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A New Look at Women's Sexuality & Sexual Orientation

by Linda D. Garnets and Letitia Anne Peplau

A New Look: Women's Sexuality

Women's sexual orientation is potentially fluid, is shaped by life experiences, and can change over the life span.

Intimate relationships are often more central to women's sexual orientation than sexual behavior.

A lesbian sexual orientation does not result from biological abnormalities. Biological influences on sexual orientation are limited and indirect.

Women's sexual orientation is shaped by such social and cultural factors as women's education, social status and power, economic opportunities, and attitudes about women's roles.

There is no single developmental pathway leading to a heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian outcome.

Scientific evidence points toward a significant paradigm shift

in conceptualizing women's sexuality and sexual orientation. When theorists generalize about both sexes, they tend to take male experience as the norm and may ignore unique aspects of women's sexuality. Yet a growing body of research indicates that the nature and development of sexual orientation are different for women and men. We have proposed a new paradigm that puts women's experiences at center stage. For example, an understanding of women's sexual orientation requires 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. These, in turn, are shaped by the cultural and ethnic context of women's lives.

Scientific research has refuted many common myths and offers a new view of women's sexual orientations. A new view emphasizes several well-documented findings, which includes the following:

- Women's sexual orientation is potentially fluid, is shaped by life experiences, and can change over the life span.
- Intimate relationships are often more central to women's sexual orientation than sexual behavior.
- A lesbian sexual orientation does not result from biological abnormalities. Biological influences on sexual orientation are limited and indirect.
- Women's sexual orientation is shaped by such social and cultural factors as women's education, social status and power, economic opportunities, and attitudes about women's roles.
- There is no single developmental pathway leading to a heterosexual, bisexual, or lesbian outcome.

Several key elements of the new paradigm deserve comment.

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The Fluidity of Women's Sexuality & Sexual Orientation

The concept of erotic fluidity is the cornerstone of the new paradigm for understanding women's sexualities and sexual orientations. Scholars from many disciplines have noted that women's sexuality tends to be fluid, malleable, shaped by life experiences, and capable of change over time. Female sexual development is a potentially continuous, lifelong process in which multiple changes in sexual orientation are possible. Women's sexuality is responsive throughout the life span to a wide range of social, cognitive, and environmental influences. Women who have had exclusively heterosexual experiences may develop an attraction to other women, and vice versa. Baumeister (2000) reviewed three kinds of evidence of women's greater erotic plasticity than men's: greater changes in women's sexual attitudes and behavior over time; social and cultural factors that influence women more; and a lower consistency between women's sexual attitudes and behavior.

The Importance of the Social Context

The new paradigm recognizes that the patterning of women's erotic and romantic attractions is profoundly influenced by the historical, cultural, and social context of women's lives. Although passion and sexual desire are experienced as intensely personal and unique, they are in fact shaped by cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality, by kinship systems, by economic opportunities, by social status and power, by attitudes about women's roles, by whether or not sexual identities are recognized in a given culture, and by attitudes of acceptance versus rejection toward sexual minorities. For example, in some cultures, same-sex attachments are socially approved and widespread; elsewhere they are stigmatized and hidden. In some settings same-gender relationships for women co-exist with heterosexual marriage; in other settings women are more likely to form exclusive relationships with either a same-gender or other-gender partner.

The Importance of Relationships

Increasingly, researchers with diverse theoretical orientations have suggested that love and intimacy are more important for understanding women's sexuality than men's sexuality. That is, girls and women tend to have a relational



Linda Garnets presented this research in a talk in the Women's Studies Lesbian Speakers Series on November 2. The event was co-sponsored by CSW and the Williams Institute.

or partner-centered orientation to sexuality, and boys and men tend to have a recreational or body centered orientation. 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. Models of women's sexual orientations 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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Linda Garnets (shown above) has been an affiliated professor of psychology, women's studies, and LGBT studies since 1987. She is nationally known for her publications and presentations on lesbian and gay psychology, including a co-edited anthology titled, *Psychological Perspectives on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Experiences*. She can be reached at lgarnets@ucla.edu.

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