the best guess that male homosexuality is more strongly linked to innate or genetic determinants while female homosexuality remains more subject to personal choice and social influence." Although additional research will fill in gaps in our knowledge, there is no reason to expect that biological factors play anything other than a minor and probably indirect role in women's sexual orientation.

The Fluidity of Women's Sexuality

Scholars from many disciplines have noted that women's sexuality tends to be fluid, malleable, and capable of change over time. This point is often made in comparison to men, whose sexuality and sexual orientation are viewed as less flexible and more automatic. Recently social psychologist Roy Baumeister (2000) systematically reviewed empirical research on gender differences in erotic plasticity. Baumeister defined *plasticity* as the degree to which a person's sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural, social, and situational pressures. By contrast, a lack of plasticity would indicate that a person's sexuality is more rigidly patterned early in life, as a result of biological and/or childhood influences.

The concept of sexual fluidity is the cornerstone of a new paradigm for understanding women's sexuality and sexual orientation. If women's sexuality is not primarily determined by biological programming but is instead responsive to social contexts, then theories about women's experiences must be social psychological in focus. To make the case for this core idea, we next review evidence from Baumeister and others that supports three specific predictions concerning the fluidity of female sexuality.

Influence of the Social Environment

A first prediction is that to the extent that sexuality is plastic and malleable, it can be shaped by a range of social and situational influences. Baumeister (2000) marshaled considerable evidence showing that such factors as education, religion, and acculturation have greater impact on aspects of women's sexuality than on men's. Consider the link between education and sexual orientation. The National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994, p. 305) found that completing college doubled the likelihood that a man identified as gay or bisexual but was associated with a 900% increase in the percentage of women identifying as lesbian/bisexual (from 0.4% of women high school graduates to 3.6% of college graduates). Similarly, the association between religious

conservatism and a heterosexual identity was stronger among women than men. Also consistent with the plasticity hypothesis is evidence that active involvement in the 1970s feminist movement led some women to turn away from sexual relations with men and to establish relationships with women (e.g., Kitzinger, 1987; Rosenbluth, 1997; Whisman, 1996). Pearlman (1987) explained that "many of the new, previously heterosexual, radical lesbians had based their choice as much on politics as on sexual interest in other women" (p. 318).

Within-Person Variation or Change Over Time

A second prediction by Baumeister (2000) is that some degree of erotic plasticity would make it possible for an individual to have nonexclusive attractions toward both women and men. In addition, plasticity would permit a woman to change aspects of her sexuality or sexual orientation across the lifespan. There is considerable evidence that both nonexclusive attractions and change over time do characterize the experiences of some women (see Rust, this issue). American women who are not exclusively heterosexual are more likely to be bisexual rather than exclusively homosexual in their attractions and relationships (e.g., Laumann et al., 1994; Weinberg, Williams, & Pyror, 1994). For example, a recent study of 6,935 self-identified lesbians from all 50 states found that 77% of lesbians had had one or more male sexual partners during their lifetime (Diamant, Schuster, McGuigan, & Lever, 1999). The study's authors cautioned health care providers and others not to "assume that a woman who identifies herself as a lesbian has not had any sexual contact with men, or that such contact was only in the distant past" (p. 2734). Baumeister documented that this pattern of bisexual attraction and behavior is significantly more common among women than men.

Further, both women's identification as lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual and women's actual behavior can vary over time. In an early study of bisexuality in women, Blumstein and Schwartz (1976) interviewed women who had a long-term heterosexual relationship followed by a long-term lesbian relationship. Some of these women subsequently returned to relationships with men. Other researchers have also documented the experiences of married women who switch course and start a new life with a female partner (e.g., Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). The reverse pattern also occurs: Women who identified as lesbians may begin sexual relationships with men (e.g., Bart, 1993; Rust, 1992).

Claims about the potential erotic plasticity of women do *not* mean that most women will actually exhibit change over time. At a young age, many women adopt patterns of heterosexuality that are stable across their lifetime. Some women adopt enduring patterns of same-sex attractions and relationships. To the extent that the social influences acting on a woman remain constant, there is little reason to expect change based on the sexual plasticity hypothesis. The key point is that at least some

women are capable of variation and change, and that such plasticity appears to be more characteristic of women than men (cf. Diamond, 2000).

