## Chapter 9: Pressure to conform

The reclaiming of the umbrella term “queer” in recent years is partly a response to the ever-thickening LGBTQ+ alphabet soup, an effort to create more solidarity across that archipelago of minority identities. It simply means, “not on the mainland.” It says, “I don’t conform.” But it’s also an acknowledgment of the way sexual flexibility and other kinds of fluidity can render some of those fine alphabetic distinctions tenuous, at least as a stable basis for identity: “I’m queer and categories don’t fit and sometimes answers sound conflicting when they aren’t.”[[1]](#footnote-21)

Consistent with this, we can see sharp rises in queer identification among the young even between 2018-19 and 2020-21. We can also see the way it has become strongly associated with younger women— under the age of 30, about two thirds of queer people are women, about a quarter are men, and about 10% identify as both or neither, whereas above middle age roughly equal numbers of queer people are women and men, with a negligible number of people (queer or not) identifying as both or neither.

By the end of the 19th century, “queer” had become a slur referring specifically to gay and lesbian people. This usage is often traced to John Sholto Douglas, the 9th Marquess of Queensbury (1844-1900), a boxing enthusiast and bully whose sons had love affairs with other men, much to Queensbury’s disgust.[[2]](#footnote-22) The eldest son, Francis, was engaged as a private secretary (with… benefits) to Archibald Primrose, the 5th Earl of Rosebery, who briefly served as the Prime Minister of the UK in 1894-95. When Francis died under suspicious circumstances at a shooting party, Queensbury sent an enraged letter to his younger son, Alfred, blaming the death on “Snob Queers like Rosebery.”[[3]](#footnote-23)

The survey shows us how the meaning of “queer” has shifted in recent decades. While three quarters of queer people over the age of 50 identify as “homosexual, gay or lesbian,”[[4]](#footnote-24) this figure drops to around half for younger people. At the same time, older lesbians and gay people are somewhat *less* likely to identify as queer; that’s not so much because they don’t believe the word was intended to apply to them, but because many still find the term offensive, hence reject it. As a 59 year old man from Jacksonville, Florida put it, “I identify as homosexual or gay, but not queer.”

We can see more evidence of the way “queer” has become both broader and less offensive over time if we look at the same pattern with respect to bisexuality. Among the young, nearly 70% of queer people are bisexual, while less than 30% of people older than 55 are. Conversely, while 40% of the 19 year old bisexual population consider themselves queer, only about 10% of 65 year old bisexuals do.

There’s more going on here than a mere shift in language. Most older lesbian, gay, and bisexual people seem to have less *use* for the flexibility implied by the term “queer,” because more of them comprise the “hard core” who are— and perhaps always were— unable or unwilling to conform to the heterosexual majority even at a time when the social pressure to do so was far more intense than it is today.

We’ve seen evidence that, on average, most women tend to be more sexually flexible, or adaptable, than most men, and that the stigma associated with same-sex attraction seems to be easing. Before we move on, an important caveat is in order, though.

Recall the income data from Chapter 4, showing how much less money women used to make than men (an earnings gap that still hasn’t closed). This strongly incents women to marry men, and stay married to them, especially if they’re committed to the costly project of raising children. Many women might make this choice even if they’re far from heterosexual— and perhaps even if they’re not particularly flexible. This didn’t escape the notice of Edmund Bergler, who set aside a chapter on lesbianism in his 1956 book, writing:[^5]

The ratio of visible to camouflaged Lesbians is probably one to one hundred, and most of the camouflaged Lesbians are married. […] Male homosexuals habitually overplay, female homosexuals habitually underplay the perversion. […] [F]emale homosexuals of the majority group (those who have married for social or economic reasons) […] tend to “prove” that the whole thing is child’s play, for aren’t they married? […] In observing and studying women patients for nearly thirty years, I have always been amazed at the frequency with which one finds protracted or sporadic, transitory Lesbian episodes in the histories of frigid women.

Bergler’s glancing reference to the likely “economic reasons” for this asymmetry hardly does justice to the profound difference in means between men and women historically, and why this might have mattered. Lesbians were never well represented in the trendy gay neighborhoods of San Francisco, New York, or Seattle;[[5]](#footnote-25) when I once asked a lesbian friend why that was, she replied acidly, “Do you think we could afford the rent?”[[6]](#footnote-28)

On the survey, a 91 year old woman from Seffner, Florida wrote, “I am attracted to other women, but do not act on it.” This is indeed likely true for the majority of lesbian or bisexual women of her generation, and earlier. Especially for women far from the heterosexual end of the scale, like this 49 year old from Johnson City, Tennessee, repression can manifest as a lack of interest in sex:

I consider myself asexual at this point in my life. All my life I have been attracted to males and females. Mostly females. As a female I conformed to my family and societal norms and no one has ever known I have been attracted to females. I believe years of marriage to a male has a great deal to do with why I now feel nearly completely asexual.

