## Chapter 8: Female flexibility

Over the past fifty years, a rainbow of gender and sexual minority identities have emerged— lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning, asexual, aromantic, and many more. This LGBTQ+ “spectrum” is, unsurprisingly, most embraced by the young, more than a quarter of whom lay claim at least one of those letters. Even among older people, though, the survey suggests that significantly more people identify in these ways than commonly cited statistics suggest.[[1]](#footnote-21)

Bisexuality, though often “invisible” as we’ve noted, accounts for well over half of the rainbow— about 60-70%, over all ages. Women, in turn, make up about three quarters of the bisexual population, at least under the age of 50.

We can see a striking difference between female and male bisexuality by graphing them separately. Roughly 5% of men are bisexual, with only modest variation by age. For women, though, the variation is dramatic. About 35% of 19 year old women are bi (that’s more than 1 in 3), but by age 65 it’s only about 2.5% (1 in 40). There are, in other words, about 14 times more 19 year old bisexual women than 65 year old bisexual women.

What are we to make of this? Thinking in terms of the Kinsey scale, we might imagine that women are on average closer to the middle than men, that is, “more bisexual”; but this wouldn’t explain why we see such an impressive *change* as a function of age. In theory, this change could be at least in part age-related; perhaps something about women’s physiology, more so than men’s, changes as they age?

Remember, we have a tool for testing this idea: we can compare the 2018-19 data with the 2020-21 data. Although the error bars are large, the percentages appear to be in flux, which isn’t consistent with the “age hypothesis”:

[[COMBINE INTERACTIVELY]]

We can see that among women in their 40s and older, there has indeed been little or no change in bisexuality, but among younger women, the numbers have risen by over 2% in absolute terms— not a large change, but probably a significant one. Interestingly, we also see a rise in bisexuality among men, across all ages. Although the absolute increase is smaller (about 1 to 1.5%), it’s also likely significant, and is larger in relative terms. So, men are increasingly identifying as bisexual across all ages, as are younger women.

Here are four potential explanations:

1. Maybe women are more flexible in their sexual attraction than men, resulting in a far greater proportion of younger women (for whom it’s more socially acceptable, hence less stigmatized) identifying as bisexual.
2. Maybe male bisexuality carries a greater stigma at *any* age, resulting in only a fraction of potentially bisexual men acknowledging their bisexuality. Absent such uneven stigma, the curves for women and for men might look more alike.
3. Maybe women aren’t inherently more flexible than men, but have been forced to compromise more, especially in the past, due to economic disadvantage.
4. Maybe female sexuality has been systematically devalued, especially in the past, resulting in lower expectations of sexual attraction and pleasure.

There’s evidence for all four factors.[[2]](#footnote-23) In this chapter, we’ll focus on sexual flexibility, since we have several ways to see its effects, and it has many interesting implications. For instance, it bears on the question of essential nature versus “lifestyle choice”— that is, free will— broached in the previous chapter. In the next chapter we’ll consider the third and fourth factors, exploring gender asymmetries in the role of economics and in societal expectations about sexual fulfillment.

Flexibility isn’t something we can fully describe using a single point on the one-dimensional Kinsey scale, or even the two-dimensional “Kinsey diagram.” We can instead imagine a person as being tethered to a “home position” on that diagram by a spring, which might be tight or loose, or perhaps even loose in one direction (say, attraction to the same sex) but tight along another (say, attraction to the opposite sex). A highly flexible person may live in an entire fuzzy region of the Kinsey diagram.

There’s evidence that most people have some flexibility in their sexual “wiring,” allowing them to adapt to varying environments. Studies have documented this kind of flexibility, for example, among many otherwise heterosexual men in prisons, on naval ships, and under other prolonged single-sex living conditions.[[3]](#footnote-24) It’s also common for gay and lesbian people to have a history of early opposite-sex relationships before coming out, so while these may not have been entirely satisfying, presumably it means they may have some flexibility too. The survey comments include many accounts of sexual flexibility, but, as the numbers also show, they’re a lot more frequent among women, regardless of whether they identify as straight, lesbian, bi or pan, or otherwise:

There were a couple questions that may seem contradictory, to clarify: I am both hetero and bi, a little bit… Meaning I’m not like fully bisexual because it’s only a physical attraction towards women sometimes. I would consider myself more “bi-comfortable” than bisexual, if that makes sense.[[4]](#footnote-26)

I have had homosexual and bisexual experiences and attractions to women in the past. I consider myself heterosexual, but could change my mind if the right woman came along.[[5]](#footnote-27)

I am mostly lesbian, but once in a blue moon I am attracted to a man. It doesn’t happen often enough for me to consider myself bisexual, but it happens.[[6]](#footnote-28)