A related idea is that the patterning of women's sexuality can be expected to vary cross-culturally and in different historical contexts. Articles by Blackwood and others in this issue have documented this point (see also Peplau et al., 1999). Future research will benefit from paying more attention to the complexity and variability in women's erotic and emotional experiences.

Attitude-Behavior Consistency

A third issue relevant to sexual fluidity concerns the consistency among an individual's sexual attitudes, desires, and behavior. Baumeister (2000) argued that "if women's behavior is more malleable by situational forces than men's, then women will be more likely than men to do things contrary to their general attitudes" (p. 359). In the area of sexual orientation, the plasticity hypothesis would challenge the popular belief that sexual desires, behavior, and identity are invariably interconnected. To be sure, many individuals do report complete consistency: A woman might identify as lesbian, be attracted exclusively to women, and have sex with women partners only. But exceptions to this pattern of consistency are common. For example, a woman who identifies as lesbian might develop a strong attraction to a man. A woman may have strong attractions to both men and women but not identify as bisexual. A heterosexual woman may employ homoerotic fantasies when having sex with her male partner. Inconsistencies such as these were discussed in articles in this issue by Diamond and Savin-Williams and by Rothblum.

Further, when inconsistency occurs, it may be more common among women than men. For example, compared to men, a higher percentage of women who say they are attracted to women have not actually had sex with a woman (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Laumann et al., 1994). After reviewing evidence about these kinds of discrepancies, Rust (this issue) challenged the interpretation of this pattern as reflecting inconsistency in women's sexual identities. Instead, she suggested that women may have more complex self-identities that can encompass seemingly discrepant ingredients and that are not captured by current research methods. According to Laumann et al. (1994, pp. 285–286), one implication of this line of research is that it "makes more sense to ask about specific aspects of same-gender behavior, practice and feelings during specific periods of an individual's life rather than a single yes-or-no question about whether a person is homosexual."

In summary, there is growing evidence that women's sexuality and sexual orientation are potentially fluid and changeable over time. Consequently, efforts to understand women's sexual orientation must look to psychological and social influences.

Childhood Influences on Women's Sexual Orientation

It is often believed that childhood experiences in the family and with peers are formative in shaping many aspects of adult personality, attitudes, and behavior. From this perspective, one would expect that sexual orientation is strongly influenced by childhood experiences. Yet empirical research has so far failed to identify events or activities that predictably point a girl in our culture on the path toward lesbian or bisexual attractions (Bohan, 1996).

Efforts to test psychoanalytic theories about the family history antecedents of sexual orientation have failed (e.g., Bell, Weinberg, & Hammersmith, 1981; Downey & Friedman, 1998). Furthermore, the sexual orientation of parents appears to have limited impact on the sexual orientation of their children: most lesbians were raised by heterosexual parents and most children raised by gay or lesbian parents become heterosexual adults (e.g., Bailey & Dawood, 1998; Patterson, 1997). There is some suggestive evidence that gender nonconformity in childhood may be correlated with adult sexual orientation (e.g., Bailey & Zucker, 1995). Based on retrospective reports, lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to remember having been a tomboy as a child. Such studies are inconclusive, however, because memories of childhood may be colored by adult experiences. Equally important, most tomboys grow up to be heterosexuals.

Two issues concerning childhood influences on women's sexual orientation are noteworthy. First, according to the sexual plasticity hypothesis, we might expect women's sexuality to be more strongly influenced by childhood events than men's sexuality. Baumeister (2000) considered and rejected this possibility on empirical grounds. His review of research on childhood gender nonconformity, sexual dysfunction, and paraphilias suggested the opposite: that childhood experiences have stronger and more lasting effects on male than female sexuality. So, for example, the correlation between adult sexual orientation and retrospective reports of childhood gender nonconformity is significantly higher among men than among women (Bailey & Zucker, 1995). To explain this apparent contradiction, Baumeister (p. 368) proposed that "male sexuality may undergo a childhood phase (akin to imprinting in animals) during which social and environmental influences can have a major influence." In contrast, females may have no such critical period and so exhibit greater sexual fluidity across the lifecycle. This speculation needs empirical investigation (cf. Weinrich, 1987).