There were many survey responses in this vein. Some, like “Female looking, now asexual, maybe my whole life but pretending?”[[7]](#footnote-29) hint at a lifelong forced fit into being a woman, period, not just being a straight woman.

Beyond issues of economic privilege, expectations have also shifted over time regarding female sexual pleasure. The fact that leading 20th century psychiatrists like Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Stekel, and Edmund Bergler considered “frigidity” in women a problem (Stekel wrote a two volume monograph on the subject[[8]](#footnote-30)) represented progress of a sort, as the pervasive belief in the 19th century had been that women didn’t, or shouldn’t, actually enjoy sex.

British medical doctor and author William Acton (1813-1875) was a towering figure during this earlier period. His book *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* was a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, going through dozens of editions and reprintings in London and Philadelphia from 1857 until 1903, more than a quarter century after his death. *The Lancet* and other prominent medical journals of the day were effusive in their praise. The following is from the third edition, printed in London in 1867:

[The] majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind. What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally. It is too true, I admit, as the divorce courts show, that there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men, and shock public feeling by their exhibition. I admit, of course, the existence of sexual excitement terminating in nymphomania,\* a form of insanity that those accustomed to visit lunatic asylums must be fully conversant with; but, with these sad exceptions, there can be no doubt that sexual feeling in the female is in abeyance, and that it requires positive and considerable excitement to be roused at all; and even if roused (which in many instances it never can be) is very moderate compared with that of the male.

The footnote on “nymphomania” is perhaps even more remarkable, in that it spells out the potential consequences for a woman who admits to too much sexual pleasure:

\*I shall probably have no other opportunity of noticing that, as excision of the clitoris has been recommended for the cure of this complaint, Kobelt thinks that it would not be necessary to remove the whole of the clitoris in nymphomania, the same results (that is destruction of veneral desire) would follow if the glans clitoridis had been alone removed, as it is now considered that it is in the glans alone in which the sensitive nerves expand. This view I do not agree with […].

Acton, in other words, wasn’t content to cut off the exposed tip of the clitoris to “treat” cases of excessive female pleasure, but felt it necessary to excise “the whole” organ[[9]](#footnote-31) in order to ensure sexual pleasure would be extinguished— the same reason female genital mutilation is still practiced in some African and Middle Eastern countries today. On the other side of the pond, America’s most famous doctor, the KFC-looking John Harvey Kellogg (of breakfast cereal fame), recommended the same procedure for the “treatment” of masturbation in girls.[[10]](#footnote-32)

Returning to economics, what Acton had to say about the role of social class in female sexual desire is noteworthy too:

Men, and particularly young men, form their ideas of women’s feelings from what they notice early in life among loose or, at least, low and vulgar women. There is always a certain number of females who, though not ostensibly in the rank of prostitutes, make a kind of trade of a pretty face. They are fond of admiration, they like to attract the attention of those immediately above them. Any susceptible boy is easily led to believe, whether he is altogether overcome by the syren or not, that she, and therefore all women, must have at least as strong passions as himself. Such women, however, will give a very false idea of the condition of female sexual feeling in general.

Association with the loose women of London streets, in casinos, and other immoral haunts (who, if they have not sexual feeling, counterfeit it so well that the novice does not suspect but that it is genuine), all seem to corroborate an early impression such as this, and […] it is from these erroneous notions that so many young men think that the marital duties they will have to undertake are beyond their exhausted strength, and from this reason dread and avoid marriage.

Married men — medical men — or married women themselves, would tell a very different tale, and vindicate female nature from the vile aspersions cast on it by the abandoned conduct and ungoverned lusts of a few of its worst examples.

There are many females who never feel any sexual excitement whatever. Others, again, immediately after each period, do become, to a limited degree, capable of experiencing it; but this capacity is often temporary, and may cease entirely till the next menstrual period. The best mothers, wives, and managers of households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.\*

As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions.

So, we learn that lower-class women may have feigned or exaggerated sexual interest in order to secure support from wealthier men. Given the economic prospects for a single working-class woman in the 19th century, this did undoubtedly happen— and it must have made the line between professional sex work and mere survival while being female somewhat blurry, as it often has been throughout history.