An implication is that many women with male partners (including ones who think of themselves as straight) could easily have been bisexual or pansexual, or even lesbian, had they grown up without the pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations— reminiscent of the way many people whose behaviors suggest they’re ambiguously handed seem to have taken the path of least resistance to become right-handed. This is most clearly evident in comments from 20-40 year old women:

I am a slightly closeted bisexual woman who is happily married to a man.[[7]](#footnote-29)

I consider myself bisexual because I am attracted to both men and women, but I’ve only ever dated men.[[8]](#footnote-30)

I’m bisexual, married to a man, living a hetero-normative life.[[9]](#footnote-31)

Bisexual but in a heterosexual partnership.[[10]](#footnote-32)

Bisexual, don’t show it much.[[11]](#footnote-33)

Closeted bisexual.[[12]](#footnote-34)

I guess I could be classified as bisexual because I am physically attracted to women. But have never acted on it and doubt I ever will.[[13]](#footnote-35)

I don’t identify as bisexual, but find myself attracted to women.[[14]](#footnote-36)

These sentiments are so common, it can almost make one wonder whether *truly* exclusively opposite-sex attracted women might be a rarity, as one less flexible 33 year old from Kennesaw, Georgia wryly points out:

It seems like everyone is so touchy [nowadays] about their sexuality, and it [seems] like women are supposed to be attracted to other women. but I’m not, [it’s] almost confusing.

Implicit in this comment is the observation that, as with other sexual minorities, same-sex attraction and bisexuality are much less stigmatized now than they used to be, especially for women, among young people, and (as we’ll confirm with data in Part III) in cities. A 38 year old woman in San Francisco, a city famous for its progressive attitude to sex, celebrated this in her response, writing,

I was born female and have always identified as a heterosexual woman. But I am very blessed to live in a city/community that is the most diverse, open, and beautiful in this world and I feel so very lucky to live a place where everyone is allowed to be who they truly are in every sense.

It’s still worth remembering that this isn’t always the felt reality, though. A fellow resident demurred,

I consider myself heterosexual because I don’t want to deal with being gay or bisexual in our current society, but every once in a while I’ll be attracted to another woman. I suppose that could make me bisexual then, but I don’t really consider myself that.

Given these are the sentiments of a 32 year old woman in San Francisco, we can imagine that for an older man in a more conservative rural ZIP code, the closet is still the norm.

The recent and somewhat controversial idea of “demisexuality” can be understood as another manifestation of sexual flexibility. Per Wikipedia,[[15]](#footnote-37)

The term ‘demisexual’ comes from the concept being described as being “halfway between” sexual and asexual. […] A demisexual person does not experience sexual attraction until they have formed a strong emotional connection with a prospective partner. The definition of “emotional bond” varies from person to person. Demisexuals can have any romantic orientation. People in the asexual spectrum communities often switch labels throughout their lives, and fluidity in orientation and identity is a common attitude.

The apparent vagueness of demisexuality as a phenomenon or identity has attracted a certain amount of ridicule in some quarters, especially given the ever-lengthening “alphabet soup” of finely parsed LGBTQ+ identities. There has been critique, also, of the way it seems to reinforce a pop romance trope wherein a woman being wooed by a man isn’t initially driven by libido, but awakens sexually to her suitor only once she has fallen in love with him. From the male perspective, a woman in this scenario may come across as morally pure, sexually flattering, and reassuringly faithful. She wasn’t looking for sex in the first place (so, is virtuous), but, having fallen in love with a man, experiences sexual passion exclusively for him (what could be more gratifying to his ego?), and once in love won’t seek sex elsewhere (so, both virtuous and safe). This certainly whiffs of a patriarchal fantasy, though it’s also undeniable that paperbacks telling this story sell in large numbers— and men aren’t the main audience.

Setting aside sexual politics, though, claiming that there’s no such thing as demisexuality is hard when so many people *say* that they’re demisexual: between 2% and 5% of men, and between 5% and 10% of women. Here, as elsewhere, we should listen to what people are telling us about themselves, and follow the data where it leads.

We’ve seen that asexuality is more common among women than men, and hypothesized that women tend to be, on average, more flexible in their sexuality than men. It’s unsurprising, then, that demisexuality is also more common among women. One way to think of it is as an asexual default or anchor point, along with a high degree of flexibility. So, a demisexual person can be understood to be asexual but flexible— able to become more sexual under the “right” circumstances, and with the “right” person. We’ve also seen the way asexuality and bisexuality are neighbors on the 2D Kinsey diagram, explaining why demisexual people are often fluid in their orientation, as with a 27 year old woman from Batavia, New York, who wrote, “I identify as demisexual and have only had relationships with men, but that doesn’t mean I’d be opposed to a relationship with a woman.”