Second, it is possible that important early antecedents of women's sexual orientation have simply been overlooked by researchers and could be identified with further effort. For instance, in a society that is hostile to homosexuality, lesbians may be women who are willing to challenge convention and take social risks. Researchers have not investigated whether the development of personality characteristics such as risk taking or independence affects adult sexual orientation in women. Longitudinal studies charting the development of sexual orientation in women over time would be valuable.

Sociocultural Influences on Women's Sexual Orientation

There is mounting research evidence that the patterning of women's sexuality and sexual orientation varies across time and place. In her article in this issue, Blackwood illustrated some of the many ways in which women's sexuality and sexual relationships are influenced by cultural beliefs about gender and sexual desire, by kinship systems, and by women's economic and social status. Garnets and Peplau (this issue) highlighted the importance in our own society of the views of scientific experts and the impact of feminist and gay/lesbian rights movements. In a large and complex society, the experiences of ethnic minority and majority women may differ because they live in distinctive, though sometimes overlapping, social worlds. Greene (this issue) has identified specific ways in which African American women are affected by their unique historical and cultural experiences. The diverse forms that women's same-sex attractions and relationships can take add further support to the hypothesis of female erotic plasticity.

Although there has been no systematic attempt to quantify the impact of sociocultural forces on women's sexual orientation, their influence can be quite powerful. One of the most profound ways in which society shapes sexual orientation is by providing the social identities and institutions available to individuals. In addition, the cultural climate of prejudice versus acceptance of sexual minorities affects the lives of all women.

Identity

Sexual identity can be defined as "an individual's enduring sense of self as a sexual being that fits a culturally created category and accounts for one's sexual fantasies, attractions, and behavior" (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166). Historical changes in cultural interpretations of women's romantic relationships illustrate how cultural categories shape identity. The romantic friendships between women that flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries were socially acceptable and had no implications for a woman's identity (Faderman, 1981). As the 20th century unfolded, however, the identity of "lesbian" emerged, and social attitudes about these relationships changed. Faderman (1991, p. 303) explained that

love between women, especially those of the middle class, was dramatically metamorphosed from romantic friendships [into] "lesbianism" once the sexologists formulated the concept, economic factors made it possible for large numbers of women to live independently of men, and mobility allowed many women to travel to places where they might meet others who accepted the lesbian label.

Historians contend that the creation of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" as defining identities is a relatively recent development (e.g., Katz, 1995). As Rust has discussed (this issue), these sexual identities then set the stage for the emergence of a new social identity, that of the bisexual person.

Institutions

Another way in which cultures influence sexual orientation is through the creation of social institutions that provide both opportunities for and constraints on women's sexuality and relationships. As Blumstein and Schwartz (1990, p. 310) observed, these social arrangements can "be as concrete as a woman being unable to have heterosexual experience because her interactions with men are always chaperoned, or as subtle as her being unable to have sexual relations outside of her marriage because she is a suburban housewife who . . . never finds herself in the company of men."

As another example, living in same-sex institutions also tends to increase the likelihood of romantic and erotic relationships between women. In the 1920s, Katharine Davis (1929) surveyed more than 2,000 graduates of women's colleges. Fully 42% of the sample reported that they had had an intense emotional relationship with another woman in college; 1 woman in 5 reported having a sexual relationship with a best friend in college. Same-sex relationships are also common among prison populations and appear to be more prevalent among women than men in prison (see review in Baumeister, 2000; Rust, this issue). In both cases, institutions created for nonsexual purposes—education and incarceration—provide settings that foster same-sex bonds between women.

An important implication of cross-cultural and historical findings is that researchers cannot assume that the experiences of contemporary American women are universal or even typical of the full range of women's erotic attractions and relationships. More broadly, the phenomena of sexual orientation are not fixed and universal, but rather highly variable across time and place. Researchers interested in understanding the general nature of female sexuality must look beyond their immediate cultural and historical context.

Sexual Prejudice

The experiences of contemporary lesbian and bisexual women must be understood in the context of widespread prejudice against sexual minorities in our society (see Herek, 2000, and this issue). Indeed, bisexual women may encounter negative attitudes not only from heterosexuals but from lesbians as well (Rust, 1993, and this issue). Similarly, individuals who are both ethnic and sexual minorities may encounter sexual prejudice from both mainstream society and from their own racial/ethnic communities (Rust, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1996).