The sex trade did in fact flourish in this age of extreme repression, rapid urbanization, and rising economic inequality. According to an 1857 article in *The Lancet*, there were 80,000 sex workers and 5,000 brothels in London (“one house in sixty”),[[11]](#footnote-33) generating a torrent of lurid reportage and hand-wringing policy debates among clergy, politicians, doctors, lawyers, reformers, and moralizers— many of whom, being older, male, and moneyed, were undoubtedly also clients. With no antibiotics and scant use of condoms (for these were still primitive and costly), epidemic waves of syphilis and other “social diseases” swept through the cities, disfiguring, sterilizing, and sometimes killing both the poor and the rich. The ensuing body horror, reminiscent of something from a zombie movie, is hard to imagine today, especially in the developed world. To those who believed lust was a sin, the “pox” must have seemed like a foretaste of the tortures of the damned in a Heironymous Bosch painting. Like zombie horror today, there was also a powerful element of class anxiety in play.[[12]](#footnote-34) The association of frank sexuality with poverty, disease, and rotting flesh clearly played a role in amplifying Victorian sexual shame, connecting pleasure with pathology by way of sin and punishment. Perhaps, indeed, the sharp rise in sexually transmitted infections associated with urbanization was the real driver of the sex-negativity that characterized the period.[[13]](#footnote-36)

At any rate, female desire, whether feigned or real, was associated with the lower classes and their moral depravity, with animalistic “ungoverned lusts.” Bourgeois and upper-class women would be far removed from all that, and if they weren’t, they would certainly claim to be, to avoid social stigma, institutionalization, and perhaps even mutilation. Once again, the footnote in the passage above, expanding on the correspondence of women’s sexuality with that of beasts, is remarkable:

\*The physiologist will not be surprised that the human female should in these respects differ but little from the female among animals. We well know it, as a fact, that the dog or horse is not allowed approach to the female except at particular seasons. In the human female, indeed, I believe, it is rather from the wish of pleasing or gratifying the husband than from any strong sexual feeling, that cohabitation is habitually allowed. Certainly, it is so during the months of gestation. I have known instances where the female has during gestation evinced positive loathing for any marital familiarity whatever. In some of these instances, indeed, feeling has been sacrificed to duty, and the wife has endured, with all the self-martyrdom of womanhood, what was almost worse than death.

If respectable women can’t admit to sexual pleasure, greater female sexual flexibility is hard to distinguish from the expected— and required— “self-martyrdom of womanhood.” That is, in a repressed society, it may be hard to tell the difference, from the outside, between a straight woman avoiding any great show of desire in her marriage for propriety’s sake, and a woman who, whether straight or not, simply isn’t with a sexually compatible partner, and is thus “not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind.”

Figuring out what’s pleasurable, what works and what doesn’t, is also an active process of exploration, learning, and even of self-creation— what Dan Savage has sometimes referred to as carving neural pathways.[^15] In an environment where that kind of learning is discouraged, one’s own sexuality may remain undeveloped, and perhaps orientation itself may remain uncertain or even undefined. The high rates we see of asexuality among older women today are probably due at least partly to this effect.

To be fair, Victorian society also regarded “excessive” *male* sexuality as a problem. However, judgments in that quarter were more lenient,[[14]](#footnote-37) and “treatments” were generally less grisly, though they did sometimes involve dubious tinctures, running current through electrodes inserted into the urethra, administering cold enemas, blistering the penis with harsh chemicals, and other creative activities not to everyone’s taste.[^17] In curbing excess male sexuality, the main goal was to avoid overtaxation, which (the theory went) would lead to a premature decline in virility, which would in turn compromise THE TRUE MISSION OF SEX. Remember that sex was, for husband and wife alike, a solemn duty, for race and country. As Lady Hillingdon allegedly wrote in her journal in 1912,[[15]](#footnote-38)

I am happy now that Charles calls on my bedchamber less frequently than of old. As it is, I now endure but two calls a week and when I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, close my eyes, open my legs and think of England.

For Acton, this was well and proper; “frigidity” in women wasn’t a problem. Male impotence was. That’s why the passages from Acton’s book I’ve quoted at length are, counterintuitively, from a chapter on potential causes of *male* sexual dysfunction. The idea was that fear of women’s sexual demands was a common cause of anxiety, impotence, and aversion to marriage among “nervous and feeble” young men— presumably both those who weren’t enthusiastic about marital rape, and those who were intimidated by the prospect of needing to satiate a “nymphomaniac” who *did* want sex.