When we compare the percentage of women who are lesbian with the percentage of men who are gay, we see more evidence of the same pattern of greater female flexibility and also, perhaps, of greater stigma for gay men.

The consequences are interesting. First, we notice that the percentage of men who are gay at different ages only varies by a bit over a factor of two, from a high of just over 10% around age 22 to a low of 4-5% among the youngest and the oldest adults in the sample. A reasonable interpretation is that about 5% of men are so unambiguously gay that they identify that way regardless of which generation they belong to, which is to say, despite the greater stigma experienced by older men. It seems that an additional 5% or so of young men who don’t identify as gay at age 19 decide that they are by their early twenties, which suggests a greater degree of flexibility; in earlier generations, when the stigma was stronger, many of them would likely *not* have identified as gay. By contrast, the “hard core” of inflexibly lesbian women appears to be only half the size, with a low of about 2.5% (1 in 40) among older female respondents. Yet among young women, lesbian identification rises to 20% (1 in 5), a factor of *eight* higher! The curious result is that older lesbians are half as common as older gay men, while 19 year old lesbians are four times *more* common than 19 year old gay men.

When we compare the proportion of gay men who are exclusively same-sex attracted[[16]](#footnote-39) with the proportion of lesbian women who are exclusively same-sex attracted, we see more evidence supporting this interpretation. Only 25% or so of young lesbians are *exclusively* same-sex attracted, suggesting some combination of sexual flexibility and a broader application of the lesbian identity, as we’d expect given lower stigma nowadays. Among 65 year old lesbians, though, nearly 90% are exclusively same-sex attracted— the more inflexible “hard core” of the lesbian population. On the other hand, a strong majority of gay men of all ages, roughly 60-80%, are exclusively same-sex attracted, though there’s a minimum in this curve around age 22, coinciding with the previous graph’s peak in gay male identification.

[[FOLLOWING THREE PLOTS ARE INTERACTIVELY COMBINABLE]

As we also saw in the graphs at the end of Part I of this book, the percentages of women and men who are exclusively same-sex attracted show much less variability, both by age and by gender, than the percentages identifying as lesbian and gay— though even here, there’s some evidence for greater female flexibility, in that the range for exclusive same-sex attraction among women varies from a low of about 2.5% at age 65 up to nearly 6% at age 19 (a 2.4x difference), whereas among men it doesn’t vary as much by age and only ranges from about 3% to about 5.5% (a 1.8x difference). It’s interesting to see, though, that under the age of 40, the percentages of exclusively same-sex attracted women and men are very similar. While we know better now than to speculate on what humanity in “a state of nature” might look like (we’re cultural beings), the numbers among the young may reflect conditions both less contingent on the evolving meanings of terms like “lesbian” and “gay,” and less distorted by historical stigma.

The emerging picture, then, suggests that with less social stigma, more men might be gay or “heteroflexible,” or put another way, women’s apparently greater flexibility is at least partly a function of the lower stigma surrounding female same-sex attraction.

1. [Link](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=LGBT_demographics_of_the_United_States&oldid=955102707) The National Bureau of Economic Research has concluded that the non-heterosexual population has been significantly underestimated in surveys using traditional questioning methods, even if anonymous. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. This isn’t an exhaustive list of potential factors, just the ones for which I have evidence. For instance, it’s also possible that sexual attraction varies more as a function of age in women than in men for physiological reasons— but we have no evidence in support of this idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/15248380020033005> Hensley, Christopher, and Richard Tewksbury. “Inmate-to-inmate prison sexuality: A review of empirical studies.” Trauma, Violence, & Abuse 3.3 (2002): 226-243. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
4. A 29 year old woman from Bargersville, Indiana. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
5. A 40 year old woman from Dallas, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
6. A 37 year old woman from Austin, Texas. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
7. A 26 year old woman from Eureka Springs, Arkansas. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
8. A 39 year old woman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. A 34 year old woman from Thomson, Georgia. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
10. A 29 year old woman from Huntersville, North Carolina. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
11. A 21 year old woman from Rensselaer, New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
12. A 34 year old woman from Winnetka, California. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
13. A 35 year old woman. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
14. A 36 year old woman from Westland, Michigan. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
15. [Link](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Gray_asexuality&oldid=1045042052) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
16. These calculations are based on both sexual and romantic attraction. Exclusive same-sex attraction here means “yes” to both sexual and romantic attraction to the same sex, and “no” to the opposite sex. As in other plots where numbers are broken down by binary gender, people whose own gender identification is ambiguous are left out of the analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)