Sexual prejudice is closely linked to attitudes about gender and women's sexuality. Lesbians and gay men are disliked in part because they are perceived to violate traditional gender roles (Storms, 1978). Gender nonconformity is a central theme in antigay stereotypes, which depict lesbians as masculine or unfeminine and gay men as effeminate or unmasculine (Herek, 1984, Kite & Deaux, 1987).

Furthermore, antigay prejudice is stronger among heterosexuals who endorse traditional, restrictive attitudes about gender and family roles and who reject equality between the sexes (Herek, 1984).

All people are affected by sexual prejudice and discrimination. Women who identify as lesbian or bisexual must navigate through hostile social environments and may experience difficult dilemmas about when to conceal versus reveal their sexual orientation and intimate relationships. Women who are uncertain about their sexual orientation may be discouraged from considering sexual-minority options. Sexual prejudice also touches the lives of heterosexuals. Fear of being labeled gay is a powerful socialization influence (see Hyde & Jaffee, this issue). Regardless of their sexual orientation, girls and women who appear to be masculine in their appearance or interests, who dress in nontraditional clothes or resist a man's sexual advances, who work in nontraditional occupations or appear assertive risk being called lesbians (Kite, 1994). As a result, heterosexuals may experience social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles in order to avoid the stigmatizing label of homosexuality. For example, varsity women athletes often wear dresses, makeup, jewelry or long hair to avoid being considered lesbian (Blinde & Taub, 1992).

In summary, cultural and historical research documents the varied patterns of women's sexuality and erotic relationships. These findings add support to characterization of women's sexuality as potentially fluid and influenced by social forces.

The Importance of Relationships for Women's Sexuality and Sexual Orientation

For many theorists, especially those taking male experiences as their model, sexuality and sexual orientation are first and foremost about sexual behavior. Increasingly, however, researchers with diverse theoretical orientations have suggested that love and intimacy are more important for understanding women's sexuality than for understanding men's sexuality (e.g., Golden, 1996; Weinrich, 1987). For example, Regan and Berscheid (1996, p. 116) asked young heterosexual adults, "What is sexual desire?" These comments are illustrative:

Man: Sexual desire is wanting someone . . . in a physical manner. No strings attached. Just for uninhibited *sexual intercourse*. (italics in original)

Woman: Sexual desire is the longing to be emotionally intimate and to express love for another person.

Regan and Berscheid concluded that men were more likely to "sexualize" and women to "romanticize" the experience of sexual desire. Similarly, based on their study of bisexuals, Weinberg and colleagues (1994, p. 7) concluded: "For men it was easier to have sex with other men than to fall in love with them. For women it was easier to fall in love with other women than to have sex with them." We are not suggesting that eroticism is unimportant in women's lives or irrelevant to their

sexual orientation. Rather, we think it is crucial to acknowledge and analyze the central role emotional intimacy often has for women's sexual experiences. Similarly, we do not propose that emotional intimacy is unimportant to men's lives or their sexual orientation.

Gender differences in sexuality have been widely discussed (e.g., Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). In general, women have been characterized as having a relational or partner-centered orientation to sexuality and men as having a recreational or body-centered orientation (e.g., Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997; DeLamater, 1987). Both biological and social explanations have been proposed for these differences. Oliver and Hyde (1993) reviewed five theoretical perspectives—sociobiology, neoanalytic, social learning, social roles, and script theory—all of which predict sex differences in sexuality—for instance, that compared to males, females will have a smaller number of sex partners and hold more negative attitudes toward premarital sex. Several lines of research provide empirical support for these generalizations and suggest that they may apply regardless of sexual orientation.

Beliefs and Attitudes About Sex

There is considerable evidence that men and women tend to think about sex differently (see reviews by Baldwin & Baldwin, 1997; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). It is likely that these general patterns apply to gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as well as heterosexuals, although available research on homosexuals is often limited. As a starting point, men apparently think about sex more often than women do. In a U.S. national survey (Laumann et al., 1994), 54% of men reported thinking about sex every day or several times a day compared to only 19% of women. Compared to men, women hold less permissive attitudes toward casual sex, both premarital and extramarital. In a meta-analysis (Oliver & Hyde, 1993), the difference between men's and women's attitudes toward casual sex was quite large, with an effect size of $d = .81$. We do not have comparable data for lesbians and gay men, but the greater availability of opportunities for casual sex in gay male communities (e.g., bath houses) and reports of greater numbers of sex partners among gay men would suggest relatively permissive attitudes toward casual sex (Paroski, 1987).