In sum, fear and horror of female desire pervaded the entire culture. The conjugal advice of Acton and his contemporaries seems perfectly calculated to make sex miserable— especially for women, but really, for everyone.

These attitudes have cast a long shadow. I remember, shortly after I moved to the U.S. in the 1980s, being subjected to sex ed at school. Boys and girls were segregated, the windows were blacked out with construction paper to prevent any information leakage out of the room, and cryptic diagrams of internal organs and reproductive processes were projected onto the screen at the front of the class. Laughter was forbidden, on pain of being sent to sit class out in the hall. The proceedings could not have been less appetizing, or more suffused with shame and dread. Many topics were covered, but most were medical and scary— fibroids, genital warts, teen pregnancy, AIDS, death. It went without saying that boys would try to talk girls into sex; also, that it was immoral, and that girls should listen to Nancy Reagan and “just say no.” As with drug use, the factors that might weaken a girl’s resolve and cause her to say “yes” were peer pressure or a self-sacrificing desire to please— never to *be* pleased. The idea of female sexual pleasure literally never came up. This remains true of many sex ed programs to this day.

1. A 23 year old woman from Galena, Ohio. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. [[REF]] Perhaps Graham Robb, *Strangers: Homosexual Love in the Nineteenth Century*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. In case you’re dying to know whom Alfred had *his* love affair with: it was renowned Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde. The ensuing campaign of harassment and legal attacks instigated by Queensbury ultimately led to Wilde’s sentence— two years of imprisonment with hard labor— followed by his self-exile and an untimely death in France. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. A somewhat antique-sounding phrase today, which I cribbed from the U.S. Census (along with several others) to allow for apples-to-apples statistical comparison. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. This is part of the reason there are now only 21 lesbian bars in the United States, out of roughly 1,000 bars catering to gay men and LGBTQ+ people more generally. During the general downturn of the COVID pandemic, lesbian and Black-owned gay bars were hit hardest, due to the greater economic precarity of both their owners and their patrons. See <https://www.lesbianbarproject.com/the-21-bars-home> and <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/year-pandemic-america-s-remaining-lesbian-bars-are-barely-hanging-n1262936>. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
6. Nowadays it’s a common refrain that these neighborhoods “aren’t what they once were.” Partly, as the stigma of being LGBTQ+ decreases (and more social life moves online), there’s less pressure to move to these special places. Relatedly, it becomes hard to counteract the dilution in numbers caused by an onslaught of straight people attracted to the night life in these neighborhoods. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
7. A 67 year old woman from Mishawaka, Indiana. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
8. Stekel, Frigidity in Women. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. The full extent of the clitoris wasn’t well understood in the 19th century, but we can assume that Acton’s “excision of […] the whole” implied removal of much more than the glans. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
10. [[REF]]. In this doomed quest to eradicate lustful urges and “self abuse” by means of wholesome grains, cereals, and genital mutilation, Kellogg was inspired by temperance preacher Sylvester Graham (of Graham cracker fame) and in turn inspired Charles William Post (of competing breakfast cereal fame). Ah, America. To my knowledge, no other country’s contribution to the culinary arts was deliberately designed to extinguish pleasure. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
11. William Acton, *Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and other large Cities, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*, London: 1857. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
12. As sociology lecturer Phil Burton-Cartledge put it, “Zombies as a horror staple are the result of some unfathomable biological or supernatural crisis that cannot be reversed. They are mindless. They are faceless. They are ugly. And they want to invade your home and feast on your flesh. If this does not work as an allegory for bourgeois attitudes to and fears of the working class, I don’t know what does.” <http://averypublicsociologist.blogspot.com/2010/11/zombies-and-ideology.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
13. As has often been remarked, pre-Victorian attitudes toward sex in “Merry Old England” (and elsewhere in the West) were far less repressive. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
14. For example, while U.S. Surgeon General William Hammond wrote in *Sexual Impotence in the Male* (1883), “That the civilized man is in general excessive in the matter of sexual intercourse admits of no question,” his prescription is rather vague: “The question then arises, what is excess? There are men who think it entirely within bounds to have sexual intercourse once every twenty-four hours; others, again, indulge regularly twice a week; others once; still, others who think once a month sufficient. It is exceedingly difficult to lay down any rule in the matter which will be applicable to all men […].” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
15. [[REF]] may be apocryphal but too good not to use. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)