DeLamater (1987) has suggested that adolescent men and women develop different beliefs about the types of persons who are appropriate sex partners and the time when sexual expression is acceptable. DeLamater reviewed research indicating that men are more likely to have a recreational orientation toward sex, in which most women are potential sex partners and no particular emotional relationship is needed as a prerequisite for sex. In contrast, women tend to have a relational orientation, in which sexuality is seen as an integral part of an ongoing, emotional relationship. Similar patterns may also characterize lesbians and gay men. In an analysis of lesbian and gay novels, Rose (1996) found that the most common story

line for women was a “romance script” emphasizing emotional intimacy, sexual attraction rather than sexual activity, and progress toward commitment. In contrast, the most common story line for gay men was an adventure script emphasizing the physical attractiveness of the partner, surmounting obstacles to love, and ambivalence about emotional intimacy. Another study asked lesbians and gay men to describe an actual recent first date (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). Lesbians’ dating scripts were more intimacy focused and less sexually oriented than those of gay men.

Men and women also differ in their reasons for having sex. In samples of married and dating heterosexuals, women said they desired intimacy from their sexual encounter; they viewed the goal of sex as expressing affection to another person in a committed relationship (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1989). In contrast men wanted sexual variety and partner initiative; they emphasized physical gratification as the goal of sex. In a study of lesbians and gay men, similar differences were found (Leigh, 1989).

Sexual Behavior

One of the largest and most consistent gender differences in sexuality concerns engaging in autoerotic sex without a partner. In a meta-analysis (Oliver & Hyde, 1993), males were substantially more likely than females to masturbate, with an effect size of $d = .96$. Laumann et al. (1994) found similar gender differences among both homosexual and heterosexual respondents: Women were significantly less likely than men to have masturbated during the last year. Further, among both heterosexuals and homosexuals, males report a significantly greater number of sex partners than do females (e.g., Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Laumann et al., 1994; Oliver & Hyde, 1993).

Another male-female difference concerns the timing of sex in the development of a relationship. In several studies of heterosexuals, women were significantly more likely than men to say that they were in love with their first coital partner (DeLamater, 1987). A similar pattern is found among sexual-minority adolescents: Diamond and Savin-Williams (this issue) reported that 70% of women had their first same-sex sexual contact within an established same-sex romantic relationship, compared to only 5% of the men. Other research also suggests that among lesbians, an intimate friendship often precedes sexual involvement (e.g., Vetere, 1982). Lesbians are much less likely than gay men to have sex with a new partner on a first date (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994).

Sexual Fantasies

B. J. Ellis and Symons (1990) reviewed research on gender differences in sexual fantasies. It is likely that most participants in these studies were heterosexuals,

although their sexual orientation was not discussed. Ellis and Symons found that women's fantasies were more likely to include a familiar partner, to include affection and commitment, and to describe the setting for the sexual encounter. In contrast, men's fantasies were more likely to involve strangers, anonymous partners, or multiple partners. Male fantasies were more likely to focus on specific sex acts and/or sexual organs. Researchers have not yet investigated the sexual fantasies of lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals.

In summary, patterns of sexual thoughts and behaviors appear to be strongly linked to gender but not to sexual orientation. This point was made most clearly in a study (Bailey, Gaulin, Agyei, & Gladue, 1994) that explicitly compared homosexual and heterosexual men and women on seven aspects of "mating psychology," including an interest in uncommitted sex, frequency of casual sex, and the importance of the partner's physical attractiveness, youth, or status. Male-female differences were found on all seven measures. In contrast, lesbian and heterosexual women were indistinguishable on most measures.

For many contemporary women, sexuality and sexual orientation are closely linked to intimate relationships. An important goal of sex is intimacy; the best context for pleasurable sex is an ongoing relationship. Sexual orientation is not merely about sex, but more broadly about personal relationships. Rust (this issue) suggested that women may be more likely than men to construct personal sexual identities based on elements other than sexual feelings and behaviors. Women, she proposed (p. 215), are more likely to treat their sexual identity as a reflection of their "romantic, social and political relationships with others as well as their sexual feelings and behaviors." Blumstein and Schwartz (1990, p. 307) made a similar point, noting that "if Kinsey had used female sexuality as a model, his scale [to assess sexual orientation] might have been conceptualized not so much in terms of accumulated acts and psychic preoccupations but rather in terms of intensity and frequency of love relationships." Researchers' tendency to accord greater weight to sex than to relationships may be an unintended legacy of male-centered thinking. If we were to conceptualize sexual orientation on the basis of women's experiences, we might well rename it *relational orientation* and then note that eroticism can be a vital component of intimate relationships. In summary, an adequate understanding of women's sexuality and sexual orientation will require a shift away from focusing on sexual behavior toward studying erotic relationships.

A New Paradigm for Understanding Women's Sexual Orientation

In the preceding sections, we have provided an overview of major research findings about women's sexual orientation. Research has discredited two leading theories of women's sexual orientation: the illness model and the inversion model. Investigations of women's sexuality have also challenged the primacy of biological factors in determining women's erotic attractions and point instead to the

importance of personal relationships and sociocultural contexts. Taken together, this body of research suggests the need for a new framework or paradigm for understanding women's sexual orientation. A comparison of old approaches and the newly emerging paradigm is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparing Old and New Paradigms for Conceptualizing Women's Sexual Orientation

Old Perspectives	New Perspective
Heterosexuals are normal and mentally healthy; sexual minorities are abnormal and psychologically impaired (the "illness model").	Sexual orientation is not associated with psychological adjustment or mental health.
Gender conformity is central to sexual orientation; heterosexual women are feminine and lesbians are masculine (the "inversion model").	There is no inherent link between gender conformity and sexual orientation; this link varies across different social contexts.
Biological determinants of sexual orientation are emphasized.	Biological influences are limited, indirect and differ across specific contexts.
Sexual orientation is an enduring, unchanging disposition.	Women's sexual orientation is potentially fluid and changeable over the lifespan.
Sociocultural influences are not considered; observed patterns are often assumed to be universal.	Sociocultural influences are emphasized, including cultural views of gender and sexuality, women's economic and social status, sexual identities recognized in the culture, and attitudes of acceptance versus rejection toward sexual minorities.
Sexual activity is central to sexual orientation.	Relationships are central to sexual orientation.
Sexual-minority women (lesbians) are the focus of inquiry.	All women are considered.
Bisexuality is ignored or seen as a transitory state in becoming lesbian.	Bisexuality is considered.
Differences between sexual minority versus majority women are emphasized.	Similarities among women are recognized based on biology, gender socialization, social status, etc.
Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior form discrete categories (i.e., heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual).	Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior can be varied, complex, and inconsistent.
Researchers look for a single cause or a single distinctive developmental pathway (e.g., prenatal hormones, family dynamics in childhood).	Researchers recognize that multiple causal factors and multiple pathways are involved; developmental pathways may not be linear.

We now consider two approaches to reconceptualizing women's sexual orientation, one emphasizing typologies of women and the second focusing on multiple pathways to sexual orientation outcomes.

Efforts to Identify Distinctive Types of Women

Recognizing the diversity of women's erotic lives has led some scholars to propose distinctions among different types of lesbians. Some have suggested a distinction between born-that-way "primary" lesbians and "elective" lesbians who chose same-sex attractions later in life (e.g., Ponse, 1978). According to Golden (1996, p. 235), from a young age primary lesbians have a "sense of difference based on sexual attraction toward members of the same sex and [do] not perceive this difference to be a conscious choice." A second distinction is between masculine "butch" lesbians and gender-conforming "femme" lesbians (e.g., Faderman, 1991; Singh, Vidaurri, Zambarano, & Dabbs, 1999). Still others have suggested a distinction between real lesbians and women who may resemble lesbians but are not truly members of that category (e.g., Bem, 1996; H. Ellis, 1928; and Muscarella, 1999, for a critique). Unfortunately, empirical research concerning these typologies is quite limited, inconsistent, and often not supportive (see, for example, Diamond & Savin-Williams, this issue). There is no compelling evidence that any of these typologies provides a general model of women's sexual orientation. Equally important, these typologies suffer from a variety of conceptual flaws.

First, typologies focus exclusively on sexual-minority women and fail to inquire about the experiences of heterosexuals. For example, in his theory of sexual orientation, Daryl Bem (1996) excluded "political lesbians" from his analysis. According to Bem (p. 331), some women "might choose for social or political reasons to center their lives around other women. This could lead them to avoid seeking out men for sexual or romantic relationships, to develop affectional and erotic ties to other women, and to self-identity as lesbians or bisexuals." Even though these women describe themselves as lesbian and have sexual relationships with other women, Bem considered them "beyond the formal scope" of his theory of sexual orientation. Bem did not discuss his criterion for excluding these women, but it presumably centered on their motivation for entering lesbian relationships, which is political rather than sexual. Importantly, Bem did not make a similar exception for women who might be termed "economic heterosexuals," that is, women whose motives for forming relationships with men include financial security or social status but not sexual passion. Are such women beyond the scope of a theory of heterosexuality? Personal motivation was relevant for classifying lesbians but not heterosexuals. This lopsided approach to theory development is unlikely to provide an adequate explanation of women's sexual orientation.

Gender nonconformity provides another example of the unequal analysis of sexual minority versus majority women. The butch-femme typology gives

prominence to the role of gender conformity in categorizing lesbians but fails to inquire about the experiences of heterosexual or bisexual women. Yet we know that most gender-nonconforming tomboys grow up to lead heterosexual lives. What impact do variations in masculine and feminine physical attributes, personality qualities, and interests have for the sexuality and sexual orientation of heterosexual girls and women? Note also that the butch-femme typology does not address the question of what factors lead some women to be lesbian and others to be heterosexual or bisexual. Rather, the typology considers variations among lesbian women.

A second problem is that current typologies fail to consider the sociocultural context of women's lives. For example, the primary versus elective lesbian distinction gives prominence to a woman's beliefs about whether or not her sexual orientation was a conscious choice. In forming an opinion on this matter, contemporary women are strongly influenced by prevailing social attitudes including the lesbian feminist ideology of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave great emphasis to the value of personal choice. Similarly, the butch-femme pattern is by no means universal. This pattern has been found in some contexts (e.g., the American butch-femme subcultures in the 1950s and 1960s studied by Faderman, 1991; the *tombois* of Sumatra studied by Blackwood, this issue). But in other contexts, such as 19th-century American romantic friendships and the *motsoalle* friendships among African women (Blackwood, this issue), masculinity and femininity were not defining elements in women's same-sex relationships.

A third limitation of typologies is that they usually propose mutually exclusive categories, each presumably with distinctive antecedents. The primary versus elective lesbian typology is illustrative. It assumes that the age of first same-sex attractions, youthful feelings of difference, and beliefs about choice are all strongly intercorrelated and form two mutually exclusive categories. In reality, women's experiences are often more complex than this dichotomy suggests (see Diamond & Savin-Williams and Rust, this issue).

For all these reasons, a typological approach does not appear to provide a viable framework for understanding the nature or development of women's sexual orientation.

Multiple Pathways

The emerging view of scholars is that sexual orientation is multiply determined by many influences. No single factor reliably predicts whether a woman embarks on a path toward heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, or some other pattern. Further, there are multiple developmental pathways leading to common outcomes (see Diamond & Savin-Williams, this issue). In contemporary society, a woman's assertion that she is heterosexual or lesbian may be based on quite diverse and nonlinear developmental trajectories. Women may be drawn

to a particular lifestyle for differing reasons. Knowing that a woman labels herself as heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual does not necessarily inform us about the pattern of her life experiences or the nature of her current erotic thoughts and feelings. Indeed, Pattatucci (1998) criticized research on sexual orientation for concentrating on "end states" (i.e., self-identification as lesbian) and ignoring how individuals reach that point. Demo and Allen (1996, p. 426) urged researchers to focus on the "multiple trajectories and social contexts . . . shaping individual lives; . . . the transitions and turning-points lesbians and gay men experience from their families of origin through the families they form and maintain as adults."

Recently, Peplau and colleagues (1999) proposed the concept of *intimate career* as a metaphor for thinking about women's sexual orientation. This concept suggests that the development of women's sexual orientation is analogous in important ways to occupational career development. The pathways that lead one woman to be a personal exercise trainer and another to be an Internet Web page designer are diverse and multiply determined. So, too, are the developmental origins of a woman's sexual orientation. The term "intimate career" refers to the sequence and patterning of a person's intimate relationships across the lifespan. Whereas some analyses of sexual orientation give prominence to sexual activity, the intimate careers model emphasizes the formation of same-sex and other-sex pair bonds; this approach is neutral as to the relative importance of sex, love, and nurturance in these relationships.

A career perspective recognizes that sexual identities, like the job categories available in a society, change over time. Designing Web pages is a new job; the "bisexual person" is a new social identity. The career analogy draws attention to the temporal dimension in conceptualizing women's sexual orientation. The factors shaping women's attractions and relationships vary across the life cycle. For example, the role of sexual arousal and passion may be different in the relationships of adolescents, middle-aged women, and older adults. Although some women remain in the same job throughout their life, other women make major career changes. Similarly, women's erotic and romantic attractions can also shift and change during their lifetimes.

Biology plays a part in the development of both occupational and intimate careers, but biological influences are inevitably indirect. Exercise trainers and computer Web page designers may differ in their physical and cognitive abilities, but these differences do not predetermine the women's occupations. Similarly, biological factors do not influence women's sexual orientation directly or in the same way across cultures. In particular contexts, certain physical characteristics may be important. The American lesbian women who adopt butch identities may differ from other lesbians in their personality and physical attributes (e.g., Singh et al., 1999). This may reflect a differential selection effect influencing which social category (butch or femme) a lesbian woman finds appealing. It may also reflect an

on-the-job training effect, in which enacting masculine versus feminine roles further differentiates the characteristics of butch and femme women over time. In contrast, contemporary lesbians who disdain the butch-femme pattern, like the Victorian women in same-sex Boston marriages before them, are probably indistinguishable from other women in their physical attributes, differing instead in such characteristics as their education, economic independence, feminist leanings, and progressive social attitudes.

Directions for Future Research

The recognition of multiple pathways to sexual orientation suggests a rich research agenda that spans from childhood to old age. We need to know more about how children form concepts of sexual orientation and come to match their personal experiences to the social identities available to them. The role of social class, ethnicity, urban-rural residence, religion, and education are poorly understood. Although we have retrospective studies linking gender nonconformity in childhood to adult sexual orientation, we need prospective studies describing the experiences of tomboys and the factors that lead most tomboys toward heterosexuality and a few toward bisexuality or homosexuality. Adolescence and early adulthood are a time when a young woman's sexual identity is often established and consolidated through the formation of romantic relationships. The research of Diamond and Savin-Williams (this issue; Diamond, in press) illustrates an innovative approach to analyzing this process while it is occurring, rather than retrospectively years later.

At later ages, questions arise about why most women maintain a consistent sexual orientation but some do not. We are just beginning to learn about possible transitions and shifts in sexual orientation in adulthood (e.g., Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Research on specific social settings such as all-women schools, the military, religious orders, or sports teams would help to illuminate the impact of situational opportunities and constraints on women's attractions, behavior, and identity. The influence of gay, lesbian, and feminist organizations and communities also merits study. Finally, very little is known about the experiences of bisexual women.

In conclusion, a growing body of scientific evidence provides the ingredients for a new paradigm for understanding women's sexual orientation. Accurate models must recognize the potential plasticity of female sexuality. As a result, new models will give prominence to a wide range of sociocultural factors that influence women's sexuality and sexual orientation. Successful models must also account for changes that may occur throughout a woman's lifespan; sexual orientation is not necessarily fixed in adolescence, and so a temporal dimension is essential. Equally important is recognition of the complex interrelationships among women's sexual identity, attractions, and behavior. Models of women's sexual

orientation must pay attention to the importance of personal relationships as an essential element in sexual desire and erotic attraction. Successful models will address not only the experiences of sexual-minority women but also the experiences of heterosexual women.

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